

The Image of Christ in the Franciscan Christology

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Introduction

In the history of Christianity, throughout the centuries, thousands of theological books have been written about Jesus. When we read them, in the first place, these books tell us about the divinity of Jesus, the sovereignty of Jesus and the power and majesty of Jesus. Most of these theological books deliberately stress the issue of the divinity and the greatness of Jesus Christ. The theme of the humility of the incarnation is briefly mentioned but does not play a central role. The primary tone, which is presented in these volumes and other Christological discussion, is not the humility of the incarnation, but, rather, the exaltation of Christ; the Christ of Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost. Still worse, this tendency became more popularized during the Middle Ages with the Renaissance religious art, which was unhesitatingly formed under the Byzantine influence and greatly determined by the structure of medieval society, especially feudalism. As a result, the humanity of Christ had begun to appear not as an expression of God's fellowship with mankind, but simply as a divine stratagem to outwit the Devil.¹

However, with the advent of Franciscan Evangelical movement in the early thirteenth century that the image of Christ again began to appear as it was defined in the Early Councils of the church: True God and True man. Francis' great desire then, and what becomes the "Franciscan revolution," is a bold attempt to change this perception and to *rehumanize* God. This desire to bring what was perceived as a distant God back into the ordinary lives of ordinary people was Francis' life long mission. He accomplished this mission taking a decisive step to live out the integrated vision of Christ (True God and True man) and drawing the attention of his contemporaries to this vision by his remarkable and extra-ordinary relationship to the humanity of Christ.

¹ R. W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, Vol. I (2nd edn, Great Britain: T. J. Press LTD, 1997), P. 29.

In this essay I shall try to examine various attempts made by Franciscans (particularly, Francis, Clare, Bonaventure and Duns Scotus) to rediscover the meaning of the ancient message contained in the prologue of John's Gospel which stated in unequivocal terms that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. To do this, I shall begin by showing the image of Christ in the Popular piety of the High Middle Ages with special reference to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who is generally acknowledged to be a principal literary source of that tender devotion to the humanity of Christ found in the Western piety.²

I. Historical Back ground

A. The Image of Christ in the Popular piety of the High Middle Ages.

Bernard J. Otten S.J.³, in his well-known *Manual of the history of Dogmas*, states that even though, when the Patristic age came to a close, Christology had been fully developed, and at the same time there seemed to be no room left for new heresies to spring up along the lines of Christological teaching in the centuries that followed, there were clear evidences of its consequence in the decades preceding the Middle Ages. There is no doctrine of our faith that was so thoroughly investigated and discussed as that of the Mystery of the Incarnation. Because, the doctrine is so fundamental that with it Christianity must either stand or fall.⁴

As Otten maintained, after the close of the Patristic era, strictly speaking it is obvious that there was no indication of major Christological clarification that was different from the Christology of the first four councils. Doctrinal development of Christological issues stopped at this point. However, implicitly, this fundamental doctrine of Christian faith always had remained as the point of divergence for many writers and theologians.

² Cf. Emero Stiegman, "Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, the Victorianes", *The Medieval Theologians*, edited by G. R. Evans (Great Britain: MPG Books Ltd, 2001), P. 133.

³ Bernard J. Otten, S.J., was professor of Dogmatic Theology and the History of Dogmas at St. Louis University, Mo., when he published his well-known *Manual of the History of Dogmas* (St. Louis, Mo., and London: B: Herder Book Co., 1918), in *The Theology of Christ: Commentary*, ed., by Ralph J. Tapia (The Bruce Publishing Company: New York, 1971), P. 218.

⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 218.

History witnessed the fulfilment of the prophecy of Simeon regarding the issue of Christology: “Look, he is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed” (Lk 2:34).

Ultimately, this divergence on the issue of Christology became more apparent with the rise of Medieval “renaissance” in the eleventh century, because this century saw a revival of interest in the big theological questions of the patristic period, the nature of God, the Trinity, and the Incarnation. Making use of the advantages of the booming social, cultural and intellectual phenomena of the eleventh century, theologians and people of different interests had begun to demonstrate major theological and Christological issues in ways more appealing to their contemporaries. As a result, in the eleventh and twelfth century, we have the shift of emphases on the vision of Christ, as represented in sculpture, art and literature. For example, representation of Christ throughout Middle Ages utilized an array of stylistic and iconographic devices to portray Him as majestic thereby synthesizing Christian theology with imperial authority.⁵ Christ was hardly conceived as a suffering servant on the cross. Instead, He was seen as a Teacher, Saviour and Judge of all things, before whom all humanity prostrates itself. He is also seen as all-powerful God, a king of glory seated on the throne of majesty, in the act of receiving the homage of the entire universe.⁶

When we analyse the theologians of the Middle Ages, they accepted in principle, the authority of patristic Christology and allowed their thoughts and experience to be enriched by Augustine's stress on the real humanity of Christ in his atoning work, on his importance as our example in humility, and on mystical experience. However this emphasis on the humanity of Christ tended to be made only when he was presented in his passion as the One who mediates between man and a distant and terrible God. In their

⁵ Thomas J. Herbst, *The Humanization of Christ in the Central Italian Panel Crucifixes of the Twelfth and Thirteenth-Centuries Reflected in the Development of Franciscan Christology*, A Thesis presented to the Faculties of the Graduate Theological Union and the Franciscan School of Theology in Partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS, Berkeley, California, April, 1989, P. 58.

