

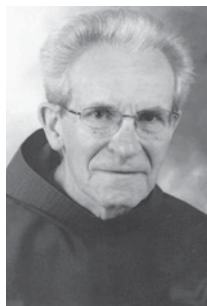
# Custodians of the Tradition

*Reclaiming the Franciscan  
Intellectual Tradition*



Those like ourselves who are immediate heirs of the tradition inspired by the spirituality of Francis [and Clare] might better see ourselves as responsible stewards of a treasure that has much to offer for the healing of humanity and of the world at large.

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Bonaventure Fest, 2003, Aston, PA



## Francis of Assisi “Theologian?”

Thaddée Matura OFM

*“The theology of this man, held aloft by  
purity and contemplation, is a soaring eagle” — 2 Cel LXIX*

A theologian is the one who contemplates and scrutinizes visible and invisible reality, using the Word of God as a starting point — then Francis is both. What he allows us to glimpse in his writings authorizes us to say that he proposes an authentic general outline of a theology whose center is the Trinitarian God in love with the human person.

### Francis of Assisi “Theologian?”

Is Francis a theologian and if so, why? Does he have a theological vision of the real? Has he examined it in a discourse or in his writings? To respond to these questions we have only two means of access to his person and his message: the witness of his hagiographers and the writings which he has left us.

The main biographers, Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure, do provide important allusions to Francis’s vision and spiritual intelligence, but they emphasize rather the grandeur of his figure and his deeds. Marked by the stigmata — which make of him a unique Christological personality, an apostle sent by God to awaken and stir up “a world gone cold,” his actions and his words are interpreted and often used to address the problems of the Order and the Church. For the biographers and other witnesses, Francis seemed too unlearned, without a scholastic formation, to dream of presenting him as a theologian. Yet one of the narratives reports the words of a Dominican master who was astonished and observed that “*the theology of this man, held aloft by purity and contemplation, is a soaring eagle*” (2 Cel LXIX). It is then rather to Francis’s writings that one must turn in order to determine if they are truly vectors of theological perspectives which would allow us to apply the label “theologian” to Francis. But here we find ourselves faced with a paradox. Francis is not a cleric in the meaning given to this term in the Middle Ages — someone who has “done studies.”

### Francis’s Answer

Three times in his writings he refers to himself as *idiota*, one without formation and uneducated. He knows, nonetheless, how to read and write, in Latin obviously, and is not shy of doing so, insisting quite to the contrary some eight times that his writings be received, preserved, written, meditated upon, and handed on to others. He has authored some thirty texts, if one can use this expression. They are all occasional texts, diverse in length, style, language (Latin and Italian) and all are considered today as authentic by the most rigorous scholarship. The entire corpus is, nonetheless, on the slim side covering some 120 pages in the critical edition. It is in this modest collection that one must look for an answer to the question that we have raised.

What becomes immediately evident to everyone who reads these writings is their religious nature. About a third of their content is in the form of prayers: twenty are addressed to God. The remainder — while touching diverse aspects of life — nonetheless make constant reference to God and his Word. Even if occasionally there are allusions to some situations of the time or to the person of Francis, these are much too meager to draw out unwonted historical teachings or to paint a psychological portrait or spiritual biography of their author. Francis himself, in one of his longest and most structured texts — the *Second Letter to the Faithful*, speaking of his writings, characterizes them as “words of my Lord.”

### Francis’s Use of Scripture

The theological dimension of Francis’s writings is further manifested, in a general way, by the scope he gives to the Old and New Testaments. One finds, as a matter of fact, over 400 explicit quotations: 156 from the Old Testament and 280 from the New Testament. Some texts are composed explicitly from biblical quotations: the fifteen psalms; the *Praises for All the Hours*; and the *Exhortation to Praise God*. In practically all his writings there are a great number of biblical quotations, especially in the Earlier Rule, the *Letters to the Faithful*, the letter to the Order and half of the Admonitions. It



### Chapter 23 of Francis' Rule of 1221

*A proclamation in the form of a thanksgiving centered on God and on the human person*

All-powerful, most holy,  
Almighty and supreme God,  
Holy and just Father,  
Lord King of heaven and earth  
We thank You for Yourself  
for through Your holy will  
and through Your only Son  
with the Holy Spirit  
You have created everything spiritual and corporal  
And, after making us in Your own image and likeness,  
You placed us in paradise.

