

## Part 1 – Understanding Franciscan Theology, Tradition & Spirituality

In order to better understand the different focus of the two main theologies in the Catholic Church, we need to understand or at least revisit the primary theology that is taught and is the basis for our religious education programs.

The following diagram, though much simplified, can aid in setting us on our basic path to understanding. We will look at the Two (2) main theologies from the Middle Ages: the Primary Theology adopted by the Church (i.e. The Work of the Dominican School) and the Alternate Theology in the Church, (i.e. The Franciscan School).

I am not here speaking of Spiritualities, of which there are many fine paths that can lead us to experience God. I am speaking only of the foundations in theology that give rise to the many varied and equally excellent approaches to God (spiritualities).

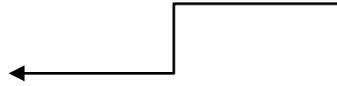
As with all Orders, we have much in our development that is based in the insights and writings of both St. Augustine and St. Anselm. So to help us understand the different focus that has become the foundations of the basic spiritualities accepted in the Church, we need to look at these 2 major schools of thought, The “Dominican” School and the “Franciscan” School.

Lets begin with the chart on the next page for our discussion.

St. Augustine



St. Anselm & the Doctrine of Atonement



Thomas Aquinas (Dominican School – The Primary Theology)

- atonement centered
- Jesus seen as expiation for sin
- Jesus – Incarnation would not have been necessary if Adam & Eve had not sinned
- Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris 1879* made this school the primary theology taught in all Catholic schools of religion and theology.
- Primary theology in the Church
- Juridical or law based (Commandments, laws, rules)

Western (Latin) Fathers

St. Augustine

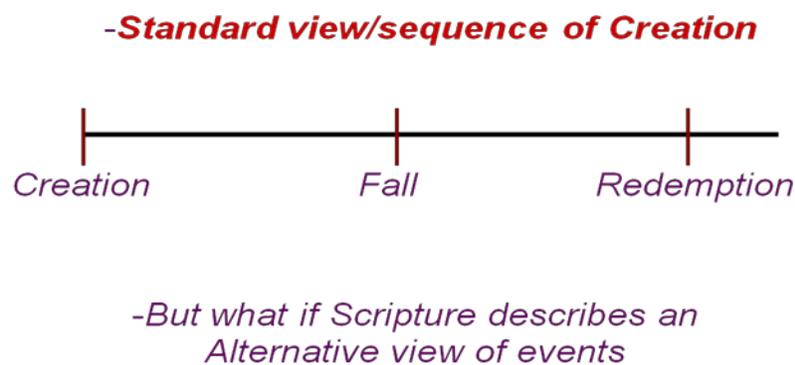
- Though much of St Augustine's writing is based on seeing God as love, he still had an emphasis on the fall of man characterized by Original Sin – this foundation places our focus on the sin of Adam and Eve (pride, disobedience, possibly trying to take by force (fruit of the forbidden tree), that which cannot be taken or earned, but which can only be given). None the less, with original sin predominant we develop a spirituality based on our need for redemption, penance and restitution. The love of God is very much present, especially for Augustine, but it is still viewed in light of the fall.

St. Anselm

- Doctrine of Atonement – Middle ages – this doctrine was developed to reconcile the love of God and His forgiveness with the human need for retribution or atonement. It is an answer to cheap grace or a God too loving and gracious to desire punishment. Sin can be

forgiven through the love and mercy of God, but it must be atoned for through penance and punishment. Investigate the writing “*Cur Deus Homo*” or Why the God Man.

This Western (Latin) theology was championed by St Thomas Aquinas and became identified as the Dominican School, and might have a view of creation as depicted below. (Again remember this is much simplified to emphasize the basic foundational difference in approach to God. There is much in the various theologies that overlap in many areas and all are directed to the same goal of unity with God)



**Figure 1 - basic view of creation**

This brief diagram is to highlight what we generally understand as the sequence of Creation, taken from Genesis. Creation is the beginning of God’s wondrous activity. As we know also from Genesis, it seems that sin and the fall from grace along with expulsion from the Garden of Eden, follow hot on the heels of God’s work. As we sing in the exultat every Easter vigil, O wondrous fault, that earned us so great a redeemer.

