

Franciscan Prayer

Every human being needs to talk! Some talk to themselves, but we need also to talk to others. The proliferation of cell phones backs this up; the need to share thoughts, or simply because we don't want to feel alone.

But there is a *spiritual reason* – we need to communicate because we are made in the image of God: *You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you* – Augustine. Prayer is *the longing to be at home with God, who wants to be with us*. God is the source of my identity – the truth of who I am, who I am called to be – *a uniquely beloved of Abba*.

This is not a one-sided relationship – not just my longing for God, but also God's longing for me. Prayer is God desiring *to breathe through me* the Spirit of my life, so that I can enjoy fullness of life – as Jesus promised: *I have come that you may have life, and that you may have it more abundantly* – Jn.10.10. When I pray I am venturing into the intimacy of the presence of God.

Intimacy was gifted [graced] to Francis, and became the heart-felt desire of his life; so much so that he advised his brethren to have *above all things the Spirit of the Lord, and his manner of working*. Breathe-in the Spirit, breathe-out the Spirit's way of working [gifts and fruits]. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law* – Gal.5.22-23. This is why Celano [his biographer] wrote: *he did not so much pray as become a prayer*. Which explains why Francis did not *recite* many prayers, but lived in such a relationship with God, as to become a prayer.

If prayer shapes who I am and what I become, this *breathing with God* must be the source of my identity, the reason why God desired me enough to create me. This why Bonaventure compares love to the work of the sculptor – love preceded by a negative: *a sculptor never adds anything, rather removes matter revealing something beautiful hidden in the stone*. Like the birth of a child – the discovery of a new being within me.

Prayer releasing what is within is difficult, because it needs honesty and humility – *freedom from expectations and self-centredness*. It means saying who I am my strengths and weaknesses, gifts and failings; for, as Francis wrote: *what a person is before God, that he is and no more* – Ad.20.

When I accept my *thisness* [uniqueness] I free myself to become what God desires of me – an intimate; an honest meeting with God – no running away because I'm naked. We often prefer our false self, who we prefer to be, hidden from God, *the self that God knows nothing about*, cut off from what is life-giving, forcing God to say: *truly, I do not know you* – Mt.25.12.

My false self is self-centred, seeking my own security my way, with no belonging; aimless in the world. *God is the One closer to me than I am to myself* – Bonaventure. God is so close to me that even if I deny him: *if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself* - 2Tim.2.13.

Franciscan prayer is prayer leads to self-knowledge as the foundation for being with God. As a youth, Francis was arrogant, unreliable, libertine [without moral purpose] and a spendthrift, getting everything he wanted; it was when he was made aware of the compassion of God, from the cross in San Damiano, that the change began – when he prayed before that crucifix asking: *who are you, Lord; and who am I?*

Prayer is actually living the answer to those questions. This is evident from one of his earliest recorded prayers: *Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me, Lord, a right faith, a certain hope, a perfect charity, sense and knowledge, so that I may carry out your holy and true command*. Show me who I am.

His *returning home* with God was gradual – possible *because he was open to Grace*. See this with the leper. He was sickened by the sight and stench of leprosy – he avoided meeting them like the plague – until *the Lord led me amongst them* [grace]. Instead of turning away, he got down from his horse to give alms.

When the leper held out his hand, he kissed it – mounting his horse he turned to look back, the leper had disappeared. Was this a dream or reality? Or both? Whichever, it made him aware of his own leprosy - this *other* coming to him as an equally a *beloved of Abba*. Francis' meeting God was through meeting the leper.

He became aware that there is no *real* self without a real other. It is said that *Salvation* is rescuing the person from the individual; or bringing the individual to personhood. *Person* derives from the Latin *personare* [per-sonare – *to sound through*]. To be a fully human person is not based on *what* we are, but *who we are in relation to God, other and so discover self*.

To relate is letting *other* sound through my life. Francis became a person when God was able to sound through his whole life: *my God and my all* – [Deus meus et Omnia]. Chardin tells us that the peak of our originality is not our being individual, *but in being person*. The more we are in union with other, the more we are ourselves – our truth is who we are in God, who is total communion.

Prayer leads us to know ourselves-in-God, and God-in-ourselves; which opens up and flowers when we see the *humility of God* – really present all around us. It is our heart that involves us in human struggles – darkness, loneliness... which is why Francis prayed: *Most high, glorious God...*

He was praying to be free from isolation, domination, self-centeredness... from all holding him back from being fully alive. *Prayer* leads to intimacy, to freedom [vastly different from *saying prayers*] – freedom lets me love another without trying to possess.

