**FRANCISCAN SCHOOL OF PRAYER**

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Saint Francis of Assisi was a man completely devoted to and infused by God. His inward life of transparent communion with God, his outward life of virtue and compassionate good works, and his chivalrous and loving attention to each and every creature combined with an ardently devotional spirituality to form Francis as a man of prayer. A masterly spiritual director, Francis transformed the lives of countless people of his time and continues to do so today.

Gustavo Gutierrez suggests that there are three stages in the development of new approaches to prayer. a) A person or a community has a powerful experience of the way of Jesus. b) One reflects theologically on the experience of the way of Jesus to formulate a general paradigm to explain the experiences, and seeks to emulate that experience. c) The fruits of this experience become tradition to the believing community and one of the many spiritualties as appropriate ways of following Jesus.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Francis had a powerful experience of the way of Jesus and devoted his life to imitating Christ and combining his intimacy with God and his ministry of compassionate love and action for the people, especially the poor. Francis’ whole life was a prayer. This essay explores the characteristic of the school of prayer of Francis such as i) praying with the Gospel; ii) praying with all creatures; iii) meditating on the Passion of Christ; iv) praying the Divine Office, psalms and other prayerful expressions; v) apophatic and kataphatic prayer experience; vi) devotion to the Eucharist; vii) private meditation; viii) devotion to our Blessed Mary; ix) Christmas crib and novena; and x) Francis’ intimacy with God through prayer.

**Characteristic of the Franciscan School of Prayer**

**Praying with the Gospel**

The prayer life of Francis was mainly based on the words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospel, the humility of God revealed in the incarnation, the love Jesus manifested in his cross, and seeing the goodness of all creation. God revealed to Francis how he should live according to the ‘model of the Holy Gospel’. Listening to the Gospel prompted the conversion of Francis. Francis took the Gospel message literally and wanted to follow Jesus as per Gospel. In the Gospel, a rich man was told to give his money to the poor. Francis literally took it to his heart and gave all his money to the poor. He became poor for Christ. Francis used the phrase in his Rule where he spoke about the poverty that “For our sakes, our Lord made himself poor in this world”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Francis believed that everything comes from God and the individual cannot own anything, as all belongs to God. Francis was inspired by the humility of God revealed in the ‘Word made flesh’ with the consent of Blessed Mary who gave us the body and blood of Christ. Francis compared the Eucharistic ministry of the priesthood with the role of Mary.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Praying with all Creatures**

Francis understood the goodness of the Creator through the creation and addressed everyone as his brother or sister. His deep love and reverence for all creatures was not for sentimental or naturalistic enjoyment but it was purely religious as they were created and owned by God. It is rooted in a deep theology of creation. The created world is a sacrament of the free gift of creation coming from God.[[4]](#footnote-4) Francis was able to penetrate into their inner secret, to drink their beauty, to be warmed by their goodness, to hear their voices, even their silent hymns, to taste their sweetness and to speak with them. Francis praised God, joining with all creatures. Francis sang with Brother Sun and with the rest, and even with Sister Death. [[5]](#footnote-5)

**Meditating on the Passion of Christ**

Francis meditated on the ‘Passion of Christ’, which led him to prayer. Francis was aware that Jesus does not draw back from suffering but he fulfilled the will of his Father on the cross in order to share divine life with humanity. Francis was deeply moved by the suffering of Jesus and experienced that Jesus redeemed the world through his holy cross.[[6]](#footnote-6) Though there is doubt about their authenticity, many believe that Francis had a *stigmata* experience resembling the wounds of Christ’s passion during his life time. Praying for a share in Christ's passion, Francis had a vision in which he received in his own body the Stigmata, the marks of the nails and the lance wound that Christ had suffered.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Praying the Divine Office, Psalms and other prayerful expressions**

Francis and his followers were very committed to the recitation of the Divine Office. “He celebrated the canonical hours with no less awe than devotion. Although Francis was suffering from diseases of the eyes, stomach, spleen and liver, he did not want to lean against a wall or partition when he was chanting the Psalms. Francis always fulfilled his Hours standing up straight and without a hood, without letting his eyes wander and without dropping syllables”. Francis prayed the Psalms, which are the Word of God and a school of prayer. The way the Church prayed the Psalms was important for Francis so that his followers always feel that they are part of the Church. Francis praised God using poetic images, and often sang in praise of God. That is why he insisted on his friars singing the Divine Office whenever possible. It was because of this that the early friars had a great influence on the liturgical music of their time.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When Francis prayed at home, he remained reserved but when in the forest, he wailed and cried, beat his hands on his chest and – making the most of the privacy – prayed intimately and in dialogue with the Lord in a loud voice; he answered to his Judge, begged the Father, spoke as a friend, joked in a friendly way with the Lord, often without moving his lips, meditated at length within himself, concentrating his external powers internally, he lifted his spirit on high. The whole action of Francis was an act of worship from his caring of the poor, to his adoration of nature, to his fervent times of prayer.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Apophatic and Kataphatic prayer experience**

Francis had initially an apophatic experience of prayer in search of God, the complete otherness of God, by renouncing all earthly attachments. Francis began spending more time in prayer and solitude after his conversion. He went off to a cave and wept for his sins. He went into solitude and spent three years as a hermit. For Francis, prayer was a response to God in faith which flowed from a relationship with God in Christ. Francis trusted God and formed a deep friendship with God who manifested himself to him in various ways. The time he spent in the hermitage was an apophatic prayer experience.