⁶ Eric Doyle, OFM, and Damian McElrath, “St. Francis and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan Life and Doctrine,” in *Franciscan Christology*, ed. Damian McElrath, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute publications, 1980), P. 4.

more abstract discussion of the person of Christ there was a tendency to present One who has little share in our real humanity.⁷

This tendency of Middle Age theologians more popularized with the Renaissance religious art, which was unhesitatingly formed under the Byzantine influence and greatly determined by the structure of medieval society, especially feudalism.⁸ As Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh says, the religious art and especially the monumental art of this period “offers us the image of Christ as an all-powerful God, a King of glory seated on the throne of majesty, in the act of receiving the homage of the entire universe.”⁹ Nguyễn-Van-Khanh also identifies four basic characteristics of representing the image of Christ in this period. These are: The Christ of the Apocalypse, The Christ of the Ascension, the Christ of Pentecost and The Christ of Last Judgement. In each of these presentations, Christ is seen in His glorious status as One who has little share in our real humanity. He was the transcendent God before whom they prostrated themselves and begged for mercy.

In the apocalyptic character of the art we encounter the figure of Christ enthroned among the four living creatures, or at least among the elders of the Apocalypse seated in a circle around the tympanum.¹⁰ In this vision Christ appears as both Teacher and Judge of nations. These two figures were very important for the people of the Middle Ages. In The Christ of Ascension, again Christ is characterized as a sublime God as He is presented in the apocalyptic vision of St. John. Having passed through life and death, Christ appears

⁷ R. W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, Vol. I (2nd edn, Great Britain: T. J. Press LTD, 1997), P. 29.

⁸ Eric Doyle, OFM, and Damian McElrath, “St. Francis and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan Life and Doctrine,” in *Franciscan Christology*, ed. Damian McElrath, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute publications, 1980), P. 4.

⁹ Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, OFM, *The Teacher of His Heart, Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St. Francis*, trns. by Ed Hagman, OFM. Cap, eds. by Louise Hembrecht, O.S.F., and Bernard R. Creighton, OFM (St. Bonaventure University, New York: BookMasters, 1994), P.20.

¹⁰ Emile Mâle, *L’art religieux du XII^e sie’cle en France* (Paris: A. Colin, 1923), P. 378, quoted in Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh’s , *The Teacher of His Heart, Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St. Francis*, P. 21.

in His pure divine essence.¹¹ In *The Christ of Pentecost*, particularly in the painting in Ve'zelay, Christ appears in the semicircle of the tympanum, illuminating the apostles with the rays that issue from His hands. It is the risen Christ bestowing the Spirit upon His followers. Finally, in *The Christ of the Last Judgment*, Christ is still presented as One who presides at the last judgement. According to Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, this vision of Christ profoundly stirred the hearts of twelfth and thirteenth century Christians. Some of the apocalyptic visionaries such as Joachim of Fiore and Hildegarde took their aspiration from this idea of last judgement.¹²

It is important to note that in all of these representations Christ is hardly conceived as a suffering servant on the cross. Instead, He is seen as a teacher and judge of all things, before whom all humanity prostrates itself. He is also seen as all-powerful God, a king of glory seated on the throne of majesty, in the act of receiving the homage of the entire universe.¹³

Even though there is no Christological error with these sublime visions of Christ as the Lord of glory and supreme Judge of the universe; at the same time, its outcome was close to damaging the fundamental perception of our Christian faith. It resulted among the Christians of the Middle Ages in a strong tendency to overlook the humanity of Christ. Due to this new emphasis on Christ as an all-powerful God, a king of glory and both Teacher and Judge of the nations, the humanity of Christ had begun to appear not as an expression of God's fellowship with mankind, but simply as a divine stratagem to outwit the Devil.¹⁴

Moreover, as Daniel-Rops maintained, it took the Christians of the Middle Ages back to the periods of early Christological dispute where Christians considered Christ as God

¹¹ Ibid. , P. 22.

¹² Ibid. , P. 23.

¹³ Ibid. , P. 4.

¹⁴ R. W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, Vol. I (2nd edn, Great Britain: T. J. Press LTD, 1997), P. 29.

rather than man, His transcendent dignity rather than His immanence, the creative Word and supreme Judge rather than the companion on the way, the human model, the consoler and friend.¹⁵ The influence of this vision, which focused mainly on the divinity of Christ, is seen not only in the religious art, but also in the liturgy and popular devotion of this period. For example, in the prologue to his Rule, St. Benedict envisioned his monks as forming a militia in the service of Christ the Lord.¹⁶ All of this contributed to an obscuring of the human face of Christ among the Middle Ages Christians.

