The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition:

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The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition

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Edited by

Elise Saggau, O.S.F.

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A wonderful contemporary experience is the retrieval, indeed the renaissance, of Franciscan scholarship available in symposia, workshops, and a host of books and journals. As a student in the mid-1950s, when I first came to read the Franciscan tradition, only a few cherished classics were available. The works of Jorgenson, Felder, the graphic genius of Leonard Von Matt, and the ever-delightful Chesterton come to mind. At that time I was introduced to biographies of St. Francis and folklore about the tradition, with the hope that these would respond to my searching queries. They did not. I—and others—wanted more. Sound scholarly studies, critical historiography, systematic theology rooted in scriptural, philosophical, and linguistic advances were soon offered us in the second half of the next decade. Little did we know then that the splendid scholars of that day—Philotheus Boehner, Kajetan Esser, Allan Wolter, the two Brady brothers, Ignatius and Mel, not to mention the ecumenical contribution of many Anglican scholars, most notably Bishop John Moorman, would soon create a strong foundation for this present age. Not only did the scholars of the 50s and 60s spark a vibrant revival of first-rate Franciscan scholarship, they also made their scholarship accessible for eager readers on the popular level.

For the past forty years, their progeny have worked long and hard and have further probed, developed, translated, and made available deeper riches of this ancient, yet fertile tradition. Indeed, they have gone further and deeper in exploring the relationship of past to present for import and future promise. While still in its initial stages, this exploring of the past in light of the contemporary has established a launching pad for what might well be described as a third generation of Franciscan studies. Nor is that study now limited solely to members of the religious institutes of the Franciscan family. Other scholars, Catholic, Protestant and, yes, Jewish, are now numbered among significant commentators on the Franciscan tradition.

Of the many remarkable directions set out in Vatican II, the call to religious institutes of women and men to return to the charism of their
particular founder has yielded a great amount of scholarship in history and theology. This is evident in a broad range of monographs in the rich traditions of mendicant and monastic families—Augustinian, Benedictine, Carmelite, Dominican, and Franciscan, both male and female. They, coupled with the excellent scholarship in the Ignatian tradition and the fruitful ecumenical retrieval in Patristic studies, have made this current age one of extraordinary promise in the development of the spirituality characteristic of each family, as well as providing new paths for exploration in contemporary systematic theology. In the Franciscan tradition, this is particularly evident in the theology of Christ and the theology of creation. What is so extraordinary—and I fervently hope will become ordinary—is that each family now intentionally nourishes eager students, both members and other interested learners, in a sound and scholarly introduction to the best of each tradition. This volume bears witness to that.

One source of that scholarship is the Franciscan Center, now under the imaginative direction of Dr. Ilia Delio, O.S.F. who serves with the noted Franciscan scholar, Dr. Dominic Monti, O.F.M., professor of church history at the Washington Theological Union. Ever since Dr. Anthony Carrozzo, O.F.M., then Provincial Minister, and the friars of the Province of the Most Holy Name of the Order of Friars Minor, endowed the Franciscan Center at the Washington Theological Union, it has brought together annually scholars to break open a specific vein of Franciscan studies. This effort, however, is not (and should not be) the work of one institution. It is made possible through generous cooperation and publishing by the Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, the venerable founding institute of Franciscan scholarship in the United States. In addition, the contributors to this volume include scholars from other North American graduate institutions of theology and spirituality: the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago and the Franciscan School of Theology, Berkeley, California.

The scholarship in this volume on the Franciscan intellectual tradition represents an array of gifted North American thinkers who have addressed the relationship of past tradition and contemporary issues. They continue the important task of bringing historical knowledge, critical acumen, and theological imagination to a dialogue of the past with our contemporary age. Drs. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M. Kenan Osborne, O.F.M., Joseph Chinnici, O.F.M., and Dominic Monti, O.F.M. now constitute well over a hundred years of significant, long term contribution to theology and history and particularly to Franciscan theology and history. Dr. Ilia Delio, O.S.F., Dr.
Mary Beth Ingham, C.S.J., and Diane Tomkinson, O.S.F. are now taking up the scholarly task anew. It is especially encouraging to see women enter this field of study since so many have lived the Franciscan tradition with great imagination and authenticity. The combination of senior and younger scholars gives a certain freshness and imaginative edge to these important studies. Each splendidly contributes to this volume on the intellectual tradition and its meaning for contemporary life.

