

## Characteristics of Franciscan Spirituality

I was attracted to “Franciscan Spirituality” long before I even knew there was such a thing. As a child growing up in Wichita, Kansas, my family belonged to a parish staffed by Franciscans and there was something about the way these men lived and worked that made me want to be one of them. I became a Franciscan in 1957 and for over 50 years I have tried to walk in [the] footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi. In this reflection I would like to share some of the highlights of that journey in the hope that some of the insights I have gained along the way might be useful for you in your own faith journey.



What was it that first attracted me to the Franciscans? I think the thing that fascinated me most was the fact that these guys in their brown robes seemed to be *really happy people!* I couldn't have explained it then, but over the years I have come to understand that Franciscan joy is the joy of people in love – people in a deep personal loving relationship with a God who is Love itself. Francis of Assisi was so in love with God that he was one of the happiest people who ever lived.

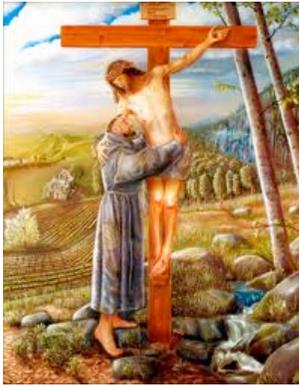
### God Is Love

Franciscan spirituality is rooted in the simple affirmation: “God is love.” We know from our human experience, love is generative; lovers want to express their love. God – Love Itself - desired from all eternity to express Divine Love in a creature (someone outside of God's Self) that would be able to love back perfectly. And this “Perfect Lover” is Jesus of Nazareth. Great men who have immersed themselves in Franciscan spirituality to a degree that I could never hope to achieve, for example St. Bonaventure and Bl. John Duns Scotus, have explained that God took flesh and became one of us not because of sin but because of Love.

It is hard to love someone or something you can't see. And so the invisible God has given us Jesus as a visible sacrament of how we are to love. The way to perfect joy is to become the perfect lover by imitation of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Consequently, in instructing those who would come after him, Francis could simply say: “The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” [In fact, this assertion is at the heart of the *Rule* of each of the Franciscan Orders, including the Secular Franciscan Order.]

Loving always involves a certain “emptying,” a certain “dying.” Often at weddings, I am asked to proclaim the text “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Mark 10:7-8). There is a real “dying” in the “leaving” – but it is essential for the “loving.” Francis had a deep appreciation for this “emptying” aspect of loving. He saw it expressed in a unique way in the Crib, the Cross, and the Eucharist.

## Self-emptying Love



While some forms of spirituality stress the divinity of Christ and the transcendence of God, Franciscan spirituality looks intently on the humanness of Jesus and embraces imminence.

On Calvary we see this “self-emptying love” graphically displayed. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). In the Eucharist, God places Himself in our hands under the form of bread. If God could place Himself in our hands, why should we hesitate to give up everything and place ourselves in God’s hands?

As an artist is revealed in the art produced, so Francis saw the loving hand of God in everything around him: Sun, Moon, Fire, and Water. All creation is a sacrament revealing and praising God and leading us to wonder, awe, and gratitude, and causes Francis to sing out: “Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun . . . he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor; and bears a likeness of You, Most High.” While some may look at the world and see “a valley of tears” or “a culture of death,” Franciscan spirituality is much more optimistic about the signs of the times.

## Love Is a Journey

One doesn’t fall in love all at once; love is a journey. Franciscan spirituality is a spirituality of journey, a spirituality of pilgrimage. It takes place on the go – in the midst of daily living. It is on the journey that the Spirit shapes us into the “lovers” that God desires us to be. As the Franciscan poet, Fr. Murray Bodo, O.F.M. writes: “Who we are is how and where we’ve traveled.”

But falling in love isn’t an easy journey. There can be obstacles along the way. Years ago on my first day of high school, I opened my Latin text book and there was a picture of the Roman legions crossing the Alps to conquer the world. The Latin word for “baggage” and all the “stuff” they had to carry was *impedimenta*. The word in English has taken on the meaning of things that can hold us back and keep us from moving forward.

Franciscan spirituality recognizes the importance of “traveling lite.” Taking too much “stuff” can slow us down and get in the way of loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength. Francis echoes Jesus: “Take nothing for the journey” (Mark 6:8). Today, many people find their worth in the things they possess: the amount of money they have in the bank, the type of car they drive, the size of their home. Franciscan spirituality considers all these things – and acquiring them, protecting them, dusting them – distractions, impediments on the journey.

I am a child of God – what could give me greater worth than that? And knowing that God loves me with a parental love, frees me from worrying about material possessions. “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink . . . Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?” (Matthew 6:25-26). I once saw a bumper sticker that said “The guy that dies with the most toys wins.” The Franciscan mantra is just the opposite: “The guy that dies with the least toys wins.”

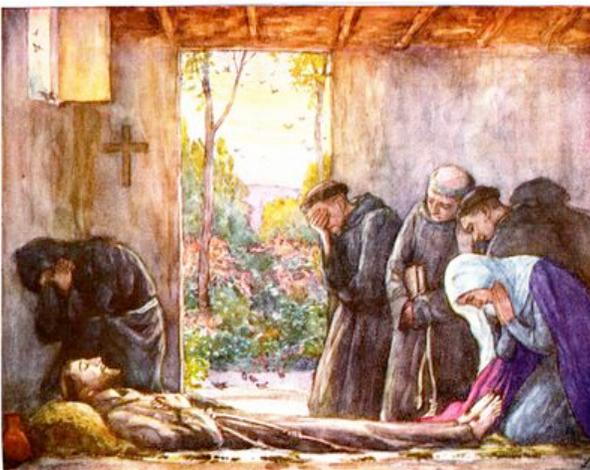
## Community



St. Francis didn't journey alone; he gathered a band of brothers who journeyed with him. He followed the example of Jesus who gathered disciples and sent them out two by two. Franciscan spirituality is a community experience; we journey with brothers and sisters. And we often stop and reflect on our journey with our fellow pilgrims. I learn from your journey and you learn from mine. This "sharing of journey-stories" is the very essence of Franciscan spiritual direction.

While fraternity is of the very essence of Franciscan spirituality, it is not a spirituality in which the individual is lost in group uniformity. Franciscan spirituality has a great respect for the individual and the individual's journey. Shortly after a small group gathered around Francis, they journeyed to Rome for papal approval of their itinerant life. The pope [Innocent III] was not impressed and told Francis to go join the Benedictines. Francis, respectfully, told the pope "no!" This was a significant moment in the faith journey of Saint Francis.

Francis felt the Spirit was calling him to something new and different. While some spiritual traditions place a high value on unity and conformity, Franciscan spirituality recognizes the charism given to each individual by the Holy Spirit. Franciscan spirituality is "catholic" not only because it is in union with the Roman Catholic Church; it is "catholic" in the sense of "universal" – embracing many different gifts and ways of following Jesus.



As Francis lay dying, ready to embrace Sister Death, he didn't say to the Friars: "I have given you an example to follow. Do what I have done." Rather he said: "I have done what was mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours" (Bonaventure, *Major Life*, XIV, 3). As we each strive to become joyful lovers, I hope we may find courage in this prayer of Francis: "May Christ teach you what is yours to do."

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