But Francis was more inclined to kataphatic prayer experience as Francis found God through His wonderful creation. Francis found creation as a ladder to ascend to God. That led him to see God in all human beings and in all creatures. He led a life of radical devotion to God and service to the people, especially the poor and needy. One day while riding his horse, he came upon a leper. His first impulse was to throw him a coin and spur his horse on. Instead Francis dismounted and embraced and kissed the hand of the leper. When his kiss of peace was returned, Francis was filled with joy. On his death bed he recalled the encounter as the crowning moment of his conversion: "What seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body”. After the first encounter with the leper, Francis started to live with the lepers and took care of them.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Friar Thomas of Celano writes that Francis would grieve over those who were poorer than himself, from a feeling of sincere compassion. Ever since his early years, he felt a compassion for those less fortunate, and gave alms to the beggars liberally.[[11]](#footnote-11) His prayer always led him to action. His whole life was a prayer because service to humanity is a service and offering to God. Francis and his companions sought to live the gospels in spirit and deed.[[12]](#footnote-12) Once Francis was praying before the crucifix in the abandoned Church of San Damiano, he heard a voice coming from the crucifix, which challenged him to rebuild the Church. At first he thought it meant that he should rebuild San Damiano. Gradually, Francis realised that God meant that he should "rebuild" the Church at large.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Devotion to the Eucharist**

Francis had deep devotion to the Eucharist and he felt the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist. His first Admonition was centred on the Eucharist. Wherever he prayed, whether it was at home in the friary, or among the people, or in caves or in the forest, he preferred to pray in small abandoned churches and to adore Jesus in the Eucharist using the words “We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, here and in all your churches throughout the world and we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” Always, we find Francis full of wonder and admiration before the Eucharist. The bread of life sustained him and kept his dream alive. The Bread and Blood of Christ transformed him.[[14]](#footnote-14) Francis attended daily Mass and received communion frequently. Francis and all his members offered themselves with the Sacrifice of Christ, to become like Christ – a living altar. He visited often the Blessed Sacrament and spent a lot of time in adoration. Because of his reverence for the Blessed Sacrament, he asked his friars to have reverence for the Eucharist, priests, churches, altars and church furnishing and vestments, and all the books used for prayer.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Private Meditation**

Francis spent a lot of time in private meditation. When he meditated, he would often be filled with emotion and sing in French, taking branches and playing them like a violin on his arm. His contemplation of the Passion of Christ often ended up in tears. By contemplating God’s glory and majesty, Francis came to see his own sinfulness and his need of God’s mercy. In experiencing God’s forgiveness he would cry “Holy, holy, holy God” in praise and thanksgiving for God’s goodness. In this he saw God’s sanctifying and healing power in his own weak humanity. The prayer of Francis was affective, focussed on the person of Christ. His prayer came from the heart rather than the head. Although Francis did not recite many prayers, he was in constant dialogue with God. Francis sought tranquillity and peace in prayer.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Devotion to our Blessed Mother Mary**

Francis, with his emphasis on the Incarnation, had a great devotion to Mary. He introduced ringing bells three times daily as a call to prayer at sunrise, at midday, and at sunset. The practice of praying at these times was established and gradually the Angelus Domini was created to fulfil the need to pray often. The Angelus is the traditional form used by the faithful to commemorate the holy Annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary.

**The Christmas Crib and Novena**

For Franciscans, the Christmas novena and the crib play a dominant role in the celebration of Christmas. Francis initiated the first crib at Greccio to remind us of the loving action of God in sending His own Son to become like us, and take on human flesh with all its weaknesses. It is meant to highlight the humility of God and His great love for us.

**Francis’ intimacy with God through prayer**

For Francis, being with Christ was a love affair. When referring to his relationship with God, he called himself "a spouse of the Holy Spirit." To cultivate his intimacy with the Divine, he often retreated to remote places to pray and contemplate alone with God. He loved being alone with His Father so much that, at times, he was torn between devoting himself completely to the contemplative instead of the active life.[[17]](#footnote-17) Prayer was Francis’ comfort and starting place, his source of strength in faith. Francis was completely dependent on the Lord on whom he could cast all his cares and burdens. In fact, he placed prayer at the highest pinnacle of all the spiritual exercises and used every means to have his friars’ concentrate on it. He eagerly sought to pray to God without ceasing, to keep his soul always in the presence of God.

Francis was convinced that all religious should long for the grace of prayer. Prayer is part of the Franciscan vocation. Francis believed that no one makes progress in the service of God unless he is a friend of prayer. He would make the groves re-echo with his sighs and bedew the ground with his tears, as he beat his breast and conversed intimately with his Lord in hidden secrecy. "Intimacy with God was the foremost priority for Francis, being in love with the One who loved him first.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Conclusion**

Francis embraced both the contemplative and the active life. Without the contemplative, his action would be empty, shallow. He would have nothing to give but himself. Without the active, he would have a superficial love affair at best. Instead, he was able to live in the love of Christ through a knowledge of Scripture and a relationship of intimacy. His relationship with God pressed him to make radical decisions, offering his life to God as a spiritual act of worship.

Francis' life is a vivid model and a welcome challenge to the spiritual lives of today's Christians. He lived what he preached, and therefore he did not need to rely on oratorical skills or psychological manipulation to share what was in his spirit, the Spirit of God. His life was a witness to his relationship with Christ. St. Francis of Assisi combined the intimacy of contemplation and active ministry in spiritual tandem, leading to an honest and devoted imitation of Jesus Christ. His life of radical poverty, kinship with all people, oneness with nature, embrace of the enemy, appreciation of suffering, peacemaking, joy and companionship sum up his spirituality. His whole life was a prayer.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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