We are both blessed and deeply appreciative to present their work to the larger family of readers and scholars who will benefit from it.

Vincent Cushing, O.F.M.
Washington Theological Union,
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Chapter One

THE FRANCISCAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION: CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

Ilia Delio, O.S.F.

Introduction

In his provocative work, *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy confronts the reader with a challenging question. He writes: “In a culture of pluralism must each religious tradition finally either dissolve into some lowest common denominator or accept a marginal existence as one interesting but purely private option?”¹ Although Tracy will argue for the public role of Christian theology in a pluralistic world, the same question could be applied to a specific religious tradition within Christianity such as the Franciscan tradition. We may ask, in our post-modern culture,² must the Franciscan tradition either dissolve into some lowest common denominator or accept a marginal existence as one interesting but private option? The question is startling when one considers the fact that Francis of Assisi was anything but a private person. His charism and transformation into the iconic figure of Christ had far-reaching effects on the Church and society in the Middle Ages. From the charism of this one individual sprang a whole

²Postmodernism is a complex term that describes the contemporary philosophical and cultural milieu. Coined in the 1930s, the term “postmodern” is used to describe the historical transition from modernity to a period beyond modernity, namely, postmodernity. Whereas modernity emphasized objective, logical thinking, as well as a universal morality and law, postmodernism indicates there is no transcendence in reality; rather, all knowledge is derived from the self who interprets reality. Thus, there is no single, universal worldview. Postmodernism celebrates the local and particular at the expense of the universal and emphasizes a respect for difference. For an introduction to postmodernism, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 39-56.
movement that would culminate in a tradition known as the Franciscan tradition. But what exactly is this tradition and what is it as an intellectual tradition? Who are the bearers of this tradition and what is its purpose? Do we know enough of what the Franciscan intellectual tradition is to ask if it can be a public voice in the Church and world today?

When we hear the Franciscan tradition described as “intellectual” we are taken aback, since the word itself seems antithetical to the spirit of Francis. Certainly, for Francis and Clare, intellectual learning was not held in high esteem. To follow Christ and to pursue a life of poverty meant that books were not to be accrued either individually or communally nor should one pursue academic study because it risked engendering intellectual pride. But is the Franciscan intellectual tradition about book learning or is it a set of values, theologically informed, that comprise a distinct view of the world, one that takes as its basis the theological intuitions of Francis of Assisi? Although it would be impossible to answer this question in a short amount of time, I do not think we can easily identify contemporary concerns about the tradition unless we know what the tradition is.

What I would like to do, therefore, is to “break open” the meaning of the Franciscan intellectual tradition. First, I would like to explore the meaning of the word “tradition” and then to ask, is the Franciscan intellectual tradition really a tradition integral to Franciscan life? I would like to suggest that the Franciscan intellectual tradition arose out of the theological intuitions of Francis and initially had a profound influence on the shape of Franciscan evangelical life. In light of this, I will briefly examine the synthesis of evangelical theology and lived experience as it emerged in the writings of Celano and culminated in the writings of Bonaventure. I will suggest that the synthesis of theology and lived experience formulated by these writers eventually collapsed leaving the Franciscan intellectual tradition to develop as an elite school of thought divorced from the tradition of Franciscan life. That is, the Franciscan intellectual tradition developed as a tradition within a tradition. In the latter part of my talk, I will discuss recent efforts to renew the Franciscan intellectual tradition in light of Franciscan evangelical life. It is in the
context of lived experience, I believe, that the intellectual tradition finds its deepest meaning.

Is the “Franciscan Intellectual Tradition” a Tradition?

