

Recently, I was in a store thumbing through books when I noticed a small pamphlet entitled "Becoming God's Friend." I leafed through it to discover a series of meditation points on how to develop friendship with God. Although some of the points were inspiring, the book on the whole seemed to be trying to present itself as a sure method to attain friendship with God, sort of a "guaranteed or your money back" type. The Franciscan path to friendship with God is, in some ways, much more simple than a series of points but much more profound because it requires a wholehearted relationship with God. The key to friendship is in relationship, not as a point of meditation, but as a way of life. Turning one's heart toward God and centering it in God is the basis of friendship with God, that is, the God who comes to share life with us in the person of Jesus Christ. When Clare of Assisi advised Agnes of Prague to consider the Spouse to whom she had dedicated her life, she was asking Agnes to become a friend of the crucified Christ. How does prayer foster our friendship with Christ? It does so by fostering fidelity to relationship with Christ, and in this fidelity, a growing capacity for mutuality. Clare tells Agnes to "consider him." By this she means dwell on the mystery of the Incarnate Word who suffered and was crucified out of love for us. Taste the hidden sweetness of God in this mystery; feel what his friends feel; experience the love of God hidden in the flesh that was scourged, bruised and beaten. How difficult is the gaze that leads to friendship with God! But Clare is not superficial in her directives to Agnes. She is not asking Agnes to gaze and consider the crucified Christ, as if looking on a painting. Rather, she is asking Agnes to be drawn into what she sees and to become transformed in the one she loves.

Clare describes the image of the crucified Christ as a "mirror" and she advises Agnes to see herself in the mirror. The word "mirror" (*speculum*) means "reflection," "speculation," "contemplation" or "consideration."¹ It is a very feminine symbol and one that was popular among women religious in the Middle Ages. For Clare, Christ is the mirror in

which God reveals himself to us and we are revealed to ourselves as we begin to see the truth of who we are—our identity—in the mirror of the cross. She writes: "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead itself through contemplation. So that you too may feel what his friends feel."² By asking Agnes to transform her entire being into the image of the Godhead itself, she indicates that the image in which we are created—our mind, soul and heart—is reflected in the mirror of the Crucified. In the image of the crucified Christ is the image of our human God-likeness which is the capacity to love by way of self-gift. To live in this image is to become one with the one we love. "Love him totally who gave himself totally for your love," Clare writes.³ To live in the image of the mirror is to be transformed in the image, bearing the crucified Christ in one's own body. Clare continues in her advice to Agnes: "By following in his footprints of poverty and humility, you can always carry him spiritually in your body. . . . And you will hold him by whom you and all things are held together."⁴

Like Clare, Francis too was a friend of Christ because he bore the marks of Christ's cross and therefore became Christ's friend, conformed to his likeness. Describing Francis as a friend of Christ, Bonaventure writes, "The Lord calls the humble his friends."⁵ In Bonaventure's view, humility is a prerequisite for friendship with Christ. We must sit at the lowest place of the table of life if we are to be invited into friendship with Christ. Friendship with Christ is a grace, an invitation to enter into union with God. In the gospel of the banquet we read, "friend, go up higher." According to Bonaventure, Francis was a faithful friend of the Lord because he chose to sit in the lowest place.⁶ He sought no glory for himself in this world but rather saw himself as a sinner, "an ignorant and unlearned" (*simplex et idiota*) person.⁷ He was a congenial friend of God because he strove for purity of heart through penance and patience in his trials, and he was an intimate friend because he was conformed to Christ by the Stigmata. As Christ's friend, Francis was made like him in appearance by having the marks of the crucified body of Christ imprinted visibly on his own.⁸

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If Francis was truly a friend of Christ, as Bonaventure claimed, then to be a friend of Christ is to be willing to love like Christ, with compassionate love for others. In his "Instructions to the Novices," Bonaventure indicates that the love of God is not a speculative idea, it is not abstract. It is real and concrete and it is shown to us in the figure of Jesus on the cross. He writes,

