Seasonal Reflection: Franciscan Spirituality
October 2009
by Neil O'Connell, OFM

This reflection is adapted from a presentation given by Neil O'Connell, OFM, on Oct. 3, in the rectory of St. Joseph of the Holy Family Church, in Harlem, New York City, where he lives. Neil shared with parishioners his understanding of the concept of Franciscan spirituality.

An invitation from the pastor of the parish where I am in residence to make a presentation on Franciscan spirituality to parish members has prompted me, after 51 years as a professed Franciscan, to reflect on that spirituality, which I professed to be living.

Since I have spent 38 years in higher education, I need to cite my sources, as I require my students to do. Aside from my own personal reflection, I acknowledge as sources, Francis, Clare, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, my father’s fond recollections of growing up in the Franciscan St Patrick Parish in Buffalo, N.Y., a “great cloud of (Franciscan) witnesses,” starting with my Bishop Timon High School freshman teacher, Boniface Hanley, OFM, through my novice master Peter Sheridan, OFM, to the present, and Michael Himes, brother of Kenneth Himes, OFM.

Franciscan spirituality is not a well-defined, structured spirituality, as those constructed beginning with the Catholic Reformation of the 16th century. Francis’ spirituality was a rather spontaneous response to God’s grace and personal revelation. It was a lived process until the end of his life. In 2009, Franciscans are celebrating Papal approval of a rough draft of a way of life which Francis finally formulated, under Papal pressure, into the approved Rule of 1223. Even that Rule was quite minimal and has lent itself to interpretations of various Franciscan families. Franciscans, both individually and communally, will always be “pilgrims and strangers” on the road of ever-evolving Franciscan spirituality. Having said this, my German side will now violate this assertion by presenting a structured personal view of this evolving Franciscan spirituality.

The center of Franciscan spirituality is the triune God, who is all love and all good. Unlimited love and good, of itself, can only limitlessly overflow. Although he had a problematic relation with his own father, Francis saw God the Father as all love/all good flowing into God the Son, and both flowing into the Holy Spirit. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are an eternal whirlwind tarantella with, in, and through each other. The compressed
energy of this eternal dance is a black hole of love/good, which is compelled to blast out into a creation, which is all love/all good.

Focus on Incarnation
From this, Franciscan spirituality is deeply incarnational. The ultimate overflowing of trinitarian love/good is in the Son of God immersed in human flesh. It is the trigger, the catalyst for the big bang of the black hole of divine love/good. Human sin is not a “happy fault” fusing the incarnation, but a mordant malady which requires a passover of the always intended incarnation to restore humanity to original grace which trumps original sin every time. The resurrection of the incarnation is the seal on the continued eternity of the incarnation and the restored harmony of humanity with all love/all good creation. In our baptisms, all creation is being baptized too.

At this point, Franciscan spirituality is strongly Marian, for Mary provides the flesh of the incarnation. Mary is also conflated with lady poverty, for she is the first among the scriptural poor little faithful ones. The frequent depiction in Franciscan churches of Mary with a cloak opened and sheltering the poor and physically impaired is not an accident. Mary can sing confidently the revolutionary words that the high and mighty will be deposed and the lowly will be raised up. The preventive medicine of the incarnation’s passover makes Mary, from the very beginning of her existence, the truly liberated person who confronts a self-centered and prideful distortion of the all love/all good creation. Mary is finally lady of the angels, the fierce defenders of the poor and helpless.

From all of the above, Franciscan spirituality is Pentecostal. Francis and his first followers were constantly in–spirited or inspired. In the face of a recent Church prohibition against new rules for religious life, Francis asserted that his way of life was inspired by God, and he prevailed. Francis proclaimed that the Minister General of the Order was the Holy Spirit. No doubt, the relation of the Holy Spirit and Mary has played an important role in Franciscan Pentecostalism and draws Franciscan spirituality to transcend the limits of the impossible, for all things are possible in the Holy Spirit.

Franciscan Spirituality in Books
Franciscan spirituality finds all of the above revealed in a series of “books.”

First is the book of creation, which is filled with the footsteps of the
triune God from whom all good and perfect gifts come. All human art/craft engaged positively with creation leads to a knowledge of God.

Second is the book of the scriptures, in which Francis saw a real presence of the incarnation that caused him to reverently treat even the smallest scraps of scriptural text as he would the smallest portions of the Eucharistic elements.

Third is the book of the Eucharist and the liturgy of the Church, in which the passover of the incarnation is really present. From this, flows for clergy, regardless of ability and probity, as the catalytic with the believing community of this presence. Franciscan spirituality promotes a liturgy and scriptural/liturgical, well informed preaching, which effectively communicates the passover of the incarnation, giving a good word to raise up the poor.

Fourth is the book of the cross, the tree of life, the actual passover of the incarnation, the process of curative medicine restoring all things to the original grace of harmony with the all love/all good creation, the liberation from the enslavement of a false world, the birthing of a restored humanity, an active peace beyond all comprehension. Francis’ final identity with the cross in the stigmata imbued him with unspeakable freedom, peace, and joy.

Fifth is the book of the Church, the mystical body of the incarnation. There is a Franciscan loyalty to the Church that promotes reverence for Church leaders, theologians, and the faithful, which does not preclude a prophetic shaking of dust from Franciscan feet when the Church inhibits Franciscans from living the Gospel.

All other typical features of Franciscan spirituality now flow from these five books.

“We” Over “I”
Franciscan spirituality is communal, emphasizing the “we” over the “I.” While each human is a separate species, each human grows and flourishes in community formed by the above five books. Franciscan communalism has the calming insight that we can choose our friends but we cannot choose our brothers and sisters. In the larger society, Franciscan communalism democratizes aristocracy and renders all people lords and ladies, and replaces class warfare with class cooperation. Franciscan communalism is always for others.
Franciscan spirituality is lesser/humble/poor. It acknowledges that all is gift from the triune God, including our talents and abilities. Since Franciscans own nothing, they wear greatness well, and are the true and faithful stewards of creation, always asserting that up to now, we have done nothing.

Franciscan spirituality is a constant interplay of contemplative action and active contemplation, often simultaneously. A simple, ancient “Lectio Divina” of the scriptures is the base of this interplay. Since Franciscans are inundated by the footsteps of the triune God, they are always at prayer.

Franciscan spirituality is practical; not fasting more beyond what the Church requires for all, eating of what is set before one, preaching without words, and feeding 100 bag ladies by noon tomorrow.

**Spirituality of Wisdom**

Franciscan spirituality is wise. It espouses wisdom which is knowledge wrapped with intuitive love bathed by divine illumination. Thus, Franciscan education promotes learning with feeling and shares the riches of wisdom with the poor and alienated.

Franciscan spirituality is peaceful. Yet, it advocates an active peace which is always emanating outward to transform a frequently violent world with peace and reconciliation.

Finally, Franciscan spirituality is joyful. It is always ready to burst out with refreshing laughter and mirth as a result of being truly free and peaceful.

In conclusion, I thank my Franciscan brothers and sisters for staying with me to this point. I leave with a parting shot. This, my personal reflection, and, in reality, a distinctive feature of Franciscan spirituality is that it is as varied as the number of Franciscan men and women who have are now living it.

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