However, with the rise of the ‘Medieval Humanism’¹⁷ and the growing appreciation of the humanity of Christ preached by individuals such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Waldo,¹⁸ particularly with the rise of Franciscan movement, in the early thirteenth century the image of Christ again began to appear as it was defined in the Early Councils of the church: True God and True man. Francis’ great desire then, and what becomes the “Franciscan revolution,” is a bold attempt to change this perception and to *rehumanize* God. This desire to bring what was perceived as a distant God back into the ordinary lives of ordinary people was Francis’ life-long mission. He accomplished this mission by taking a decisive step to live out the integrated vision of Christ (True God and True man) and drawing the attention of his contemporaries to this vision by his remarkable and extra-ordinary relationship to the humanity of Christ.

Of course, as has been mentioned, before St. Francis, the humanity of Jesus became the focus of mystical devotion by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who stressed the union of the soul with the Bridegroom. However, it is difficult to imagine this spirituality reaching the

¹⁵ Henri Daniel-Rops, *Le Porche du Dieu-fait-homme* (Paris: Plon, 1952), PP. 83-84, quoted in Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh’s, *The Teacher of His Heart, Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St. Francis*, P. 24.

¹⁶ “To you, then, whoever you may be, are my words addressed, who, by the renunciation of your own will, are taking up the strong and glorious weapons of obedience in order to do battle in the service of the Lord Christ,” Saint Benoît, *La Règle des moines*, ed. Dom philibert Schmitz (Namur: Gembloux, 1948)2, 22, quoted in Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh’s, P. 28.

¹⁷ Cf. R. W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*.

¹⁸ Cf. ¹⁸ Emero Stieglman, “Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, the Victorians”, *The Medieval Theologians*, edited by G. R. Evans (Great Britain: MPG Books Ltd, 2001), P. 129-139.

ranks of popular piety without Francis of Assisi.¹⁹ Yet, St. Bernard still played a decisive role in the evolution of Christian spirituality and deserves considerable attention before passing to the Franciscan vision.

B. The Role of St. Bernard and the Evolution of Christian spirituality

Emero Stiegman in his presentation of Bernard of Clairvaux, claims that St. Bernard is the principal literary source of that tender devotion to the humanity of Christ found in Western piety, from the Nativity crèche of Francis of Assisi to the oratorios of J. S. Bach. He also he believes that the frequent denaturing of this piety into deviationism represents a failure to follow this devout theologian as he advances from the *memoria Christi* to the invisible ever-present resurrected Lord.²⁰ This daring statement by Stiegman would not surprise anyone coming across the writings of this classic theologian, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the contemplative who has been unanimously acknowledged as a powerful promoter of devotion to the humanity of Christ.

Of course, there were many writers and preachers before him who displayed a fervent love for the Saviour and His humanity. We can go all the way back to the Patristic era, where we find writers like Origen, who was generally regarded as the precursor of devotion to the humanity and person of Jesus Christ. Later we encounter authors such as St. Gregory the Great, St. Anselm, and St. Peter Damian, who speak tenderly of Jesus dying on the Cross.²¹

But, it was with St. Bernard that the devotion to the humanity and person of Jesus Christ reached its full prominence. No theologian before him offered a clearer vision on the humanity of Christ as did St. Bernard. As Daniel-Rops says:

¹⁹ Damian McElrath, *Franciscan Christology*, P. 4.

²⁰ Emero Stiegman, P. 133.

²¹ Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, P. 29 (Cf. Frédéric Bertrand, *Mystique de Jésus chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1951) 153-154).

Just as Saint Augustine had endeavoured to bring the human soul to an inner awareness of God as the Creator, purpose, and cause of all things, so Saint Bernard more than anyone else strove to bring about an inner awareness of the God who became man.²²

Basing his whole program of spiritual growth on the ancient maxim, ‘Know thyself’, Bernard found a positive value in human nature, which led him to appreciate the great mystery of Christian faith, namely Incarnation. In pursuit of this program, he understood the positive value in self-love, and his programme for growing in the knowledge and love of God was based on the gradual refinement of self-love until it developed into love of one’s neighbour, and by further refinement, love of God.²³

At the heart of Bernard’s thought is Christology. In his collection of eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs, completed during the last decades of his life, Bernard presents us with a complex narrative Christology grounded in experience.²⁴ His Christology has a determinedly relational character that reflects both the practicalities and theological moorings of monastic culture, interests which shaped and were shaped by the Benedictine commitment to embodying a particular *conversatio*, or “way of living.”²⁵ The emphasis he put on the humanity of Christ permeated all his doctrines, because for him, it is only through the carnal love of Christ one became rational and then moved on to a spiritual love.²⁶ He also believed that the principal reason for the Incarnation is God’s desire to be known by human beings. Therefore, love of the humanity of Christ is a key to all theological and spiritual endeavours. He writes,

²² Henri Daniel-Rops, *Le Porche du Dieu-fait-homme*, quoted in Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh’s, *The Teacher of His Heart, Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St. Francis*, P. 29.

