

Keynote Address by Father Murray Bodo OFM

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It was the very closeness of God that moved him to the depths of his being. He was no longer alone. God was with him and with the whole world. God was in him and God was in every creature, and all was blessing.

His name was Francis, the son of a cloth-merchant father and a mother who was of French origin, and they lived in Assisi, Italy in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. He was a man born of wealth, a leader who dreamed of knighthood and who went to war on a high steed only to be brought low to the earth in defeat and imprisonment that made of him a man with what today is called post-traumatic stress that marked him for the rest of his days until, singing the words of the one hundred and forty-second Psalm, David's prayer in a cave, "Bring me out of prison," he entered heaven on the high steed of Evangelical poverty and intimate union with Jesus Christ, his Lord and Savior.

It was that very Jesus who became for him, and all his followers, the closeness of God. For Jesus was and is the closeness of God. He is God become one of us, like us in everything but sin. He is the mystery of the incarnation of God, and that mystery was deepened for Francis in that this Incarnate God can become enfleshed in us through the Sacramental grace of the Holy Eucharist wherein we eat the body and drink the blood of Christ whose effect is to intensify the indwelling of God in us.

St. Francis is not a Medieval theologian, but a wisdom figure, a *moshel moshelim*, a teacher of wisdom who uses sayings, stories, and rituals to show us how we can allow God to transform our lives. In this, as in everything

else, he is following in the footsteps of Jesus, who is the fullness of God among us.

This mystery of the fullness of the Incarnation of God is the central teaching that St. Francis left us. And from that core teaching derives another six key teachings of St. Francis, namely, the grace of Evangelical Poverty and how it unites us to God and leads to the third mystery, which is how to live the Gospel in our time and place. This living the Gospel leads to the fourth teaching, which is that we are to repair God's house, which leads to the fifth teaching that we repair God's house by making peace. And peace-making leads to the sixth teaching, that God's house, God's dwelling, is all of creation. Then, in the fullness of time, our living of these teachings leads to the final teaching, that joy comes from humble praise of God and service of God and of all our brothers and sisters who are not just humans, but all of God's creatures, animate and inanimate.

That simple map for living is why St. Francis is still listened to and followed today in our fractious and divided world. What he teaches, if lived out, brings joy, which is the result of union with God who lives with us and within all of creation. God lives in creation but is also apart from creation as its Creator who existed before the existence of the universe God created.

St. Francis' teachings, then, become both a theology and a way of living. They are a theology that emerges from the concrete, practical choices he made in the effort to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who is the teacher and embodiment of what it means to live and love in God.

What, then, are these experiences, these choices that open up and flesh out the abstract teachings in the life of St. Francis and in our own lives as we act upon them? And how is it that when we do act upon them, the teachings of St. Francis unfold as counter valences to the negative, immature "acting

out” which has led and continues to lead to the divisions and hatreds that split us apart? The teachings of S. Francis enable us to imagine another future and gives us hope; for hope is the grace to imagine a future more positive, more loving, and more joyful than the world we now find ourselves in. As St. Francis used to say to his brothers, “Let us begin to do good, for up to now we have done nothing.”

We haven’t the time to talk about all of these 7 Teachings of Francis, but we can examine three of them for the purpose of talking about rebuilding the church in our time.

The First Teaching I would like to address is: Making Peace, A Social Justice that makes beautiful that which has been deformed.

In all creatures God is revealed to us: the beauty, the grandeur, the infinite variety, the individuality, and the mystery. That is what St. Francis saw and what he teaches us.

But something has deformed the beauty of God’s creation, and that something is injustice. According to St Bonaventure, the great Medieval Franciscan Theologian, only justice can make beautiful that which as been deformed. Justice then is the beautiful path to peace, peace of mind, peace between and among people, and peace among all God’s creatures.

Now Francis, of course, was not a philosopher, a thinker and theologian like St. Bonaventure. He was a seer, a poet. He spent his whole life trying to see rather than trying to reason things out. He was always looking for signs of God in the world around him. He had found God in the lepers, so he knew that one must look hard and long in order to see the hidden mystery beneath

the appearances of things. And because of that deep looking, he learned to be present to things and people; he was among other things, then, a contemplative, someone who looks and looks deeply. And that is the first step toward making peace and reconciliation.

