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St Andrews

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology
Franciscan Theology

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First published: 17 November 2022

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/FranciscanTheology>

Citation

Ingham, Mary Beth. 2022. 'Franciscan Theology', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*.
Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/FranciscanTheology>
Accessed: 14 June 2025

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ISSN 2753-3492

Franciscan Theology

Mary Beth Ingham

This article emphasizes the particular contours that define the Franciscan theological paradigm as a distinct contribution to the discipline of Roman Catholic theology. Grounded in the lives of Francis and Clare of Assisi, the tradition unfolds as a Wisdom tradition, both christocentric and praxis-driven. A highly pastoral vision, Franciscan theology emphasizes the contingent particular (person and experience) and focuses on the dynamic of ongoing conversion in the life of the individual believer within the faith community. This article integrates major figures of the tradition within a thematic unfolding that frames the singularity of the Franciscan theological and pastoral paradigm, according to its trinitarian, christological, soteriological, ecclesiological, and sacramental aspects.

Informed by wisdom texts, Franciscan theologians link salvation history to concrete human experience (praxis). Key crises surrounding Franciscan identity deepen the tradition, particularly the debates over poverty, divine foreknowledge, and human freedom. Apocalyptic visions of the fullest realization of the reign of God inform the deepening historical consciousness and ecclesiology of scholars throughout the tradition. Finally, the commitment to theology as a science of praxis (rather than theory) distinguishes this tradition from other major approaches (e.g. Thomistic) and finds significant echoes in contemporary theological reflection on creation, the incarnation, ecclesiology, and human fulfillment.

Keywords: The Franciscan Order, Trinitarianism, Christology, Incarnation, Pastoral theology, Moral theology, The way of beauty, Sacramental theology, Soteriology, Divine nature

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1 Foundational contours of Franciscan theology

The Franciscan approach to theology includes a wide variety of voices, perspectives, and methodologies. Nevertheless, all theologians in the Franciscan School draw centrally upon the spiritual inspiration of the Assisi saints, Francis (1181–1226) and Clare (1194–1253). The insights and theological developments found in the early years of the tradition are rich in texture and variety, exhibiting both continuity and discontinuity. Throughout their history, the privileging of contingency and human experience results in a tradition of theological reflection that responds to historical events within and surrounding the Order. Then as now, Franciscan theologians adapt their arguments to their contemporary context. Despite this variety within the tradition, Franciscan theologians share common points of reference that build upon the foundation of the original founders and spiritual sources. These common points of reference offer the paradigm for a unique approach which emphasizes the following: the centrality of beauty and divine graciousness; the superiority of loving over knowing as perfective of human persons; a trinitarian and relational foundation that grounds and permeates reality; christological and incarnational emphases that reveal divine generosity and the dignity of creation; the primacy of contingency over necessity; and, finally, the pastoral over the dogmatic.

The Franciscan theological paradigm has particular elements that define its contours. These elements frame and undergird the Franciscan approach to, and articulation of, central theological insights.

1.1 Augustinian and voluntarist tradition

Franciscan theology is Augustinian in nature, drawing on the writings and influence of the Bishop of Hippo. For Franciscans, love is the most excellent act of the human person, both fulfilling and surpassing our intellectual knowledge. As medieval scholastics develop this insight within faculty psychology, the will (or the human orientation toward God as Good) is understood to be the highest faculty of the soul. The will is superior to the intellect (or the human orientation toward God as True), since one can never completely understand God, yet one can completely love God above all things. This approach identifies Franciscan theology as a praxis theology of love, rather than a theological enterprise that is abstractive or theoretical.

1.2 Primacy of contingency over necessity

Franciscan theology affirms the foundational dimension of the divine will as grounds for creation and for all of salvation history (Osborne 2013: 23–50). Franciscan scholastic theologians rejected the necessitarian paradigm, grounded in Arab and Aristotelian philosophical sources, that entered the Latin West in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This necessitarian paradigm was based on naturalism and maintained that the cosmic

order is what it is necessarily, and not the result of a free, creative act on the part of the divine will. Such a necessitarian model rose to prominence in arts faculties throughout the thirteenth century, prompting numerous ecclesiastical censures in 1250, 1260, and 1270. It was definitively condemned in 1277 (Paris) and 1284 (Oxford). Following the Condemnation of 1277, divine freedom grew in prominence and as a model for human freedom.

The emphasis on freedom in the will for Franciscans has implications for moral theology, sacramental theology, the theology of grace, and justification. All these will be reframed within a context of divine love, freedom, generosity, and incarnational presence to the created order. In contemporary Franciscan theology, these ground the ecological and spiritual ethic of kinship with all creation (*Laudato Si* 2015).

1.3 Approach to the incarnation

The primacy of divine freedom over natural necessity supported the Franciscan approach to the reason behind the incarnation. Moving away from Anselm's theory of atonement, Franciscan thinkers eventually embraced an alternative view of redemption, one equally founded on scripture and tradition, that the incarnation was the primary intention of God from before the foundation of the world (Wolter 1994: 139–144). The incarnation was not the result of the sin of Adam, nor can sin be used to explain why God became human. The generosity of divine freedom explains why God became human. This approach emphasizes divine presence in and through creation and the created order as an act of loving conservation. The sacraments and liturgical life continue divine incarnate presence within the community of believers.

1.4 The relationship of faith and reason

Rather than envisioning reason as a prelude to faith, Franciscans view the rational project as internal to the life of faith and the believer's reflection upon revelation (in nature or in scripture). This results in an approach to truths of faith that is not fundamentalist, nor literal. In their interpretation of scripture and tradition, Franciscan theologians emphasize 'fittingness', thus uniting both coherency and reasonableness (Cross 1999: 10–12).

