The Retrieval of a Distinctively Franciscan Spirituality and Intellectual Tradition
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Introduction

St. Francis of Assisi is arguably the most popular saint in the Catholic Church. His witness has inspired people for centuries across continents and religions, and he has been particularly popular in the Spanish-speaking world. His followers today (men and women, lay and religious) constitute one of the largest movements within the Catholic Church. The revolutionary changes in societies in the 1960s and 1970s renewed popular interest in his example of a Christian spirituality. He embodied the values of humility and compassion, he embraced the poor and outcast, and he preached peace and love for the Earth. Scholarship over the past two generations has described not only St. Francis's distinct role in the history of Christian spirituality, but also the remarkable scope of his influence on religious thought and cultures over the centuries.

Thus, the re-examination of the Franciscan tradition has expanded its scope from the individual charismatic example of Francis to a broader way of living, loving, and knowing Jesus Christ and his message. This retrieval project is more than echoes the ideas of great medieval Franciscan thinkers such as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and John Duns Scotus. The Franciscan intellectual tradition is broader than theology and philosophy, for it also includes early forms of natural and social sciences.

This essay recounts the religious and scholarly efforts to retrieve the example of St. Francis: his witness, wisdom, and vision. It then explains the relationship between scholarship about Francis and the renewal of Franciscan religious life, spurred by the Second Vatican Council. The second part reviews recent efforts to identify, articulate, and retrieve the Franciscan intellectual tradition. The essay concludes by outlining the broader implications of this project of retrieving the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual traditions.

Retrieving St. Francis

Vatican II opened the Catholic Church to the modern world and challenged its members to reexamine their identity and mission within contemporary society. It had the effect of upending tacit assumptions about the purpose and praxis of religious life, or living the Catholic Christian faith in a religious order. The Vatican II document Perfectae caritatis challenged Catholic religious orders in two ways: to return to the sources of Christian life and the origins of their specific religious community, and to adapt the structures of their religious communities to the modern era. This was commonly spoken of as recovering “the original charism of our founders,” meaning their initial genius or gift to the church and world. For religious orders with a narrowly

3 The history and goals of the retrieval of the Franciscan intellectual tradition project can be found at http://www.franciscantradition.org/about (accessed April 22, 2011).
defined mission or identity, this task was relatively straightforward, akin to updating. Due to the diversity of expressions of Franciscan religious life, however, recovering the original genius of St. Francis was a more complex undertaking than the Franciscans first realized. Few members of Franciscan religious orders anticipated the degree to which this recovery effort would challenge the conventions that guided the practice of religious life. Prior to Vatican II, men and women joining Franciscan religious life received at most modest training—if any—on the person and social context of Francis. Most of what was passed on came from hagiographic stories about his life and a handful of his writings. There was virtually no input on the witness of Clare (the exception being for cloistered Poor Clare sisters).

Over the subsequent decades, scholars undertook an enormous effort to create a historically accurate portrait of Francis using the tools of textual criticism. Until recently, popular books about his life have drawn chiefly on medieval legends written decades or centuries after his life by people who did not personally know him. Determining the “historical Francis” has been encumbered by the volume of hagiographic writings about him, running into the thousands of pages. Some of these are strongly shaped by later polemical disputes among the Franciscans, which have further encumbered efforts to understand him. These include many later additions of questionable historical accuracy.4

Kajetan Esser OFM created the first critical edition of writings attributed to Francis in 1978.5 Francis wrote at least twenty-eight documents and dictated five others, and these bear his own voice.6 These writings can be grouped as prayers, meditations, written sermons, exhortatory letters, and instructions for following the Gospel.7 The complete writings of Francis and Clare were published in English for the first time in 1982,8 and subsequent scholarly work produced a four-volume set of writings by and about Francis covering the period from 1205 through 1365.9

With the help of these scholarly tools, a more vivid, coherent, and compelling portrait of the man and his spiritual vision has emerged from Francis’s writings. He did not leave behind what we would recognize today as formal theological work. The writings of Francis and Clare are marked by essential themes: passionate love for Jesus Christ and the desire to follow him, contemplative prayer, ongoing conversion of life,
and a spirituality of brotherhood with everyone and everything. Francis’s writings describe his dedication to following Jesus Christ, his devotion to the Incarnation, his love of the Gospel and the Eucharist, his religious vision of the human family, and his public preaching of God’s love and peace. This new scholarship emphasizes his practice of deeply listening to the Gospel, receiving the Eucharist, and weaving periods of contemplative prayer in wilderness hermitages with and public proclamation of God’s love.