Francis looked intently, and he looked with reverence and with love. This kind of looking elicits an affective response in him, a response of compassion, of feeling with and/or for what is seen. He is moved. And it is that movement of the heart that leads to action. At the very least, it leads to praise; or if what is seen is broken or hurt, it leads to the need to help the other. And that need to help for Francis is not minimal. He pushes the envelope, for example, vis-à-vis the lepers. He doesn't simply give them a coin or food. He goes and lives among them and in, in his own words, he "works mercy with them." It is a mutual exchange; he works mercy WITH them. Both he and the lepers experience mercy.

That mutual giving and receiving is, I believe, the bedrock of all Franciscan peace making. By overcoming shame or fear; or whatever it is that is holding you back from reaching out to the poor and broken ones, you enter a startling world of sweetness of soul that is not just self-serving but that accomplishes a profound reconciliation of opposites that makes it possible to experience a new, unexpected bond with the other. And you want to stay there, not necessarily in that physical place but in that spiritual and psychological space where the lion and the lamb lie down together.

Nor is the bond that results from working mercy something static. It only endures as you continue to overcome new barriers, to cross new and fearsome borders, so that you yourself become the place of reconciliation wherever you go. That kind of portable peacemaker was who Francis was.

Pope Francis made such bonding concrete and tangible when, in a talk to priests, he gave them *the* sign of what it means to tend the sheep. You come back, he says, smelling like the sheep. That is the kind of action peace making involves. It is nitty-gritty, hard work, but it also brings with it the sweet fragrance, which we previously thought was a sour and ugly odor

Crossing borders and overcoming barriers, if done with love, also brings a new vision of reality that enables us to have reverence for everything that is. Francis's early followers used to say that he used to spare lamps, lights, and candles because of the Eternal Light they symbolized and that was, in fact, inside them. That is a bit over the top, but that is also who St. Francis is, someone a bit over the top because of how and what he had come to see. His vision was changed so that he could see the light of God radiating from God's creatures, even though he himself, during his last years, was for all practical purposes blind, as a result of disease he contracted in Egypt where he went during the Fifth Crusade to try to bring peace and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. The Crusaders laughed at him; but, surprisingly, the Sultan Malik al-Kamil listened to him for over two weeks and they became friends, each of them apparently having embraced what they found foreign or even repulsive in the other. They ended up listening to the truth of each other. That is one of the most dramatic stories from the life of St. Francis, relevant enough today to have merited a docudrama filmed for television as "The Sultan and Saint," and which, by special permission, will be shown here at this convocation six months prior to its appearing on PBS in December.

And this is how the story goes. In 1219, in the midst of the Fifth Crusade, Francis went to Damietta in Egypt, not as a Crusade preacher to cheer on the Crusaders and their supporters, but to preach the Gospel of

peace to the Crusader Cardinal Pelagius and to the Sultan, Malik al-Kamil. When the Crusaders laughed at him and dismissed him, Malik al-Kamil received him into his camp and spoke with Francis for over two weeks, from September 1 to the 26th. The two men recognized in each other a desire for peace and a devotion to their mutual sacred texts, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Q'uran. Al-kamil was a devout Suni Muslim, and Francis was a devout Christian.

Francis had learned early on that God surprises us in unexpected places, like among the lepers, and now in the Sultan's camp at the very court of Malik al-Kamil. Francis's daring to make peace with the Muslim forces was a radical departure from the ethos of the day, especially in the Church, Pope Innocent himself having called the Fifth Crusade and declared war against Islam for the re-capture of the Holy Land for the Church.

Francis, ever obedient to the hierarchical Church, was a faithful preacher and teacher of the decrees of Innocent III's Fourth Lateran Council, especially those relating to the Eucharist. But regarding the Crusade, Francis and his followers are silent of any support. Francis abhorred war, and he had come to see that those we call the other, even those we consider our enemies, are really our brothers and sisters.

Malik al-Kamil is also a man who desires peace and sued repeatedly for peace but was turned down by the Crusaders, especially under Cardinal Pelagius. When Francis leaves the Sultan's camp, al-Kamil gives Francis a beautiful ivory horn that Francis uses to call people to prayer. He also asks Francis to pray that God will show him the path.