2 Franciscan spiritual inspirations

Unlike the Dominican tradition, whose central voice is Thomas Aquinas, the Franciscan theological tradition admits many authentic theological voices. All take as their point of reference the life, experience, writings, and teaching of Francis of Assisi. The result is a theological tradition that is primarily and intentionally spiritual and pastoral. The emphasis on love, rather than knowledge, as perspective of human persons results in a praxis-

centered approach which emphasizes contingency over necessity, the concrete over the abstract (Osborne 2013: 23–50).

2.1 Francis and Clare of Assisi

Franciscan theology cannot be understood in abstraction from Franciscan spirituality (Osborne 1994: 16). Francis and Clare of Assisi have left numerous writings that serve as touchstones for the theological tradition. These can be found in the recent definitive publications by New City Press, *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* (1999) and *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (2006). Francis' conversion, from worldly youth to ascetic saint, offers the tradition a spiritual map involving continuous conversion, which in Franciscan eyes acknowledges the need to turn away from sin but emphasizes both the natural desire of the person toward love and continuous enlightenment. Ongoing personal conversion from the self toward others and, ultimately, toward mystical union with God, expresses the spiritual dynamic that underpins theological exploration and insights (Cunningham 2004).

2.2 Scriptural focus on wisdom literature

The Franciscan tradition identifies itself as a wisdom tradition, privileging scriptural texts that encourage ongoing conversion and transformation of the believer. Books from the Hebrew Bible such as Genesis, Psalms, Wisdom, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and the later prophets (Micah, Amos) figure prominently in Franciscan theological and prophetic consciousness. In addition, the Gospels of Luke and John are also of primary importance to the tradition, as they reveal the compassionate, incarnate God in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel and letters of John, as well as the letters to Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians (notably the hymns that appear in these letters) capture the tradition's commitment to the incarnation and Christology from above (Guinan 2006). Commentaries on these scriptural texts by Franciscan Masters can be found throughout the medieval period. The Franciscan focus on scripture provides the foundation for a theology based on the economy of salvation and a distinctive approach to the theology of history.

2.3 The Franciscan way of beauty (*via pulchritudinis*)

With its central focus on the experience of Francis of Assisi and taking up his love for creation as brother/sister, the tradition can be identified as a *via pulchritudinis*, or way of beauty (Ingham 2009). Clare of Assisi's *Letters to Agnes of Prague* celebrate the transformation into divine beauty with nuptial imagery (see Clare of Assisi 2006). Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* traces out the pathway to God as a ladder from created beauty, through the beauty of human knowing, to the highest transcendental attributes of God: One, True, Good (Spargo 1953). John Duns Scotus (Kovach 1972: 445–

459) highlights the beauty of each creature, in all its particularity, with his identification of *haecceitas* ('thisness') as the foundational principle of individuation (Ingham 2017: 23–30).

3 Franciscans and the science of theology

Scholastic theologians addressed the question of the scientific nature of theology in several ways. Peter Abelard identified the dialectic approach of inquiry, questioning, and discovery as proper to theology. In his *Sic et Non*, Abelard contrasted opposing voices from early Church Fathers to proceed toward the emergence of truth. Hugh of St Victor defended the apologetic nature of theology as the rational defence of doctrines of faith. Anselm of Canterbury identified logic as the primary pathway to arrive at understanding, once faith was present (*fides quaerens intellectum*) (Ingham 2017: 71–84).

3.1 Theology's scientific nature

With the entrance of Aristotelian models for scientific knowledge, Christian theologians embraced a new framework to approach this question. According to Aristotle (*Posterior Analytics* I, 2), unqualified scientific knowledge requires evident knowledge of the cause on which a given fact depends, a fact and a cause which cannot be other than they are. This implies that scientific knowledge is based on necessary realities and causal relationships. Bonaventure used this model to conclude that the science of theology is reducible to God as the First Principle (Bonaventure 2005: 22–23). Theology would be demonstrative in the way that geometry is demonstrative. Often alleged to be anti-Aristotelian, Franciscan theology integrates Aristotle into a broader patristic and Augustinian tradition.

For example, John Duns Scotus holds that metaphysics (not physics) offers the best scientific way to demonstrate the existence of God as First Principle (Wolter 1990a: 254–277). His *De Primo Principio* provides the most elaborate philosophical demonstration of God's existence (Duns Scotus 1983). When he turns to theological matters, Duns Scotus distinguishes between the subject of theology and the object of theology. While the subject provides unity for the science, the object of the science finalizes the act of understanding for a mind seeking to grasp the truth of the science. By this distinction, Duns Scotus introduces two modes of theological knowing: *theologia in se* (a pure, abstract science, such as God knows the truths about divine reality) and *theologia nostra* (historically contextualized, as a created mind would know these same truths). The events of salvation history, recorded in scripture, are part of *theologia nostra* (Ingham 2017: 71–84).

In contrast to Duns Scotus, William of Ockham does not consider theology to have reached the level of scientific knowledge. Basing his argument on the meaning of the word *scientia*, Ockham demonstrates that statements of faith are precisely that; because we have no simple cognition of God in this life, there is no sense in which any assertion about the existence of God, the divine essence as Trinity, or the immortality of the human

soul could be demonstrated in a scientific manner. Ockham uses the tools of logic and philosophy to highlight the superiority of faith over reason. Theology's purpose lies in its ability to help deepen the believer's understanding of the content of faith statements. This is truly 'faith seeking understanding'.

3.2 Franciscan theology as praxis

Bonaventure argues that Franciscan theology has its practical fulfillment in conversion, transformation, and love of God and neighbour. Peter John Olivi (2012) also stresses conversion and develops a significant path of practice for the laity. Duns Scotus elaborates on his predecessors in the tradition when he identifies theology as a practical, not theoretical or contemplative, science. He uses the term praxis, one of the earliest appearances of this term in relationship to theological inquiry and doctrine. As praxis, the science of theology records contingent, historical events whose purpose is to inspire and exemplify how believers are to live in the world. The purpose of theological study, for Duns Scotus as well as Bonaventure, is so that we might love the good, become good and do good (Duns Scotus 1950: 151–237).