The portraits of Francis that emerged from this scholarship have prompted fresh reflection about the contemporary praxis of Franciscan religious life. Inspired by the itinerancy of Jesus, Francis and his early followers were travelling preachers and contemplatives. Francis and Clare wanted to be fully faithful to the Catholic Church’s leaders and teaching, yet they wished to express their faith in Jesus Christ in radical ways that appeared novel to church authorities of that time. Their spiritual practice alternated periods of intense contemplative prayer and popular preaching. The early Friars would spend weeks living in caves and informal huts in the wilderness where they fasted and prayed, practicing extended periods of silence. Their preaching was in the vernacular language in the public spaces of burgeoning towns. The message of the early Friars was faithful to the Church, but strongly emphasized the concrete social implications of the Gospel. Francis and his early followers preached peace. They undertook specific efforts to reconcile warring social groups and they fostered compromise. Francis accompanied the fifth crusade as a noncombatant and crossed enemy lines to preach to the Sultan El-Kamil, the leader of the Muslim forces. While the Christian army was slaughtering innocent civilians or being routed by the Muslim army, Francis and the Sultan undertook a form of interreligious dialogue. Evidence suggests this had a significant impact on both of them.10

Francis and his early followers founded a lay religious movement within the Catholic Church to live the Gospel. The genius of this movement was its broadly inclusive approach. The Friars included both lay and ordained men. The Poor Clares provided the opportunity to live a dedicated contemplative life. Francis also inspired the “third order” of lay or Secular Franciscans. The movement included men and women, vowed religious and married, dedicated to reforming their lives and society, and guided by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Scholarship about Clare has shown that she was an important leader in her own right. As the first Franciscan woman, she played a vital role in the movement after the death of Francis. Clare and her followers lived a dedicated contemplative life behind cloister walls, but other women were inspired by Francis to live out their lay vocation and preach in the world. The (re)discovery of many diverse expressions of Franciscan spirituality lived by lay women points to the recurrent themes in feminine Franciscan spirituality.11

Challenged by Vatican II and this new scholarship, American members of Franciscan religious communities began to realize that Franciscan spirituality had some

distinct features, emphases that were different from other currents within the church. It was not monastic, for it promoted public preaching and social engagement. It was not strictly apostolic, for it was grounded in the practice of community living and contemplative prayer. Because the practice of Franciscan living is patterned on living the Gospel, a leading Franciscan scholar named it as “the Evangelical life.” This is a useful term for distinguishing this spiritual tradition from others within the Catholic Church (but it can be confused with conservative evangelical Protestants).

The “rediscovery” of a Franciscan intellectual tradition

Over the past twenty years, the focus of Franciscan scholarship has expanded to investigate how Francis’s religious intuition has shaped the practice of Franciscan spirituality as a broad tradition in diverse expressions: in living, prayer, preaching, thinking, and acting for the past eight centuries across the world. This work by scholars—women and men, lay and vowed religious—is done to understand the breadth of the Franciscan tradition, and possibly to open up fresh perspectives on how to live out the Franciscan vocation today. Perhaps the most surprising rediscovery—at least to many—was the recognition of a distinctly Franciscan approach to philosophy, theology, and now, more broadly, to the intellectual life.

A commission for the retrieval of the Franciscan intellectual tradition began as a formal project around the year 2000, but efforts to promote “the Franciscan school” as a distinct approach to understanding God, nature, and humanity can be traced back much further. This project has expanded the frame of reference for Franciscans from the individual charismatic witness of Francis to a broader intellectual movement reflecting his intuition, values, and spirit. For those familiar only with the popular representations of Francis as the poor man from Assisi, a Franciscan intellectual tradition might seem counterintuitive. Some prior scholarship had presented the movement of early Friars into the university with a narrative in which the purity of Francis’s primitive vision was corrupted by academic institutions. In reality, the retrieval of the Franciscan intellectual tradition has clarified how Francis inspired his followers as a form of creative continuity through institutionalization.