But as the diagram suggests, what if there is an alternate view of how these events unfolded? There is the possibility of a different understanding of God’s plan that will find some voice among the Eastern (Greek) Fathers and will later become the foundation for the Franciscan School and its understanding of God’s plan for creation.

Comparison of Schools of Theology

<p>The Western or Latin Fathers</p> <p><i>Saint Augustine</i>  <i>Saint Anselm of Canterbury</i>  <i>“Cur Deus Homo”</i>  <i>Doctrine of Salvation</i></p> <p><b>The Dominican School</b>  <b>Thomas Aquinas</b></p> <p>Jesus comes (Incarnation) as atonement and expiation for sin</p> <p>without sin – Incarnation was unnecessary</p> <p>redemption and salvation centered</p> <p>atoning for personal sins</p> <p>This path became the Primary theology of the Church</p> <p>Pope Leo XIII (OFS) – <i>“Aeterni Patris”</i> 1879          More judicially based on rules &amp; moral codes</p>	<p>The Eastern or Greek Fathers  <i>(Cappodocians)</i>  <i>Athanasius, Basil the Great</i>  <i>Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus</i>  <i>Pseudo-Dionysius</i>  <i>The Victorines</i>          Rupert of Deutz (Benedictine)          Robert Grosseteste</p> <p>The penitential movement in the Church</p> <p><b>The Franciscan School</b>  <b>Bonaventure of Bagnoriglio</b>  <b>John Duns Scotus</b></p> <p>Jesus comes (Incarnation) because this was always God’s desire and intention</p> <p>Incarnation was never dictated by any need of man, but by God’s free desire</p> <p>God is the ultimate Good = Love          Love is the reason for creation</p> <p>redemption and salvation are the result of God’s love</p> <p>conforming oneself to Jesus in radical sonship</p> <p>This path toward humility &amp; poverty remains as an alternate &amp; accepted theology</p> <p>Based on the gift of the Father’s love</p>
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**Figure 2 - Alternate (Franciscan) Tradition**

## Franciscan Tradition (alternate theology)

The theology of the Franciscan School develops from an insight of the Eastern Fathers, namely that the Incarnation is too important and too great an event to be initiated by sin. This insight stimulates a new understanding and hopefully an appreciation of the fullness of God's love for creation.

Pseudo-Dionysius & later the Victorines developed the understanding of God as goodness, and the ultimate good is love. And this goodness is self diffusive or is constantly being given to others.

Rupert of Deutz (a Benedictine) around 1127 was possibly the first to articulate the idea that since God was good and therefore could not will evil, then the Incarnation was fore-ordained so that God could be present and rejoice with His people. The Cross was the result of man's fall, but the Incarnation was not.

Later, in the 1230s, Robert Grosseteste, (secular clergyman and later bishop), a noted Scripture scholar at Oxford, came up with an original theological conception quite appropriate for a natural scientist. He believed that the whole universe reflected the glory of God. It was a great educational machine, meant for the instruction of humanity.

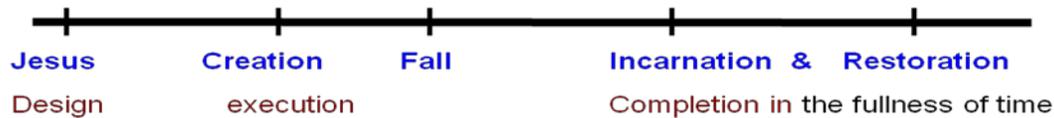
For Grosseteste, Christ's incarnation was not a last-minute rescue plan devised to rescue fallen humanity. It was part of the plan from the beginning. Christ, God incarnated in man, had always been meant to be the capstone of creation. This teaching resonated with the Franciscans at Oxford, where Robert taught theology to the new friars.

The writings and thoughts of both Rupert and Robert would eventually come to the fore in the work of Bl. John Duns Scotus OFM and would form the basis of thought for the theology of the Franciscan School.

Jesus was not an after-thought that happened because mankind did not keep our part of the covenant with God. Sin was not the reason for Jesus, and nothing man could have ever done could force God to act. The Incarnation was **not a reaction, but the initial action** that caused creation in the first place. In other words, the Incarnation was not God's "plan B" set into motion after "plan A" failed.