The Franciscan commitment to contingency influences how Duns Scotus understands the science of theology (Dumont 1989: 579–599). Franciscans follow Aristotle's understanding of praxis and its limitations in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he outlines the methodology for theological inquiry (Ingham 2017: 71–84). As a sacred science, theology does not involve syllogistic reasoning or deductive inferences; it is based on the experience of the believer. And like his fellow Franciscan William of Ockham, Duns Scotus holds that truth in matters of God has less to do with the way a conclusion follows from a demonstration, and more to do with the personal experience of certainty and immediacy on the part of the believer (Freddoso 1999: 326–349). Truths of faith are independent of one another, such that, for example, one might hold to the resurrection with certainty and doubt the immortality of the soul.

Duns Scotus' Franciscan approach is unlike that of Thomas Aquinas, for whom the sciences exist in a relationship of 'subalternation' (Aquinas 1998: 61–62). This relationship maintains that any scientific knowledge of a lower science (such as optics) depends on the principles of a higher science (such as geometry). In this way, sciences form a cascading dynamic from principles to conclusions to principles and conclusions, all flowing from the divine act of self-knowing. Duns Scotus approaches theology primarily as a practical science (praxis), where experience, certainty, self-evidence, and analysis of primary terms offer the basic framework for method. Thanks to his identification of two cognitive acts (abstraction and intuition), Duns Scotus balances the domain of theoretical knowledge beyond sense experience with that of practical experience of divine action, both in revelation and in the everyday life of the believer.

3.3 Scripture and gospel living: Peter John Olivi and Nicholas of Lyra

Peter John Olivi (1248–1298), Franciscan lector, approached the study of theology through that of scripture. For him, true theological reflection depended upon the life of faith as prelude, not completion. For the believer, faith meant the praxis of ‘adhaererer’ (adherence) to the truths revealed in scripture, the historical, contingent events that reveal God’s actions in history and, in particular, the primacy of the life of Jesus Christ. The act of faith is the act of an historical agent (Flood 1994: 148) that depended radically on human free will. Perfection means following Christ in all things, especially the life of poverty, emblematic of gospel living (Olivi 2012). Perfection means right action, and not ideal behaviour. In this way, theology relates directly to ethical living, not in the mode of Aristotelian intellectualism, but rather in the reality of human freedom in the will. By free will, the believer is able to respond to the truths revealed in scripture and follow the example of Jesus. Olivi’s approach to biblical texts, in particular the synoptic gospels and Book of Revelation, through commentaries and other writings, was based upon the conviction that Francis of Assisi was ‘the angel of the sixth seal’, ushering the final age before the return of Christ in glory (Flood 1994: 167–169).

In addition to Olivi, another highly influential Franciscan exegete was Nicholas of Lyra (1270–1349). Nicholas authored the first printed commentary on the Bible, *Literal Postill on the whole Bible*. This fifty-volume work emphasized a literal and spiritual, rather an allegorical, interpretation of the biblical texts. Nicholas’ study reveals his openness to Hebrew as well as Latin sources. His important work of Franciscan evangelism influenced later scholars, including Martin Luther (Krey and Smith 2000).

4 Franciscan trinitarian theology

4.1 Alexander of Hales and early sources

While Francis of Assisi might be considered a ‘vernacular theologian’ (Monti 2002: 21–42), the Franciscan theological tradition formally began with Regent Master Alexander of Hales (c. 1185–1245). Alexander was already a Master at the University of Paris when he entered the Order of Friars Minor, resulting in the religious order gaining the Chair in Theology. Alexander brought the wealth of early scholastic theology (especially the writings of Anselm) into Franciscan intellectual development. He served as a bridge from earlier sources to the developing thirteenth-century theological insights. Key to the development of theology as a science is the way Alexander and his collaborators (John of La Rochelle, William of Melitona, Odo of Tournai, and others) systematized theology in the *Summa Theologica*, also known as *Summa Halensis* (Osborne 1994: 2–38).

Alexander's theological vision is predominantly Augustinian, with respect to the complex reception of Augustine and his legitimate and spurious works in the Middle Ages (Schumacher 2019: 26–27). His *Summa* brings together the major theological positions of the preceding centuries, such as John of Damascene and Peter Lombard, and takes careful note of the contemporary positions of his day, such as those of Philip the Chancellor, William of Auxerre. The *Summa* presents Augustine's position on original sin, yet nuances it along the lines of Anselm of Canterbury. Alexander's retrieval of Anselm was a crucial enabler of the eleventh-century Benedictine's ability to influence later scholastic thinkers.

Drawing on trinitarian insights from the influential School of St Victor, Alexander sets out the trinitarian model for Franciscan theology according to a dynamic, interpersonal relational model. A metaphysics of Good that harkens back to the Dionysian synthesis (rather than a metaphysics of Being) allows the tradition to follow a Victorine approach, based upon human experience of loving relationships to grasp the triune God. For Richard of St Victor's *On The Trinity*, Goodness and Love are convertible. Relational self-gift is the foundational reality proper to divine life. This results in three distinctive aspects found in the Franciscan approach to trinitarian theology. First, the identification of divine nature with the Good means that God's essence is defined as Goodness Itself, rather than Being or Existence Itself (*Ipsium Esse*), as Aquinas held. Second, the reflective methodology moves from three persons to one God, rather than the approach taken by Aquinas, from *de Deo Uno* to *de Deo Trino*. Finally, for Alexander, Christ is not the image of God (*imago*) in order to reveal to us who we are. Rather, Christ is the image of God in order to show the world who God is. The intimate connection between the Trinity and the Word made flesh (incarnation) makes use of Platonic exemplarism and grounds the more developed trinitarian theology found in his student Bonaventure (Osborne 1994: 18–22).