Prayer is the ladder on which Jacob saw the angels of God ascending and descending. So once a day, separate yourself and call to mind the many blessings of God with deep humility of heart. Remember for your sake, he willed to be born, suffer, and die. Picture the bloody sweat, the outrageous blows, the stinging lashes, the thorny crown, the blasphemous spit, the mocking words. Picture him hanging from the cross, the bloodshot eyes, the pallid lips, the bowed head, the agony of death. No need for more. Life itself has died for us!⁹

We don't usually think of our closest friends hanging on a cross. Usually we want to help our friends get down from the cross. We want our friends to be happy, to enjoy life. Yet, there is no doubt that sacrifice is part of friendship. Jesus said, "No one has a greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). If friendship was simply looking for one happy day after another without sharing sorrow, it would not be real friendship but a type of narcissism or self-love. To love another for the sake of the other is to love like God. Only one who has known or experienced compassionate love can share this love with another. In her letters to Agnes, Clare asks Agnes to become a friend of Christ by learning to love like Christ. Seeing the love of God poured out in the crucified Spouse, Agnes is to grow in the same spirit of self-giving love.

For the Franciscans, to love God is to love a crucified God, a God of reckless, scandalous love. It is difficult to love a God of reckless love without becoming somewhat reckless in love oneself. Loving this type of God requires a public display of affection. Bonaventure states that as we ascend to God, that is, as we move inwardly into deeper relationship with God (since to "ascend" is to go "inward") we are to become

ever more crucified to the world, that is, willing to suffer out of love for the sake of the other. At first the thorns and bristles of trying to live deep, compassionate love are difficult because all too often we want to go the way of individualism, privatism and selfishness. We desire God but the path is harsh, so the world is crucified to us because we find everything in the world difficult as we try to find (and love) God—our neighbors, our friends and families. However, as we persevere in prayer and deepen our trust in God, as we become more open to grace and rely more on God's mercy then the path of self-giving love becomes easier. We become crucified to the world. Learning to love by way of self-gift and becoming a friend of Christ goes hand-in-hand with a growth in self-knowledge, knowledge of God and the freedom to surrender. When prayer brings us to this level of relationship with God, then we are crucified for the sake of the world since one chooses to die for all in order to please God.¹⁰ Thus, to ascend to union with God is to enter into the mystery of God as love, especially as this mystery of love is expressed in the crucified humanity of Christ. The more deeply we enter into friendship with Christ, the more we reflect this friendship by a willingness to love our neighbor. There is a short Jewish tale that captures the essence of this relationship to God. "A young woman once said to an old woman, 'what is life's heaviest burden?' And the old woman said, 'to have nothing to carry.'"¹¹ The type of love that gives life and brings one to the fullness of life is love for another, the type of love that ultimately is the gift of oneself. This love is most clearly expressed in those who are friends of God.

The centrality of the Crucified in the life of Francis suggests that Francis became a friend of Christ because he sought to follow Jesus who lived out of depth of love in obedience to the Father. The obedience of love led Jesus to the prophetic margins of announcing the kingdom despite opposition, misunderstanding and rejection. Christ left us an example, Francis said, that we might follow in his footprints.¹² In his *Earlier Rule* Francis claims that "our friends are all those who unjustly inflict upon us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martyrdom and death. We must love them greatly for we shall possess eternal life because of what they bring to us."¹³ One could read-

ily conclude that either Francis had a lot of friends (because he had a lot of enemies) or he had very few friends because his idea of friendship was rather peculiar. Francis' thought in this passage seems contradictory to the human spirit. We usually do not count as friends those who harm or injure us. But he reflects here the gospel message of Christian love: "Love your enemies, do good to those who abuse you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . . If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (Luke 6:27–33). And here is the key to friendship with God. We are asked to love in a transcending manner, to go beyond our natural inclinations, to extend ourselves in love because God lives in the enemy and in the one who injures us. The one who loves God by loving the enemy is a friend of Christ. Although Francis the saint seems to have attained this level of love in his life, we can be sure that this type of love did not come easy to Francis, the cloth merchant-turned-beggar, as the story of the leper suggests. His biographers tell us that, as a young man, Francis loathed the sight of lepers; however, touched by God's grace he experienced a change of heart and one day bent down to kiss the hand of a leper and to give alms. The kissing of the leper's hand marked a turning point in Francis' life. He began to do penance and to acquire the spirit of compassionate love, and somehow a space opened up within him to embrace those he would otherwise reject. We might say that he came to embrace the leper by learning to embrace the leper within himself. Only when he came to a clearer knowledge of himself, his own weakness and smallness, could he see the greatness of God in the leper and those shunned by society.