Tradition comes from the Latin \textit{traditio}, the noun of the verb \textit{tradere} meaning to transmit, to deliver. Used as a term of ratification in Roman law, the word \textit{tradere} meant to hand over an object with the intention of parting with it on the one hand and of acquiring it on the other. A good simile would be that of a relay race where the runners, spaced at intervals, pass an object from one to the other, for example, a baton or torch.\(^4\) Although the word tradition implies conservatism, it is more than retaining the past; rather, it is the continual presence of a spirit and of a moral attitude.\(^5\) Yves Congar has described tradition as a “spontaneous assimilation of the past in understanding the present, without a break in the continuity of a society’s life, and without considering the past as outmoded.”\(^6\) Perhaps we might say that tradition enables the continuity of values/ideas as the past yields to the present. What links one generation to another is the principle of identity, which is inherent to tradition and which tradition strives to maintain.

Before examining the meaning of the Franciscan intellectual tradition, I would like to begin with a preliminary question, namely, what characterizes a tradition? Cicero once claimed that tradition is like a second nature.\(^7\) This leads us to suggest that tradition is integral to identity. When we think of the Franciscan tradition we think of a core set of values such as poverty, conversion, and peacemaking, which have been maintained in an identifiable way through rules and customs passed down through succeeding generations. In light of the Franciscan tradition, we can say that every authentic tradition has certain features. First, there is a core of fundamental values and beliefs that are particular to the tradition. Next, there are witnesses to the tradition, those in whom the set of beliefs have

\(^5\)Congar, 7.
\(^6\)Congar, 8.
taken root and become visible in such a way that the tradition has formed a culture. Clifford Geertz states that cultures are socially established structures of meaning in which human actions gain their meanings. Traditions give rise to cultures because they give rise to meaningful lives. The recipients of a tradition are those who bear witness to its particular meaning. It is they to whom the future of the tradition is entrusted insofar as they remain faithful to the identity of the tradition. What makes a tradition a tradition, therefore, is the reception and transmission of a core set of values/beliefs that shape a particular culture in such a way that the self-identity of the tradition is maintained from past to present by those who bear witness to it.

Delwin Brown states that traditions are creative insofar as they maintain a dynamic interface between culture and canon. Canons, he says, are reasonably defined “spaces,” bodies of material—texts, doctrines, symbols, rituals, or combinations of these—within which and with which the negotiation is conducted. A tradition that lives within canonical space can grow creatively as long as fidelity to the core of the tradition is maintained. He writes:

The creativity of a tradition is the tensive character of the life lived within, and sometimes against, its boundaries. The viability of a tradition is the vastness of its collected resources, unified enough to sustain needed continuity and diverse enough to create something new for new times. The power of a tradition is the worth of its space, the productivity of its complementary and competing voices, as it progresses through the novelties of history. The dynamism of a tradition is its contestability and therefore its perpetual contest. The relevance of a tradition is its contemporaneity, what it brings to and receives from the discourse of truth in every age. But the life of a tradition, its vitality as a real way of being in the world, is the assumption of its resources as one’s own. Tradition is canon lived—the negotiation of corporate and personal identities within canonical space.}

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10 Brown, 89.
Canons, therefore, are the spaces within which adherents continuously and repeatedly negotiate who they are. Tradition is canon made existential, canon lived. Negotiating identity in relationship to a canon means construing the canon as a framework in terms of which one understands oneself, one’s social and natural world, and one’s place in it.¹¹

When we apply these ideas of tradition to the Franciscan intellectual tradition we are faced with some challenging questions. First, if this is truly a tradition, what are the core values or set of beliefs that define it? What is its identity and how is it in creative tension with the past? To whom are these beliefs entrusted, that is, who are the bearers of this tradition? Finally, what are the canons of this tradition that make it meaningful? What guides the Franciscan intellectual tradition and enables it to grow while remaining faithful to its core values? Of these questions, the first can be answered with some assuredness. A brief look at the tradition enables us to identify key themes that, since the time of Francis, have been held as fundamental themes in the tradition. These include an emphasis on divine love and freedom, the primacy of Christ, the centrality of the Incarnation and, in particular Christ crucified, the sacramentality of creation, the goodness of the world, the human person as image of God, an emphasis on poverty and humility, and the development of affectus. While this list does not exhaust the tradition, it highlights its key characteristics.

