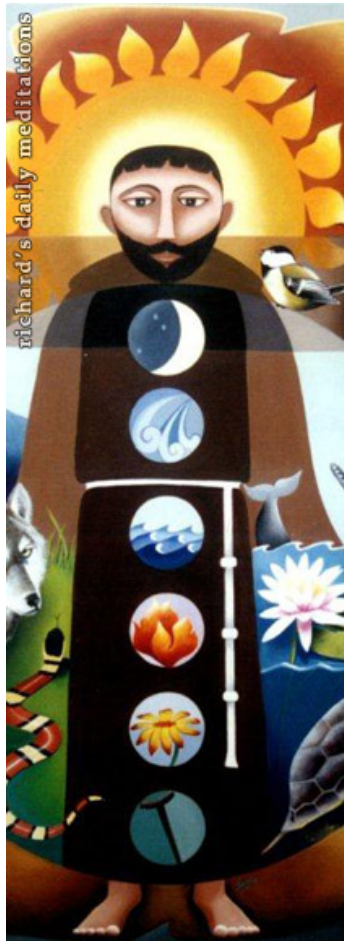


FRANCISCAN MYSTICISM



Mysticism is when God's presence becomes experiential and undoubted for a person. You can see a kind of courage and self-confidence in the mystics. That puts them in an extraordinary category. Most of us believe things because our churches tell us to believe them and we don't want to be disobedient members of the church so we say "I believe" as we do in the creed.

A mystic doesn't say "I believe." A mystic says "I know." A true mystic ironically speaks with an almost arrogant self-confidence and, at the same time, with a kind of humility. When you see this combination of calm self-confidence, certitude, and patient humility, all at the same time, you can trust you are in the presence of a person who has had an actual "encounter" with God or the Holy.

In the first six centuries most of the mystics were identified with the early desert fathers and mothers of Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, and the area of Palestine. Then the search for encounter moves into the monasteries where it becomes more academic trying to explain itself. And later St. Francis would bring mysticism from the monasteries to the streets and cities. He said "Don't speak to me of Benedict and Augustine. God has shown me a different way!" (Although Francis had nothing personal against these saints, he did have great inner clarity about what was his to do, and knew that the church would try to put him inside of its known

modes of religious life.)

Franciscan men are not monks (from Greek *monos*, "alone"). We are called friars ("brothers"). A friar is one who mixes with the people. Often we were found near city centers in Europe, because we were a part of city life, the working people, and the poor. This was the beginning of a real "alternative orthodoxy," a kind of practical mysticism of the streets, and with those who were on the edges of society. In fact, our poorly named "vow of poverty" was to structurally assure that we would stay on the edge and not become establishment people. St. Clare and the "Poor Clare" Sisters tended to live this much better than we, the later "ordained" friars. (Francis himself refused ordination to the priesthood.)

St. Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus observed what St. Francis was seeing and doing, and took it to the universities of Paris, Cologne, and Oxford where they translated it into a systematic philosophy and theology. God, for them as intellectuals, was not just "out there" but just as much "in here"—the transcendent was also within. Grace is inherent to creation from the first Chapter of Genesis ([1:1-2](#)). Grace is not something you invite into the world but something you discover already in the world.

This is why Franciscanism normally had no trouble with evolutionary thinking. Bonaventure wrote *The Tree of Life* and *The Soul's Journey into God*—images of growth and development from *within* while basking in the sunshine from *without*. Duns Scotus taught “the univocity of all being,” in other words, that we could use the word “being” with *one consistent voice*—for the natural world, animals, humans, angels, and God. Then he further taught that each act of creation is absolutely chosen, free, and unique in the universe (his doctrine of [haecceity](#)). Both St. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus created an entire philosophical system out of Francis’ uneducated, but intuitive, genius.