This happens, according to Bonaventure, through owning our *human poverty*, our need for God; recognising our limitations and weaknesses. He writes: *to ascend to God we must descend into our humanity*. This descent is not preoccupation with self, but a genuine desire for God. Which means that the *ascent to God* begins by going inwards, for the Spirit to release the very core of who we are: *created imago Dei*

There's risk involved! Who knows what awaits us in there? How will we cope with what makes us ugly instead of beautiful, angry instead of happy, isolated instead of belonging. But, unless we descend into who we really are, we will never find our way to God. Which is why Bonaventure suggested steps into such a descent. We cannot love the God we cannot see till we love the ever-present love within us and in others. *Enter your heart; Ponder what you were, what you are, what you should have been; What you are by nature; What you are through sin; What you can still be with the help of Grace.*

Franciscan prayer is never escaping from the world, but deliberate entrance into it. Realising how much the world is with us – seeing the poor and excluded through fresh eyes. Bonaventure again: *after Francis was moved by the Passion of Christ... he showed deeds of humble humanity to lepers, even kissing their wounds. Just as God reached out to embrace Francis from the Cross, that same God is now here in the leper.*

The leper was no object of charity, but the *necessary other* of his desire for the freedom of love; the otherness of God in himself and his neighbour.

What was the practicality of this – how did he go about letting it happen? This is why solitude for the heart is necessary. Solitude is not loneliness. Loneliness – the deafening silence of being on my own, isolated and confined. Solitude is *being-alone-with-God*. Many often ask how could Francis be away so often in such lonely places? He was never alone, he raced to such places to be with his heart's desire.

Physical silence is not necessarily solitude: *let your behaviour be as decent as if you were staying in a hermitage or a cell... wherever we are our cell is with us. Brother body is the cell and our soul the hermit within it praying to God... If the soul does not remain in quiet solitude in its cell, a cell made by human hands does little good* – 3Comp.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? – 1Cor.3.16. How often do we neglect this, and wander off searching for God who is very much at home within us?

To find God in solitude we must follow the lead of the Spirit – listen to the breath of God [obey]: *But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you* - Jn.14.26.

It is in darkness that God's light shines brightest – I need to enter the dark places of my life to find myself lit-up by the ever-abiding presence of God, inviting me to trust – *that all will be well*. Searching for the atmosphere to be with God, has to be wholehearted; not something I do when I'm not busy about the many things Jesus warned Martha about – Lk.10.41. Francis prayed: *with heart and soul, mind and strength – with our understanding and every effort, let us love him.*

Desire

Moreover, if you seek, in what manner these things occur, interrogate grace, not doctrine, desire, not understanding; the groan of praying, not the study of reading; the spouse, not the teacher; God, not man, darkness, not brightness; not light, but the fire totally inflaming, transferring one into God both by its excessive unction and by its most ardent affections. Who indeed is the God of fire, and whose forge is in Jerusalem, and Christ ignites this in the fervour, of His most ardent Passion – Itinerarium.

Ours is a world of desires – see TV commercials. The problem with such desires is they create empty spaces – nothing finite can ever satisfy a thirst that is infinite. Desire is born of God, because we are made in God's image. There is something in us that longs for fulfilment – because it is for the infinite, everything finite will never satisfy – as Augustine reminds us of our restless heart.

Prayer is desire. Our affection reaching out towards the infinite affection God has for us: *desire above all to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy manner of working*. We do desire God, but mixed-in with other desires – desiring God has to be *with all my heart*. If I would attain to this, I must take my desiring seriously. The proper object of desire is someone, not something. Prayer leads to life, it is the breath of life – God breathing in me.

Desire is ongoing, when I set my sights on what I can achieve for myself, desire does not end with this. I might desire to get a million pounds, and succeed; but what then, because desire does not go away. My desiring must be worthy of me, in the sense that I become my desiring in the experience of being desired.

For one has not been disposed in any manner to divine contemplations, which lead towards mental excesses, except with Daniel [9.23] one be a man of desires. Moreover, desires are inflamed in us in a two-fold manner, that is through the clamour of praying, which makes one shout from a groan of the heart, and through the lightning of speculation, by which the mind thoroughly turns itself most directly and most intensely towards the rays of light – Itinerarium.

Desire is the compass of life – prayer gives direction, direction is not to be found in the noise and clamour of the world. It is in inner solitude we find the silence that lets us hear God's voice. It is important to name our desires so as not to fear them, making them prayer – where we sort out our desires and are sorted out by them. *Everything* can lead us to God – if we are truthful and honest with ourselves.

Sin is the disorder of desire – letting the *desire of self* override. If desire is not totally focused on intimacy with God – then desire, a form of imitation, then self becomes our god. We are fashioned able to imitate God – for anything else or anyone else to occupy our focus, our desiring is distorted.