²³ R. W. Southern, P. 27.

²⁴ Cf. *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs*, Vol. II, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series: Number Four (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1971), P. ix.

²⁵ Mark S. Burrows, “Foundations for an erotic Christology: Bernard of Clairvaux on Jesus as “tender lover””, *Anglican Theological Review*, Inc. Fall, 1998, Available from: <<http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/>>

²⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux Sermon (Serm.) 20.9, Cf. *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs*, P. 154.

I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with humans as a human. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal beings who were unable to live in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.²⁷

For him the humanity of Christ was a continuous object of meditation. To his monks he frequently proposed the human life of Jesus as an object of contemplation and tender feeling.²⁸ He says that in flesh we are bound to Christ. The word became flesh and dwelt among us to show God's lovableness, to attract our human love.²⁹ Therefore, according to him, the human encounter with Christ as "tender love" is only the beginning point, leading us to meet him not through some act of the mind but through a heart passionately and even violently engaged. In this case, one that answers Christ with a love that is "tender", "wise", and "violent."³⁰ He expressed this love in the most strikingly lyrical words: "Even clad in my form, how beautiful you are, Lord Jesus! And not merely because of the miracles of divine power that render you glorious, but because of your truth and meekness and righteousness."³¹ This devotion also exclaimed by Martin Luther (1537) who said that there was "no friendlier word on earth" than Bernard's phrase naming Christ "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (Gen.2: 23).³²

It is important to note that Bernard's attitude to the humanity of Christ is not only a devotional one. Rather it has a doctrinal base of the soteriological role of the human Christ and of the relation of Jesus to the eternal word. As Bernard McGinn maintained for

²⁷ Serm. 20.6-8, Ibid. , p. 152-154, Cf. *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs* , P. 154.

²⁸ Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, P. 30.

²⁹ Serm. 20.9, Cf. *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs*, P.154.

³⁰ Serm. 73. 10, Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux On the Song of Songs, IV, trans. Irene Edmonds, Cistercian Fathers Series: Number Forty (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1980), PP. 83-84.

³¹ Serm. 25.9, Cf. *The Work of Bernard of Clairvaux On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers series: Number Seven (Kalamazzo: Cistercian, 1976), P. 57.

³² Emero Stiegman, P. 134.

Bernard, Jesus, the God-man, is lovable on the most basic level of human attraction, that of the flesh. This is why he took on humanity, since he knew “if he had not drawn us to himself, he would not have drawn us out of sin.”³³ Therefore, he insisted that the progression to perfect love of God through devotion to the humanity of Christ could respond to the loving God redemptively at work within every human being.³⁴

Although the humanity of Christ played a more significant role in Bernard’s spirituality, we still find within his spirituality instances where at the highest level of union, the humanity of Christ gave way to the eternal divine Word. This is more evident in his sermon on the *Song of Songs* where he reflected the idea that devotion to Christ was in the service of contemplation and only achieved by the pious monks whose intensity of yearning attracts Christ. He says, Christ “will not reveal himself in this way to every person, even momentarily, but only to the one who is proved to be a worthy bride by intense devotion, vehement desire and the sweetest affection.”³⁵ He also clearly manifested dissatisfaction of his longing, which is created not only because of the tension that existed between God’s divine transcendent nature and human limitation, but also because the experience of divine love in his life was always subject to forms of meditation.³⁶

So, Bernard’s image of Christ, in general, gives us an image of God who is not somehow transcendent to us, hidden at a remote distance from our “carnal” experience as it was presented in High Middle Ages. Instead, it gives us an image of God as one who we know through our experience of human-Christ. On the other hand, Bernard also gives us an indication that God is still far from this busy world with its sinful practices and evil. To attain union with God one has to strive, through listening in silence and solitude, to be alone in the presence of the transcendent One. Therefore, it would be very difficult to

³³ Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism, Vol. 2, The presence of God: A history of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), P. 174.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 134.

³⁵ Serm. 32.3, Cf. *The Work of Bernard of Clairvaux On the Song of Songs II*, P. 135.

