

## Christ the Center: The Franciscan Image of Christ

by Edward L. Shirley, O.F.S.

© National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order, U.S.A.



We all know about Jesus. We know what the Church teaches about Him: that He is truly God and truly human, united in one person. From all eternity, He is the Word of the Father, the Second Person the Holy Trinity, and that He entered time and became as human as you and me. He entered our history as one of us, as the *Nicene Creed* says, “for us men and for our salvation.” St. Athanasius tells us that “He became human so that humans could become divine,” and at Mass we pray that “we might come to share the divinity of Christ who humbled Himself to share our humanity.” This is our faith; it is the faith of the Catholic Church. This was the faith of St. Francis, for whom Christ was the center and focus of life.

This idea of Christ humbling Himself is very important. Quite often, we in the Church have so emphasized the divinity of Christ, we sometimes forget his true humanity. Prior to Francis, Christ was pictured most often as the *Pantokrator*, the Gloriously Reigning King, seated on his heavenly throne. Even when He was pictured on the Cross, it was usually as Christ the Victor, the Risen Christ. For Francis, the divine Christ was known only through his humanity, which was, in turn, a sign of his humility (the words “human” and “humility” are from the same root). For Francis, and for Franciscan spirituality after him, the humanity of Jesus is of central importance. For Francis, Jesus was brother and friend, as well as Divine Savior. For Francis, the humanity of Jesus was a constant reminder that Christ chose to empty himself, to become poor and humble, to serve and not to be served. For Francis, the clearest examples of the humility, poverty and helplessness of Jesus were the Christ of the Crib and the Christ of the Cross. In what theologians were to later call the coincidence of opposites, for Francis, it was precisely in this humility that Christ most clearly manifested his Divine Glory.

True, Christ was the Eternal Word from which all Creation sprang. Yet, this same Word of the Father entered into Creation as one of us. This is the Mystery of the Incarnation, that the Creator actually became a creature. When Christ became human, he began his life as every other human does, as a baby. To think that the Eternal Son of God lay helpless in a feeding trough, without a decent place to lay his head, subject to the elements, to the dangers of Herod’s army, that he depended on Mary for his food, on Joseph for love – well, it is almost more than the human mind can comprehend or the human heart can bear.

The first Nativity or crèche scene was set up by St. Francis himself in order to celebrate in a special way his devotion to the Mystery of the Incarnation. In 1223, in the town of Greccio, Francis brought together a manger, hay, and living animals, and Christmas Mass was celebrated. When we set up our Nativity scenes, are we aware that this practice began with St. Francis? And have we stopped to reflect on the deep mystical theology which lay behind Francis' devotion to the infant Jesus?



Francis' reception of the stigmata, a physical manifestation in his own body of the bloody wounds of Christ crucified.

These two central events in the life of Christ, summarized in the Joyful and Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary, stand as a reminder that Francis' Jesus was the Christ who, though "being in the form of God," chose to empty Himself, to become human, and, as human, continue to empty Himself "even unto death, death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-11). This is a Jesus who has come to our level, who shares in our own misfortunes and the misfortunes of the poorest of the poor. This is a Jesus who is friend and brother.

Yet, for Francis, devotion to Jesus was not enough; he called for imitation of Christ, who alone is the model for human life. Jesus Christ is the Rule of Life, and even our own Secular Franciscan *Rule* today calls us to go "from gospel to life and life to the gospel" (article #4). This is not a mere external imitation of Jesus; rather, it is an imitation which comes from the inside out. Thus, Christians must be transformed by grace into the likeness of Christ: we must become like the infant Jesus and the crucified Jesus, a transformation which comes through prayer and meditation on the life and virtues of Jesus.

St. Bonaventure, one of the greatest Franciscan theologians, portrays Jesus as the Tree of Life, whose leaves are medicine to prevent and cure every illness, whose flowers, beauty and fragrance attract the human heart, and whose fruits satisfy human longing. Bonaventure says that the lower branches of this tree contain the fruits of Christ's birth and life, the middle branches the fruits of his passion and death, and the upper branches, the fruits of his resurrection and glorification. Each of the fruits is a particular virtue: humility, piety, confidence, patience, and so forth. Through eating these fruits (meditation on these virtues), they become part of ourselves, and we are transformed into the likeness of Christ, producing these virtues in our own lives (Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*). Precisely because Jesus really shared our human nature, He can transmit his own qualities to us, and we can come to share in his divinity. He can share our human nature because we were created according to his image and likeness, who Himself is the Image and Word of the Eternal Father. Christ, for Francis, is the center of our innermost being, and in Him we live and move and have our being.