Distorted desire, distorted imaging always seeks scapegoats – someone to blame. Bonaventure helps: *Anyone wishing to keep the ardour of desire alive needs to contemplate Christ-crucified. Our God of humble love: Christ on the cross bows his head, waiting for you, to kiss you; his arms outstretched to embrace you; his hands are open to enrich you, his body spread out to give himself totally; his feet are nailed, that he may stay there, with open side, waiting for you.*

The cross doesn't sit easily in a pain-avoiding culture – but remains the most visible expression of self-emptying love; as Clare wrote to Agnes of Prague – who *for our sake took on the wood of the cross [you will be lost over my dead body]*.

If God is only the *unmoved mover*, we would have a God aloof from us. But God is love, desiring to share all that is God with all that isn't. In the Gospel Jesus asked his followers: *what do you want me to do?* No intrusion, no force – telling us that our desire for God is God's desire for us. Without both, mutuality cannot happen.

Friendship is mutual desiring; and is possible when mutuality is real and vibrant. Scripture shows us that new things can emerge out of chaos; because in open systems novelty can arise. God is always present to us, but because our desiring is ambivalent, fear often gets in the way. God is *strange* because God is totally other – *mysterium et fascinans* – but attractive because nothing can prevent his being with us.

To be *imago Dei* is to be a person [per-sonare] to be free. Freedom is infinitely more than autonomy and independence. *Blessed be the Lord... he has looked favourably on us and freed us* – Lk.1.68 – giving us the gift of experiencing intimacy with God. Freedom is access to love. To love God is realising that there is a choice, I can choose not to. I am created by God's will alone – but I can't *become imago Dei* by God's will alone. I must choose, because God created me to be free.

Creation is not God showing how powerful he is. It is *communication*. God – love - communicating God's-self totally. God is powerless in the presence of human freedom, since it flows from his own omnipotence. God created me free and cannot take back the freedom given. God cannot [will not] force me to choose God. *Even in human relations we are most responsive to others whose love is non-interference, giving us space to be ourselves.*

The cross signifies the depth of God's love for us and for creation – which suggests God is taking a risk. The human person is the highest expression of creation, with the gift of love in freedom – one who can say no! No wonder the cross stands as the pinnacle of love! The greatest gift of the human person is not the ability to think but the freedom to love.

God want us to love him by our freely choosing to do so. Bonaventure tells us that suffering is where we are face to face with God-of-humble-love. The cross is not about sin and judgement, but all about the God-of-humble-love. Francis became aware where God is to be found, taking on the sufferings of humankind: being with the lepers and marginalised – he saw it as sharing-in the Incarnation.

To desire God is the fruit of the seed implanted by God – to become fully alive: *I have come that you have life, life in abundance* – Jn.10.10. There is no loving relationship that doesn't include suffering and hardship – ask any parent.

Prayer

Prayer is about God and me. If I use distant and remote language about God I will image God as remote and distant.... The God to whom I pray is the God who directs my life. Is my God engaged with my everyday experience, *is God my judge or my lover?*

Francis came from the popular, lay experience of God; he belonged to the newly emerging merchant class. He regarded earthly life as living within God's creation. The Franciscan way to God is an *inward* journey, *in which God takes on flesh anew* in my life. The Good News is that we do not go to God, as if God is *up there* waiting. God has come to us, where we are. *The eternal God has humbly bent down and lifted the dust of our nature into unity with his own person* – Bonaventure.

To pray is to seek God at the centre of our everyday living. We pray, not to set-up a relationship with God, but to show the image in which we were created – the image of God; and to enjoy the experience. Not to *ascend* to God, but to give birth. To allow the image in which I am created become visible. To pray is to affirm what we already have, the potential for *life in abundance* which is the reason Christ came: *I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full* – Jn.10.10.

This understanding of prayer differs from focusing on the transcendence of God – the monastic vision, moving through purification from attachment to things and sin to arrive at an angelic state of union with God without imagery. The structure of monastic living is to seek God through a life of solitude, silence, prayer and meditation.

The Franciscan path inverts the monastic values. Rather than fleeing the world, finding God in the very heart of the world – *the world is our cloister*. Face-to-face with cross in San Damiano Francis met the God of compassionate love: *while he was praying with all his fervour absorbed in God, Christ appeared to him as fastened to a cross* – Bonaventure. There was no exchange of words, rather his soul *melted* as the passion of Christ was impressed on his heart. *From then on, he clothed himself with a spirit of poverty, a sense of humility and an eagerness for intimacy* – Bonaventure.

The God he experienced was a God who delights to be with the simple and the excluded. He encountered Christ as *other* – and so every *other* became a presence of Christ. Only in relation to the *other* did his weakness become strength; in naming his weaknesses he matured in love. Community became for him the concrete expression of the Christ mystery. *In all the poor he saw the portrait of Christ* – Bonaventure.