God always intended Incarnation before and regardless of the existence of man or any of his subsequent (to creation) actions.

In the Franciscan vision, creation might look more like this: all creation begins with Jesus, who is the blueprint for creation and is the ultimate goal of creation.



#### Franciscan view of creation

- based on Jesus always being the blueprint and basis of creation. It was always God's intention in the fullness of time to Incarnate
- Jesus the Master Plan - **Ephesians 1: 4**
- First born of Creation – **Colossians 1:15-18**
- Pre-existent Word- Logos – John 1
- Center, focus, reason for creation -
- goal of creation - **All things created through, for Him & have their goal/fullness in Him - Colossians 1:15-18**

**Figure 3 - Franciscan sequence of Creation**

Now with the possibility of a new starting point different from the traditional one of the first sin, we can look into the events beginning with the life of St. Francis, the inspiration of St. Clare and the wisdom of St Bonaventure and Bl. John Scotus that moves sin out of the forefront and replaces it with overwhelming love of a Creator overjoyed and passionately in love with creation.

#### Francis of Assisi – vernacular theologian

Though not formally educated in theology, Francis through gift and experience was able to articulate the loving presence of God in a way understandable to the poor and unlettered masses, those relegated to second class places by both church and secular institutions.

The foundation stones for Franciscan theology, spirituality and life are based in the **humility and poverty** of God. This poverty is known as kenosis, or God's total giving/self-emptying to be born into the human condition. God freely chose to become human to rejoice in creation.

In Jesus, God the Father expresses utter humility in His turning completely in love to Jesus and through Jesus, to us.

Francis in his Canticle of the Creatures expresses his understanding of this poverty and humility, turned in love toward creation and goes on to declare that God alone is good and

worthy, while man in his exalted position (within the created and ordered world) is little more than a worm compared to the greatness of God. In all this Francis is humbled and in awe of God, who despite all His majesty, desires us and stoops down low in love for us, a love that surpasses and covers everything.

The Franciscan path is a Spirituality of descent, a way of becoming little and a way to imitate the humility and poverty of God.

Taken to its conclusion, the Franciscan view is that in ourselves, we can never be worthy and earn our salvation. "Only God is good". There is only one way in our grasp and that is a simple "yes" to accept God's love as a pure gift and to live life reflecting that love, (yes it is a sacramental vision of life).

God desires us, to be in a deeply loving relationship with us and constantly invites us and offers us opportunities to enter into relationship. On our part, we will still need to make a fundamental option to either accept God's invitation or to reject it. As God through His free will has chosen us, we too, in our free will, must choose Him.

Before going on to Bonaventure and Scotus and a brief look at their contributions to our Franciscan traditions, let pause and review the foundations of Franciscan life and spirituality.

## Two Key beliefs as foundation of Franciscan Life & Spirituality

- **Poverty of God** – Perfect love requires the lover to hold nothing back from the beloved! God freely, by choice empties Himself for the good of the other (self-communication -- kenosis)

- **Humility of God** – God turns toward Jesus completely (**God's full self-expression in one other than Himself**) and through Jesus The Father turns toward us (**finite self-expression of Jesus**) and all creation.

- **Our poverty & humility is based on our understanding and embracing our absolute dependence upon God for existence and our need for otherness (relationships)**

### Figure 4 - Foundations of Franciscan Spiritual Tradition

Think about what these 2 statements say to you about the nature of our God, and what challenges do they ask of you?

## St. Bonaventure

**Bonaventure** ([Italian](#): *San Bonaventura*; 1221<sup>[1]</sup> – 15 July 1274), born **John of Fidenza** ([Italian](#): *Giovanni di Fidenza*), was an Italian [medieval scholastic theologian](#) and [philosopher](#), the eighth [Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor](#). He was a [Cardinal Bishop of Albano](#). He was [canonized](#) on 14 April 1482 by [Pope Sixtus IV](#) and declared a [Doctor of the Church](#) in the year 1588 by [Pope Sixtus V](#). He is known as the "*Seraphic Doctor*" ([Latin](#): "*Doctor Seraphicus*").

