

## TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

### Bonaventure and Ignatius: Kindred Spirits?

AT THE CHAPTER OF NARBONNE (1260) the Friars Minor commissioned their Minister General, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, to compile an official biography of St Francis of Assisi. The work resulting from Bonaventure's efforts is entitled *The Major Life of St Francis*<sup>1</sup> and is based upon the earlier biographies written by Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer. A study of the Bonaventurian text reveals the careful selectivity of the author in the use of these earlier biographies and shows his own insights, perspectives and theological understanding of the events of the life of Francis.

Regis Armstrong O.F.M.Cap. has done us a great service in analysing the *Major Life*.<sup>2</sup> He claims that Bonaventure was not writing an historical biography,<sup>3</sup> but a theological study of the inner life of the saint of Assisi. Thus Bonaventure took the data of the earlier biographies and subjected them to the principles of theology. In doing so, his work encompasses history and theology and provides a classic study of spirituality. Bonaventure attempted to set forth a manual of Franciscan spirituality within the context of the life of Francis. He wanted to rekindle the dynamic spirit of Francis which was at the heart of the Franciscan way of life.

In 1986 Fr Tom Speier O.F.M. and Sr Marilyn Joyce O.S.F. came to this country from the United States and conducted a three-month internship programme in Franciscan spiritual direction and directed retreats. The *Major Life* was used as a manual of Franciscan spirituality. As one of the participants on that programme, one of the insights that I gained was the fact that the life of Francis of Assisi can be understood as a series of calls to which he was invited to respond by the Lord and that these calls and his responses are set forth in the *Major Life*. Bonaventure, as a representative figure of our Franciscan tradition, has given us a valuable tool which is of great use for those involved in contemporary spiritual direction. Since Francis is the *Forma Minorum*<sup>4</sup>—the pattern of life and growth for all Franciscans—we have in his life a pattern of the calls and responses each one of us is invited to hear and answer in our own way. I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Tom Speier and, along with the insights I gained from him, I wish to suggest in this article that the dynamic of call and response can easily fit into the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola.

I am not suggesting for one moment that Ignatius is simply a repetition of Bonaventure. He is not. Ignatius showed a touch of genius and originality in distilling out the pattern of the movements of the Spirit within himself and

those whose lives he touched. That cannot be denied. What interests me is the pattern of the movements he describes. There are some striking similarities between the way the *Major Life* and the *Spiritual Exercises* are set out in terms of call and response. In recognizing this we can come to appreciate Francis's life and journey in a new way, how rich is the interpretation of that life by Bonaventure, and what treasures there are within the Franciscan (and Ignatian) tradition.

There are similarities between Francis and Ignatius. Compare, for example, the description of the cave experience in their lives. Francis is described thus by Thomas of Celano his first biographer:

He withdrew for a while from the bustle and the business of the world and tried to establish Jesus Christ dwelling within himself . . . There was a certain grotto near the city . . . when he came out again to his companion, he was so exhausted with the strain, that one person seemed to have entered, and another to have come out.<sup>5</sup>

Ignatius's biographers pay much attention to his spiritual experience on one occasion by the river Cardoner, near the cave at Manresa where he had done penance and had been tempted even to the point of suicide. Ignatius himself writes of that moment:

It is impossible to set out in detail all that he then understood, and the most he can say is that he received so great an enlightenment of mind that, taking together all the things he has learned and known during the whole course of his life up to the age of 62 years now passed, he does not think they amount to as much as he received from that one illumination. It left him with a understanding so greatly enlightened that *he seemed to himself to be another man, with another mind than that which was his before.*<sup>6</sup>

## I. THE DYNAMIC OF CALL AND RESPONSE IN THE *MAJOR LIFE*

Armstrong gives two patterns of order to the *Major Life*. The first is a general chronological framework at the beginning and at the end of the work. The initial section comprising the first four chapters deals with his early life, conversion, the foundation and spread of the Order; the final section from chapters thirteen to fifteen deals with the stigmata, his death and canonization. The second pattern is the nine core chapters on the virtues which are set out according to themes. This section has an inner order according to the three stages of the spiritual life: purgation, illumination and perfection or the unitive way. The first three virtues are purgative (chapters 5-7), then follow three illuminative virtues (8-10) and three unitive virtues (11-13).

This ordering according to the three stages of the spiritual life can be applied to the work as a whole: the first two chapters correspond to the

purgative way, chapters three to twelve to the illuminative way and chapters thirteen to fifteen the unitive way. It is this order which brought to mind the pattern I set forth here.