Contemporary Franciscans face some of the same challenges as the early Franciscan movement: how is one to follow an intensely charismatic yet simple popular preacher? If one’s task is merely to mimic Francis as though he or she were a medieval man and woman, one need not bother with academic learning. However, if one accepts the premise that translation and interpretation can serve as helpful intermediary steps to living the Gospel in the spirit of Francis, or to proclaiming the Gospel throughout the world, then additional intellectual tools can be of great help.

Drawing on the intuition of St. Francis, the Franciscan intellectual tradition is a philosophical and theological expression of the Catholic faith. It complements the other two major intellectual traditions within western Catholicism, the Augustinian and Thomistic (or Dominican). All three respect the fundamental teachings of Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium. All three traditions have received the blessings of popes and scholars. They reinforce each other on the essential elements of the one Catholic faith. Yet in their diverse interpretive approaches, they complement each other, like multiple strands woven together make a stronger rope.\(^\text{15}\)

The most important Friars in this tradition are Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (d. 1274) and John Duns Scotus (d. 1308). In their work we find the intuition and spirit of Francis and that of the primitive Franciscans translated into formal philosophy and systematic theology. Bonaventure was a teacher at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century. His theology has enjoyed a resurgence of interest, in part because it provides an alternative to Thomism with several advantages for fostering dialogue between religion and a modern scientific understanding of our evolutionary universe. Although his complex medieval thought patterns, replete with subtle symbolism and numbered images, can be intimidating for those unaccustomed to these kinds of texts, several very accessible summaries of his general thought and theological images of creation are now available.\(^\text{16}\)

The writings of Friar John Duns Scotus reflect a deep, penetrating meditation on the significance of the Incarnation. He fleshed out the philosophical, theological, and ethical implications of Francis’ genius. Scotus understood the Incarnation as the highest, greatest expression of God’s love. The divine desire to become incarnate was integral to the divine plan, and creation was made capable of bearing Christ in incarnate form. Jesus came to express God’s love, and not as a result of human sin. Thus, the Incarnation itself is a communicative strategy that reveals the character of God and love. It is not only a discrete historical event, nor merely a precondition for the Word to be preached to us. Christ is the meaning and model of creation, and every creature is made in the Image of Christ. The divine logic of using the physical material world to communicate love to us was and is manifest in the Incarnation. He boldly asserted that God’s love is the most important reality in the cosmos and he drew


conclusions from this first principle. His method was deeply faithful to the Christian tradition, yet highly original, challenging shallow or distorted assumptions serving as obstacles to God’s love and grace.\footnote{Translations of his original texts are difficult to read, but several more accessible, derivative works have been recently published, and these form the basis for this section. The most important is Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, \textit{Scotus for Dunces: An Introduction to the Subtle Doctor} (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2003). See also Ilia Delio, OSF, \textit{A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World} (St. Bonaventure NY: Franciscan Institute, 2003), Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, \textit{Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader} (Quincy Illinois: Franciscan Press, 2003), part IV.}