³⁶ Bernard McGinn, P. 216.

imagine this spirituality reaching the ranks of popular piety without the rise of the Franciscan movement. As Nguyễn-Van-Khanh maintained providence reserved to Francis and his evangelical movement the grace of attracting the faithful to the One who revealed the Father's love, the God-Man Jesus Christ.³⁷

II. Franciscan Image of Christ: Two-fold vision of Christ - True God and True Man

As it has been said, the loveliest paradox of the Franciscan movement is that the profound teaching of its theology and sublime riches of its spirituality, are all derived from the simple faith and transparent holiness of the poor and humble Francis of Assisi. It is cause for wonder that though St. Francis most probably never read a work of theology in his life, and certainly did not leave behind a developed system of spirituality, he was, nevertheless, the source and inspiration for some of the most attractive mystical writings and practices of devotion in history of religion.³⁸ One of these is, his great desire, what then becomes the Franciscan revolution, the bold attempt to *rehumanize* God – the desire to bring what was perceived as a distant God back into the ordinary lives of people. Francis gave birth in the church to the theology and spirituality, which insists in a special way upon the humanity of Christ and transformed the Christological doctrine of the 13th and 14th century.³⁹ It is a cause of surprise that this fresh idea of Francis was brought about not from his systematic theological or spiritual writings, but rather as it was the result of his faith-vision in Jesus Christ. Meeting face to face with the wounded and glorified Christ on the cross in the broken-down church of San Damiano, he discovered the God of compassionate love, a God 'bent over' in love in the wounds of the crucified Christ.

This, Francis' new understanding of Christ, developed against a medieval background. As we have seen above, the 11th and 12th century image of Christ was formed under Byzantine influence and greatly determined by the structure of medieval society and

³⁷ Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, P. 31.

³⁸ Damian McElrath, *Franciscan Christology*, P. 1.

³⁹ Friedric Wetter, "Franciscan theology", *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopaedia of Theology*, Vol. II (West Germany: Herder KG, 1968), P. 347.

particular, feudalism. Christ appears a Teacher and Judge of all things, the King of glory before whom all humanity prostrates itself. Moreover, as dutiful vassals of their Lord, Christians are obliged to take up arms in his cause.

Called to live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel⁴⁰ against this background, Francis' realized that he had a mission to witness his unique experience of God through his encounter with a leper. From this event, he came to understand that knowing God is a personal experience, that God comes to us with human limitations, and that Jesus is the visible sign of the invisible God. From the example of Jesus' life, Francis discovered in Christ the servant who had washed the feet of the apostles, the beggar and pilgrim who had lived on alms, the suffering servant who had exposed Himself to the insults of His enemies, the worm, the lamb, and the Good Shepherd who gave his life by dying on the cross.⁴¹ Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M., explains this Francis' new vision in the following words:

For Francis, it's not the Resurrection of Jesus that offers such a lens. In many ways, it is not the divinity of Jesus alone which centres his vision. It is certainly not the Jesus who alone offered satisfaction for all our sins (the atonement theory regarding Christ's death) that centres his focus. Nor can one say that it is simply the incarnation which inters his view. It is the incarnation, but, more, precisely, it is the humility of incarnation which summarizes the life, conversion, teaching and example of Francis.⁴²

Several stories from the early biographies and Francis' own writings make it clear that what separates Francis from his contemporaries is his outstanding insight into the depth and height, the width and length of the mystery of Incarnation.⁴³ Incarnation was one of the most important core elements of the spiritual vision of Francis. Celano, in his *First*

⁴⁰ *Testament 14 (Cf. Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. I, The Saint*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City press, 1999), P. 125.).

⁴¹ Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, P. 56.

⁴² Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M., *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: Tracing Its Origins and Identifying Its Central Components*, The Franciscan Heritage Series, Vol. One (USA: Book Masters, Inc., 2003), P. 34

⁴³ *Ibid.* , 32 (Cf. Eph. 3:18 and Col. 3:16).

Life, tells us that the humility of incarnation is the key issue, which relates all aspects of Francis 's life:

Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ and recollect His deeds with most attentive perception. Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.⁴⁴

We also hear from Celano the well-known celebration of Christmas at Greccio. Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis instructed a man named John in the following way:

If you desire to celebrate the coming feast of the lord together at Greccio,” he said “hurry before me and *carefully make ready* the things I tell you. For I wish to enact the memory of that babe *who was born in Bethlehem*: to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he *lay in a manger*, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay.⁴⁵

When Christmas day came, Francis arrived, and what he saw made him very glad.

There, simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.... *The holy man of God* stands before the manger, filled with heartfelt sighs, contrite in his piety, and overcome with wondrous joy.⁴⁶

These stories from Celano are very important for an understanding of Francis' vision of Christ. Francis realized that by the mystery of Incarnation, God loved our world and wanted to be with us. God did not become incarnate as some mighty lord. Rather, he became a humble and defenceless infant, taking all our human frailty – the fullness of what it means to be human flesh, body and soul, with all the limits of the human condition. Francis often underlines the love of God which is manifested in the humility of Christ by the Incarnation. In Admonition 1:16 he says “Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the Virgin's womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes down from the bosom of the

⁴⁴ 1Cel 84, FA: ED, Vol. I, P. 254.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ 1Cel 85, Ibid.