St Bonaventure is often referred to as the Second Founder of the Franciscan Order.

These are some of the key highpoints from the works of Bonaventure to reflect on:

- **Incarnation** is God's complete self-communication/expression of Himself to creation
  - Sin is the least important reason for the Incarnation (Bonaventure does not totally leave the theology of the Dominican school)
  
- **Trinity**
  - Humility, poverty (kenosis), self-emptying is an essential aspect of God's nature
  - God is the highest good. As Francis would say "God is good, the most high good, the supreme good, You who alone are Good."
  - The Trinity might best be understood as "fountain-fullness" or the source that is constantly overflowing to fill us.
  - Trinity is total and mutual relationship.
  - God's nature is the highest good/love which is constantly given away in the act of creation.

"Bonum est sui diffusivum" ("goodness is diffusive") or directed outward to the other – this is the heart of Franciscan theology!

It is appropriate that we begin our look at the development of Franciscan Spirituality from the place where it all begins, the Most Holy Trinity.

Bonaventure begins his journey into the depths of the Trinity with the solid understanding that the ultimate act of God's love was the Incarnation, God's total self-emptying (kenosis) in

order to fully communicate and express Himself (His nature) in a way understandable to mankind, through Jesus.

Much of Bonaventure's work leads us deeply into the mystery of the Trinity, and the image of a fountain is possibly the best way to understand the life of the Trinity in his writings. Trinity is a community of perfect loving relationship (e.g. total self-giving, total receiving by the other, and total reflection back to the giver), so intense and complete that it is an ever-flowing fountain or spring, constantly drenching creation with sustaining love.

To be perfect, love cannot and does not by nature withhold anything of itself from the object of the love (Lover and Beloved).

The relationship of love within the Trinity is internal (intra) to the nature of the Trinity, and all creation is the product of that "perfect" and totally shared love. (In Francis' day it was called the fecundity of God and was understood that perfect love shared perfectly must be fertile and productive).

Franciscan thought brings about the insight that this internal relationship within the Trinity is intrinsically connected to the ongoing act of creation and through the act of Incarnation, we, humanity, are given a special invitation to enter into relationship with the Trinity.

Bonaventure in his writings will go on to explore the images of God found throughout creation (one such work is the "Breviloquium"), relating the presence of God existing in all things.

Using the model of a book, Bonaventure, in the first chapter, describes the Trinity as being present and shining forth in all of creation. All parts of the created world in its own way and capacity bears the marks of its creator and offers its own song of praise, whether as a vestige, an image or lastly a similitude.

- The **vestige** is the reality and presence of God in all created things and creatures.
- **Image** is the gift given to the rational beings (people), who have the presence of God within them and by free will are capable of touching the spirit of God within or rejecting it. Note, however, that our choice of rejecting does not reduce or eliminate the presence of God within.
- Lastly, **similitude** is the goal of Franciscan spirituality (St. Clare's gift), where we are, like Francis, not to just accept and acknowledge before the world the presence of God within, but are called to conform ourselves to become an external view of that internal reality. We are called to be transformed into the imitations of Jesus.

The first part alluded to in the "Breviloquium", is the Book of Creation, where we begin to see, albeit dimly, the traces of God throughout all of creation. An image or trace that

becomes clearer as we transform ourselves into purer and more complete imitations of Jesus.

Still at this time in medieval history, the predominant theological thought was that Jesus came to die for our sins. This remained true for Bonaventure, who, though he acknowledged sin as the last and least important reason, still believed that sin, was “one” of the reasons for the Incarnation.

Following the work of Bonaventure, and succeeding him to the Chair of Theology at the University of Paris, was Friar John “Duns” Scotus.

### **John Duns Scotus**

**Blessed John (Johannes) Duns Scotus, O.F.M.** (c. 1265 – 8 November 1308) was one of the more important [theologians](#) and [philosophers](#) of the [High Middle Ages](#). He was nicknamed *Doctor Subtilis* for his penetrating and subtle manner of thought. Scotus has had considerable influence on [Catholic](#) thought.