And when Francis returns to Italy, he adds to his Rule of 1221 these provisions regarding those who go among unbelievers: The brothers can go and live among them as good Christians, and/or if it is God's will, they can

preach the Gospel. The phrase, “if it is God’s will,” is interesting in this context because it echoes the oft-repeated Muslim phrase, *enshallah*, if Allah wills it. These two additions to the Rule may be one of the origins of the modern saying attributed to St Francis but which he didn’t actually say, namely, “Preach always; if necessary, use words.”

Also, when Francis travels some 100 miles north of Assisi to Mount La Verna two years before he dies, he takes the Sultan Malik-al-Kamil with him in his heart which is grieving for al-Kamil and all those Christians and Muslims who will be involved in a new crusade that Pope Honorius III is contemplating. With these thoughts in his mind on La Verna, Francis composes his Praises of God which echo the 99 Beautiful Names of God in Islam. On the reverse side of the Praises of God Francis blesses Brother Leo and then draws a head of a turbaned man who is thought be Malik al-Kamil out of whose mouth a large Tau cross emerges, the Tau being Francis’s sign of peace in contrast to its symbolism in the Church of the time as a sign of the cross that is the hilt of a Crusader sword. To take up the cross means in the crusade to take up the sword against the infidels.

Francis proposes the sign of the Tau as a peace symbol, thus once again pushing back against the accepted meaning of the Tau during the Fifth Crusade. Francis sees peace and peace making as a way to make beautiful what war and violence have deformed.

The Second Teaching I want to address here is: Environmental Justice: Creation as God’s Dwelling Place. Creation, the out-of-doors is the place of freedom where the laws are based on relationship instead of ownership, of nurturing rather than overpowering and subduing. It is more the place of

Trinitarian relating than hierarchical relating, of openings, rather than closings.

As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things,” because God dwells deep down everything that is. Francis first realized this truth in his meeting with Christ in the lepers. If God could dwell in someone who seemed repulsive to the young Francis, someone whom others rejected, then God could dwell and be present to us in a poor carpenter’s son from Nazareth.

Further meditation convinced Francis that God indwells everything God has created; therefore, nothing is evil in itself, and everything is worthy of reverence and respect because of its Creator. And further, every creature is made holy in the Incarnation, the mystery of God’s presence among us in Jesus. Jesus sanctified all of creation by becoming, though he was God, one with creatures and among creatures, animate and inanimate. He made holy the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire.

This insight of Francis was spelled out and opened up by the great Medieval Franciscan philosopher/theologian, Blessed John Duns Scotus. He named this insight the Absolute Predestination and Universal Primacy of Christ. Duns Scotus rejected the prevalent teaching of the time that the Incarnation was the result of the sin of Adam, that Jesus came because Adam sinned, and we needed saving. Duns Scotus rejected this thinking because he found inconceivable that the Incarnation should be dependent upon something as negative as sin. He writes:

I say then that the Fall was not the reason of Christ’s predestination. Even if no angel had fallen, nor any human, Christ would still have been predestined – yes, even if no

others were to have been created save only Christ.

Parisiensia, III, vii, 4.

These words of Duns Scotus establish Christ as the pinnacle of creation, containing in himself the patterns of everything that is created and as the primary intention of God in communicating God's perfections. The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was deeply influenced by Duns Scotus, states in his spiritual writings, "The first intention of God outside himself, or as they say, *ad extra* (outwards), the first "outstress" of God's power, as Hopkins phrased it, was Christ," (S, 197). Simply put, this means that Christ is willed by the Trinity, independent of sin and redemption.

So, for Scotus the Incarnation is an act of love that would have taken place in one form or another whether or not there had been any sin. As one Franciscan writer put it, God as God could not perform the act of an inferior nature; so from all eternity God willed to become a creature in order to express that aspect of God's love which was impossible for God alone, namely to love Himself from within His creation.