In most paintings of people waiting for the Holy Spirit they are looking upward, with their hands outstretched or raised up, the assumption being that the Holy Spirit will descend from “up” above. In the Great Basilica in Assisi where St. Francis is buried, there’s a bronze statue of him honoring the Holy Spirit. His posture and perspective are completely different from what we have come to expect. He’s looking *down* into the earth with expectation and desire! This is the change of perspective that became our alternative orthodoxy—although it should have been mainline orthodoxy! He was merely following the movement of the Incarnation, since Christians believe that the Eternal Word became “flesh” ([John 1:14](#)), and it is in the material world that God and the holy are to be found.

Francis recognized and took to the logical conclusion the implications of the Incarnation. If God became flesh in Jesus, then it is in the world, the physical, the animal, in the natural elements, in human sexuality that God must be found. Speak of embodiment, physicality, and the world—use whatever words you want—these are the hiding places and the revelation places of God. This is how Christianity was supposed to change everything. Most of us just kept looking up, when God in Jesus had, in fact, come *down*. (This is the foundation of Franciscan mysticism.) On this day in 1226, Francis died at sunset and asked to lie naked and exposed on the earth as he died. The friars were embarrassed, but conceded to his wish. Now you know that it made total sense.

On our great feast day of Francis, let me elaborate a little further on what we Franciscans believe to be “the Univocity of all Being.” Univocity, in Latin, means “one voice.” When you speak of God, when you speak of angels, when you speak of humans, when you speak of animals, when you speak of trees, when you speak of fish, when you speak of the earth, you are using the word “Being” *univocally*, or with one foundational and common meaning.

They all participate in the same Being to varying degrees. And being is One, as is God. It might seem like an abstract philosophical position, but I hope you can see how life-changing it is. Now we have an inclusive and consistent universe where everything is sacred, where you can’t divide the world into the sacred and profane anymore. God is revealed in everything and uses everything without exception ([1 Corinthians 15:28](#), [Colossians 3:11](#)).

Thus later biographers have brilliantly called Francis “an authentic spiritual genius” and “our one sincere democrat” (lowercase “d”). Today we bless all the creatures in his honor!

Easter, not Christmas, was the big celebration for the first 1200 years of Christianity. It was the Franciscans who popularized (and sentimentalized) Christmas. For Francis, if the Incarnation was true then Easter took care of itself. He told us to celebrate Jesus' birth and created the custom of the creche, or nativity scene. To his normally fasting friars, he said "Even the walls should eat meat on Christmas Day!" Incarnation was already redemption for him. Once God became a human being, then nothing human or worldly was abhorrent to God. The problem was solved forever.

Resurrection is incarnation coming to its logical conclusion. If God is already in everything, then everything is *from* glory and *unto* glory. We're all saved by mercy, without exception. We're all saved by grace, so there's no point in distinguishing degrees of worthiness because God alone is all good and everything else in creation participates in that one, universal goodness to varying degrees. There is no absolute dividing line between worthy and unworthy people in the eyes of God, because all our worthiness is merely participation in God's.

The two adjectives most applied to God by Franciscan mysticism were *goodness* and *humility*. Hardly any of us would think to call God humble, but Francis did. He fell in love with the humility of God because if God emptied himself and hid himself inside the material world as in Jesus, and waits so patiently for us to grow up, then God is very humble indeed.

Francis fell in love more with Jesus' humanity than with his divinity. It was his humanity that he wanted to draw close to and imitate. Only in a humble state, and among the humble, could Francis easily and naturally see God. He even loved humble creatures like worms, and crickets, and little lambs because they more truthfully revealed the Mystery of Jesus.

Some art historians say that Western Christian art changed after Francis. Giotto, the early Renaissance painter and architect, for example, moved from the depiction of exclusively sacred scenes and religious icons, to the painting of natural life: animals, nature, and human encounters. It is never the same afterwards, because this world and God's world are now revealing themselves as one.

Prayer: I will Seek the goodness and humility of God

Daily Meditation of Fr. Richard Rohr O.F.M. 9/30-10/6/2012

From an unpublished talk in Assisi, Italy, May 2012

For more on Franciscan Mysticism, consider

[Great Chain of Being: Simplifying Our Lives \(CD/DVD/MP3\)](#)