4.2 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio

Three aspects of Bonaventure's trinitarian theology influence all Franciscan thinkers: emanation, exemplarism, and reduction. These form the paradigm of *exitus-reditus* that is proper to Platonic and neo-Platonic theological patterns. All flows forth from God (*exitus*) and all returns to God (*reditus*) in and through Christ Jesus.

4.2.1 Emanation

Bonaventure's trinitarian theology has been aligned with Greek Patristic, or Cappadocian, theology, although the validity of such general identifications is questionable. Crucially, he does not expound the nature of God independently from trinitarian relations. By moving away from the Augustinian-Thomistic emphasis on the divine nature, 'God in Godself', Bonaventure avoids a self-contained and isolated model of the triune God. His approach to the Trinity, understood as divine self-gift in love (emanation), links divine life *ad intra*

to divine action *ad extra* in creation and incarnation. And, while divine life internal to the Trinity is necessary, divine action beyond the Trinity is free and contingent (Friedman 2010).

4.2.2 Exemplarism

Like Alexander before him, Bonaventure's approach is exemplarist and Platonic, allowing his trinitarian theology to privilege the Second Person (Word or *Logos*) as medium for creation (Hayes 1992: 12–18). Bonaventure unites the primordial fecundity of the Father with the principle of self-diffusive goodness. Divine life is a fountain fullness (*fons plenitudinis*). Platonic exemplarity forms the unfolding of all reality, coming forth from God (*exitus*) and defining the return of all things to God (*reditus*). Divine ideas, present in the *Logos*, serve as models for all created reality which mirrors the Trinity. All of creation is stamped according to a triune pattern, as vestige or image of God within (Bonaventure 1993). Thus the metaphysical constitution of all created reality allows for the conditions for moral living: the return of all creatures to God (Carpenter 1999).

4.2.3 Reduction

The centre of Bonaventure's trinitarian theology is the Second Person who reveals divine life in Jesus of Nazareth and offers the pathway to return (reduction). This Franciscan theology of the Word places Jesus Christ at the centre of all reality. As Second Person, the Word is image of the Father and the medium (exemplar) through whom all has been brought into being. As the incarnate Word, Jesus is eternal and timeless, immanent in history and means of salvation. Together, the Cappadocian understanding of the relations among persons in the Trinity and the Platonic exemplarist universe allow for the centrality of the Word to bind divine life to creation and to the ultimate consummation or reduction of all in God (Hayes 1992: 39–41).

5 Franciscan Christology

The christocentric nature of Franciscan spirituality appears clearly in St Francis' *Admonition 5* (McElrath and Doyle 1994: 1–13). There, the saint emphasizes that each person is not only *imago Dei* (God's image) but, importantly, *imago Christi* (Christ's image). This deep identification with Christ and the connection to a dynamic, trinitarian vision influences how Franciscans understand the incarnation. The incarnation is, for the tradition, the ultimate reason for everything God has chosen to do: the ultimate reason for creation, the ultimate reason for the covenant, the ultimate reason for endowing human persons with free choice. As St Paul states: 'all was created for him, all was created through him, he is before all else that is' (Col 1:17). This means that, in the person of Jesus Christ, the divine plan has already been fulfilled and will reach fulfillment, when God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

5.1 Synoptic gospels

Franciscan theologians focus primarily on the Gospel of Luke, which emphasizes Jesus' poverty, his inclusive outreach to the marginalized, and his prophetic critique of material wealth and power. Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Man, the Parables of the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son are all highlighted in Franciscan commentaries on Luke and referenced in other, parallel writings, such as Bonaventure's *Defense of the Mendicants*.

Both Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and Peter John Olivi authored important commentaries on the Gospel of Luke (Bonaventure 2001). Luke's depiction of Jesus' material poverty, his suffering and death – along with the parallel Christology of Acts of the Apostles and the life of the early Christian community – complete the Franciscan scope of Christology as fundamental basis for their vision of evangelical life. For Franciscans, evangelical life refers to the experience of the early followers of Jesus both during his life and after his resurrection. It is life according to the gospel. It is neither fundamentalist nor literalist in its biblical interpretation. The life of intimacy with Jesus defines the Franciscan vocation as it emphasizes relationships among the brothers and sisters. As an evangelical religious movement (rather than either an apostolic or monastic order), Franciscan life is *sui generis*: giving witness to the reality of the reign of God as already and not yet fully realized, made manifest during the ministry of Jesus and the earliest days of Christianity.

5.2 John Duns Scotus

5.2.1 Incarnation

John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) fully articulated the Franciscan position on the incarnation. Duns Scotus reasoned that the incarnation could be considered independently of human sin, that is, of the fall of our first parents. While he neither denies the reality of the fall, nor the role of Jesus as Redeemer, Duns Scotus proposed that God's choice to become incarnate is logically prior and intentionally superior to the alternate teaching that God became human as a direct result of the sin of our first parents. Developing Bonaventure's trinitarian Theology of the Word as exemplar for all creation, Duns Scotus understood how, in the act of creating our first parents, God created in the image of the incarnate Son. This way of casting the reflection uses the logical methodology known as the *ordo intentionis*, or the ordering according to intention. A type of 'backward mapping', the order of intention points to the fact that the primary motivation for an event is best seen in light of the event's purpose, not in terms of prior events. Coming later in time, the purpose is logically (rather than temporally) prior according to the agent's intention. Events that occurred chronologically prior to others (such as the creation of something from nothing, the call of Abraham, the covenant with Moses, etc.) are understood to point toward a later, and more important event, namely the incarnation (Wolter 1994: 139–144).

