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Thomas Piolata

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, obsacula@csbsju.edu

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The Religious Vision of Saint Francis of Assisi as Mission: Entering Into the Experience of the Other

Thomas A. Piolata

We have seen that holiness, that is to say, belonging to the living God, signifies mission... Jesus, the Holy one of God, is the one sent by God. His whole identity is "being sent"... He lives totally "from the Father"... After the Resurrection, Jesus draws the disciples into this dynamic of mission... [The disciples] represent Christ, just as Christ represents the Father.¹

With these words, Pope Benedict XVI articulates that *mission* constitutes the fundamental quality of Christ's identity and, therefore, the fundamental quality of Christian discipleship. In this paper, I show that Francis of Assisi's own religious vision also sets forth *mission* as the essential and deepest expression of the religious and Christian life.

According to Benedict XVI, mission is characterized by "being sent," living totally "from the Father." Yet, this "being sent" remains incomplete by itself. As Benedict XVI has shown, Christ is sent *from* the Father precisely *for* others—to draw them into his intimate relationship with God. Mission thus involves a dyadic dynamic of relationship: being-from and being-for. Christ lives totally from the Father and totally for others. Likewise, the Christian receives her being from the Father and then becomes a being for others.

In what follows, I argue that Francis of Assisi identifies mission—understood precisely in the aforementioned dyadic dynamic—as the fundamental quality of Christian discipleship. Moreover, I show how Francis' understanding of mission is ultimately about *entering into the experience of the other*. That is, Francis desires first to enter into the inner life of God. Then, desiring to live totally from the Father, Francis wants to draw others into that experience. In order to draw the other into the experience of living from the Father, one must enter first into the other's experience. Thus, for Francis, entering into the experience of the other constitutes the culminating expression of mission in the Christian life.

In order to articulate this theology of mission in Francis' thought, I divide the paper into three parts. First, I present preliminary remarks concerning the presence of "mission" in Francis' *Regula non bullata*.² Second, I examine "mission" as

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth Part II* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 97-98.

² I chose to use the *Regula non bullata* as the foundational text of this paper because, as William Short argues, this text really reflects the "I" of Francis—to understand his vision, this text remains an imperative and necessary source. See: "The Rule of the Lesser Brothers: The *Earlier Rule*, *Fragments*, *Later Rule*, *The Rule for Hermitages*," in *The Writings of Francis of*

being-from and *being-for* in Francis' theology. Third, I propose that entering into the experience of the other encapsulates the expression of mission.

1. Preliminary Remarks on the *Regula non bullata*

In this first section, I set forth some of the key elements in Francis' *Regula non bullata*. I show that this *regula* presents not a "rule" that requires adherence, but rather a person, Jesus Christ, who requires discipleship. For Francis, a specific asceticism did not capture the fullness of the Christian life. Instead, the fullest expression of Christian life is Jesus Christ. This foundation allows me to examine and develop Francis' Christological vision to show that entering into Christ is entering into his identity characterized by mission.

In Francis' *Regula non bullata*, the Saint begins his rule in a radically new way relative to the previous traditions of religious life. His *regula* does not embody a rule, but rather a life, namely, *vita Jesu Christi*. In a study on this rule, David Flood claims that the "text describes the life of the brothers. It is neither a model...nor a project...The *regula non bullata* manifests the dynamism of the community."³ Moreover, this dynamism of the community presents itself as a living person; the nucleus of the *regula* is the life of Jesus Christ. Thus, Eric Doyle and Damian McElrath claim that "Francis' christology...is of the existential order."⁴

However, Francis' theological vision centers on Christ in a penultimate way. Francis' ultimate concern lies in the figure of God the Father—to praise him.⁵ Francis possessed a profound consciousness of the role of Christ with respect to praising the Father: all true praise springs from him. For this reason, the Johannine passage, "Ego sum via, veritas et vita; nemo venit ad Patrem nisi per me [I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me]"

Assisi: Rules, Testament and Admonitions, Eds. Michael Blastic, Jay Hammond and J.A. Wayne Hellmann (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2011), 24.