In John’s writing, though not as well organized as the “Summa” of Thomas Aquinas, the Franciscan School moved away from atonement-based theology, which had become the primary theology of the Dominican school. After many years of debate, the Dominican based approach would become the most widely held theology within the Church, though the position of the Franciscan School as secondary remained and still remains today a fully accepted Tradition or alternate theology within the Church, so much so that many of our Roman Pontiffs became members of the Secular Franciscan Order.

Scotus will take the final step in establishing the Franciscan approach/school and our approach to God by explaining that the Incarnation was always the primary goal for all of God’s creation, a plan that could not be changed or altered by mankind’s activities.

It was the desire of God to embrace and in turn be embraced, and this desire, not the sin of man, was the reason for the coming of Jesus, the fulfillment of the intention that became creation. Bl. John Scotus expresses his understanding in his work, the “Primacy of Christ”, the theological foundation that stems from the lived reality of Francis of Assisi.

Scotus places Jesus and the Incarnation firmly at the absolute core of Christian belief. Not starting with the need for a sin offering as we still do today, (we Franciscans so often start here too), but at a beginning based on a total and completely free expression of God's love and otherness. Sure we don't deny that Jesus redeemed us and died because of sin, but Jesus was always God's first intention or master plan and would have become incarnate (taken on our humanity) regardless of sin or anything else.

Jesus came to show us the depths of God's love and desire to love us, and to offer us the invitation to be loved by us in return. He gave us a true model of how to live life through love and respect for each other.

Jesus passion and death shows us that God loves us so much there is nothing He would hold back on our behalf. Such complete, unconditional and steadfast love on God's part is the wonderful journey we come to understand, through Scripture, through community and through living authentic lives that seek Jesus.

Scotus affirms that Jesus is the reason, not just for the season as the popular slogan proclaims, but for the existence for all creation. All was made for Him and will return to Him (as we read in the prologue to the Gospel of John 1:1-18).

It is through God's choice and total freedom that Jesus fills the role of savior and redeemer, but God was never constrained or forced to the cross in order to complete the act of salvation. God could have chosen any method including simply willing salvation. Instead He chose the cross, not from necessity, but to demonstrate the reality and depth of free unconditional love.

In this unconditional Love the welfare of the other is always the central focus of the love. Nothing can be held back whether through God's initial self-emptying communication (Incarnation) or the absolute demonstration of self-giving and sacrificial love.

All is freely given up for you!

## Bl. John Duns Scotus Primacy of Christ

- The Incarnation is not a divine after thought or reaction to any event, but the cornerstone of the whole plan of creation
- Everything that was, is & ever will be is based in Christ
- The relationship between divinity & humanity  
God & humanity are intrinsically united and all creation is centered in Jesus
- **Creation is based on God's absolute freedom and love, e.g God's very nature, and not a need.**

### Figure 5 Scotus - Primacy of Christ

John's insights into the nature of God lead us to another important concept, "thisness" (in Latin "*Haecceitas*"). This concept relates to each of us, as unique individual gifts of God, and as gifts we are loved because we simply "ARE", not because of anything we accomplish.

Think of it this way: Before you were born, there were an infinite number of possibilities for the "you" that would eventually come into creation. Once you were created, the created "you" is the specific one, of all the infinite possibilities, that God always desired and loves, unconditionally and this love is what called you into being.

**You are the unique and specific one that is the apple of God's eye.**

### **Thisness** [*haecceitas*]

The doctrine of thisness applied to the human person invests each individual with a unique value as one single individual wanted and loved by God, ***apart from any trait, attribute, accomplishment, similarity to others or any contribution to society.***

***Of the infinite possibilities for a "you" the specific, unique "you" is the one wanted & loved by God and called into being.***

We are a unique, customized, gift from God

### Figure 6 Scotus, Thisness (*haecceitas*)

The Franciscan Spiritual tradition, though one of many in the church, is focused on encouraging all Franciscans, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Orders, to move beyond a “Me and God” faith to a faith that truly lives the great commandments of Love. The essence of the Rule of all the branches of the Franciscan Family is simple: “To observe the Gospel of Jesus Christ”.

Until we can see God instead of ourselves and our own wants as the center of the universe, we cannot fully understand what the Father is offering us in Jesus. Until we decide to begin the difficult journey inward, to become fully mature in Christ, to become Eucharist blessed, broken, and given for others, we cannot break out of the consumer-oriented, performance-based spirituality of ascent (“upward spiritual mobility”) and embrace the path of descent or littleness walked by Jesus and later by Francis.