Francis also discovered the likeness of Christ in Creation all about him. His biographies tell us of how Francis, on one occasion, rescued some lambs being led to the slaughter because they reminded him of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Again, on another occasion, Francis found a worm in the middle of the road, and remembering how the psalms, speaking prophetically of Christ, declared, "I am a worm, not a man," he moved the worm to safety on the side of the road.



However, Francis' vision of Christ in Creation was not limited to such biblical symbolism. For Francis, all of Creation reflected patterns found in Christ himself; every creature was a reflection of the Image of God, between God and the world, is the center of each creature. This vision is nowhere so clear as in his *Canticle of the Creatures*. In this *Canticle*, Francis begins by praising God, who transcends all Creation. Then,

beginning with the Sun, whom he calls "brother," Francis begins to praise God for each creature. The word he used in Italian, *per*, has an interesting complex of meanings. It can mean *for*, *through*, *in*, and *with*. Here we have a wonderful example of St. Francis' sacramental world vision: each creature is a theophany, a manifestation of God breaking through into our world. Thus, we praise God for each creature as a gift, through each creature as a mediator, in each creature as its center, and with each creature as brother or sister. As each creature reflects something of the Divine Image of Christ, each creature is a "miniature Christ" to us.

St. Bonaventure tells us that Christ, from all Eternity, is the Word and Image of the Father; whatever the Father is, the Son expresses completely. And from all Eternity, the Son has emptied Himself and returned to his Source, the Father. Thus, the Son is at the very center of Trinitarian life. In Him exist all patterns for all of Creation. Whatever can exist is somehow contained in the fullness of the Word, who, Himself, contains the fullness of the Godhead. Yet, this same Christ, Word and Image of the Father, emptied Himself, and through Him all Creation came to be. He is the center of the relationship

between God and the world. For Franciscans, the Incarnation is the completion of Creation, and the very reason God created in the first place, to share Himself fully with his creatures.

Finally, no treatment of Franciscan devotion to Christ would be complete without touching upon the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. St. Francis, like all Catholics, accepted Church teaching that the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist are the Body and Blood of Christ. Though our faith in the Real Presence is the same, many elements of Eucharistic practice are different in our day than they were in the time of Francis. One significant difference is that in the Middle Ages, the Church was just beginning to develop the practice of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. We have more than 800 years of development of Eucharistic adoration between Francis' time and our



time. The Christ in the Eucharist is the same Christ who is present in Creation and within us. Indeed, Christ can be present in the Eucharist precisely because the bread and wine which are offered to God are already manifestations of God's Eternal Word, the "gifts of the earth and work of human hands." And, as St. Augustine reminded people as they came forward for Communion, "Receive what you are." The Blessed Sacrament preserved in the tabernacle or displayed in a monstrance can serve as a powerful focal point for our Christ-centered prayer. Many have been led into the heights of contemplation through prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. What a wonderful way to confess our faith that Christ is truly Present!

But, of course, our faith in the Presence of Christ in the tabernacle would be empty if we did not first of all confess with our hearts and receive in our bodies the Real Presence of Christ at the Eucharistic liturgy itself. In Francis' day, people would often receive the Eucharist only once a year. This is why the first article of the *Rule* of the "Third Order" required members to receive Communion three times a year. What a gift we have in our day when the Church, going back to ancient practice, urges us to receive the Eucharist frequently. Indeed, most of us could receive the Eucharist daily if we so chose. What a tremendous gift, to receive in our bodies Christ, who transforms us into his likeness.

Thus, we can see that for Francis, Christ is truly the center: the center of the Trinity, the Image and Word of the Father; the center of each creature, manifesting Himself on all levels of Creation; and the center of the human soul, transforming us, who are created in his image, into the likeness of Himself, drawing us into the very life of the Trinity. St. Bonaventure, in *The Mind's Journey into God*, reflecting on Francis' vision of the six-winged seraph, sees a pattern for our spiritual lives: our mystical journey begins with finding God in all creatures and all creatures in God, moving into finding God at the center of the soul, and into contemplation of God Himself, and at the center of each of these stages is the Crucified Christ Himself, through whom we then pass into the very life of the Triune Godhead.