³ David Flood and Thadeè Matura, *The Birth of a Movement: A Study of the First Rule of St. Francis*, Trans. Paul Schwartz and Paul Lachance (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1975), 51.

⁴ "St. Francis of Assisi and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan life and Doctrine," in *Franciscan Christology: Selected Texts, Translations and Introductory Essays*, Ed. Damian McElrath (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1980), 4.

⁵ Cf. Thadeè Matura, *Francis of Assisi: The Message in His Writings*, Trans. Paul Barret (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1997), 57-60.

(Adm 1,1), shapes the marrow of his spirituality as articulated in his *Admonitiones*.⁶ Francis' focus on the life of Christ results from his desire to return into the Father.⁷ For Francis, it is not asceticism, not pious rituals, not devout prayer, not the priesthood, not anything else save Jesus Christ that forms the matrix of the human person's journey into God.⁸ In other words, the *Regula non bullata* focuses therefore on Christ because Francis' sole concern is to belong absolutely to God. He wants his brothers to share in this similarly.

To no surprise, then, the first lines of the *regula* read: "In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti! Haec est vita evangelii Jesu Christi [In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ]" (Prol 1,2). These opening words reveal to the reader that the genesis of the rule lies in the inner life of the Trinity and that this inner life of God unfolds in the *vita Jesu Christi*. Francis thus experiences the human life of Christ as a revelation of the divine life.⁹ The *regula* therefore begins in God, from whom Christ is sent. Then, it presents the life of Christ, and concludes where it began (cf. RegNB 24, 5). The very structure of the rule consequently narrates Francis' personal religious vision: to enter into Christ so as to enter into God.¹⁰

Following the Prologue, Chapter One clarifies the primacy of the figure of Christ in the rule: "Regula et vita istorum fratrum haec est... Domini nostri Jesu Christi doctrinam et vestigia sequi [The rule and life of these brothers is this...]

⁶ Cf. Edith van den Goorbergh and Theodore Zweerman, *Respectfully Yours: Signed and Sealed, Francis of Assisi: Aspects of His Authorship and Focuses of His Spirituality* (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2001), 56. All textual citations of Francis' writings are taken from: Kajetan Esser, *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assiensis* (Grottaferrata/Rome: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1978). All references of Francis' writings in the present paper will be cited parenthetically (title chapter, verse). Note: In Esser's critical edition, he uses plain text unless the passage is utilizing a biblical phrase; I stay true to Esser's text and will only italicize the Latin citations of Francis' writings when Esser does so, too. The English translation of the Latin text will all be taken from: *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Eds. Regis Armstrong et al., Vol I: The Saint, (New York: New City Press, 1999).

⁷ Cf. Duane Lapsanski, *The First Franciscans and the Gospel* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1976), 49.

⁸ Following the theological vision of Francis, Bonaventure adheres to and develops this Christology in his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*.

⁹ On the significance of the invocation of the Trinity, see: Short, "The Rule of the Lesser Brothers: The Earlier Rule, Fragments, Later Rule, The Rule for Hermitages," *The Writings of Francis of Assisi: Rules, Testament and Admonitions*, 31.

¹⁰ This Christology manifests itself beautifully in the concluding prayer of Francis' *Epistola toti ordini missa*. He prays for grace that "sequi possimus vestigia (cfr. 1 Petr 2, 21) dilecti Filii tui, Domini nostri Jesu Christi, et ad te, Altissime, sola tua gratia pervenire" (EpOrd 51-52).

to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ]" (1, 1). The text is *regula* and *vita*: the *regula* expresses Christ as its *vita*. Thus, as Giovanni Miccoli argues, "following Christ" constitutes the fundamental expression of the friars.¹¹ Consequently, the friar maintains his identity insofar as he coalesces with the *vita* of the *regula*: "non videtur esse de fratribus, quia plus diligeit corpus quam animam [He does not seem to be one of the brothers because he loves his body more than his soul]" (10, 4).