Until we understand that we stand alone and naked before God, without any accomplishments and without any successes, and understand/experience that God is totally consumed with love for each of us, we cannot fathom the depth and passion of God’s love and His desire to share this love with us.

We are contingent beings, we do not exist by our own force of will and we do not hold ourselves in creation. We are completely dependent on another for our very existence. We are dependent on God. This is why Francis could call himself a worm, as worth nothing, because alone he was nothing – God is everything, and Francis found himself in awe of this greatest of lovers.

The beauty here is that God wills our existence and continues our existence, simply because He loves us, desires us and hopes we will love Him in return.

Here in our absolute littleness and “creature-li-ness” is where we can experience the embrace, peace and joy of a love beyond any loves, and here alone can we become aware of our totally gifted beloved-ness.

## Summary & Conclusions: Franciscan Spirituality in 7 Steps

The summary, compliments of Friar Joe Schwab OFM: director of the Franciscan Renewal Center “The Casa” in Scottsdale, AZ

Franciscans view the world and God's creative presence in a particular way. How we understand this and our relationship to God is at the heart of what we call Franciscan spirituality. The following are key themes in Franciscan theology (how we understand God) and consequently in Franciscan spirituality (how we relate to God). We owe this understanding to the experience of St. Francis first, then to his followers throughout the ages, particularly St. Clare.

### **1. God is absolute love, being and creativity. Creation is dependent upon God to exist.**

No created thing exists because of its own capacity to be; only God is capable of being without depending on something else. The development of created things through time reflects God's inexhaustible ability to be creative and to remain the source of demonstrated love.

### **2. God has freely chosen incarnation (taking on human form) before the human choice for sin.**

Jesus Christ comes to us because God loves us, not because we sin. Because of sin, Jesus comes in a particular way out of free will, not because a particular method of human behavior is needed to save us. God can simply will salvation, because God is always free. Christ chooses to be with us physically now through the Eucharist until he comes again. This is reflective of God's willingness to be with us in humble ways and to nourish us physically and spiritually.

### **3. Christmas is of primary importance to us.**

Easter is the outcome of Christmas. The Incarnation is the greatest thing God could do for creation. The death of Jesus on the cross remains a mystery, because even given human sin, God was not constrained to act in this unbelievable self sacrificial way. It was done to attract us to divine love.

#### **4. Christ is the perfect image of who God is for creation.**

He is the mirror of who and what all humanity and created things are meant to be. Creatures participate in this perfection to the capacity of their natures. Humans can choose to not participate in Christ. Mary is the human person who has most perfectly chosen to participate in imaging God, both physically and spiritually.

#### **5. Every creature is unique, gifted, and living in relationship.**

No human life is a mistake, because everyone is uniquely gifted. The relationships of life are meant to be deepened according to the nature of the creature. This reflects the nature of God, who lives in Trinity and is therefore capable of the greatest depth of relationship.

#### **6. Nothing humans have the ability to do has the capacity to make God do something.**

God is always freely choosing love for humanity, even when we don't see that the choice is the best. Our knowledge is too limited by space and time, while God is not limited by them. We all remain poor at God's table, because God doesn't owe us anything.

#### **7. Mercy, forgiveness and justification are God's actions.**

They do not result from our actions. We work on our salvation, while recognizing that even our capacity to want to do good comes as a gift from God. We must do what we can - the freedom to choose comes from God - but realize that God is behind the ability to do good. God respects our freedom so much that he asks us to cooperate with him.

### **Franciscan Spirituality (God is love)**

God always intended to incarnate (become human) into creation whether or not humans choose to sin. The sin of Adam and Eve does not make God "decide" to become incarnate and act as a redeemer. God incarnates because God loves creation and wants it to experience His love in a way appropriate to creatures. We can be intimate with God because of the incarnation. Because of the human choice for sin, however, God incarnate (Jesus Christ) comes as a redeemer, not because it's the only possibility but because God wants to show us that self sacrifice is the strongest way to demonstrate love and to conquer sin.