In addition to their activities at the University of Paris, the Franciscans participated in the University of Oxford, and they were fortunate to recruit as their teacher Robert Grosseteste, one of the most influential English scholars of that era.\footnote{A.G. Little, "The Franciscan School at Oxford in the 13th Century," \textit{Archivum Franciscanum Historicum} \textbf{19} (1926), Andrew G. Little, \textit{The Grey Friars in Oxford} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), Andrew G. Little, \textit{Studies in English Franciscan History} (Longmans, Green & Co.: London, 1916). James McEvoy, \textit{Robert Grosseteste} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).} His best known student is Friar Roger Bacon (d. 1292) who joined the Franciscan Friars about 1256. He was educated at Oxford, but taught and wrote at the University of Paris for some time before returning to England. Roger Bacon was a thirteenth century scholastic philosopher, a proto-scientist, and a scholar with a truly astonishing scope of interest and ambition. His accomplishments can be conceived as in three clusters. He made important advances in the scientific study of light, vision, energy, and the physical processes of change in nature. The Oxford Franciscan School believed that by studying light, one was studying God revealed in creation.\footnote{Roger French and Andrew Cunningham, \textit{Before Science: The Invention of the Friars’ Natural Philosophy} (London: Scolar Press, 1996). 230} Roger described the earth and the heavens using mathematics and maps, and he has been called the Father of Modern Geography.\footnote{This honorific title, from E.G.R. Taylor, "Compendium Cosmographiae: A Text-Book of Columbus," \textit{Scottish Geographical Magazine} \textbf{47} (1931), is exaggerated, but has a grain of truth, according to David Woodward and Herbert M. Howe, "Roger Bacon on Geography and Cartography," in \textit{Roger Bacon and the Sciences}, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 1997).} Third, he is best known for his advocacy for direct observation. For Roger, how we justify what we know was critically important. Investigation of nature requires observation and mathematics; appeals to the authority of others do not suffice. He articulated a philosophy of knowledge which was highly influential on the modern scientific method several centuries later.\footnote{He used the term \textit{scientia experimentalis}, which can be translated as natural science, phenomenology of experience, or philosophy of science. It certainly means a critical reflection on the nature and use of science, but did not mean experiment in the modern sense. See Jeremiah Hackett, "Roger Bacon: His Life, Career and Works," in \textit{Roger Bacon and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays}, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 6.} Bacon did not propose what we understand today as the experimental method, but he did lead medieval science closer to modern science than any other medieval scholar.\footnote{Brian Clegg, \textit{The First Scientist: A Life of Roger Bacon} (New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2003).} Roger’s scholarship helps justify the term “Franciscan intellectual tradition,” for his work is broader than philosophy and theology. He and others were impressive scholars of their era, investigating, documenting, and teaching about social and natural phenomena.
Retrieval for renewal

The notion of returning to sources or retrieving something from the past assumes that something had been lost or hidden. Was the Franciscan intellectual tradition lost? This is an important question that merits careful consideration for understanding contemporary interest in spirituality. Other terms could be used, such as forgotten, or stolen. Beginning with the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, Liberal governments brutally persecuted religious orders in Europe, and in some cases dismantled the structures of religious life. Secular, democratic governments seized monasteries and institutions and disallowed the practice of religious life (this is one reason why so many religious orders migrated to the U.S. a century ago). For example, the Franciscan Friars globally declined in number by 80% over a period roughly coinciding with the nineteenth century.23 As the church and religious orders recovered, there was a strong impetus toward centralization and homogenization of thought. The Franciscan philosophical and theological tradition was largely disregarded in the rebuilding of Catholic institutions during the early twentieth century.24

The word “tradition” comes from the Latin tradere, meaning to transmit, hand over, or deliver. This indicates that a tradition is not only a list of ideas to be defended, but suggests rather a range of practices for loving and knowing God, nature, and our fellow human beings, practices shared from one generation to the next. Retrieving a tradition requires the application of wisdom through multiple steps.

• Of all the elements in a religious tradition spanning centuries, which should be selected for retrieval? This requires discernment, for some elements of a tradition should be left in the past, and others could be helpful for inspiring action today.
• In light of the needs of the contemporary world, how should one reinterpret these elements? How can elements of the historical past provide meaning in our world that is deeply divided by income, scarred by recurring violence, and entering an ominous stage of ecological disruption?
• How can these processes renew religious identity more generally? This requires thinking critically about what values we want to animate us today and identifying examples from our past to help us in our journey into the future. But it also requires engagement with powerful contemporary forms of knowledge, such as economics and science.

Thus, retrieval is a creative process because it requires synthesizing the past with present knowledge to live the Gospel in our present reality. A genuine, life-giving retrieval process must not only draw from the past, but also find expression in ways that are meaningful in our place and time.

To date the retrieval of the Franciscan intellectual tradition has emphasized historical rediscovery. Most of the research has been defined as discovering what was in

the past: the idea, figures, and themes from Franciscan history. Much less of this work has articulated these with contemporary philosophies and systems of knowledge. Franciscan Gospel values are essential, but the Franciscan traditions of spirituality and intellectual life are not constituted exclusively by themes. Retrieving this tradition demands an integrated approach to knowing (across different forms of knowledge and modes of knowing, i.e., disciplines), but also articulates to praxis for love, virtue, and moral living. Scholarship in the Franciscan tradition can and should now expand to include work that articulates explicitly with contemporary knowledge systems and articulates a vision for living, loving, and knowing into the future.

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