In addition, according to Miccoli, "following Christ" involves, at its core, assuming "the condition of Christ as Son and Word of the Father."¹² To follow Christ is to enter into his identity, thereby invigorating the Christian life: "Nunc autem, postquam dimisimus mundum, nihil aliud habemus facere, nisi sequi voluntatem Domini et placere sibi ipsi [Now that we have left the world, however, we have nothing else to do but to follow the will of the Lord and to please him]" (22, 9). One who follows Christ, in Francis' view, has no reason to care for worldly affairs (cf. RegNB 22, 25-26). The only matter is to be faithful to the Lord: to carry out his mission. Hence the Saint writes in his *Admonitiones*: "Servo Dei nulla res displicere debet praeter peccatum [Nothing should displease a servant of God except sin]" (11, 1). Sin is the enemy, for sin alone detaches the human person from her God-sent mission. The point here is that following Christ consists of entering into his identity—an identity that is characterized by its perennial propinquity with God and hence by mission, as well.

For this reason, humility and poverty appear throughout the whole *Regula non bullata* as a principal desire of Francis. He often exhorts his brothers to humble themselves in everything (cf. 9, 1; 17, 5). In this way, their humanity may be fully capable of embracing others and open to the existential presence of Christ—whose Incarnation reveals the ultimate expression of God's mission of love. To echo the words of Pope Benedict XVI once more:

For Francis extreme humility was above all... freedom for *mission*... It was a corrective to the Church of his day, which... had lost the freedom and dynamism of missionary outreach. It was the deepest possible openness to Christ, to whom Francis was perfectly configured by the wounds of the stigmata, so perfectly that from then on he truly no longer lived as himself, but as one reborn, *totally from* and in Christ.¹³

At this point, I want to present a couple of passages in the text that exemplify the relationship between mission and following Christ. For the sake of brevity, I present two

¹¹ Cf. "The Writings of Francis," *Greyfriars Review* 15, No. 2 (2001): 157.

¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹³ *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 78. Emphasis mine.

important passages in the text.

First, mission appears in the first chapter of the *regula*. After identifying the *regula et vita* of the brothers, Francis cites Gospel passages to show the friars what their life entails and to ground it in the figure of Christ. The text reads: “*Si vis perfectus esse, vade (Mt 19, 21) et vende omnia (cfr. Lc 18, 22), quae habes, et da pauperibus et habebis thesaurum in caelo; et veni sequere me (Mt 19, 21)* [If you wish to be perfect, go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me]” (1, 2). “Come, follow me,” speaks the Christ, and Francis with him. *Veni*: this word implicates mission and invites the friar to follow the one sent by God and to be sent with him. The words of Jean Francois and Godet-Calogeras capture well Francis’ and the early fraternity’s desire to be sent with Christ: “Whether on the road, in cities, towns, or villages, or staying in ‘hermitages,’... Wherever they were, they were *on their journey to the reign of God and God’s justice* through loving brotherliness and caring stewardship.”¹⁴ In the opening Biblical passages of the *Regula non bullata*, Francis reveals that the whole purpose of the rule is to make clearer entering into Christ’s mission: to respond to his imperative *veni*.

Second, the *Regula non bullata*, for the first time in Christian history, details instructions for missionary activity.¹⁵ Francis must have thus possessed a deep desire for *mission* in the life of his brothers. In Chapter Sixteen of the text, Francis instructs his brothers about going into the world as heralds of the Gospel, figures of Christ. The chapter opens with the words of Christ: “*Ecce ego mitto vos sicut oves in medio luporum* [Behold I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves]” (16, 1). Beginning the chapter as such, Francis thereby understands mission as being-sent. Eventually, he concludes: “*Et omnes fratres, ubicumque sunt, recordentur, quod dederunt se et reliquerunt corpora sua Domino Jesu Christo* [Wherever they may be, let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ]” (16, 10). The origin of mission exists in the person of Jesus Christ, to whom the Christian gives and relinquishes himself in order to “se exponere” to others (RegNB 16, 11). For Francis, the Christian life—of mission—is heterotelic.