The remaining questions are more difficult to answer. We may assume that Franciscans are the bearers of the intellectual tradition and that the canon of the tradition is Franciscan life but there seems to be no real connection today between the Franciscan intellectual tradition and Franciscan life. Indeed, the intellectual tradition seems to follow a trajectory that deviates from the life, one guided by medieval scholastic thought. This leads us to ask, is the Franciscan intellectual tradition a tradition unto its own?

Tradition and Evangelical Life

While we may consider the Franciscan intellectual tradition as somewhat nebulous, at least with regard to the life, there is every reason to believe that it originated in the core values of Francis and Clare. Although

¹¹Brown, 90.
the word “intellectual” connotes book learning and does not appropriately describe the distinct values of Francis and Clare, we can at the same time profess that neither Francis nor Clare were simply pragmatic Christians. They were not savants in the intellectual sense but their lives were theological by definition. Bernard McGinn has identified Francis as a vernacular theologian. This means that the authority of Francis’s theological voice emerged from his experience of God. Clare, too, could easily be defined as a vernacular theologian, one in whom *scientia* gave way to *sapientia*. McGinn describes vernacular theology as a third type of medieval theology (alongside that of monastic and scholastic theology) whose distinguishing mark is linguistic expression in the medieval vernacular tongues. The idea that scholastic theology was the only kind of medieval theology began to be questioned between 1940 and 1950 when Etienne Gilson defended Bernard of Clairvaux as a profound dogmatic and mystical theologian, not just a pious preacher. In the same way, McGinn has described a “grassroots theology” in medieval women mystics and those such as Francis whereby the authority to teach came about not *ex officio* but rather *ex beneficio* or by the gift of grace.

Just as monastic theology has been retrieved from the historical closet of piety so too vernacular theology is finding its way into the mainstream of experiential theology. Regis Armstrong indicates that in the Middle Ages theology was to “teach of God, to be taught by God, and to lead to God” (*theologia Deum docet, a Deo docetur, ad Deum ducit*). If theology is essentially “from God to God” then it would be difficult to distil theology from the spiritual journey itself. Zachary Hayes has suggested that a certain kind of logic connects Franciscan spirituality and Franciscan theology through three key themes: the humanity of Christ, the mystery of God as generous love, and the sense of creation as family. Focusing on the development of the Christological theme in the writings of Bonaventure and

14 Knox, 175.
Scotus, he points to an integral connection between the Franciscan intellectual tradition and evangelical life.18

Michael Blastic has described early Franciscan life as “doing theology,” meaning that, in the beginning of the movement, Franciscan theology was essential to the Franciscan form of life.19 He draws upon the Vita prima of Thomas of Celano to support the link between theology and life, stating that evangelical life is an integrated life of contemplative action, a life which is theological by definition.20 According to Blastic, Celano developed a Franciscan worldview based on three theological intuitions of Francis: 1) the Christian relation to the world; 2) the meaning of the human Christ, and 3) the nature of the human person.21 From these three basic points, Celano construed an evangelical form of life in which theology was integrally related to the shape of the life. This symbiotic relationship between theology and forma vitae in Celano’s writings could be described as a Franciscan evangelical synthesis meaning that Franciscan gospel life is theological by definition.

Although Blastic’s argument is persuasive, recent evidence by Timothy Johnson suggests that Celano’s synthesis may not have been entirely faithful to Francis’s original interpretation of the Gospel but rather an effort to create a literary corpus for an increasingly literate community of brothers.22 As the number of learned brothers (trained clerics) increased in the community, Johnson states, a textual maturity formed within the community centered on readers, writers, and texts. The development of a learned community centered on written texts eventually forced Francis’s theological voice to become marginalized. This transition is evident in Celano’s later writings such as the Legenda ad usum chori in which there is no reference to Francis’s own writings and the role of Francis shifts from interpreter of Gospel life to thaumaturgist or wonderworker.23

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20Blastic, 2.
21Blastic, 4.
23Johnson, 9-15.