Christ alone is the one in whom Abba is well pleased. Instead of relating to Jesus in a personal way, Francis frequently spoke the *Word of the Father*. The Father speaks and expresses himself – the Word, who is Jesus. *Through Gabriel, his angel, the Father announced his Word... in the womb of BVM* – Adm.1. Abba speaks and expresses himself in his Word, Jesus is the Word of God, assuming fragile human nature – the poverty of humanity.

The Incarnation is where the Father *descends* to embrace us in love – an everyday happening: *Behold, each day, he humbles himself when he came... into the Virgin's womb; each day he comes to us... upon the altar, a tiny piece of bread in the hands of a priest* – Adm.16-17. The humility of God does not simply mean the humble circumstances of Jesus' earthly life, *humility* is another name for God who is love – incarnate in Jesus.

God loves us *where we are* – weak and insecure. This came to Francis through the cross in San Damiano. God is infinitely intimate – utterly transcendent yet intimately close. When Jesus says *follow me* he is showing us how to get to Abba, who is already with us – through the one Spirit Jesus shares with us.

For Clare, prayer was not climbing a ladder to God, but wakening to the love that is God so visible in crucified Christ; reminding us of Paul's words: *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us* – 2Cor.4.7. God has already come to us by sharing our humanity.

Clare doesn't pray by reading Scripture but by *gazing on crucified Christ*. Gazing is vastly different from looking – gazing is being wide open to take everything in – as a baby does. There is already a judgement implied in *looking* – [I don't like the look of him!]. Gazing has us ask *what am I actually seeing* – not what I *think* I am seeing. Seeing what is real I not only observe suffering, but begin to feel [compassion] what I am seeing – not least asking myself *am I complicit in this? Do we come freely to the cross, or simply endure being crucified by others?*

Clare says for her Christ-crucified is a mirror, reflecting herself! She is most like God in the world – *through suffering*; and making God suffer by we are doing to God, crucifying him still. This mirror image shows how we are most like God in the world both through suffering – and making God suffer: *As often as you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to me!* – Mt.25.40.

The goal of such prayer is *to become what we love*; to be transformed into the image of the crucified – to become channels of God's compassion for others *We are mothers, sisters and brothers when we bring him to birth by the way we live*. Prayer is never fuga mundi in pursuit of Transcendent God. God took on our flesh so that we might find him *in ourselves*.

Let Clare teach us to gaze

Having lived through austerities of a world war, paradox is evident – we literally had next to nothing, and yet there seems to have been much more freedom and consideration for others than is currently the case. This wouldn't surprise Francis and Clare, for them, poverty was the solid foundation for relating.

Gazing is not just seeing. It is being drawn into what is seen. A self full of itself can neither receive nor move towards other. Open arms show a space in myself for other to come in, and a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by other. A genuine embrace means not-understanding, but freely accepting the other to remain mystery, never seeking to possess.

To gaze on the cross is desiring the *otherness* of God into our lives; it cannot be an immediate vision, rather an encounter with the God of humble love missing in fragile humanity [*the poor you will always have with you* – Mt.26.11]. Poverty helps create this space, when we are free of possessions [of things that possess us] we see more clearly, and receive what we see within us.

This can be difficult because modern sensitivity is not attracted to the wounded bodies of suffering humanity [*why doesn't somebody do something about this?*]. We tend not to see suffering and *pass by on the other side*.

There is an important lesson here: if I am on my way somewhere and see in the distance that there has been an accident, common sense says if I am not to be delayed I need a detour. But, if the accident actually happens alongside me, I get involved – trying to help. The built-in instinct in humankind is *to save* – we only seek *to avoid* once the head kicks in! Do we follow heart or head?

God is found in wounded, fragile flesh [Clare] – in the scandal of the cross we see God's love for us, no *conditions apply!* This *prayer of gazing* only happens through Grace – gift. The gift of the Spirit, already within us gazing on humble love. The Spirit joins us to Christ by embracing God, humble love: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God* – Rom.8.26-27.

This is why we are called to be poor - in order to be enriched in the Spirit. Francis locates poverty in everyday relationships; for Clare, poverty is imitating God. The poor person is one for whom *need for God is very real*. Poverty belongs to our essence as creature, unequal to God. The appropriate answer to *who am I - someone radically dependent*. I am not the source of my life – I am given to me.

Why I am given is in the will of the Giver... all that I have is gift freely given to me. But this I will never know until I allow poverty [my dependence] to tell me. The crucial question which only I can answer – do I willingly live my total dependence on God, or am I boss in my own house? This is why Francis embraced the Church of Exodus [where he could hear the cry of the poor] over the Church of Leviticus [making sure he does things rightly].

Sin, for Francis, is self-appropriation; taking for ourselves what belongs to God and our neighbour [who is in the image of God]. There is no space within us to see the crucified God-of-humble-love. Only the door marked *poverty* opens to us for freedom from self-concern – brought about by our crucified God.