This section has shown the presence of “mission” in the *Regula non bullata*, and in particular that following Christ forms the concrete expression of mission. For Francis, mission constitutes the fundamental quality of Christian discipleship on the grounds that following Christ constitutes the way into a relationship with God. I now delve into the theology of Francis at a deeper and more comprehensive level. In what follows, I develop Francis’ understanding of mission as a

¹⁴ “*Illi Qui Volunt Religiose Stare in Eremitis. Eremitical Practice in the Life of the Early Franciscans*,” in *Franciscans at Prayer* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 331. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Cf. Short, “The *Rule* of the Lesser Brothers: The *Earlier Rule*, *Fragments*, *Later Rule*, The *Rule for Hermitages*,” 96.

dyadic dynamic of *being-from* and *being-for*.

2. Mission as “Being-from” and “Being-for”

I begin this section considering the pneumatic element inherent in Francis’ theology. Francis desires to live by the movement of the *Spiritus Domini*.¹⁶ He does not want to externally imitate Christ—he wants to be set aflame by the Holy Spirit, an activity that would naturally guide one to follow in the footsteps of the Son (cf. EpOrd 51-52). Doyle and McElrath explain that “the following of Christ is primarily due to an interior conversion inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ In his writings, Francis desires a spousal relationship with the Holy Spirit—to become one with the Spirit of the Lord—in order to connect with Jesus Christ: “*Sponsi sumus, quando Spiritu Sancto coniungitur fidelis anima Domino nostro Jesu Christo* [We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ]” (EpFid I 1, 8). Francis sees this espousal with the Spirit as the way to conjoin his soul to his Lord, Jesus Christ.

Where does mission exist in this pneumatology? I propose at the core. Francis understood that to enter into Christ’s identity marked by mission, he must go first to the Spirit. In this pneumatic relationship, he receives the capacity of being sent from God into the world—much in the same way that the Father sent the Son with the Spirit. Therefore, the primitive movement of Francis’ relationship with God—to be espoused by the Spirit in order to be set aflame—reaches its ultimate expression in being sent *from* God *for* others: just like Jesus Christ.

Consequently, it should not surprise that “being sent” characterizes Francis’ conversion experience. In his *Testamentum*, the opening begins with two similar phrases: “*Dominus ita dedit mihi* [The Lord gave me]...” and “*Et ipse Dominus conduxit me* [And the Lord Himself led me]...” (Test 1-2). These words, as J. A. Wayne Hellmann claims, “provide the foundation for everything that Francis describes as decisive for his conversion.”¹⁸ The genesis of Francis’ conversion reveals itself as an invitation from God. Francis is called by God and then sent forth by God. Called out of the world (cf. Test 3), Francis ingrains himself in God. Then, *from* God, he is sent into the world *for* others: “*Et ipse Dominus conduxit me inter illos [lepers] et feci misericordiam cum illis* [And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them]” (Test 2).

¹⁶ See the excellent presentation of the pneumatic element of Francis’ theology in: Dominic Monti, “The Experience of the Spirit in our Franciscan Tradition,” *The Cord* 49, No. 3 (1999): 114-129.

¹⁷ “St. Francis of Assisi and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan life and Doctrine,” 11.

¹⁸ “The Testament of Brother Francis (1226),” in *The Writings of Francis of Assisi: Rules, Testament and Admonitions*, Eds. Michael Blastis, Jay Hammond and J.A. Wayne Hellmann (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2011) 241.

Hellmann explains that in the *Testament*, Francis reminds his brothers about the origin of their life.¹⁹ Their origin is God. Their constitution is a mission to live the Gospel, the *vita Jesu Christi*—a life characterized by a divine mission. Just as Christ belonged totally to God and lived totally from the Father and for others, so the fullest expression of the friar’s life lies in Christ’s life, of which the fundamental dynamic of being is *from* God and *for* others.