*Through our own fault we fell.*

We thank You  
For as through Your Son You created us,  
So through Your holy love  
With which You loved us  
You brought about His birth  
As true God and true man  
by the glorious, ever-virgin, most blessed, holy Mary  
and You willed to redeem us captives  
through His cross and blood and death. (1-3)

*With our whole heart,  
our whole soul,  
our whole mind,  
with our whole strength and fortitude  
with our whole understanding  
with all our powers  
with every effort,  
every affection,  
every feeling,  
every desire and wish  
let us all love the Lord God  
Who has given and gives to each one of us  
our whole body, our whole soul and our entire life,  
Who has created, redeemed and will us by His mercy alone,  
Who did and does everything good for us.  
(1221:23.8)*

*Continued on page 3*

is, as a matter of fact, when Francis intends to propose the life according to the Gospel to his brothers or to lay persons that the quotations abound. Thus, in the twenty-four chapters of the *Earlier Rule*, nineteen of them have quotations. And even when these are missing, many passages are shot through with biblical allusions. In chapters 3, 10 and 11 of the *Later Rule* the expressions: let them not “quarrel or argue or judge others, but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle, and humble, speaking courteously to everyone” are all taken from the New Testament.

But Francis does not use biblical texts as simply an ornament for his discourse. He seeks, by means of them, either to express his vision of God, the human person, and the journey that goes from one to the other, or to support and confirm actions that he proposes in the name of the Gospel. As such he shows himself as a “theologian,” in the initial and basic meaning of the word, even if he is not ranked among the “professional” theologians of the past, such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, John of the Cross, or the present ones. *In his manner of thinking and expressing himself, he is closer to the feminine “theological” figures already mentioned: Angela of Foligno, Teresa of Avila, and, above all, Therese of Lisieux. Not so primarily by the content of his theology, which has its own originality, but because, like them, he is one of the rare theological figures (if not the only masculine figure), without a theological formation who, nonetheless, proposes a full and coherent vision of God and the human person in writing.* As a matter of fact, other than some of the Fathers of the desert from whom the sayings, *apothegmata*, are reported, and the majority of whom had no theological culture, there is no masculine figure who is also a writer of this type in the Christian tradition.

### The Main Lines of Francis's “Theology”

One finds theological perspectives scattered throughout Francis's writings. Once these have been regrouped and put in order, *they offer a global vision of the mystery of God and the human person.* One text, however, stands out — chapter 23 of the *Earlier Rule* — where the main lines of such a vision are laid out in fullness, balance, and, which is characteristic of Francis, literary beauty. *It is a proclamation in the form of a thanksgiving centered on God and on the human person.* It opens up at once both theological and anthropological perspectives. *It is in taking account of the structure of this doxological credo that one can attempt a summary presentation of Francis's theology.*

It is forthrightly *Trinitarian*. The central place — the primacy — is reserved for God the Father, a constant referent of the Son, mainspring of every initiative, the primary object of praise and prayer, and, in a word, the origin and final outcome of everything. The Christology insists on the divine dimension of the Word which allows, as a consequence, for the emphasis on the humility and the poverty of the Incarnation, the life and the Eucharist of Jesus Christ. The Spirit appears almost always alongside the Father and the Son as a discreet, dynamic presence, everywhere present and introducing a dimension of spiritual experience to everything. This Triune God is at once transcendent: Lord Most High, unnamable, incomprehensible and yet near: humble, tender, delectable, and desirable above all else.

Inseparable from God, *the human person* is a being of contrast, endowed at once with unique grandeur and profound misery. “Loved by the holy love,” created in the incomparable dignity of the image of God, made for freedom and happiness, the human person is “the most worthy of all creatures.”<sup>1</sup> It is because of the fall into sin that the human person has become a miserable being. If Francis mercilessly emphasizes the evil of the human person, the

<sup>1</sup> Clare of Assisi, “The Third Letter to Agnes of Prague,” *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents The Lady*, ed. Regis Armstrong (New York: New City Press, 2006), 2.

egotism of “the flesh,” sin, it is to make more evident the unconditional love of God totally in love with those who are miserable, ungrateful and evil. God does nothing but good for them. But when the human person acknowledges the two contradictory faces of his reality — the good that is in him and the negativity that threatens and affects him — then he can render to God the benefits received without appropriating them and take responsibility for the evil which marks him. This is what true Franciscan poverty consists of: acknowledging that all comes from God and to render everything back in thanksgiving, to consider as one’s own only sickness and sin and to present these to the heavenly doctor who alone heals and justifies sinners. Thus accepted and acknowledged by God, one can know how to behave among men and women as “minors,” brothers and servants of all.

One can find, elsewhere, a more ample and detailed presentation, but already these main lines of the theology in Francis’s writings allow us to conclude that it is rich and original. Not that, to be sure, it developed something unknown until then, or presented a new synthesis, but because it coincides globally — and not without an emphasis proper to Francis — with the totality and equilibrium of the biblical vision. Coming from a man without a scholarly theological culture, it is astonishing in its breadth and correctness expressed in so few pages. And, furthermore, it is expressed in occasional writings!

