

Re : Workshop # 3: The Living Person of Christ

Excerpts from the CIOFS Manual: section Francis and his approach to Divinity: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Spirituality is based on our unique experience of God

*“... the spirituality of a saint is his or her particular way of knowing God, of speaking of Him, of going to Him, of interacting with Him. Every saint sees the attributes of God through the lens of what they most frequently meditate, what draws them most deeply, what attracts them and what conquers them. For each saint, one particular virtue of Christ is the ideal towards which they must tend, while all the saints - and indeed all the Church - strive to imitate **the whole Christ**. Also because of this, the Church is, so to speak, **the total Christ** and each single Christian, each single saint - they are all more or less perfect members of Him.”* (Pious XII to the Secular Franciscans of Italy, 1 July 1956)

“The world has need of this Franciscan spirit, of this Franciscan vision of life. You, beloved children, must hurry to comprehend it in its depths, to love it intensely, above all to live it with that perfection which befits your state of life.” (Pius XII, to the Secular Franciscans of Italy, 1 July 1956)¹

SPIRITUALITY ARISES AND NOURISHES ITSELF FROM THE INTIMATE PERSONAL CONTACT WITH GOD

It is an often forgotten fact that the Poverello spent many weeks in silence - in the last years of his life, as much as half his time².

None of us, either, can experience an authentic spiritual development towards the realisation of our own vocation, unless we find enough space for silence to remain **alone with God**, as Francis did, in intimate and ceaseless prayer.

It is not enough to follow some lessons, to read and study texts however interesting.

Spirituality is the result of an inspiration of the Spirit in the most intimate depths of our being. It is something so intimate and so personal that cannot be received through the study of books as a simple form of intellectual enrichment. It is something that concerns no-one but ourselves, individually, we and no other.

“SPIRITUALITY IS THE EXPERIENCE OF WHAT ONE BELIEVES”.³

Lk. 18.8: *“But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

Mk. 9.23-24: *“Everything is possible to one who has faith. Then the boy’s father cried out: I do believe, help my unbelief!”*

In the climate in which we live today, it is rare to find people who, in their concrete daily life, show a **true, profound and unwavering faith**, and not just on the intellectual level. In other words, people whose faith (which is more than simply believing) has substantially changed their lives. With our lips (perhaps with our minds too), we manifest our belief in the overwhelming tenets of Christian revelation: *God exists, God has revealed Himself, God loves me, God has come close, He is even intimate with me, God wants to share the fullness of His life with me for all eternity*. But then, in concrete daily life apparently nothing changes. Sadly, we have to acknowledge that for most of us there

is a gulf between the mind and the heart, between intelligence and will, between saying and doing and, in the last analysis, between thought and “being”.

We need to recognise that often our thoughts, our will, our faith, are essentially “weak”. At times they are extremely weak and unable to produce any effective results.

Religion, belief, faith have often become merely mental, theoretical, abstract exercises, a ‘habit’ which is essentially cultural and does not involve our deep being, our will or our actual life.

The Christian experience of St Francis of Assisi helps us to understand the extent to which faith must be nurtured, deepened and continuously tested out in our lives.

Faith can never be taken for granted.

This has always been true, and it is particularly true today.

We must find the courage to put ourselves to test and ‘to prove’ our faith, to make sure that it produces concrete and authentic changes in our daily lives.

Our times seem especially marked by a **lack of this verification**, which manifests itself by the **diminished impact of faith on our lives**.

*The apostasy of the modern era is based on the reduced impact of faith on the lives of Christians.*⁴

St Francis, in his own human adventure, lived out his faith by incarnating it, by making it grow each day and by allowing it to transform him in his depths. This is one reason why Francis is so perennially attractive.

In many ways, our own times are different from those of Francis but there are also many similarities between his day and ours. Through looking at him and meditating on his spiritual experience, we come to realise how faith has become habitual, theoretical, weak, discounted, unable to impact on our daily lives.

Therefore, in dealing with the “faith of Francis”, *his theology, his spirituality*, we must make an effort to assume the right interior attitude, in holy humility and in a spirit of self-criticism so that, while we discover Francis, we also adopt his own capacity to believe and live as firmly and as generously.

FRANCIS, THEOLOGIAN FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

Francis was no theologian by profession. He did not concern himself with thinking out a new theological system. Francis, truly an *evangelical and catholic man*, deepened the mysteries of Revelation, penetrated them, allowed them to permeate him so as to have the most authentic, intimate and true existential experience of God.

For this reason, Francis is **a theologian of the existential experience of God**.

The Father is the final goal of Francis’ search and of his whole existence.

Francis can hardly believe that God loves him to the extent of giving Himself totally *in the Son*, and he wants to respond to this love by offering himself completely, *like the Son*, in order to achieve a total conformity with Him. He lets the *Spirit* completely permeate him so that the *Father* may bring about this miracle.

All his prayer, all his writings, all his praises, everything he did, expressed this most eloquently.

⁴ J. Ratzinger, “Guardare Cristo. Esercizi di fede, speranza e carità”, Milan 1989 p. 31

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF FRANCIS

In Francis, just as in the *Creed* of the Church, the life of Christ is assumed globally with a particular emphasis on all those aspects which manifest the supreme expression of the love of God, and reveal his most intimate essence: his total offering of self in his death, and a death on a cross.

For this reason, the **Eucharist** had a particular importance for Francis.

The Eucharist is, in fact, the supreme realization of the love of the Father for His creatures, and the revelation of the Father's essence. In the Eucharist takes place the actual meeting between God and His creatures in both human and spiritual dimensions: (“*It is the Spirit of the Lord, therefore, That lives in Its faithful, That receives the Body and Blood of the Lord.*” and “*In this way the Lord is always with his faithful . . .*”, Admonition One)