This dyadic is also evident in the *Regula non bullata*, in which the ending chapters clarify and amplify Francis’ desire to live totally from God. In Chapter 23, Francis concludes after ecstatic praise: “Nihil ergo impediatur, nihil separet, nihil interpolet [Therefore let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us, nothing come between us]” (23, 10). Contingent upon total affinity with the Lord, if separated from God, their life—and the Christian life—necessarily dissipates. In Francis, then, the Christian life signifies relationship: it does not exist as an autonomous phenomena. It is communal. Throughout the text, Francis *roots* the Christian life in God as expressed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, for Francis, authentic Christian being is *being-from* God, which simultaneously expresses itself as *being-for* others.

In addition, Francis’ narrative in Chapter 22 of the *Regula non bullata* communicates his own experience of being sent from God. Utilizing Scripture and speaking the words of Christ in the first-person, Francis identifies himself as one immersed in the experience of the Incarnate Word. The Saint prays: “Pater, manifestavi nomen tuum hominibus, quos dedisti mihi (Joa 17, 6); qui verba, quae dedisti mihi, dedi eis; et ipsi acceperunt et cognoverunt, quia a te exivi et crediderunt, quia tu me misisti [Father, I have made Your name known to those whom You have given me. The words You gave to me I have given to them, and they have accepted them and truly have known that I came from You and they have believed that You sent me]” (22, 42). This Biblical passage, in Francis’ voice, allows us to glimpse into the Saint’s own consciousness. His experience of the Christian life is an experience of mission. He received his mission from God, and in turn, he offers that experience to others; like Christ, he draws others into his intimate relationship with God. With Christ, he writes:

Sicut tu me misisti in mundum, et ego misi eos in mundum. Et pro eis sanctifico meipsum, ut sint ipsi sanctificati in veritate. Non pro eis rogo tantum, sed pro eis, qui credituri sunt propter verbum eorum in me (cfr. Joa 17, 17-20), ut sint consummati in unum, et cognoscat mundus, quia tu me misisti et dilexisti eos, sicut me dilexisti (Joa 17, 23). Et notum faciam eis nomen tuum ut dilectio, qua dilexisti me sit in ipsis et ego in ipsis (cfr. Joa 17, 26). [As You sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I sanctify myself for them that they also may be sanctified in truth. 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 loved them as You loved me. I shall make known to them Your name, that the love with which You loved me may be in them and I in them.] (RegNB 22, 51-54)

In these words, Francis communicates that he has entered into the mission of the Son, that he has been sent by God into the world. Furthermore, *from* God, Francis is *for* others. Where else can one flow outward from the inner life of God save into God’s creation?

In this light—flowing outward from God—servitude characterizes well what *being-for* means. This characteristic thus appears in a plethora of passages in Francis’ writings. David Flood, for example, argues that in Chapter 22 of the *Regula non bullata*, Francis seeks to formulate the identity of the friar as a subject.²⁰ Flood opens his argument with the following passage: “Et odio habeamus corpus nostrum cum vitiis et peccatis suis; quia carnaliter vivendo vult diabolus a nobis auferre amorem Jesu Christi et vitam aeternam et se ipsum cum omnibus perdere in infernum [And let us hate our body with its vices and sins, because by living according to the flesh, the devil wishes to take away from us the love of Jesus Christ and eternal life and to lose himself in hell with everyone else]” (RegNB 22, 5). Living carnally destroys the Christian life because it separates the life from its divine source. Flood argues that, contrary to the flesh, to live spiritually is to “live in the company of the Lord” as *subditi omnibus*.²¹ Ultimately, then, “the brothers join Jesus’ company on the journey to set it [the world] all right.”²² To follow Christ is to enter into his relationship of being sent from God for others. Francis makes this very clear in his *Epistola toti ordini missa*:

Servate in toto corde vestro mandata eius et conilia eius perfecta mente implete. *Confitemini ei quoniam bonus* (Ps 135, 1) *et exaltate eum in operibus vestris* (Tob 13, 6); *quoniam ideo misit vos* (cfr. Tob 13, 4) in universo mundo, ut verbo et opere detis testimonium voci eius. [Observe His commands with your whole heart and fulfill His counsels with a perfect mind. Give praise to Him because He is good; exalt Him by your deeds; for this reason He has sent you into the whole world: that you may bear witness to His voice in word and deed.] (7-9)

Similarly, in his *Expositio in Pater Noster*, Francis prays:

Adveniat regnum tuum: ut tu regnes in nobis per gratiam, . . . Fiat voluntas tua sicut in caelo et in terra: ut

²⁰ “So What Is a Franciscan? Constituting the Franciscan Subject,” *Franciscan Studies* 63 (2005): 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

²² *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

amemus te ex toto corde (cfr. Lc 10, 27) te semper cogitando...honorem tuum in omnibus quaerendo et ex omnibus viribus nostris omnes vires nostras et sensus animae et corporis in obsequium tui amoris et non in alio expendendo. [Your kingdom come: That You may rule in us through Your grace...Your will be done on earth as in heaven: That we may love you with our whole heart by always thinking of you...by seeking Your glory in everything, with all our whole strength by exerting all our energies and affections of body and soul in the service of Your love and nothing else.] (4-5)

As this prayer articulates, Francis tells his brothers to exert all of their energy in the service of the Lord, from whom their existence comes. For this reason, *being-from* remains inchoate without *being-for*. Hence he writes elsewhere: “Numquam debemus desiderare esse super alios, sed magis debemus esse servi et subditi *omni humanae creaturae propter Deum* [We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God’s sake]” (EpFid II, 47). In fact, this simple sentence exemplifies the dyadic dynamic of mission in its entirety.

This section has developed mission, as articulated in the

writings of Francis of Assisi, in light of a dyadic dynamic of *being-from* and *being-for*. Francis desires *to be* totally from the Father, *to be* sent into the world accompanying Christ on his mission, *to be* a servant, *to be* subject to all.

3. Mission: Entering Into the Experience of the Other

Thus far, I have shown that for Francis mission constitutes the fundamental quality of Christian discipleship, and mission itself constitutes a dyadic dynamic of *being-from* God and *being-for* others. In this last section, I finish this examination of “mission” in the theology of Francis of Assisi. I argue that entering into the experience of the other expresses the totality of mission.

Above all, Francis desires to enter into the inner life of God. He prayerfully writes:

Omnes diligamus ex toto corde, ex tota anima, ex tota mente, ex tota virtute (cfr. Mc 12, 30) *et fortitudine, ex toto intellectu* (cfr. Mc 12, 33), *ex omnibus viribus* (cfr. Lc 10, 27), *toto nisu, toto affectu, totis visceribus, totis desideriis et voluntatibus Dominum Deum* (Mc 12, 30 par.), *quit totum corpus totam animam et totam vitam dedit et dat omnibus nobis.* [With our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with



Hoar Frost, Chris Calderone

our whole strength and fortitude with our whole understanding with all our powers, with every effort, every affection, every feeling, every desire and wish let us all love the Lord God.] (RegNB 23, 8)

Francis desires a total immersion into God's life:

Ubique nos omnes omni loco, omni hora et omni tempore, quotidie et continue credamus veraciter et humiliter et in corde teneamus et amemus, honoremus, adoremus, serviamus, laudemus et benedicamus, glorificemus et superexaltemus, magnificemus et gratias agamus altissimo et summo Deo aeterno, trinitati et unitati, Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto. [Wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of the day, every day and continually, let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High and Supreme Eternal God Trinity and Unity.] (RegNB 23, 11)

He desires his whole consciousness be set aflame with love for God. As articulated in section one of the present paper, he sought to follow in the footprints of Christ so as to enter into the divine life. In other words, Francis enters into the experience of Christ in view of entering into God. Therefore, *entering into the experience of the other* forms the defining principle of Francis' spirituality.

