
The Franciscan Genius: Integration of the Negative

Nothing Is Excluded

Wednesday, June 17, 2015

Francis of Assisi, like Jesus, refused to exclude things from the garden of grace; there is no exclusionary instinct in either of them--except toward exclusion itself! This is at the heart of the Gospel and Franciscan spirituality. Francis had a genius for not eliminating the negative, but instead using it, learning from it, and thus incorporating it. He goes to the edge and the bottom of society, he kisses the leper, he loves the poor, he wears patches on the outside of his habit so that everybody will know that this is what he is like on the inside. He doesn't hide from his shadow self, but advertises it. So much of religion has taught us to deny or hide our shadow, which forces us into a fatal split from foundational reality. If we begin by distinguishing between the "holy people" and the "unholy people," we end up with what we have now, which is largely an exclusionary religion. We don't have a strong passion about what we are *for*, but we just know what we are *against*, what is wrong, what we must not do, and who is sinful. I really wish that was not an overstatement.

Franciscan spirituality puts a big exclamation point behind Jesus' words, "The last will be first and the first will be last" (Matthew [20:16](#), Luke [13:30](#)), and Paul's, "When I am weak, then

I am strong" (2 Corinthians [12:10](#)). *Upside-downness* is at the heart of our message, always prompting us to look more deeply and broadly at things. This opens our eyes to recognize God's self-giving at the far edges where most of us cannot or will not see God, such as other religions, any who are defined as outsider or sinner, and even to the farthest edge of our seeing, toward those who fight us and oppose us--our so-called enemies. Truth, love, and beauty are often found at the lowest, weakest, and most concrete possible levels, like in a frog, a fugitive, or what others might call a "freak."

You have to participate in God's perfect freedom to be able to see this way! You must grow up to *your* full stature to find the full stature of God (Ephesians [4:13](#)). Small souls are incapable of knowing a great God, and great souls are never satisfied with a small or stingy God. You have to become fully conscious yourself, and then all things will be beautiful. To hate, to fear, or to dismiss is to have fallen into a temporary unconsciousness. Many live their whole lives unconscious.

Just as we grow by ultimately accepting and forgiving our *own* failures, conscious people, like Jesus and Pope Francis, are able to say about *others*, "Who am I to judge?" (Luke [12:14](#)). That's quite the opposite of religion as exclusion! In my fourteen years as a jail chaplain, I met people who had done things that are wrong, sinful, immoral, or "bad"; and yet when I drew close to a particular life, I found that the human heart was most often either sincere, mistaken, or afraid. Inside of that frame they sought

apparent good but not the true good. It did make them do some stupid things, for which they are now suffering because evil is its own punishment. But, in fact, the human heart has a kind of tenderness, sweetness, and littleness when you draw close to it, even in its fragility and fear. Remember, sisters and brothers, Jesus is really saying that we are punished *by* our sins rather than *for* our sins. Human sin, failure, and imperfection is something to be wept over and pitied, not something to be abhorred or hated.

None of us know the wounds that every human being carries and why they do the things they do. As the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, stated, "Be kind to all, because everyone is fighting a great battle."

Adapted from *Franciscan Mysticism: I Am That Which I Am Seeking*, disc 1

([CD](#), [MP3 download](#)),

and *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*, pp. 11-13