The Son accepts the poverty of the human condition to show how equality with God is not something to cling to: *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage* – Phil.2.6. The Word-crucified is the fullest expression of the poverty of God.

Associating poverty with power is not usual. Yet, the poverty of God translates as *Almighty God* in our language. Not brute force, no bullying, it is the power to give oneself totally, freely: *give yourselves totally to him, who for your sake gives himself totally* – urges Francis writing to the Order.

How often can I truly say to another – *I need you?* When Jesus asked Peter *do you love me*, he wasn't looking to be given something – he was looking for someone to put a belt round him – Jn.21.17 – to lead him to where he had never been. To be open to be led by the Spirit – even into the desert, where I would rather not go!

Can I accept God's goodness in my neighbour, who is very different from me? Only if I remember that my poverty belongs in my humanity, not just in my possessions. I am created poor, freely to become poor; no matter how much I amass, I am and always will be dependent. The call to poverty is the call to be my real self. Clare says: *to become poor is to lay aside all that prevents me from being truly human*. The Gospel poor person is not the one vowed to poverty, but the one totally in need of God. To live *sine proprio* is to be on the road to God.

Friendship

Christ on the cross bows his head, waiting for you, that he may kiss you. His arms outstretched to embrace you. His hands are open that he may enrich you. His body spread out to give himself totally. His feet are nailed, that he may stay there. His side open for you, to let you enter there.

[Bonaventure Soliloquy]

The key to friendship lies in relating, not as a meditation point, but as a *shape* of life [forma vitae]. Describing Francis as a friend of Christ, Bonaventure says: *The Lord calls the humble his friends*. To love God is *to love the crucified God – of reckless love*. This was evident in Francis through the Stigmata.

Francis had a lot of friends, because he had a lot of enemies – Lk.6.27-33. Love asks us to go beyond our cultural self – Francis loathed the sight of lepers, until Grace brought change.

But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.

And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that –
Lk.6.27-33. This is the key to friendship.

Francis learned to embrace the leper by first embracing the leper in himself. It is the image of the Good Shepherd that converts this message powerfully. In John 10 the author says the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and would give his life for them. Christ-crucified is the Good Shepherd.

To love the Father is to become like the Son – Francis wrote: *It is a great shame for us that while the saints did these things [imitate the Good Shepherd] we wish to receive glory by simply recounting their deeds –* Adm.6.3.

Francis sees that through the sacrifice of the Shepherd we come to union with the Father: *All of you are brothers, do not call anyone on earth your father, for One is your Father, the one in heaven*. He quotes S John:

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me –

Jn.17.17-23.

Union with God is not a kind of angelic state, exempting us from life's difficulties. It is to be like the Son, eager to be attentive to the Father's will. To be in union with the Father means travelling by way of the cross. This is what sent Francis to Egypt – 1219 – to bring the Good News to his brothers, sons of Ishmael [whom the Church called the *spawn of Satan*].

When he eventually arrived he was insulted and beaten and put in chains. However, he did manage to reach the Sultan – Malek El Kamil – He proclaimed the Good News by *his peaceful and loving presence*. Bonaventure says the Sultan was touched by this, and gave him gifts to give to the poor. They became friends because *both were willing to transcend their own boundaries so as to be with each other through respect and mutual affection*.

Apostolic action does not result from contemplating God, it *is* contemplating God; because it is one and the same Spirit that joins us to God enabling us to go out to our neighbour. Francis' desire to meet the Sultan was the same desire in him to be with God. It was God who grasped Francis and Clare – convincing them that suffering because of love for another leads to happiness, unity and peace, because this is the pathways to God. God who is reckless in love, even to death.

The Heart

What matters to the heart, what is life-giving, is the desire to share life with another. What matters is more than things – the heart flourishes on what is life-giving – affection, intimacy, friendship... it is at the centre of the *personal* life of the human person: *where your treasure is, there also is your heart –* Lk.12.34. Francis speaks of *desiring with all his heart*; very different from simply desiring.

The heart is made to be the dwelling place of the Trinity - *Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them –* Jn.14.23.

Contemplation is not intellectual union of the *mind* with God, it is a deep *experience* of reality. Not only fixing ones gaze on the mystery of God, but holding fast to the Word - *But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him –* 1Jn.2.5.

I don't have time to pray – is commonly heard today. We need to hear Jesus talking to Martha who was in just such a state: *“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her –* Lk.10.38-42.

Prayer means centring life in God – open to the activity of the Spirit. Francis associates the Spirit with the *Our Father*... the Spirit-filled prayer [the first prayer he taught the brethren]. To enter into the mystery of God is *being led by the Spirit into the intimacy of communion between Father and Son*. It is to be dispossessed *things* if we are to possess God. To possess is to cling to so that there is no way anything else can come between.