While the story of the leper symbolizes friendship with God for Francis, the image that best symbolizes friendship is that of the good shepherd. This is one of the images that Francis used in his writings that he adopted from the Gospel of John. In John 10 the author speaks of the Good Shepherd as one who knows his sheep and who lays down his life for his sheep freely out of love (v. 14–18). This idea is supported in John 15:13 where the author writes, "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." The crucified Christ is the Good Shepherd, the one who laid down his life for his sheep. Francis

was attracted to the image of the Good Shepherd because it spoke to him of the loving relationship between the Father and the Son. To love the Father in Francis' view is to become like the Son, crucified in love. Francis warned against a superficial understanding of the good shepherd or merely recalling the deeds of the saints who followed the good shepherd. "It is a great shame for us," he wrote, "that while the saints actually did these things [imitate the Good Shepherd], we wish to receive glory and honor by merely recounting their deeds" (*Admonition* 6.3). Francis was a man of action and he desired that his followers live in the spirit of Christ's crucified love in a world torn apart by violence, greed and domination. In his *Admonition Six* he provides a concrete description of what it means to follow Christ, the Good Shepherd. In his view, those who wish to glorify God must be willing to sacrifice their lives:

Let all of us, brothers, look to the good shepherd who suffered the passion of the cross to save his sheep. The sheep of the Lord followed him in tribulation and persecution, in insult and hunger, in infirmity and temptation, and in everything else, and they have received everlasting life from the Lord because of these things. Therefore, it is a great shame for us, servants of God, that while the saints actually did such things, we wish to receive glory and honor by merely recounting their deeds.¹⁴

There is no doubt that, for Francis, the image of the Good Shepherd reflects the great love of God for us in Jesus Christ. He sees that through the sacrifice of the Shepherd we are brought into union with the Father, an idea that is highlighted in chapter twenty-two of his *Earlier Rule*:

Let us have recourse to him as to the shepherd and guardian of our souls, who says: "I am the good shepherd who feeds my sheep and I lay down my life for my sheep." *All of you are brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father, for one is Your Father, the One in heaven. And do not let yourselves be called teachers*

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*for your teacher is the One Who is in heaven. Let us, therefore, hold onto the words, the life, and the teaching and the Holy Gospel of him who humbled himself to ask his Father for us and to make his name known to us, saying: Father, glorify Your name and glorify Your Son so that Your Son may glorify You. I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. I ask not only for them but also for those who will believe in me through them, that they may be brought to perfection as one, and the world may know that you have sent me and love them as you loved me. (John 17:17–23)*¹⁵

This passage clearly shows the influence of John's Gospel on Francis' thought. Although the idea of martyrdom might seem quite radical to us, he believed that one who follows the Good Shepherd must be willing to lay down his or her life as Christ did out of love for God. One who has the spirit of martyrdom is a true friend of God. Even if one is not led to actual martyrdom, having the spirit of martyrdom, in Francis' view, joins one to Christ as spouse and brother. In his *Later Admonition and Exhortation*, he indicates that to be a spouse is to be joined to Christ in such an intimate way (*coniungitur*) that one's whole life becomes an imitation of Christ insofar as one has the spirit of Christ. This union with Christ, in a spirit of sacrificial love, is the fruit of prayer. Union with God for Francis is not some type of angelic state that exempts one from the difficulties of life. Quite the opposite. Union with God is to be like the Son, wholly attentive to the will of the Father out of love and obedience. Christ's love impelled him to voluntarily choose death by submitting to the will of the Father. In this way did Christ glorify the Father. If we sum up these ideas in light of Francis' life and writings we could say that to be in union with the Father means to follow the way of the cross. To love in the spirit of martyrdom is the path to happiness and eternal life.