#### *A. The purgative calls and responses*

Francis's early life before his conversion is described somewhat briefly in all the biographies. In common with other accounts of Francis's life, the *Major Life* opens with a call to search for love before Francis's conversion. This is seen in the incidents of the dreams that Francis has: the vision of the palace full of military weapons with the insignia of the cross of Christ, and the corrective vision at Spoleto when Francis cries out: 'Lord what will you have me do?' (LM I,3). I will refer to this period later as the 'Prologue'.

This is followed by a call to conversion and a fitting response which is typified by the San Damiano crucifix experience. The Lord calls to Francis: 'Francis, go and repair my Church . . .'. Francis, we are told,

prepared to obey, gathering himself together to carry out the command of repairing the church materially, although the principal intention of the words referred to that Church which Christ purchased with his own blood . . . (LM II,1)

The final call of the purgative dynamic is a call to serve the Lord. Here the *Major Life* describes the scene of Francis and his father before the Bishop of Assisi. Francis, in stripping before his father, makes a choice to respond to the call to serve the Lord:

Until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation, 'Our Father who are in heaven', since I have placed all my treasure and all my hope in him. (LM II,4)

This call to serve the Lord, and the response, prepares us for entry into the illuminative dynamic in which the main characteristic is discipleship.

#### *B. The illuminative calls and responses*

Francis had decided to call God Father and to follow him. But this call must be further specified. In the illuminative dynamic there is a series of calls which further clarify and deepen Francis's commitment and discipleship.

Firstly, there is a call to gospel life. Francis was living as a hermit when he heard the Gospel read at the Portiuncola on the feast of St Matthias, February 24, 1208. His response to the word of God is: 'This is what I want, this is what I long for with all my heart' (LM III,1). When he is joined by others who wish to lead the same life, there is another call and another response asked for: the call to community in poverty. With Bernard coming to Francis for advice, both go to the church of St Nicholas and opening the

gospel three times, Francis makes his response: 'This is our life and our rule . . . and the life and the rule of all who wish to join our company' (LM III,3). The original call of this dynamic to gospel life is specified still further by a call to abandonment. Once he responded to the call to community in poverty, there is a further refinement. This is seen in the account of True and Perfect Joy.<sup>7</sup> Francis speaks of enduring humiliations and hardships for love of Christ. Bonaventure remarks that 'they had come to the school of the humble Christ to learn humility' (LM VI,5).

Deepening the call to discipleship, expressed as a call to gospel life, there is a further call in the illuminative dynamic. Francis experienced a call to discern. He was in a dilemma over the choice between the active or contemplative life. He sought to respond to this by asking direction from his own friars, Silvester and Clare (LM XII,1-2).

### C. *The unitive calls and responses*

The key note of the unitive dimension is compassion and discipleship in terms of wanting to be with Christ no matter what the cost. There is a call to 'suffer with' ('compassion') Christ. It is seen most clearly on La Verna and Francis's reception of the stigmata (LM XIII, 2-3). Bonaventure describes this call as being that Francis 'should be conformed to him (Christ) in the affliction and sorrow of his passion before he would pass out of this world' (LM XIII,2). Having undergone the passion, he is called to be with the risen Christ. Francis's response is his passover or *transitus* to Christ (LM XIV, 3-5). Bonaventure recounts Francis saying near his death: 'I have done my duty, may Christ teach you yours' (LM XIV,3).

### D. *Summary*

The three stages of the spiritual life can be clearly seen in Francis's life—indeed they are present in everyone's life to a greater or lesser extent. I have chosen nine pivotal instances in Francis's life, nine calls and responses, and divided them into the three stages. If one looks at the references in the *Major Life* for each of those stages, it can be seen that the so-called purgative calls and responses occur in the first two chapters of the work. The illuminative calls and responses occur between chapters three and twelve, and finally the unitive calls and responses occur in the final chapters. They correspond exactly to the structure that Armstrong has seen in the *Major Life*.

## II. THE DYNAMIC OF CALL AND RESPONSE IN THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

The Spiritual Exercises are divided into four 'weeks'. These do not correspond to a period of seven days, but rather to the three stages of the spiritual life we have been examining. The First Week corresponds to the purgative dynamic, the Second Week to the illuminative, the Third and Fourth Weeks to the unitive. In the Third Week the focus is on the passion and death of Christ, the call to 'suffer with' Christ, while in the Fourth Week the focus is on the resurrection, the call to 'be with' the risen Christ.