To be with Christ is to have his priorities – above all, eager obedience to the will of the Father, without anything of one's own, what is meant by *purity of heart*, total surrender to the highest good, through openness to the Spirit. Do I really want to receive the life-giving Word – have a mind to the parable of the different kinds of soil available to the sower:

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Mt.13. 3..

We are mothers, sisters and brothers of the Lord when we bring him to birth by the way we live – Francis Lett. Ord.

We are to take on the Word in our lives – how? By coming to the true knowledge of who we are – not simply what we have done [or haven't] about it thus far – we are little word of the Word; from all eternity we are destined to express something of God by being our true selves.

Now we live with divided self, with the spirit longing for God and the flesh longs for something else. We fail to be the word that God created us to be. The Spirit, gifted to us, can lead us home – if we but listen, and discover the fulfilment of our heart's desire, the Spirit in us brings the Word to life – flesh of our flesh.

Life in God is an adventure in love; setting aside our self-built security systems. But, for now, we follow the rules and practice of prayer, yet are unwilling to give self totally to this.

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said – as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, pray and meditate. I leave in peace as much as I can... what else can I do? The old man stood up, stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire. And he said: if you will, you can become all flame! [story from the Desert Fathers].

Why do we not dare to become *all flame*? Fire is dangerous, it burns and destroys; but it is also light and warmth; it can melt and change things: *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!* Lk.12.49. The Universe began with a fiery explosion. Jesus brought new fire – the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the fire of transforming love. So, what holds us back?

Happiness, peace, love and justice are matters of the heart – the hearth in each person, where kindling in the Spirit takes place. *When you pray, gather up your wholes self, and with your beloved enter the chamber of your heart, and remain there together, with your mind, affection and desire – Bonaventure.*

When the crucified Jesus is called the image of the invisible God, the meaning is that this is God, God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation; not more glorious than in his self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness; not more divine than he is in his humanity. The nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about God, is to be found in the Christ event.

Moltmann

Everything that can be said about God is expressed in the visible figure of Jesus on the cross. If we are to find God, and ourselves in God, we must search our hearts for the mystery of Christ-crucified. It is there we find God loving us. Too often, we look for God in the wrong places, expecting to find the God of power – instead we find the God of crucified love. To know this God, we must let our fears go, along with our expectations and freely enter into the mystery of the cross; to find God bending low to embrace us.

Bonaventure wrote: *O human heart, you are harder than any hardness of rock... you are not moved with compassion.* The heart that cannot feel, cannot love.

Maybe our hearts are blocked by fear, self-centredness, anger, hurt... preventing us from *feeling* how God loves us, descending into the depths of human suffering. He writes: *May I ponder and experience towards you, my God, crucified and put to death for me, he feeling of compassion.*

Do I crucify God? Adding to the pain of one already wounded? This God is the crucified God of abused children, of the victims of war, the elderly and mentally disabled – the crucified God of our crucified earth, and of all who are crucified.

We are asked to change this in the same way Jesus has done – love so that the wounds of God may be healed by love. But, do we long to be changed, and what are willing to offer to allow this? *For this reason, I*

remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline – 2Tim.1.6-7.

Love cannot be bought, nor is it an intellectual exercise. Love means being-in-love. Passing-over into God through crucified Christ, is dangerous. A heart centred on God is free, free to spread fire on the earth, free to love unconditionally. Such a heart can be threatened with death, and not fear. Listen to Jesus before Pilate: *Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you. Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin – Jn.19.10-11.*

You have just heard in the Gospel that one must not love self so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life history demands of us; and that those who try to fend-off danger, will lose their lives, while those who, out of love for Christ, give themselves to the service of others, will live, like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die it would remain alone. The harvest happens only because it dies...

Only by undoing itself does it produce harvest. This Eucharist, is such an act of faith.... May this body immolated, this blood sacrificed for humans, nourish us also, so that we may become body-given, blood poured-out in suffering and pain – like Christ, not for self, but to bring about justice and peace for everyone.

Oscar Romero [homily].

Contemplation

Seeing God in Christ with the eyes of the Spirit – is how Francis speaks of contemplation [Ad.1]. *The Father is humbly present in the Son through the Holy Spirit.* This is the meaning of the Incarnation we met in the Eucharist – seeing reality in its relation to God. Christ-crucified, the image of God, is the image in which we are created – to gaze on Christ-crucified, eventually will reveal us to ourselves, as we become to resemble Christ.

To see with the eyes of the Spirit is the fruit of Poverty – in the sense that I freely let go of everything that gets in the way of seeing what the Spirit shows me. When there is nothing of me in my seeing – I begin to see things and others as they really are; no longer as I believe them to be.

Knowledge deepened by love is wisdom – i.e. knowledge deepened by experience. Wisdom is the heart seeing the truth of things. Christ is the wisdom of God. Contemplation is the vision of the lover who gazes on the beloved. *This is my Son, the beloved.* Everything spoke to Francis as coming from the lover and so were the beloved.

