#### **JOY IN THE DISCOVERY OF GOD WHO IS MERCIFUL**

#### **Part Two**

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Saint Bonaventure continually stresses the notion of the divine humility and he saw humility as the greatest of all the virtues of St Francis. True humility is not a matter of walking around with bowed heads but it is a matter of acknowledging who we are – creatures, dependent on God. The words of Francis, ‘What I am before God, that is what I am and nothing more’. Humility is the virtue that results from the exercise of mercy, where concern is not for the self but for the other. Humility is the source of outpouring love.

For Francis, God is also humble because God expresses fully what God truly is, merciful love. This conviction lies at the basis of his meditation on the Eucharist, which is to be found in his *Letter to the Entire Order*. Here he speaks of the Eucharistic presence in terms of a manifestation of the humility of God.

That the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation He hides himself under the little form of bread.

In response to such divine humility, he called the brothers to

... look at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves as well, that you may be exalted by Him.

It is important to note that one of the issues being addressed in this Letter was the role of the brother-priest within the brotherhood, an issue that he became aware of, following his return from Egypt. Apparently some brother-priests were bringing into the brotherhood attitudes of superiority which were connected to the position of priests in the Church of that time. This was creating tension. In his Letter, Francis reminded his brother priests that their ministry was to be exercised as one of humility and service.

Pope Francis stresses that priestly ministry must be one of humility:

We have to be humble, but with real humility, from head to toe ... Humility is what gives assurance that the Lord is there. Where someone is self-sufficient, when he has all the answers to every question, it is proof that God is not with him. Self-sufficiency is evident in every false prophet, in the misguided ‘religious’ people who use religion for their own ego.

Pope Francis urged priests “to exercise their ministry in humility and mercy”. Speaking of the symbolism of the priestly chasuble, he traced its ancestry back to the ephod, the sacred robe of the High Priest. In wearing the chasuble, the Pope says,

... the priest celebrates by carrying on his shoulders the people entrusted to his care and bearing their names written in his heart.

A ministry of service and humility.

The humility of God, the mercy of God: convictions concerning the nature of God that are so central to our Franciscan tradition. We encounter this humility and mercy of God when we encounter Christ. This was the truth that St Francis recognized and lived and it became the source of his joy, even in the midst of trials and adversity.

Pope Francis has continually urged us to look to Christ, the one who reveals who God is. To quote his words,

When we put Christ at the centre of our life, we ourselves don’t become the centre. The more that Christ becomes the centre of your life, the more he leads you out of yourself, leads you from making yourself the centre and opens you to others. This is the true dynamism of love, this is the movement of God himself. God is the centre, but he is always self-gift, relationship, love that gives itself away.

Perhaps this is the essence of our faith, to surrender to the summons of love. As with Francis of Assisi, this surrender to love did not take away pain or suffering. Surrendering to love never does. But it transforms pain and gives us reason to hope.

Or St Bonaventure:

Love is always preceded by suffering. A sculptor never adds anything but cuts away to reveal the most beautiful from within.

The great artist Renoir, towards the end of his life, was crippled by painful arthritis, so much so that it was very painful for him even to paint. One day a friend came upon him painting and said to him, ‘Renoir, why do you keep painting when obviously it is causing you so much pain?’ Renoir replied to him, ‘The pain will go away, my friend, the pain will go away. But the beauty will last forever.’