## Francis’s Theology and the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition

Did the early voices of the Franciscan intellectual tradition know and honor Francis’s theology? The Franciscan intellectual tradition is a reality that is difficult to circumscribe and present in a few lines. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century—the scholastic period—it is linked to a few great names: Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Peter John Olivi, Raymund

Lull, Roger Bacon, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. The later periods present less significant figures. Even though some intellectual Franciscans are always present, it would be difficult to name some in the contemporary era. The medieval thinkers just indicated were, more or less, influenced by the figure of Francis as presented by the first biographies, and something Franciscan always made its way into their theology and philosophy. But nothing allows us to affirm that apart from two or three texts—the Rules, the *Testament*, one Admonition or other—they knew and read Francis’s written message which, moreover, had not yet been

fully compiled nor assembled into an anthology. These texts, it is true, were gradually assembled, recopied and printed during the succeeding centuries, but one has had to wait until about the 1950s to become aware of not only their historical, but also their theological and spiritual importance. While the research and the debate around the person of Francis continued, these last fifty years have seen the appearance of multiple editions and scholarly books and articles on his writings: their authenticity; the analysis of one or the other of them; studies of themes that could be drawn from them and even some attempts at providing a general and anthropological view of his written message.

Why this longstanding silence — this ignorance — surrounding Francis’s texts? A kind of enigma resides in the fact of the respectful and pious conservation and transmission of the writings throughout the centuries and

## Chapter 23 of Francis’ Rule of 1221

*Continued from page 2*

Therefore,  
let us desire nothing else ...  
except our Creator, Redeemer and Savior...  
Who is the fullness of good,  
all good, every good, the true and supreme good,  
*Who alone is good.*  
(1223:21.9)

Let all of us truly and humbly believe,  
Hold in our heart and love,  
honor, adore, serve,  
praise and bless,  
glorify and exalt,  
magnify and give thanks  
to the Most High and Supreme Eternal God  
Trinity and Unity,  
*Father, Son and Holy Spirit,*  
Creator of all,  
Savior of all

Who believe and hope in Him,  
and love Him, Who,  
without beginning and end,  
is unchangeable, invisible,  
indescribable, ineffable,  
*incomprehensible, unfathomable,*  
*blessed, praiseworthy,*  
*glorious, exalted,*  
sublime, most high,  
gentle, lovable, delightful,  
and totally desirable above all else  
for ever.

Amen.

(1221:23.11)



at the same time their non-utilization, in fact, the disregard for them. As an explanation one can put forward diverse factors. Firstly, all the attention and interest have been devoted to the magnified image of the saint: the unfolding of his life, his virtues, his miracles, above all his stigmata, and the meaning that all this had for the life of the Church and the destiny of his Order. As we have just said, the only thing that was read and commented upon was the Rule and the *Testament*, and this according to a juridical reading. But no doubt the main reason for this disregard, never explicitly expressed, was the fact that Francis was “simple and unlearned” and his writings, fragmentary and diverse, were so far removed from scholarly expression. “Pious and edifying” no doubt did not carry any weight in comparison with the *Summas* of the masters, even if, friars minor that they were, they admired and loved their founder. In the story of perfect joy, doesn’t the brother who slams the door in Francis’s face tell him: “you are simple and stupid. There are many of us here like you—we don’t need you!” Once dead and glorified, what was needed was the renown of his virtues and miracles, the glory of the first

one to be stigmatized in order to solidly establish the Order and contribute to its influence. The simplicity of the radical gospel message and the lack of elegance in style by which he transmitted them were less attractive.

### Concluding Thoughts

Today this shift of interest is received in different ways. We are accustomed to the current image of Francis, one with many facets, but always fascinating. When one leaves behind the narratives of the ancient or contemporary biographies and brochures austere and theoretical texts, writings which do not tell a story, we have the impression of losing something living and then penetrating into arid and dry terrain. All the more so because these texts put us into contact not with an immediate human experience, but one which demands a faith decision.

Francis’s aim is rather to transmit the Gospel of Jesus Christ, first of all to all his brothers and, ultimately, to all men and women of all time. Much as one does not read St. Augustine’s *City of God* in order to study his psychology or his spiritual experience but to discover a certain vision

of history, so too one should not read Chapter 23 of the *Earlier Rule* — which celebrates the love of God on behalf of men and women— primarily to know Francis’s personality better. This would totally miss the message of the text. With all due proportion, this principle is applicable to the totality of his writings. They are not, primarily, material to make up the story of a person—his life, his psychology, his work—they are above all spiritual writings, rather than systematic theology in the sense indicated at the beginning of this essay.

While recognized as one of the great figures of Christian holiness, Francis is never considered a mystic, nor a theologian. However, if these two words are understood according to their original meanings used in the patristic period — a mystic is someone who spiritually experiences the mystery of God and his work and *a theologian is the one who contemplates and scrutinizes visible and invisible reality, using the Word of God as a starting point — then Francis is both. What he allows us to glimpse in his writings authorizes us to say that he proposes an authentic general outline of a theology whose center is the Trinitarian God in love with the human person.*

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