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

#### **Part One**

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Let’s think for a moment about St Francis. And what I would like to focus on firstly are his words that proclaim a message of beauty and hope, his Canticle of the Creatures. The Canticle is rightly called a poem, a hymn of joy. But it is important to remember the context in which the Canticle was written, the surroundings within which joy was experienced.

Celano tells us that the night before he composed the Canticle, Francis was suffering badly, physically, emotionally, spiritually. He was even tempted to despair. But in the midst of this pit of suffering, he continued to look into the heart of God and found there an assurance of God’s continuing faithfulness. When morning dawned, Francis was able to praise the Creator in all his works, even in the midst of pain and tribulation. Joy was not linked to an unreal world where pain and suffering do not exist. Francis had come to realize this many years earlier in the event which he narrates as the initiation of his conversion, his encounter with lepers.

In his Testament, Francis does not mention here any embrace of a leper, it is rather that he came among lepers. In the Middle Ages, lepers were the lowest of the low and were shut away by the authorities in types of hospices where a few dedicated people would care for them. It could very well be that after his return from Spoleto, increasingly dissatisfied with his former way of life, seeking happiness elsewhere, Francis began to engage in works of ‘mercy’.

Mercy was an essential element of the lay spirituality of that period. Towards the end of the twelfth century, the term ‘mercy’ began to apply not only to sinners who needed God’s mercy, but also to the unfortunate ones within society. To bring assistance to such people was a special way of entering into God’s kingdom. Hence we find at this time, before Francis’ period of conversion, the creation of hospices and hospitals, where a considerable number of men and women engaged in caring for the needs of the unfortunate. To work in a leprosarium caring for lepers was to engage in a work of mercy and advance along the path of spiritual perfection.

Hence Francis’ words, ‘I showed a heart full of mercy towards them.’ It is not as if Francis was the first to engage in works of mercy; rather he was attracted to this work when he became more aware of this religious movement of the laity that showed such sensibility to the suffering and misfortunes of such as the lepers.

Francis insists in his Testament that his encounter with the lepers had been at the origin of his process of conversion - not his praying within San Damiano nor his dreams. Perhaps it was in San Damiano that Francis’ mission was confirmed as he prayed before the Crucifix. The compassion, the drawing out of himself that he had experienced while working among the lepers is now concretized in the compassion he experienced as he contemplated Christ hanging on the Cross.

What is important here is the experience of mercy, the experience of being drawn out of oneself through love for the other. Because Francis had practised mercy, had gone out of himself to reach out in love to the lepers, he was also able to experience the mercy of God poured out for him in Jesus Christ. And so it is for us: the more I reach out of myself in love for the other, whoever that other is, the more I may begin to experience God’s mercy for me.

And I think it is important here when we start to talk about love that we are clear what we are talking about. I like the analysis of the meaning of love given by the Latin poet Virgil. Love is not just romantic emotion or sexual passion linking two individuals. Love is linked with desire, and desire is a fundamental category of human experience, the driving force behind all human interaction with the world, the engine of who we are as moral beings. Love is when this driving force of desire is directed not to the benefit of the self but takes me out of myself to seek the good of the other. It is this understanding of love that was taken up and developed by Benedict XVI in his first Encyclical in 2005, *Deus Caritas Est*.

Francis, the one who reached out in mercy to the lepers, certainly experienced God as merciful. In Chapter 23 of the Earlier Rule

Let us desire nothing else except our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, the one true God, who is the fullness of Good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good Who alone is Good, merciful and gentle.

When St Bonaventure speaks about God, he takes as his starting point the experience of St Francis. A trained philosopher and theologian, he differs from many other theologians in beginning his theology not with the abstract speculation of the philosophers but with the concrete experience of the prophet, the saint, Francis. Experience is the surest foundation for faith.

St Bernadine of Siena cites as the most effective argument for the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist the argument from experience of believers. He draws on Peter Olivi’s statement:

“It has been proved and continues to be proved by experience that from this sacramental work the divine love flows forth and is drawn out in the whole Church of God. Therefore it is impossible that the highest and most virtuous and divine truth is not in it... this experience is the argument of arguments.”

St Bonaventure begins with Francis’ experience, God is the highest good, and from there presents an understanding of the Trinitarian God of Christian faith in terms of the eternal expression of goodness, the never ending outpouring and flow of love and goodness between the persons of the Trinity. The Father is the *fontalis plenitudo*, the never ending fountain ceaselessly pouring forth love and goodness which is the life of God. The Son, the Word, is the expression of that goodness. The Spirit is the bond of love that exists between Father and Son. To affirm in faith that God is Trinity is to affirm that the originating source of all that exists is a life of relational love.

In Bonaventure’s incarnational theology, that love is most fully expressed in time and history in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Incarnational Christ, we find the greatest manifestation of God going out of himself (mercy) to reach out in love for the other, for all of us who, as Francis recognized, are lepers, hurt and wounded and vulnerable and in need of mercy. That was Francis’ experience, praying before the Crucifix in San Damiano.

Since the life of the Godhead itself is one of continuous outpouring of selfless love, so it is with Christ. How does Bonaventure speak of Christ among us?

Likewise the Son of God, the very small and poor and humble One, assuming our earth, and made of earth, not only came upon the surface of the earth, but indeed to the depth of its centre, that is, He has wrought salvation in the midst of the earth, for after His crucifixion, His soul went down into hell and re-established the heavenly thrones.

Such a Centre has a saving power: and anyone who draws away from it is condemned, as drawing away from the means of humility. And the Saviour proves it: ‘I am in your midst as the one who serves.” (Lk.22:27) In such a centre, He has wrought salvation, that is, in the humility of the cross... How marvellous is divine wisdom, for it brought forth salvation through the cinders of humility (*Collations on the Six Days* 1.23, 24).