In his Canticle, Francis praised God through all the elements of the universe; reminding us that the human aspect of creation is totally dependent on the rest, as they are dependent on us. The Canticle signifies that all creation is a cosmic Incarnation – earth, air, fire, water, sun, moon and stars. Coming from the same origin, they are, as he proclaimed, our sisters and brothers; making him their cosmic brother.

Through Penance he recognised his sinfulness – ignoring and mistreating these gifts. Through Poverty he recognised our tendency to possess. Through Humility he recognised solidarity with all else. Through Compassion he began to *feel* for all creatures, great and small. He realised that he reaches into God, not by abandoning the things of earth, but in actually embracing them.

The relationship between seeing and loving is the hallmark of Franciscan Contemplation. Bonaventure reminds us that Christ goes away when the mind tries to see him with the intellect. Accepting the other is God coming to us in the fragility of everything created, discovering everything grounded in the gravity in God. *Love him totally, who gives himself to you – totally* – Clare. To see, to love and to become what we love is the fruit of Contemplation.

Contemplation is not directed towards heaven, but towards the fullness of the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, Christ binds himself to fragile humanity – and so must we; in seeing the compassion of God in flesh and blood like ours we will see and feel the suffering of others.

Open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips and apply your heart, so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise and love your God – Bonaventure.

In Contemplation, all sorrows are shared in a compassionate heart, where pain is healed and tears result in active compassionate love.

Becoming what we love

Witness to the Gospel through the way you live... is what we are bid do as we leave our Eucharist celebration. But there is a difference in the Franciscan way. When I ask – *What would Jesus do?* I am looking for a moral guide. Whereas, the Franciscan way doesn't ask *what would Jesus do*, but: *How does Jesus live in me?* The Incarnation is not something *out there*, but something within. Me, seeking to become myself, calls for the self-emptying love that called me into being.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. Col.1.15.

When the Word became flesh, the perfect image of Abba was expressed in history and time. This means that everything we can know about God is revealed in the life of Christ. We follow Christ, not only to do the right thing, but because he is the image in which we are made; we are made to become sacraments of God.

Prayer deepens this belonging – we are not simply hearers of the Word; it is where we belong; which is why Jesus says: *remain* in my love – Jn.5.9. Be transformed by abiding there – where we belong: *it is now no longer “I” that live, Christ lives in me* – Gal.2.20. To be *at home* there is to be suffused with compassionate love.

Celano tells a story of what this looked like in Francis:

He appeared to a brother in a dream, dressed in a dalmatic, followed by a host of people. Someone asked “Isn’t this Christ?” He answered “yes”. Someone else asked isn’t this brother Francis?” he said “yes” – it seemed to them all that Christ and Francis were one person.

Bonaventure speaks of the life of Christ being renewed in Francis: *the angelic man, Francis, came down from La Verna, bearing the likeness of Christ-crucified*; not only through the Stigmata, but also in the way he related to everyone and everything. Compassionate love removes the dross that covers the image in which we are created – the dross of our own making of ourselves.

Mary is the exemplar here *of life in Christ* – who conceived the Word of God and brought him to birth by the way she lived. Francis wrote: *we are all mothers of the Lord, conceiving him through Word and Sacrament, and bringing him to birth be the way we live.*

Francis spoke of himself as *mother* to his brothers. – [Letter to Leo]. *To bring him to birth by the way we live*, is to let this love shine out through our everyday living. Motherhood for Francis was more than a physical matter, more than a woman’s prerogative. The Incarnation happens, first and foremost, in the human person – especially when a person lives in the embrace of voluntary poverty; open to receive what is offered – when there is room! We cannot conceive the Christ-life without recognising our radical need for God, through the gift of Grace, always on offer.

Whilst Francis prepared himself for this by his embracing Lady Poverty, it took a significant other – the leper – to set the seal on *what I long for with all my heart*. Bringing Christ to birth involves everyone and everything beyond me – it happens through my relating in truth; a love of neighbour – friend or foe; by leaving self and reaching out, so that opposites coincide.

Francis birthed Christ by providing a brotherhood of poor men. *He [Francis] seemed like a mother – poor men, birthed by a poor mother, and by the power of the Holy Spirit to be nurtured in the spirit of Poverty.*

Franciscan motherhood – means that our concern does not stop with the union of the individual with God; it is bringing Christ to birth, conceives and gives birth to the Word, in the shape of our uniqueness, given for the whole of creation.