Father upon the altar in the hands of a priest.”⁴⁷ In almost all of his writings where he speaks of the mystery of incarnation, what strikes him most of all is not the unfolding of the external events of Christ’s life, but his self-emptying, the movement of love that drove the Son to abandon the glory of heaven in order to come and live in poverty among us.⁴⁸

Along with the mystery of Incarnation, his love for the Passion of Christ also reveals to us the dynamic of Francis’ thought. The two German Franciscan scholars, Cajetan Esser and Engelbert Grau, expressed this love for the passion as follows:

It was especially in the passion and sufferings of Christ that Francis marvelled most at the humility of God, for therein God lowered himself to the very dregs! Not only did he sympathize in a human way with his suffering Lord by tears and lament, but he likewise filled with grateful joy and jubilation at the redemption which the most holy Father had wrought in the world through the Passion of his Son.⁴⁹

As Cajetan Esser and Engelbert Grau maintained by the Passion and death of Jesus, Francis found an irresistible power of divine love and goodness. He died from a love that did not know compromise, based as it was on an all consuming desire to be one with the divine will which was directed to the salvation of all human beings. In the Passion of Christ, Francis saw the continuity of God’s self-emptying project, which was already demonstrated most clearly in the Incarnation. “His father’s will was such that His blessed and glorious Son, whom He gave to us and Who was born for us, should offer Himself through his own blood as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross.”⁵⁰ He saw in Christ a man who embraced the Divine will on love, even to the point of dying on the cross, and he wanted to do the same.

⁴⁷ Ibid. , P. 129.

⁴⁸ Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, p. 107.

⁴⁹ Cajetan Esser, OFM, and Engelbert Grau, OFM, *Love’s Reply* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1963), 23-4, quoted in Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M, *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: Tracing Its Origins and Identifying Its Central Components*, P. 39.

⁵⁰ 2LtF 11, FA: ED, Vol. I, P.46.

Therefore, impressed by the love of the Crucified, Francis came to a new level of compassion, which led him to the spiritual insight that each and every creature was the living manifestation of God's love. In his desire for God, Francis understood that he was never exclusively in a relationship with God, but in and through God with all other beings, whether humans, animals plants or the elements. This necessity of the other thrust him into radical poverty whereby everything that hindered his relation to the other was stripped away. Seeing God in the wounds of the Crucified drew Francis to a new level of spiritual awareness and sharing his goods, indeed, his very self, with the other.⁵¹

It is important to note that, despite his entire attempt to develop the spirituality that is so existential and tangible, Francis never lost sight of the two-fold vision of Christ, God and Man, Lord and Servant. Christ is a concrete living person, in whom the most high and all-powerful God draws near to humanity. In Him, God gives Himself to us His children. Therefore, like the Christians of the Middle ages, Francis manifested his piety and faith in gestures of homage and adoration. He carried his respect even further, prostrating himself to the ground when he heard the holy Name proclaimed, and gathered up pieces of paper that might contain His Name and His Words. Reverent fear and love were two inseparable elements in the piety of Francis, but the predominant element was certainly love in response to love.⁵²

This Francis' integrated vision of Christ is also echoed by the life and writings of St. Clare, the co-founder of Franciscan movement and mother of nuns of the second Order of Francis (poor Clare). In listening to the voice within, Clare came to know the same God that Francis had met outside the walls of Assisi. She met the crucified Jesus of the cross and chose to imitate him in the poorness of his birth, in the humility and suffering of life, and in his final generous act of love laying down his life.

⁵¹ Ilia Delio, O. S. F, *Franciscan Prayer* (USA: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), P. 63.

⁵² Cf. LtR. 7, 1LtCus. 7-8, FA: ED, Vol. I and Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, p. 56.

Because of her unparalleled love for the humanity of Christ, Clare has been described as “a saint of Incarnation.”⁵³ Her life and writings are witness to the justice of this description and, in quite a distinct way, she expresses her belief in the incarnation and redemption with clarity and deceptive simplicity.

For her, Jesus Christ chose a life of poverty and humiliation in order to enrich us in grace and glory. She says, “If so great and good a Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin’s womb, wanted to appear despised, needy, and poor in this world, so that people who were very poor and needy, suffering excessive hunger of heavenly nourishment, may become rich in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven...”⁵⁴ Christ’s poverty, therefore has a redemptive value for Clare; it is not an end in itself.⁵⁵ Poverty embraced on behalf of the kingdom of God is not in the first place an ascetical practice or a form of holy athleticism; it is a participation in the redemption.⁵⁶

What makes Clare’s understanding of Christ so unique is the concrete metaphor she applied for the Christ. She understood Christ in an existential mode, as a model and example *par excellence* of our spiritual lives. Christ is the Mirror wherein we see reflected the virtues of blessed poverty, holy humility and unutterable love. In her Letter to Agnes, Clare exhorts Agnes to place her mind before the mirror of eternity, to place her soul in the brilliance of glory and to place her heart in the figure of the divine substance so that she too, may transform into the image of the Godhead Itself.⁵⁷ Therefore, we can say confidently that Clare brings ‘balanced kenoticism’ in her Christology. In her Christology we see the perfect harmony between suffering and love, poverty and wealth, humiliation and exultation, cross and glory. Like the hymn of

⁵³ Eric Doyle, O.F.M., “Discipleship of Christ in St. Clare’s Letters to Blessed Agnes of Prague,” in *Franciscan Christology*, P.17.