Duns Scotus puts it this way: Christ is first in God's intentions. It is Christ who is infinitely able to render to God supreme glory and perfect love. Christ is the first to be conceived in the mind of the Creator in projecting a creative plan. Christ is willed freely and lovingly in God, not as an improvisation or second guess merely to repair a sinful breach. As St. Paul puts it in Colossians 1:15-20,

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold

together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (NRSV)

So you see, it is because Christ was the perfect adorer and lover of God, the perfect bridge between creatures and the Creator, that he could even bridge the gap created by sin. Sin was not first in God's intention, but because we sinned, when God comes among us, Christ's perfect adoration is His perfect sacrifice. He didn't come to repair sin; He came to be the firstborn perfect creature; but because we sinned, Christ showed us just how great is God's love: God not only becomes one of us, but he dies with us and for us, making peace by his death on the cross.

The Third Teaching is the Joy of Humble Praise and Service. Albert Einstein once wrote:

A human being is part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of Nature and its beauty." [Albert Einstein in a Letter Dr. Robert S. Marcus,

February 12, 1950.]

(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/speakingoffaith/4090582706>)

Two years before Francis died, he was granted the grace of seeing the whole picture that Einstein talks about in this quote, the whole picture instead of just the piecemeal picture of his own world, the world of himself and his followers, the people he met along the way, the concerns of his own small world. Physics must become first a sort of metaphysics. As the twentieth century physicist, David Bohm, once put it, “We must turn physics around; instead of starting with parts and showing how they relate, we must start with the whole.” That is the vision of St. Francis, and this is how we know that.

After he had received the sacred stigmata in 1224, two years before he died, Francis returned to Assisi. But he did not go to his beloved Porziuncola, St. Mary of the Angels, but to San Damiano where Clare and her Sisters lived and where he heard the voice of Christ from the cross saying, “Francis, go and repair my church which as you see is falling into ruins.” And that is what he had tried to do, his life on earth now coming to an end.

He was, for all practical purposes, blind from the trachoma that he had contracted in Damietta, Egypt during his sojourn there in the midst of the Fifth Crusade. He was hemorrhaging, as well, from the wounds of Christ. He was so weak he lay in torment for over fifty days in a small lean-to beside the monastery of the nuns of San Damiano, with field mice running over his emaciated body. How terrible the memories of his imprisonment in Perugia must have been!

Then, when he was at his deepest point of near despair, a voice and a vision once more graced his waning life. Imagine this scene:

Darkness again. And pain. This time it is his eyes. They pain him so deeply that he cannot rest, cannot sleep or pray. Again he is in prison, and he is afraid, even here in this small lean-to beside San Damiano that Clare and the other Poor Ladies have prepared for him.

He is so tired. It is only a month or so since he returned to the Umbrian Valley after the long, painful journey from La Verna. He can no longer walk. He had to ride a donkey from La Verna because of the pain of the nails in his feet, the nails of Christ's passion. Nails, too, in his hands, and a wound in his side. All were love-gifts from his Beloved – Jesus, His Lord and God.

Added to these burdens, he is depressed, not because of pain, or his blind eyes which cannot bear the light of the sun by day or even a candle by night without hemorrhaging. That pain he can endure. But the further suffering that depresses him comes from the direction the brothers are now taking the Fraternity. They are building houses, contrary to the Rule, and they seem to be constantly acquiring more books, as if Salvation comes from books and the knowledge they give us. In all this they are abandoning Lady Poverty, as well as the one knowledge that matters, the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

And now, too, as in that terrible Perugian imprisonment, he cannot rest because field mice have been crawling over his body for over 50 days, and he in darkness, his memory enlarging and exaggerating what he cannot see.

He bleeds in soul and body. And one night it is almost too much to bear. He cries out to the Lord, "Help me, O Lord, with this pain and suffering. Help me to bear it patiently!"

And the Lord hears him. Francis hears the Voice again in the depths of his soul.

"Francis, my brother, Hear my voice. If the whole of the earth and the fabric of the universe were to turn to pure gold and rocks and pebbles turned to gems, and your pain were taken away, and then in addition to this, and as a reward for all your pain and suffering, you were given a treasure so precious that even gold and precious gems would not be worth mentioning in comparison, wouldn't you rejoice and gladly bear what you are now bearing?"

"Oh, yes, Lord. I'd be happy and filled with joy and rejoice with all my soul!"

"Then, Francis, rejoice and be happy. Your illness and suffering is the pledge, the promise of my Kingdom. By merit of your patience, and long-suffering, you can be firm and secure that you are in my kingdom."