We are called to become what we receive [conceive] within us, a person in relationship, sharing our Christ-experience. We are called to become bread broken for the hungry of the world. We profoundly misunderstand Eucharist, if we only see it as a sacrament of God’s presence. We can only be true recipients if we do not resist becoming agents: *what happens to us, must be done by us.*

To be the body of Christ is not just a good idea – it is a flesh and blood reality. *Christ has no body but yours* – Teresa of Avila. The Body of Christ has no meaning without us. What is the significance of Christ if those who claim believe in him do not live in the mystery of Christ? What Christ has begun we are called to help complete.

We lament the fragmentation and abuse in our world today, and yet *privatise* our faith! How much am I willing to let go so that others can experience freedom? To be *in Christ* is to be trans-personal, trans-social. Only our being *in Christ* can the many be united; the Word and centre of the Trinity – Christ is both one and many.

We will all not have the same experience of Christ, each of us is called to live in the one Christ differently and never the same.

We are not to become carbon copies of the historical Jesus, or Francis, nor of anyone. We are to fill the Christ-form with the elements of our own personal life, and so embody something of the Word in ourselves, in a distinctive and personal way – Hayes, ofm.

Each of us has a distinct role in the Christ-mystery, and the fullness of the mystery is either enhanced or diminished by the level of our participation. Surprisingly, it may seem, but Quantum Theory can help us understand this!

It tells us that we are living in a participating universe, where the observer determines reality. Our taking part is what makes it real and alive. Without us, the universe makes no real sense. In the same way, we may think of the mystery of Christ. Our participating in Christ is necessary to make Christ alive. Prayer leads us into the mystery of Christ by opening us up to this mystery in our lives. To become a *Christic* person is to come to a new level of personhood, a transcendent level, by which we realise that God, whose goodness permeates our lives and the lives of our sisters and brothers.

The goodness of God-in-me, is also in my neighbour, so that I am incomplete without my sisters and brothers. To find God, I must gaze on my neighbour, a mirror of Christ. To come to the fullness of who I am, I must love my neighbour in whom I dwell, and who is something of me. Christ comes to be the fullness of the Universe when we become the fullness of Christ.

To be in Christ is to be identified with the living One, who is not to be sought among the dead, for the Living One is the One who is Coming to Be – Beatrice Bruteau [Chardin].

Living in Christ is not waiting for new books or new insights into the Body of Christ. It is living in the mystery itself – which is what prayer is all about. Only when this relationship is active and alive does Christ become active and alive in our lives and in our world. *I have done what is mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours!*

Prayer that leads to being one-in-Christ, requires public witness of heart, mind and soul. Christ is *incarnate* – and we see him incarnate in every person, creature, flower, tree... we see all creation in some way incarnational. Which is why we must be ready to leave our comfort zones into the margins of conflict, where the Body of Christ grows fastest. The key to oneness is always seeking Christ present as the centre of all lives – see him in our lives so as to recognise him in others.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord – Rom.8.38.

The Good News is that every single person, creature, star and elements is loved by God into being, and destined for eternal life in God. All Creation is made for Christ; and since the whole is made for Christ, all Creation shares his risen life.

As a human being, Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stone he shares existence; with plants he shares life; with animals he shares sensation, with angels he shares intelligence... in his human nature he embraces something of every creature in himself when he is transfigured – Bonaventure.

What happened between God and the world in Christ, points to the future of the cosmos. It is a future that involves the radical transformation of creation reality through the unitive power of God's creative love
Hayes, ofm

This means that the justice and peace longed for in our world, must also be for the whole earth, a justice of relationship with the natural elements and all created creatures. In the end, the earth will not be destroyed or annihilated, but together with humanity will be transformed in the love of God.

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.
Rev.21.3-4.

Jesus Christ is risen and shares life with us as crucified and glorified. There is no sorrow that has not been lifted into the embrace of God's love. The wholeness we seek between peoples, cultures, races, religions and the environment, remains incomplete. We are the Body of Christ, and until Christ's body becomes our body, all creation will continue to groan aloud in the pangs of new birth. Only prayer can take us into the mystery of Christ, and open us to the wonder of God's love.

The Way to Peace

I call upon

*the eternal Father through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that
through the intercession of the most holy virgin Mary, the
mother of that same Lord and God, Jesus Christ, and through
the intercession of blessed Francis, our leader and father, God
might grant clearly seeing eyes to our mind in order to guide
our feet to the path of peace: that peace which surpasses all
understanding. This is the peace, which our Lord Jesus Christ*

proclaimed and granted to us. It was this message of peace, which our father Francis took over, proclaiming it at the beginning and the end of each one of his sermons. In every one of his greetings he wished for peace; and in every experience of contemplation he sighed for an ecstatic peace. He was like a citizen of that Jerusalem about which that man of peace—he who was peaceable even with those who despised peace—says: Pray for those things that are for the peace of Jerusalem. For he knew that it was only in peace that the throne of Solomon stood, since it is written: His place is in peace, and his dwelling is in Sion.

Bonaventure [Soul's Journey into God]