Furthermore, in one of his prayers, the Saint writes: "Nihil ergo de vobis retineatis vobis, ut totos vos [Deus] recipiat, qui se vobis exhibet totum [Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally]" (EpOrd 29). Francis admonishes his brothers to be totally received by God. Francis prays that his brothers may ingrain themselves in God as he has so experienced. He therefore seeks to draw others into his experience. So, he prays with Christ: "*Pater, quos dedisti mihi, volo, ut ubi ego sum, et illi sint mecum, ut videant claritatem tuam* (cfr. Joa 17, 24) [Father, I wish that those whom You have given me may be where I am that they may see Your glory]" (RegNB 22, 55). He asks the Lord that others may be where he is, that they may see God clearly. Accordingly, he also writes: "et proximos nostros amemus sicut et nosmetipsos omnes ad amorem tuum pro viribus trahendo [and we may love our neighbor as ourselves by drawing them all to Your love with our whole strength]" (ExpPat 5). Here, Francis prays that the friars draw others into their loving relationship with God. These passages illustrate Francis' hunger to share with others his intimacy with God. He therefore desires to enter into the experience of the other, so that the other may experience God.

Francis reveals this exercise with clarity in Chapter 16

of the *Regula non bullata*: "Et pro eius [Christ] amore debent se exponere inimicis tam visibilibus quam invisibilibus [For love of Him, they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible]" (RegNB 16, 11). *Exponere* may be translated as "to put out into the open," "to expose," or even "to make available." Charged with meaning, Francis uses this word to describe the life of his brothers. He encourages his brothers *se exponere* to others—to enter into the life of every other creature made by God. After having given themselves to the Lord and entered into him, giving themselves to others—entering into and embracing their experiences—logically follows.

Accordingly, humility and poverty mark the principal attributes of the Christian life, as articulated by Francis of Assisi. To enter into the experience of the other, the self comprises the only obstacle. For this reason, Francis consistently communicates the utmost importance of humility and poverty in the Christian life. Reflecting on Francis' understanding of poverty, Julio Mico claims that Francis perceived poverty as "the mold which shaped the saving mystery of God accomplished by Christ."²³ The Incarnation of the Word—the Son entering into the experience of humanity—rests upon poverty. Mico therefore claims that following Christ in poverty means "stripping oneself to the deepest roots of one's being."²⁴ In this way, one becomes open, literally transparent and accessible, to others. Thus, following Christ, the Son through whom God created everything (cf. RegNB 23, 1), naturally and humbly brings one into communion and an inter-subjective experience with others.

Francis' way of relating to the Trinity also exhibits the exercise of entering into the experience of the other. With respect to the Father, Francis desires sonship; with respect to the Son, he desires motherhood; and with respect to the Spirit, he desires espousal (cf. EpFid II 54-56). Particularly relevant for the purpose of the present paper is this pneumatic, matrimonial element. Dominic Monti interprets this as becoming one with the Lord—much like the Christian understanding of marriage when the two become one flesh (cf. Gen 2:24, Mt 19:5).²⁵ As such, espoused to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of God penetrates and permeates the deepest reality of what that person is" and a transformation results "in such a way that what God desires and what we desire will become more and more *one movement of love*."²⁶ Thus, penetrated and permeated by God—that is, having totally entered into the inner life of God—the Christian enters into God's life of love, which naturally leads one to coalesce into

²³ "Franciscan Poverty," *Greyfriars Review* 11, no. 3 (1997): 273.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁵ "Francis as Vernacular Theologian: A Link to the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition?" in *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: Washington Theological Union Symposium Papers 2001*, Ed. Elise Saggau (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2001), 39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39. Emphasis mine.

the lives of others. Espoused to the Spirit, the human person unites with Christ (cf. EpFid II, 51), and so enters into his life that is continually entering into others. Being totally enfolded into God's life, the Christian unfolds into the life of others.