⁵⁴ 1Lag. 19-20 (Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M., *The Lady: Clare of Assisi: Early Document* (Canada: New City press, 2006), P. 45.)

⁵⁵ 2LAG. 5, Ibid.

⁵⁶ Eric Doyle, P.19.

⁵⁷ 3Lag. 12-14 (*The Lady: Clare of Assisi*, P. 51.).

Philippians 2:6 the great paradox of self-emptying become the source of self-fulfillment and glory.⁵⁸

As it was with Francis, Clare too, never lost sight of the two-fold vision of Christ, God and Man, Lord and Servant. For her too, Christ is a concrete living person, in whom the most high and all-powerful God draws near to humanity. In Him, God the Transcendent Other: incomprehensible, impenetrable and utterly unknown in the essence of His own selfhood become a humble and poor servant.⁵⁹

III. Later development on the image of Christ with Bonaventure and Duns Scotus

As we have seen above, Francis developed a remarkable new image of Christ – an image in which Christ is seen both in existential and personal terms as well as in terms of the scriptural and redemptive history. Christ is the one who showed him how best to be in relationship to a great and awesome God and who showed him what a truly Christian life is about. Christ assumed the central position in Francis' spirituality. Following this Francis' Christocentric vision, Franciscan theologians, from Alexander of Hales to Duns Scotus, developed their own image of Christ, which later become a distinctively Franciscan contribution in the history of the church. Since this is certainly not the place to discuss all Franciscan theologians, it will suffice here to present briefly the Christological teaching of Bonaventure and Duns Scotus, who are generally accepted to represent the growth and evolution of Franciscan School.

Influenced by Francis and other great minds of the 13th century (who were filled with the currents of a new cosmic consciousness spilling over from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, and new translation of Plato and Aristotle), particularly Alexander of Hales, John of La Rochelle, Eudes Rigaud and William of Middleton, Bonaventure (1217 – 1274) developed a theology that is highly Trinitarian and Christocentric.⁶⁰ He

⁵⁸ Cf. 2LAg. 21(Ibid. P.49).

⁵⁹ Cf. 4LAg. (Ibid. P. 50-53).

developed a theology that is at once both profoundly personal and intellectually lofty and complex, thus transforming pure religious conviction of the *Poverello* to the systematic Franciscan theological vision.⁶¹

At the heart of Bonaventure's thought is Christology. In his works, especially in his commentary on *sentence*, Bonaventure presents us with profoundly practical (personal) and mystical Christology.⁶² His Christology has a relational character that reflects both the practicalities and existential dimension. Zachary Hayes, writes:

From the centrality of Christ in the religious experience of Francis, the Seraphic Doctor moves to the metaphysical elaboration of the grounding of that experience in the concept of the center. The core of Christological mystery is the fact that Jesus the center of all reality has become incarnate and has been made historically visible.⁶³

As Zachary Hayes maintained, Bonaventure understood Christ as a 'Universal Centre', as the beginning, middle and end of the mystery of creation, that all things are drawn together in one moment that is the Incarnation. Whatever existed existed because there was a Christ who was the pulse of his own existence. In other words, everything is created through Christ and with Christ, for Christ is the Word and through him all things are made (Cf. John 1:1).⁶⁴ Since Christ is the centre of all that is, He is also the exemplar of what it means to be holy and the fullest example of what it means to live a moral life. His example, though, is not merely one way among many possible ways to live, but it is the obligatory way for men and women.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ilia Delio, O. S. F., *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to his life, Thought, and writing* (2nd edition, NY: New City press, 2003), P. 21.

⁶¹ Michael Higgins, TOR. , "Franciscan Spirituality and Christology", *The Cord*, 48.2 ((St. Bonaventure University, NY: 1998), P. 65.

⁶² Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., "The life and Christological thought of St. Bonaventure", in *Franciscan Christology*, ed. Damian McElrath, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute publications, 1980), P.63.

⁶³ Ibid. , (Cf. III Sent, d. 19, a.1, 9.2 concl.)

⁶⁴ Ibid. P.63.

While acknowledging cosmic Christ – as a Universal Centre -, Bonaventure never lost sight of the historical Jesus. In his Christology, there is no tendency to detach cosmic Christ from Jesus of Nazareth. “This is what stood as so foundational in the Experience of Francis; and it is to this that Bonaventure’s Christology is constantly drawn and from which the Seraphic Doctor finds the basic clues as to the structure of reality.”⁶⁶

In addition, the place of Christ in Bonaventure’s theology is undoubtedly the foundation of his mystical teaching. As Eric Doyle, O. F. M., maintains, no one could have written about the love of Christ as Bonaventure did without having experienced the greater part of what he was writing. Christ in all His mysteries from His birth and infancy to His manhood, death on the Cross and Resurrection was the object of Bonaventure’s ardent love of God and man. Christ is the expression of the Father and exemplar of all creation. Every creature has come from God the Creator through the Eternal Word, bearing His vestige and image. All creation participates in Christ, the Incarnate Word.⁶⁷