Before the First Week proper of the Exercises, Ignatius has the Principle and Foundation. This is not so much points for meditation as a basic context and presupposition for all the meditations and contemplations. I see it as corresponding to what I termed the 'Prologue' or first call to Francis. The latter is a call to search for love and comprised his journey of dreams. The Principle and Foundation states

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created.<sup>8</sup>

The search to experience God's love spurs the individual (as it did Francis) to set out on a journey, an *itinerarium*, to find the meaning of life. Ignatius states the journey will take the individual through all of creation to God.<sup>9</sup>

The First Week of the Exercises (Exx 45), in Franciscan terms, is the call to conversion in Francis's life. This is described by Bonaventure in the San Damiano crucifix experience. At the end of the meditations for the First Week and before the Second Week, there is a meditation on The Call of the King (Exx 91). In the Exercises this acts as a bridge between the First and Second Week. The focus is not on any specific call but simply a call to serve and labour with the Lord in spreading his kingdom here on earth. It is the transition to the illuminative dynamic, the transition from the call to conversion to the call to discipleship with Jesus and his work in building his kingdom. This can be linked with the call to serve the Lord in Francis's life. That call and response were exemplified in Francis's stripping before his father and the bishop. Furthermore, shortly afterwards, Francis is beaten by robbers who ask him who he is. He replies: 'I am the herald of the great King!' (LM II,5)—the very terminology Ignatius uses at this stage of the Exercises to describe this call.

The Second Week of the Exercises (Exx 101) corresponds to the illuminative dynamic. Ignatius focuses here on discipleship. Discipleship calls for a deeper knowledge and friendship with the Lord. It is gained through a contemplation of the public and private life of the Lord. With discipleship comes the decision to commit one's life to the Lord's service so that one can 'know him more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly' (Exx 104). Bonaventure described Francis's call to the gospel life in the overall setting of hearing the Gospel read on the feast of St Matthias (LM II,1).

In the Second Week there are three structural pieces to prepare the individual for the contemplations on the following of Jesus in his public life. They are to help the individual imbibe Jesus's attitudes towards God, persons and the world. This style of praying provides the necessary context for discernment and decision-making during the Second Week: to what state of life or what kind of life-style is the Lord leading the individual to or confirming him or her in?

After the individual prays through these three structures, he or she is ready to follow Jesus in his public life with, firstly, understanding of Christ's identity and virtues (the Two Standards meditation [Exx 136]); secondly, a willingness and readiness to follow Jesus (the Three Classes of Persons [Exx 149]); thirdly, a deep desire for the grace to rejoice and delight in an intimate union with Jesus reflected in external poverty, insults and rejection, and to be considered a worthless fool (the Three Kinds of Humility or Three Levels of Discipleship [Exx 164]).

The focus of the meditation on the Two Leaders or Two Standards, is to understand the deceits and strategies of Satan in leading us to riches, honour and pride, as compared to Jesus leading us to pray for and choose poverty, insults and humiliations leading to true humility. Such a choice also faced Francis and is described for us by Bonaventure, who records that when Francis was approached by Bernard, he said 'We must ask God's advice about this' (LM III,3). Later this incident also incorporates the description of the Three Classes of Persons in the Exercises when Francis, as Bonaventure says, opens the Gospel book three times and has a description of his life and work.

The call to abandonment in Francis's life is also mirrored in the Exercises with the call to total surrender as set forth in the meditation on the Three Kinds of Humility or Three Kinds of Discipleship. The individual faces how closely he or she wants to be identified with Jesus.

Before passing into the unitive dynamic of Francis's life, i.e. the identification with the suffering and risen Lord in the stigmata and *transitus*, Bonaventure records the active-contemplative dilemma in Francis's life, the discernment of a particular call. Correspondingly at this stage of the Exercises, the end of the Second Week, there is the Election (Exx 169). It is a call to discern, to choose, and is placed at the end of the illuminative dynamic, before going on to the unitive way of the Third and Fourth Weeks.

In the Third Week of the Exercises (Exx 190) the individual is called to stay with Jesus in his sufferings of the Passion. The individual experiences a desire for a more intimate relationship and revelation of Jesus. They ask the Lord to share with them his suffering self, that he let them into his suffering and death so that they can be sorrowful and compassionate with him. At this stage in the Exercises there are meditations on the events of the Passion.<sup>10</sup> Bonaventure expresses this dynamic in Francis's life beautifully:

... the man (Francis) filled with God understood that just as he had imitated Christ in the actions of his life, so he should be conformed to him in the affliction and sorrow of his passion, before he would pass out of this world. And although his body was already weakened by the great austerity of his past life and his continual carrying of the Lord's cross, he was in no way terrified—but was inspired even more rigorously to endure martyrdom. His unquenchable fire of love for the good Jesus had been fanned into such a blaze of flames that many waters could not quench so powerful a love. (LM XIII,2)

The Fourth Week of the Exercises (Exx 218) calls the individual to be with the risen Christ, to share in the joy of Christ in his victory over death. The individual wants to be with the risen Lord in sharing this news with others. In the *transitus*, Francis is filled with the joy of anticipation of being with his Lord and he is careful to console his followers. As he lay dying on the ground, Bonaventure tells us that Francis was lost in the serene contemplation of the glory of heaven, his reward for his perfect imitation of Christ: 'I have done my duty; may Christ teach you yours' (LM XIV,3). But Francis was ever the gentle father concerned about his grieving sons:

He had all the friars who were there called to him and, consoling them for his death with words of comfort, he exhorted them with fatherly affection to love God. (LM XIV,5)

### III. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to highlight the common elements of the spiritual experience of Francis and Ignatius in the calls and responses both faced on their journeys. In Francis's case, Bonaventure sets these out in the *Major Life*. Ignatius set down his own experiences in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

One final remark. At the end of the *Exercises*, Ignatius has a beautiful prayer and meditation entitled The Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230). It describes a mutuality, the experience of God's love for the individual and the love of the individual in gratitude for God's love. If the Principle and Foundation is a 'prologue' to the *Exercises*, the Contemplation is like an epilogue. Is there something similar in Francis's life? If there is, is it recorded by Bonaventure?

It is present in Francis's life and it can also be described as a call and response. The prologue in Francis's life was a call *to search for* love. The epilogue is a call *to* love. It is a deepening, as in the *Exercises* later, of the original love which makes the journey possible in the first place. Francis expressed this response to the call to love in his *Canticle of Brother Sun* at the end of his life:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,  
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour, and all blessing.<sup>11</sup>

This however is not mentioned at the end of the *Major Life*. The sentiments are expressed, though out of sequence with the argument of this article. In chapter 9, Bonaventure captures the spirit of two mutual lovers, Francis and God, as expressed in one of Francis's favourite sayings: 'Greatly should the love be loved of him who loved us so greatly' (LM IX,1).

I believe Bonaventure experienced this mutual love, this spiritual marriage, and that he set it down for us. It is not found in the *Major Life*, but in the climax and final chapter of the *Soul's journey into God*. It is a journey inspired by the life and experience of Francis, which is begun in Christ and ends:

With Christ crucified let us pass out of this world to the Father so that when the Father is shown to us, we may say with Philip: 'It is enough for us'. Let us hear with Paul: 'My grace is sufficient for you'. (*Soul's journey*, VII,6)<sup>12</sup>

Is not this an expression of the prayer of Ignatius at the end of the *Exercises*:

Take, Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my intellect and all my will—all that I have and possess. You have given it to me: to you, Lord, I return it! All is yours, dispose of it according to your will. Give me your love and grace, for this is enough for me. (Exx 230)

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Latin title is *Legenda Maior S. Francisci*. References in this article will be abbreviated thus: LM followed by the number of the chapter in Roman numerals and the section in Arabic numerals. The English translation is taken from Ewert Cousins (trans and ed): *Bonaventure*, New York, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong, Regis J.O.F.M.Cap.: *The spirituality of the Legenda Maior of St Bonaventure*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, 1978. For a summary of Armstrong's structure of the work of Cousins, *Bonaventure*, pp 42-46. Armstrong has also published an article, 'Towards an unfolding of the structure of St Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior*', in *The cord* 39 (January 1989), pp 3-17.

<sup>3</sup> Bonaventure says as much in the Prologue to the LM.

<sup>4</sup> Before his death in 1243 Thomas Capuano, Cardinal of Santa Sabina, called Francis the *Forma Minorum* in the antiphon *Salve sancte pater* composed for the Office of the feast of St Francis. For the full text see *Analecta Franciscana* X (1941), p 387.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Celano 6. See Habig, Marion A. (ed): *St Francis of Assisi: writings and early biographies. English omnibus of the sources for the life of St Francis*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1973; hereafter abbreviated as *Omnibus*.

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Thomas E. Clark S.J., in 'The Ignatian Exercises—contemplation and discernment', in *Review for religious*, vol 31 (1972/1), p 63. No reference is given. The emphases are mine.

<sup>7</sup> Armstrong/Brady (trans): *Francis and Clare: the complete works* (The Classics of Western Spirituality, New York, 1982), pp 165-6. See also 2 Celano 125 and 145 (*Omnibus*, pp 465-6; 479); Fioretti 8 (*Omnibus*, pp 1318-20; 1501-2).

<sup>8</sup> Fleming S.J., David L.: *The Spiritual Exercises: a literal translation and a contemporary reading*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Bonaventure sets this out in *The soul's journey into God*.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. The Last Supper (Exx 289); the Agony in the Garden (Exx 200); Jesus dies on the Cross (Exx 297).

<sup>11</sup> *The canticle of Brother Sun* 1, in Armstrong/Brady: *Francis and Clare*, p 38.

<sup>12</sup> *The soul's journey into God* VII,6. Chapter VII is entitled 'On spiritual and mystical ecstasy in which rest is given to our intellect when through ecstasy our affection passes over entirely into God'.