In sum, entering into the experience of the other exists as an expression of *being-from* and *being-for*. To be sent by God results from entering into the experience of Christ. And, in order for one to truly *be for* another, he must enter into the experience of the other. In this way, *entering into the experience of the other* exists on both sides of the dyadic dynamic of mission. Thus, the ultimate expression of mission, especially as presented in the writings and theology of Francis, consists in entering into the experience of the other: first and foremost, the Divine Other, and then into the otherness of creation.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected upon “mission” in the theology of Saint Francis of Assisi. I first examined the *Regula non bullata*, in which I showed that Francis presents mission as the fundamental quality of Christian discipleship. Then, I argued that a dyadic dynamic of *being-from* and *being-for* characterizes mission. Lastly, I showed that *entering into the experience of the other* formulates the ultimate expression of mission understood in light of its dyadic dynamic.

That said, this paper is by no means exhaustive. It is rather a preliminary attempt to identify a particularly unique facet of Francis' Christian vision. Consequently, further research is needed. In particular, I suggest that further research undertake the task of tracking the presence and development of mission throughout Francis' writings more completely. It might be discovered that mission constitutes a connective link of Francis' systematic Christian vision. Consequently, understanding mission in the thought of Francis might provide a promising context in which to develop Francis' understanding of such different topics in theology as Trinitarian theology, Christology, ecclesiology, soteriology, sacramental theology, and systematic theology as a whole. It is my hope that the reader may already have identified some of the ways in which mission affects and offers insight into Francis' whole theological structure.

In addition, it would be interesting to undertake a comparative study of Francis' religious vision with Saint Benedict's monastic vision. For example, in the latter, the *regula*

exists as a “schola” for the monk: a manual for asceticism to aid the monk on his journey toward union with God.²⁷ The radically new vision of Francis, however, posits that the *regula* is in fact a *vita*. The rule of religious and Christian life cannot fit within text alone. Rather, the presence of Christ remains necessary: he is the *regula*. Consequently, whereas the *Regula Benedicta* aims to instruct the monk to overcome his vices, the *regula* of Francis aims to overcome the self in view of following Christ so as to enter into total communion with God and thence others. Thus, studying the differences—as well as similarities—between these two important religious visions may provide a promising context, in which to better articulate and comprehend Francis' unique and compelling theology.

I now conclude with a final comment about Francis' theological vision of mission. What I have shown is that mission, in Francis, is the fundamental quality of Christian discipleship; that mission is *being-from* and *being-for*; that mission culminates in the expression of entering into the experience of the other. This whole framework rests upon one initial conviction: that Francis desires nothing save intimacy with God. In the end, this affective desire entails the Saint's ultimate vision: to fall radically in love with God. Mission, therefore, forms the means to the end. The mission is accomplished when one reaches Francis' grand finale, namely, total praise. This, he articulates beautifully in his final song, the *Canticum fratris Solis vel Laudes creaturarum*—a song of absolute praise that prepares him for his transitus, his death and passover, into his Creator and Lover. He begins with praise: “Altissimu onnipotente bon signore, tue so le laude, la gloria e l'onore et omne benedictione [Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing]” (CantSol 1). And he concludes with but a simple maxim, presenting mission in its entirety: “Laudate et benedicete mi signore, et rengratiate et serviately cun grande humilitate [Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility]” (CantSol 14).

²⁷ See for instance: “Introduction,” in *The Rule of St. Benedict: In Latin and English with Notes*, Ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 94-95.

Tommy Piolata grew up in Columbus, OH and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Saint Louis University, where he studied Philosophy, Classical Humanities, and Italian. He also received a minor in Theological Studies and a certificate in Medieval Studies. At SLU, he was the chairman of the Pregnant and Parenting Student Assistance Committee and co-founded a Catholic men's group, Lateris Christi. Inspired by the faith of His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, Tommy hopes to continue studies in theology and philosophy in order to contribute to and defend the Catholic intellectual tradition, in light of sharing Christ with others. In particular, having identified with the poverty of Francis, he aspires to develop the Franciscan school of thought, wherein he has found stimulating the vision of Francis and the fresh insight of Bonaventure.