Even though, it is not easy to speak of Bonaventure’s direct authority or intellectual patrimony on the Christological doctrine of Duns Scotus (1266-1309), he too, theologically best expressed what was implicit in the spirituality of St. Francis. More than anywhere else, Scotus’s Franciscan flavour emerges clearly in his doctrine of the Primacy of Christ. As Michael Higgins maintained, “He presented Christ as the unique key through which all of the created universe, especially women and men who are called to participate in Divine life itself, can be interpreted.... Christ was not created outside of God, nor was he was created at all. He was from all times part of the uncreated triune Godhead.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Michael Higgins, P.69, Cf. Ibid. 63.

⁶⁶ Zachary Hayes, P. 64.

⁶⁷ Eric Doyle, O. F. M., “St. Bonaventure 1274-1974: Some Aspects of his Life and Thought,” THE BULLETIN 37 (7 July 1974) PP. 16-33, in *My Heart’s Quest: Collected Writings of Eric Doyle, Friar Minor, Theologian*, eds. Josef Raischl and Andre’ Cerino (Canterbury: Franciscan International Study Centre, 2005), P. 220.

Because of his unique vision of the Incarnate Word, Scotus strongly objected to the commonly held presumption that assumes Adam's sin to be the principle cause of the Incarnation. He objected to this idea because he believed that Christ, the Son of God could not be founded upon sin, for then sin, an evil, would dictate the necessity for the Incarnation and thus the principal cause of the Incarnation. Instead, Scotus championed the view that since God the Father created everything for Christ, the Son of God would have become human in order, rightfully, to claim his kingdom regardless of the fall of humankind⁶⁹.

For Scotus, the predestination of Christ is absolute and unconditioned; it is not caused or occasioned by sin⁷⁰. He goes on to assert that if the fall was the cause of Christ's predestination, then we would have to admit that in the event of no sin, the most perfect creation of God would never have taken place, which, he remarks tersely, appears extremely irrational. Scotus, therefore, cannot accept that God would abandon the most perfect love of Christ for the less than perfect love of all humankind which in fact would have been given unreservedly by us all had there been no sin.⁷¹

In his doctrine of the primacy of Christ, Scotus believes that Christ is not alone in being destined for divine love and glory. He is surrounded by all creation, his fellow human beings and the world they live in, as well as the angels. All these creatures are destined to

⁶⁸ Michael Higgins, P.70 (Cf. Duns Scotus, "Concerning the Predestination of Christ," trans. Allan B. Wolter, OFM, in *Franciscan Christology*, P. 147).

⁶⁹ Giovanni Iammarrone, OFM Conv. 1993, "The Timeliness and Limitations of the Christology of John Duns Scotus for the Development of a Contemporary Theology of Christ," (trans) by Ignatius McCormick OFM Cap. , *Grayfriars Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (New York: Bonaventure, 1993) P. 231, See also *Ordinatio III*, d. 19, Cf. quoted by Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M and Blane O'Neill, O.F.M, *John Duns Scotus Mary's Architect*,(USA: Franciscan Press, 1993), PP.54.

⁷⁰ John Duns Scotus, "Concerning the Predestination of Christ," trans. Allan B. Wolter, OFM, in *Franciscan Christology*, P. 147, Cf. Eric Doyle, *Problemata Teologica*, Romae: Commission Scotistica 1968, Vol. 3 of *De Doctrina Ioannis Duns Scoti*, 4 vols. 1968, PP. 633-652. In *My Heart's Quest*, P.275.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* , P. 279.

share in God's glory, though in different degrees. Scotus, therefore, places creation in the context of Incarnation, as a part of God's overall plan to reveal Himself in human form.⁷²

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is very important to note that if there is one word, which clearly explains the nature and characteristics of Franciscan theology and spirituality, that word is *Christocentric*. Because it was founded totally Christocentric character of St. Francis' faith and holiness. The special relationship that Francis had with Christ and his ardent devotion to the significant events in the Saviour's life spilled over into every action and coloured every thought of the saint. Following this Francis' unparalleled vision of Christ Franciscan theologians, especially Bonaventure and Duns Scotus struggled to give sound theological expression to the centrality of Christ – the One sent by God into the world because of Divine love, the One who was the model and channel of creation, the One who established the possibility of salvation through the redemptive power of the Pascal Mystery, and the One who remains with his people always in the Eucharist.⁷³ “They did so in a distinctly “Franciscan” format, which united the spiritual vision of Francis and Clare to a comprehensive theological vision.”⁷⁴

⁷² Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *A Franciscan view of Creation: Learning to live in a Sacramental World*, The Franciscan Heritage Series, Vol. Two (New York, Book Masters, Inc., 2003) P. 34

⁷³ Michael Higgins, P.68.

⁷⁴ Kenan B. Osborne, P. 69.

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