In his *Major Legend* Bonaventure indicates that Francis had a great desire for martyrdom, following the example of Christ. He writes, "Set on fire by that perfect charity which drives out fear, he desired to offer to the Lord his own life as a living sacrifice in the flames of martyrdom

so that he might repay Christ, who died for us, and inspire others to divine love."¹⁶ This desire for martyrdom impelled Francis to go to Egypt around 1219 to preach the gospel to the Muslims. Bonaventure tells us that Francis and his brother companion were savagely seized, "cruelly and contemptuously" dragged away, treated with insults, beaten and put in chains.¹⁷ However, Francis eventually made his way to the Sultan to preach the gospel. Standing before the Sultan, he announced the Good News of Jesus Christ by his example of peace and love. Francis proclaimed what he lived—that he was a Christian (*Ego sum Christianus*).¹⁸ According to Bonaventure, the Sultan overflowed with admiration for Francis and offered him gifts that he could use for the Christian poor or for the churches. Although the Sultan did not convert to Christianity, both he and Francis found common ground as brothers. In a broad sense, Francis and the Sultan became friends because they were willing to transcend their own boundaries so as to enter into the life of the other out of respect and mutual love. This episode of Francis' life reflects his spirituality of friendship as it is centered in the cross. Spiritual friendship means to be conformed to Christ and to love as he loved even if it means self-sacrifice. The bond of love not only conforms one to Christ but leads one into union with the Father; indeed, the Father is revealed in and through the one who is a friend of Christ. For Francis, apostolic activity does not arise *from* the contemplation of God; rather, it is the contemplation of God because the same Spirit of love that goes out to unite with our neighbors or our brothers and sisters is the same Spirit of love that joins us to God and enables us to see the truth of God in the reality of our world. Francis' desire to encounter the Sultan to preach the gospel was the same desire to be wholly united to God, like the Son, in obedience to the loving will of the Father. To see, to love and to become what we love reflects a deep level of friendship with Christ, as we find in Francis.

For Clare of Assisi too, friendship with Christ entailed a friendship of self-giving love. Whereas Francis emphasized martyrdom (symbolized by the Good Shepherd), Clare emphasized personal transformation in union with the crucified Spouse. Unlike Francis, Clare's letters reflect a more personal relationship with the poor Crucified. She

directs Agnes to foster a deep friendship with Christ who will lead her to the fullness of her identity in God. In her first letter Clare writes, "be strengthened... out of an ardent desire for the Poor Crucified who for our sake took... the Passion of the Cross... and so reconciled us to God the Father."¹⁹ Clare calls Agnes not to a life of suffering but to a life of love; however, the path will take her through suffering following the footprints of the crucified spouse. Agnes is to embrace this God of overflowing love who comes to her in fragile flesh. She writes, "as a poor Virgin, embrace the poor Christ."²⁰ This Spouse, Clare continues, was "struck," "scourged" and was the "lowest among humans." Gaze on this mystery, consider it, contemplate it, so that you may come to imitate it.²¹ Clare sees the assurance of this path in the mirror of the cross of San Damiano. She gazed at this mirror for almost forty years of her life and described the parameters of the mirror as poverty, humility and charity.²² Poverty is the border of the cross. Here we see the Incarnation and consider the poor manger in which Jesus was born and the swaddling clothes he was wrapped in. Humility is the surface of the cross by which we consider Jesus' life, his untold labors and burdens. Finally, charity is the depth of the cross, the center, where the love of the Spouse is made visible. This is the mirror of the invisible God and the mirror of our image, "that mirror suspended on the wood of the Cross."²³ To follow Christ, Clare indicates, is to see his footprints of poverty, humility and charity in the mirror of the cross.²⁴ She was certain that if Agnes gazes on this mirror daily she would be transformed into the one she loves.

Clare was convinced that loving the crucified God would lead Agnes to happiness, joy and a share in the eternal banquet. After all, friendship means sharing in the gifts of the one who is friend and Clare was not shy about her ambition for eternal happiness. However, like Francis, she saw that such happiness could only be attained in union with the crucified Spouse. Her thought follows a coincidence of opposites. "If you suffer with him, you will reign with him; if you weep with him you shall rejoice with him; if you die with him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions."²⁵ Clare's thought reflects the essence of the Christian message: finite things pass away,