

# *franciscan* - January 2001

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## Francis and the Incarnation

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**Francis did not talk about the Incarnation: he spoke and wrote about the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, about his beloved, about God's love made visible. He saw that creative love reflected in people about him, and he called them his sisters and brothers, and he saw it reflected differently in other beings and so he called them too his sisters and brothers. His aim was to reflect that love in his own life, and he did it so well that one early biographer tried to express the closeness of the resemblance by describing Francis's life in terms of that of Jesus: born in a stable and so on. We do not need to take those details literally, but if anyone could echo Paul's words that for him to live was Christ, it was surely Francis. At the end of his life he was so closely identified with Jesus that the very wounds of Jesus were visible in his body, a sign of something deep within.**

This is what we are concerned with: the embodying, the making visible, of something of God. Francis always saw the beings around him as examples of this. But we are also concerned with the quality of life which he saw in Jesus and in others. He saw all beings as involved in reciprocal indwelling. He saw Jesus as the Son of the Father, as existing in a relationship and this as mirrored in created beings. His view of life was one of communion, of relationship. Everyone and everything was his brother or sister, and all shared a common life. Francis often quotes the gospel and other writings of John, and he saw the communion between created beings as reflecting the communion which exists, in the Spirit, between the Father and the Son. The outstanding way in which Francis saw Jesus' life being shared with us was in the communion of the Eucharist, and his reverence for it was notable to the people of his time. He saw God's love made visible and effective in the Eucharist in such a way that it could impart a communion like that of the Father and the Son.

Throughout the centuries Franciscans have been drawn to the writings ascribed to John which speak so eloquently of this communion and have written studies of them. In our own time our Brother Barnabas wrote a commentary on the gospel according to John and other studies of the Johannine writings, and Eloi Leclerc has also written studies of the gospel. These are simply examples which bring us up to date: they are not exclusive.

Gilson said that Bonaventure thought what Francis simply felt and lived – though it would be rash to suggest that Bonaventure did not also live it in his own way. Bonaventure saw creation as making visible something of God. He said that Francis saw in all creation something of its creator, and this he supported with all the power of his mind and tried to communicate to others. Humanity was for him the midpoint and summary of the world: the meeting point of spirit and matter, the image of God in a very special way, and the created being which could be aware of the wonder and beauty of creation.

Duns Scotus saw that, in creating, God looked for a perfect response from within creation, and that this could only be made by God himself within creation. Therefore the Incarnation was necessarily central to creation from the beginning. This is far from Francis's way of expression, but surely it is close to the centrality for him of the Incarnation, and it breathes something of his very positive attitude to all his brothers and sisters within that creation. There is an all-embracing family relationship with all the beings who have come from the hand of God.

Leonardo Boff had something of the same immediate vision of God in persons and in creation, and he too understood something of the vision of mutual indwelling which is implied in Francis's quotations from the Johannine writings. When he wrote of Trinity and Society, he described an understanding of the Trinity and its implications which has been said to be close to that of Bonaventure – in a great tradition. And it is based, like that of Francis himself, on a vision of actual examples of God's love embodied in those around us, which is possible because we believe in Jesus as Son of God, embodying that love and imparting it to all who are willing to receive it.

The Franciscan tradition has, over all these centuries, been concerned with concrete examples of God's love made visible, with a belief in the life of God as one of relationship, of love given and returned within the Trinity, and of love given and returned within this world between the various created beings as they all reflect something of God. It is in the physical world, in bodily existence that our vocation as children of God is to be lived out. This is the place which the creator God has given us in which to accept our place within the body of the Son and to associate ourselves with the whole of creation. Clare said that the Son of God has made himself our way, and surely she was putting into words exactly what Francis proclaimed with his life. His attention to the nativity, and his way of giving it form in the crib at Greccio, his desire to imitate the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, and his devotion to the Passion were his way of embodying the Son of God as our way in his own life. Many people have found the crib, the Office of the Passion which Francis wrote, and other prayers which are inspired by his devotion to the cross valuable in their own following of that way.

In the end Francis's vision is heard in the Canticle of the Sun. It is not simply a poem but a song. Francis used many images for Christ: lord and servant, creator, redeemer, saviour, Word of the Father, master, wisdom and light, beloved Son of the Father and brother of all human beings, but his last word is heard in a song, which ends with a reference to the forgiveness which all

human beings need if the vision of communion is to be fulfilled, and then with the reference to Sister Death as the inevitable end in this world, to be accepted along with the rest of creation, with the assurance that then the second death will not be able to do any harm. So it looks forward to life, the fulfilment of all that Francis had ever understood in a world which is fundamentally dependent on the creator God, the good Father who made all things as an expression of the love which he wished to share with as many as possible. *f*