

Topic 9: The Franciscan Vision, Part 1

Overview: St. Francis of Assisi was inspired to follow and embrace the human Christ, who took flesh and lived in the world. The impulse of St. Francis was to take the experience of the desert and the monastery and bring it into the world. He introduced a form of religious life in the thirteenth century that brought the monastery into the world. It is no exaggeration to say that St. Francis was radical in living the Gospel. His conversion was a “falling off the horse” experience of being wounded in battle. In his recuperation, God broke into his life and changed him forever. The symbol of his conversion, the change of heart, was his embracing of the leper. Before his conversion he abhorred lepers, but now he embraced and kissed them and found in them the face of Christ.

St. Francis of Assisi: “Mystic, Medieval, Italian” (1182–1226)

- St. Francis lived in a time and place that was experiencing a shifting economy. A focus on poverty was becoming more prevalent as a reaction to the extreme wealth seen in many of the monasteries. There were a lot of wandering preachers as well as many heresies emerging in the Church.
- In his spiritual journey, Francis gradually came to see a wider picture of God’s plan in the context of the world.
- He had an affective spirituality.
- Early Christian martyrs who died for their faith in a culture that viewed faith as a threat could be seen as precursors to the monastic life.
- With the conversion of Constantine came the emergence of the desert fathers and mothers from which comes the monastic tradition. In martyrdom, desert spirituality, and monastic life is the notion of unconditional surrender.

Franciscan and Dominican Orders

- Mendicant spirituality involved a movement outside of the monasteries and into the world. It was a new way of being in the world, bringing a new dimension to religious life.
- In the 13th century, there was a new interest in the Bible and the fathers of the Church.
- The emphasis on poverty seemed to be a remedy for the decadence in the Church and the monasteries.
- The orders founded by Francis and Dominic provided a solution to the monastic and canonical aspirations of the period by creating a new form of religious life. They both corresponded to the intellectual tendencies of the day.

Elements of Francis' Vision and Spirituality

- Even during Francis' lifetime, the Franciscan school was branching out in multiple ways.
- Francis was born in 1181 or 1182 and died in 1226. In his Testament, he reflects back on his life.
- Francis had a conversion experience in 1206 while recuperating from a battle wound.
- Lepers were seen as the outcasts of society. Before his conversion, Francis would avoid lepers, running the other way when he saw one. After his conversion, he would embrace them and eat with them.

1) The embracing of the leper is reflective of a major shift within Francis, the beginning of a spiritual psyche that sees God in all of creation.

2) His conversion was a process.

- Francis struggled with what path to take. He prayed before the crucifix at San Damiano, and God called him to rebuild the Church.
- He set about rebuilding churches but soon realized that he was called to rebuild the spiritual Church.
- In 1209, Francis wrote a simple Rule. From the biography tradition we know that this Rule was brief and simple, comprised mostly likely of several scriptural texts.

1) Pope Innocent III gave it a verbal approbation.

- The Laudes was a form of preaching unique to the Franciscans in which listeners are invited by song to enter into the experience of prayer and the love of God.
- Francis traveled the world telling others about the love of God.

The Stigmata

- Towards the end of his life, Francis received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ. This reflects his conformity to Christ.
- His spirituality was Christocentric.
- After receiving the stigmata, St. Francis's health began to deteriorate. The height of his mystical experience at La Verna was followed by a state of depression.
- Francis opened a new current and school of spirituality.

The Canticle of Brother Sun

- This was Francis' masterpiece. It is a magnificent expression of St. Francis' spirituality.
- The elements are reflections of the Trinity. All of creation reflects God.
- It is all about relationships.

Review Questions

1. Pray with the Canticle of Brother Sun. Do this by going outdoors and noticing the beauty of nature in the created world.
2. St. Francis used a form of preaching that was called the "Laudes." It was a way of preaching that invited its listeners to experience God through song and possibly dance. Francis preached by example. What are some of the ways that you might "cry the Gospel with your life"?
3. St. Francis found God by embracing and living with lepers. What and who are the lepers in your life? Reflect on this and pray for the grace to embrace that which you find repulsive or distasteful.