Drawing upon aspects of the *via pulchritudinis*, Duns Scotus likens divine action to artistic intentionality. God is a well-ordered lover. The beauty of the person of Jesus Christ is revealed when one considers the incarnation as belonging to divine intentional action based not on sin, but on generous love. The logical methodology that focuses on the order of intention allows Duns Scotus to depict salvation history as the dynamic, providential unfolding of events within time. This is known as the *ordo executionis*, or the ordering according to execution. The two orders mirror one another: what is first in the order of intention (God's principal goal) is last in the order of execution (or the ultimate event that fulfills the divine plan). The unfolding of salvation history belongs to the order of execution (Ingham 2017: 139–148).

This position responds to the Anselmian argument found in *Cur Deus Homo?*. While the incarnation took place after the fall of Adam and Eve, this does not mean it took place in response to the fall. God's ultimate desire to become incarnate is explained as the result of an intentional choice to bring all reality into the divine communion of triune love. By logically distinguishing these two orders (one atemporal, the other temporal), Duns Scotus defends the thesis that the incarnation can indeed be considered independently of human sin, even if one affirms original sin as an actual, historical event. In this view, the redemption accomplished on the cross becomes the ultimate revelation of God's humility and charity.

Duns Scotus makes use of the methodology pioneered by his teacher, William of Ware, which was based on three key elements: *potuit*, *decuit*, and *fecit*. This methodology moves from the dimension of logical possibility (*potuit*), through the consideration of its beauty (*decuit*), to the affirmation of its reality (*fecit*). This is the approach of a theology of perfectibility; divine actions always reveal the most perfect, and most beautiful, attributes of God (Cross 1999: 31–33).

5.2.2 Immaculate conception

The defence of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary follows logically from the Franciscan position on the incarnation (Wolter 2000). While Mary's sanctification in the womb was commonly held by theologians, her immaculate conception was hotly debated in the thirteenth century (Ingham 2019). The strongest argument against her sinlessness is that the position would challenge the affirmation of universal salvation: that all are saved by Jesus Christ. Duns Scotus reasoned that her protection from the stain of sin would be possible thanks to prevenient grace, or divine protective action that preemptively saved her soul from taint of sin. This action would be a type of 'baptismal' grace that preceded ensoulment. Such a protective action, identical to the effect of baptism, that prevents sin (rather than removing it) constitutes a far greater divine action than what someone like Mary Magdalene, whose sins were forgiven, experienced. Her protection from sin would

be in light of the merits of Christ's passion and in light of her role in redemption. In effect, in her, God fulfills the intentionality of creation united to Christ. Duns Scotus' argument follows the common English Franciscan methodological approach of *potuit* (it can be thought of in this way; it is possible), *decurit* (it is pleasing, beautiful to consider it in the way), and *fecit* (God acted in this way).

6 Franciscan soteriology

The originality of the Franciscan theological tradition can be clearly seen in the approach to soteriology. The traditional and most famous medieval explanation for the incarnation was set forth by St Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo?*. According to Anselm's explanation, the incarnation was cast in terms of a necessary response on the part of divine action to offset and make amends for the sin of Adam and Eve. Since their sin against divine honour was an infinite injury (because of the divine infinite being), such an act of infinite disobedience could only be repaid by an infinite act of obedience. Only a God-man could perform such an act. Redemption refers to the act of remitting a debt of fallenness or sin. Justice required such retribution, and this required incarnation, passion, and death. Both Bonaventure (with some modifications of Anselm) and Aquinas (more thoroughly affirming Anselm's reasoning) accepted Anselm's argument, yet rejected the element of necessity that Anselm emphasized. Nothing necessitated divine action, so both thirteenth-century theologians affirmed divine freedom to act in the way that God did (Robson 1996: 334–347).

In response to the Anselmian position, Franciscans in general and Duns Scotus in particular argued that nothing outside of God either limits or necessitates divine behaviour (Robson 1996). God acts entirely out of divine perfection and generosity. God desires to manifest divine goodness and show forth divine glory, as Eph 1:3–14 expresses. Such a manifestation would have taken place in the person of Jesus Christ, whether or not sin was present. Therefore, the debt owed to God for the incarnation is not a debt whose basis is human sin, but a debt whose basis is divine love. Against the foundational backdrop of the centrality of divine purpose and the incarnation, four commitments highlight the particular contours of Franciscan soteriology and its contrast with the Anselmian theory (Rosato 2015: 551–584), which will be discussed in the subsequent four sections.

6.1 The nobility of finitude

Anselm had argued that the injury done to God by the disobedience of our first parents was an infinite injury, because divine honour is infinite. Indeed, no finite act could ever make up for the injury. Such satisfaction could only be made by an infinite being, hence the necessity of the incarnation. Duns Scotus argued to the contrary. He argued that because the act of disobedience was a human act, it was only finite. Therefore, any finite human

act of pure love for God would be acceptable to God as satisfaction, given the primacy of divine love and intentional purpose. Indeed, Adam himself could have made amends for his act of disobedience. In addition, Duns Scotus affirms that the merits of Christ (since they rely on his human nature) are finite, not infinite. And yet, because of the divine person in Christ, the act of love is infinite as well, far outweighing the debt of all human sin. Infinite intensity of love outweighs the finite accumulation of sin. So not only do Franciscans deny that the injury to the divine honour is infinite, they deny that Christ's merits are infinite as well.

6.2 Restoration replaces atonement

In the Franciscan tradition, salvation as the restoration of fallen human nature increasingly replaces the atonement model. In an effort to clarify and nuance Anselm's teaching, Franciscans (such as Bonaventure) had distinguished between two ways of understanding satisfaction. One way focuses on the injury against God, to whom satisfaction must be made. The other focuses on the restoration or healing of human nature, damaged and wounded by sin. This second way of understanding satisfaction focuses on returning to God what was lost through sin.