So that is what the kingdom is: everything transformed into a new heaven and earth and we seeing at last a creation transformed. That is how Francis came to write "The Canticle of the Creatures," which contains the seventh teaching of St. Francis, The Joy of Humble Praise of God. So the next morning, the voice now silent, Francis told the brothers what happened and then said, "Therefore for God's glory, for my consolation, and the edification of others, I want to compose a new "Praises of the Lord" for all God's creatures. Daily we fail to appreciate so great a blessing by not praising as we should the Creator and dispenser of all these gifts." He sat down, concentrated, then cried out:

*The Canticle of Creation*¹

Most high, all-powerful, good Lord.
 Yours are the praise, the glory and the honor and every blessing.
 To You alone, Most High, they are due,
 and no one is worthy to mention You.
 Be praised, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
 above all Sir Brother Sun,
 who is day and by him You shed light upon us.
 And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
 of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.
 Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the Stars;
 in the heavens You have formed them,
 clear and precious and beautiful.
 Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
 and through Air and Cloud and fair and all Weather,
 by which You give nourishment to Your creatures.
 Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 who is very useful and humble and precious and pure.
 Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
 by whom You light up the night,
 and he is beautiful and merry and vigorous and strong.
 Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
 who sustains and directs us,
 and produces diverse fruits with colored flowers and herbs.
 Be praised, my Lord, by those who pardon for Your love,
 and endure sickness and trials.
 Blessed are they who shall endure them in peace,
 for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.
 Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
 from whom no one living can escape.
 Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
 Blessed are those whom she will find in Your most holy will,
 for the second death will do them no harm.
 Praise and bless my Lord,
 and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility.

¹ Translated by the late Eric Doyle OFM, a priest of the English Province of Franciscans

He also composed a melody to these words, which he taught to his brothers. He **sang** creatures; they were his song, for, like the English poet and mystic, William Blake, Francis was “a divine child whose playthings were sun, moon and stars, the heavens and the earth.” (Gilchrist’s life of Blake)

In one sense, what the voice at San Damiano said to Francis is what Francis already knew, that beneath what appears on the surface is the precious gold of what everything really is: God’s precious creation. And even greater than the created thing is its re-creation in eternity. Everything will be a new heaven and a new earth and it is struggling to be so even now. And humans who join in the sufferings, the birth-pangs, of all creation become transformed through their patience and long suffering and see at once that God’s future kingdom is already being realized in and with them. For everything suffers change, and only human beings who can see and understand, can embrace that change willingly even when it involves darkness and suffering.

What Francis had come to believe about all of this, and especially about the interconnectedness of the whole universe, he now knows with certitude because of the vision given to him in his dark cell of suffering at San Damiano. And this revelation, this voice, gives him a way to express it, namely through a canticle, a sung poem of praise of God through, with, in, for, and by means of God’s creatures, who have become Francis’s brothers and sisters, animate and inanimate.

And so he tells his brothers that he is going to sing a NEW song of praise of God in whose kingdom we already dwell, and whose perfection

will be revealed when we embrace our Sister Bodily Death who will find us to be in God's holy will.

Francis answered God's revelatory voice by saying he would happily embrace his sufferings and pain, knowing now for certain that they will be the pledge of entering God's kingdom of painless, perfect interconnectedness between and among all created things.

Francis knew this was true by means of a lifetime of learning how to live with all creatures, loving them and giving God thanks for them. And now, two years before he embraced Sister Death, God assures Francis and us that everything belongs to everything else, and everything belongs to God. So everything is thereby holy and worthy of care, and reverence, and a song of God's praise.

Francis now knows how to express what he had known for years but didn't know he knew until he heard God's voice and began to sing, each word showing what he didn't know he knew. And that song gave him great joy in the composing and in the singing, as I'm sure these stanzas of Emily Bronte's poem, "No Coward Soul is Mine," did for her:

No coward soul is mine
 No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere
 I see Heaven's glories shine
 And Faith shines equal arming from Fear.

O God within my breast
 Almighty ever-present Deity
 Life, that in me hast rest
 As I, Undying Life, have power in thee.

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Though earth and moon were gone

And suns and universes ceased to be
And Thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

God is. And to sing God is to live forever.