By means of this Franciscan distinction, earlier friars such as Bonaventure were able to expand to include the incarnation as an act of restoration. In becoming human, Jesus Christ restores to God human nature as it was intended. Here he functions as the New or Second Adam. In addition, Bonaventure used this distinction to frame satisfaction as a type of merit (Rosato 2015: 440). In his argument, Bonaventure shows that in the case of Christ's satisfaction, it can be deemed merit, because it restores to God what was lost (*pro damno*) in the act of making compensation for sin. Peter John Olivi had also described Christ's satisfaction as giving back to God the good lost, namely the human race (Rosato 2015: 562–564).

6.3 Divine acceptance as the foundation for merit and satisfaction

Anselm's position holds that the sufferings of Christ make satisfaction to God for the dishonour and thereby merit the graces that restore humanity to its intended fulfillment. This way of casting the relationship of satisfaction to merit places sin (not the incarnation) in the central and primary position. It also undergirds Anselm's argument that, in order for the divine purpose to be fulfilled, the incarnation had to take place as a divine response to human fallenness.

Franciscans such as Duns Scotus deny that the incarnation was necessitated by any human act, least of all human sin. Divine love and acceptance are foundational. The nature of divine acceptance, understood within the two orders of intent and execution,

reveals that it is divine acceptance that grounds the order of merit and not satisfaction. In other words, Christ's suffering and death satisfies because it merits, and it merits because God accepts it. It does not merit because it satisfies some idea of justice in making amends to the divine honour, sullied by human sin. This reversal of satisfaction and the unity established between acceptance and merit reveals, once again, the foundational commitment to divine generosity and love over divine justice (Ward 2017: 37–43).

6.4 The Franciscan approach: salvation as a gift to be accepted by the believer

Because of their commitment to the finite nature of human sin and to the foundational insight about divine purpose, love, and creative freedom, Franciscans can (and do) maintain that divine acceptance of Christ's finite (and human) act of love is sufficient for this act to merit graces required for the redemption and restoration of everyone. This means that salvation is a gift given to all to be accepted or rejected; nothing necessitates human acceptance of God's offer of life and restoration (Ward 2017: 39–41).

7 Sacramental theology and grace: William of Ockham

Several aspects of Franciscan Theology converge on the tradition's understanding of sacraments and grace in the life of the believer. These aspects include divine omnipotence, the primacy of Christ, the dignity of creation, and the centrality of the Christian community. All creation possesses a sacramental quality since all creation reveals divine love (Bonaventure 1993). Sacraments function within the Christian community as manifestations of ongoing divine presence in human history and human life (Ingham 2017: 148–150). They also communicate the restorative power of divine grace, intimately present to all that exists (Guider 1993).

In his approach to theological questions, William of Ockham (1285–1347) takes up the key distinction between natural and voluntary causes in order to defend the divine will as absolute cause. Here faith and reason work in tandem. Ockham relies both on philosophical and theological principles to defend divine action, from creation to salvation. The affirmation of divine freedom and power, for example, is constrained by the principle of non-contradiction. In addition, God's gracious freedom in adherence to his covenants is confirmed in sacred scripture. His defence of divine freedom throughout his writings underlies his affirmation that sacraments are only *sine qua non* causes, and not instrumental causes of divine grace. Sacraments do not exercise any causal power alone; they are causes without which God does not confer grace (Goddu 1994: 234–239). God alone is efficient cause of grace, although the divine will instituted the sacraments in such a way that no grace is conferred without them.

Eucharistic theology receives important treatment by scholastic thinkers following Lateran IV (1215), the Council that affirmed without defining the term ‘transubstantiation’ as that which pointed to the conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ on the altar. This term, which would only be formally confirmed at the Council of Trent three centuries later (1545–1563), provoked significant theological reflection throughout the thirteenth century, for Dominicans as well as Franciscans. The challenge, for these theologians, was to make sense of a philosophical term derived from Aristotle (Adams 2010: 85–87). Bonaventure uses the term sparingly and prefers to remain within the patristic tradition of an emphasis on sacramental signification. While Duns Scotus and Ockham both accepted the term itself, they argued that God could act to conserve the accidents (‘consubstantiation’) in their substantial reality, without holding them in existence independently of the substance of bread and wine (Ingham 2017: 150–154). This preserved within sacramental theology the Franciscan emphasis on the signification of material realities.

8 Moral theology

8.1 The frame of beauty (*via pulchritudinis*)

The experience of beauty is central to Franciscan moral theology. Moral living is framed within the *via pulchritudinis*, or pathway of transformation into beauty (Ingham 2013). Rather, it is the most appropriate way to understand divine life and love for the world. Because Franciscans move toward God through creation, moral theology focuses on the relationship between God and the world, a relationship of giftedness. Moral living is a response to divine generous love, a response of gratitude and self-gift. Divine love and acceptance are not to be earned; rather they are given from the outset. Here the Franciscan moral vision springs from the christological and trinitarian foundations seen earlier.

Human dignity and freedom are central to moral decision-making. Because freedom is also at the heart of the Franciscan vision, the goal of moral living is the free response to divine love by means of the love of friendship. To love God generously, to love the neighbour generously – these are the two great commandments. Moral perfection is found in human love, solidarity, and generosity toward the neighbour. Franciscans do not understand freedom as an unbounded ability to do whatever one wishes. Rather, freedom grounds the response to an experience of love, both human and divine, in acts of kindness, service, and compassion (Shannon 2013: 129–160).

8.2 Divine will, natural law, and the Decalogue

A voluntarist theological tradition, Franciscan theologians hold that loving God in friendship far surpasses our intellectual comprehension of God. Human moral excellence involves

the perfection of love; this requires ongoing conversion and enlightenment. Divine freedom, strongly defended in 1277 (Bianchi 2003), emphasized the importance of creation as an intentional act and moral living as grounded on the divine will (Bonansea 1981: 296–335).

Divine love and freedom are the foundation to the contingent order. This includes the moral order (Ingham 1993). Natural law refers to those rational, innate principles that ground human reasoning, human discernment, and human perfection. Franciscans do not reduce natural law to physicalism ('what nature has taught animals'). Accordingly, Franciscans understand natural law to belong to human rational capacity to distinguish principles from conclusions, to reason discerningly from first principles, and to apply reasoning to contingent and concrete particulars (Möhle 2003: 332).

Franciscans vary in the way they embrace an understanding of moral law in its relationship to a type of divine command theory (Cross 1999: 89–95). The thirteenth-century approach to the divine will made use of an earlier distinction introduced by Peter Damien (d. 1072) which highlighted two powers in the divine will; one understood as absolute and the other understood as ordained (*potentia absoluta/potentia ordinata*). The first, absolute power, refers to any rational action bounded by the principle of non-contradiction that lies within the power of the lawmaker. The second, ordained power, refers to those commands or laws which the legislator enacts in light of present circumstances. Using the example of a king, Duns Scotus explains the divine power to grant exceptional behaviour by means of this distinction. In this way, all law depends upon the divine will, whose actions are not limited by the present state of affairs. Duns Scotus extends this legal/moral distinction to every agent who acts rationally, that is, by virtue of intellect and will working together. While this approach makes room for the contingent order of all that exists, it is often misinterpreted as a defence of arbitrary voluntarism. At its foundation is the Franciscan affirmation of the rational, loving, and generous power of God (Frank 1982: 68–89).

The historical background for the question of natural law was the problem of scriptural passages in which God requires someone to disobey a command. When the Hebrews were told to steal from the Egyptians (Exod 12:35), or when Abram was told to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen 22:1–20), one might ask if God were an arbitrary despot. Aquinas responded to this problem by distinguishing what God demanded in contrast to the deeper intent behind the demand (for example, to test Abram's faith). As a result, Aquinas considered all commands of the Ten Commandments to be without exception. By contrast, Duns Scotus responded to this question by distinguishing two aspects of natural law. Firstly, natural law strictly speaking (*stricte loquendo*), refers to analytic truths, self-evident, *per se nota* principles. 'God is to be loved' is this first, and most basic, truth of natural law. Even the divine will necessarily follows this first self-evident principle.

The second aspect, natural law broadly considered (*large loquendo*), refers to those principles of moral science that derive from both human experience and rely upon the first practical principle. These are present in the last seven commands of the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. Thanks to this distinction within natural law, Duns Scotus understands the commands of the Decalogue to fall into the two tables: commands that relate to love for God (commandments 1–2 and possibly 3) relate to God alone and admit of no exceptions. Commands that relate to love for the neighbour (commandments 4–10) are in harmony with the first commands yet can admit of exceptions. In this way, divine actions in scripture are not arbitrary: they follow the nature of law and respect contingency (Prentice 1967). In addition, Duns Scotus weaves contingent human experience into the fabric of moral law and principle.

William of Ockham develops even further the foundational capacity of the divine will as grounds for all reality, especially moral law. Using the inherited scholastic distinction between divine power, *de potentia absoluta/ordinata*, Ockham affirms divine power for any action short of a contradiction. Divine power is the foundation for moral law and the absolute cause for sacramental efficacy. All natural causal explanations are thereby removed from the area of faith. The goal of his approach is not to diminish rational activity, but rather to emphasize the role and power of faith in the life of the believer.

8.3 Moral science and conscience

This nuanced distinction in natural law allows the Franciscan theological tradition to be both a natural law tradition, and one that emphasizes the dignity of human conscience and the exercise of human moral freedom. Moral decisions are rational and follow the first principle, ‘God is to be loved’. Morally good actions embody generous love for the neighbour and perfect the moral agent. Moral living is other-centred and compassionate living, extending and deepening relationships in light of divine love and generosity (Nairn 2013). The body of moral science, both learned and informed by scripture, is both inductive and deductive, taking into account the fabric of contingency against the backdrop of the first, exceptionless moral principle. Human rational freedom is the foundation for the understanding of the moral conscience, and the emphasis on the internal forum is highlighted by the Franciscan commitment to human dignity.

8.4 Contingency and moral discernment

Franciscan moral discernment is pastoral in nature. Franciscan praxis follows a threefold methodology: ‘Behold! Consider! Respond!’ Central to all moral discernment for Franciscans is the present context in all its dignity and particularity, read in light of moral principles. Moral freedom is based upon the capacity for self-restraint. Moral response involves self-mastery and self-gift over a lifetime. Franciscan moral theology is not rigid in its conclusions, but always seeks to bring forth the greatest moral good, the highest

degree of moral beauty, in the person and in light of the given set of circumstances (Ingham 2013). This approach seeks to unify moral objectivity with rational subjectivity in striking the right note. The good grounds moral beauty, understood as a divine attribute and not a matter of personal taste.

9 Franciscan women

Due to the manner of university education and scholastic organization in the Middle Ages, women were not allowed to hold significant roles in the articulation of theological teachings nor had they permission to teach. Nevertheless, early Franciscan women had a significant influence on the lives and writings of Franciscan theologians of their time. Women of particular holiness, whose spiritual and ascetic lives embodied the values and characteristics of Franciscan gospel living, dominated the times in which they lived. Angela of Foligno (1248–1309), third order Franciscan, became known as ‘Teacher of Theologians’. Her writings about her spiritual experiences, recorded by Brother Arnaldo, influenced her many disciples and provided spiritual nourishment for the growth of fourteenth-century lay spiritual movements. Margaret of Cortona (1247–1297) was another third order Franciscan, whose experiences were recorded by her confessor. Ubertino of Casale, the leader of the Franciscan Spirituals, had contact with some of these early female Franciscan mystics (Carney 1994).

10 Contemporary Franciscan theology

Two contemporary Franciscan theologians have made significant contributions to theology. In addition to critical commentary and translations of Bonaventure’s major works, Zachary Hayes, O.F.M. has studied creation and eschatology in *A Window to the Divine: A Study of Christian Creation Theology* (1997). Kenan Osborne, O.F.M. has developed a significant body of material integrating the Franciscan tradition with contemporary concerns. Major treatments occur in the following works: *Sacramental Theology: A General Introduction* (1988); *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (2001); *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium* (2000); *Orders and Ministry: Leadership in the World Church* (2006); *The Infinity of God and a Finite world: A Franciscan Approach* (2015); *A Theology of the Church for the Third Millennium* (2009).

In addition, a host of resources for the Franciscan theological tradition may be found on a website sponsored by the Secretariat for the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: <https://www.franciscantradition.org>.

10.1 Liberation theology: Leonardo Boff

The Franciscan methodology of praxis in theology helps connect Franciscan theology to twentieth-century liberation theology. While liberation theology emerged from within German philosophical categories, and included Jesuit (Jon Sobrino), Dominican (Gustavo Gutierrez Marino), and Franciscan (Leonardo Boff) theologians in Latin America, the connection to praxis and the methodology of subjectivity, attention to contingent particularity, an experiential awareness, accompanied by sustained historical analysis and reflection points to areas of convergence between Franciscan models of theology and Latin American liberation theology and the post-Vatican II church. Most prominent in Brazil were Antonio Moser and Leonardo Boff. Boff's works include *Church: Charism and Power* (1985); *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (1986); *Ecología: grito de la Tierra, grito des los pobres* (2006, 4th edition); *Evangelio del Cristo cósmico* (2009).

10.2 Cosmic Christology and evolution

10.2.1 Ilia Delio, O.S.F.

In the twenty-first century, and influenced by the work of Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Franciscan theologian Ilia Delio, O.S.F. has developed a christological approach influenced by Bonaventure's theology of trinitarian outpouring. Her work integrates the scientific approach of evolutionary evidence with the theology of Bonaventurian dynamism. In *Christ in Evolution* (2008), *The Emergent Christ* (2011), and *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness* (2015), Delio explores a cosmic Christology which embraces the approach known as 'deep incarnation'. Deep incarnation identifies all creation as an incarnational moment, wherein God is present to all material reality. Rather than pantheism, this is more akin to *panentheism*, which understands divine presence as sustaining or conserving all that exists.

10.2.2 Richard Rohr, O.F.M.

Richard Rohr, O.F.M., a more pastoral writer in the Franciscan tradition, also develops this renewed Christology, with its emphasis on the incarnation, contingency, and particularity. In *The Universal Christ* (2019), Rohr seeks to introduce a renewed theological paradigm based upon the Franciscan spiritual and intellectual tradition. His Center for Action and Contemplation (Albuquerque, NM, USA) serves as a resource for the development of insights surrounding the value of Franciscan theology today.

10.3 Contemporary Franciscan ecclesiology

Franciscan ecclesiology reflects the Vatican II understanding of communion. Expressing the trinitarian, incarnational, and sacramental commitments noted earlier, this ecclesiology is grounded in concrete experience and mutuality. As the People of God, the church is meant to reflect the life of the Trinity, a communion of charisms, celebrating the rich

diversity of gifts. This charismatic element belongs to the church's structure (Boff 1985). The ecclesial communion reflects the mystery of God in the created order, present to and with others, especially the poor and marginalized. In the post-Vatican II world, Franciscans view the church as the sacramental expression of the divine will for communion with all persons (Burkhard 2000). Open to other religions, avoiding the false dichotomy of sacred versus secular, Franciscan ecclesiology emphasizes salvation as liberation. The mission of the church is not triumphant, but relational: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue with science, and engagement with all persons of good will.

10.4 Recent papal encyclicals

The revival of the Franciscan theological tradition in the late twentieth century has found resonance in papal teaching from Pope Paul VI to Pope Francis. Paul VI and John Paul II were influenced by the thought of John Duns Scotus, Benedict XVI by Bonaventure. Recent papal writings have expressed a significant catechesis based upon key Franciscan theological insights and commitments to human dignity, economic justice, and ecological awareness. The most prominent expositions are explored in the following sections.

10.4.1 *Caritas in Veritate*

In *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Pope Benedict XVI outlines the relationship between love and social justice. By means of the principle of gratuity (all is gift), the encyclical lays the groundwork for an economy of peace and justice, based on the nature of gracious divine love active in the world in and through human relationships.

10.4.2 *Laudato Si'*

In *Laudato Si': Care for our Common Home* (2015), Pope Francis builds upon Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of Creatures* to appeal for greater attention to the interrelationship of ecological justice, economic justice, and social justice. Abuse of the environment increases poverty throughout the world. The poor, treated as disposable in a consumerist economy, pay the price for advanced standards of living in the northern hemisphere. Using the term integral ecology, Francis offers the paradigm of kinship ethic to complement the stewardship ethic as a fruitful way to ground the future of our common home (see Ecological Ethics).

10.4.3 *Fratelli Tutti*

Fratelli Tutti (2020) appeals to St Francis of Assisi's *Admonition 6*, where the saint calls on his brothers to care for one another, as the Good Shepherd cares for the sheep. Centring his reflection as a meditation on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Pope Francis extends his insights from *Laudato Si'* to address the plight of those in need, in poverty, victims of racism, and those excluded from opportunity and marginalized.

11 Conclusion

This article has contributed to an understanding of Franciscan theology viewed through its many different aspects: the influences, methods, key texts, and core beliefs. Starting with Francis and Clare of Assisi, Franciscan theology was traced through its pastoral dimensions, its christocentrism, praxis approach, trinitarianism, sacramentalism, and ecclesiology. The continued vibrancy and influence of the tradition in the third millennium is a testimony to the importance of this intellectual and spiritual resource, as it has developed through eight centuries by the followers of the Poor Man of Assisi.

Attributions

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