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Capuchin Vocation Update

Province of St. Joseph

Franciscan prayer: God's method—be small

Part 4 in a series by William Hugo, Capuchin

In the last *Update* on Franciscan prayer, we explored God's passionate desire as a starting point for prayer. Francis and Clare started there, and they are now revered among the church's greatest mystics. How did they do it?

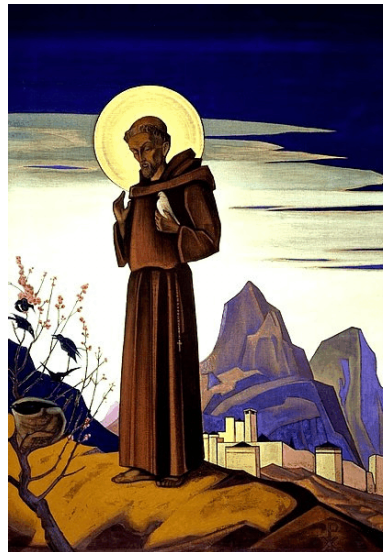
To use Clare's four-fold method, they began by *gazing* at God's life. Very visible in Francis' writings is his view of God creating. Perhaps at first blush, Francis' focus seems a sentimental consideration of the various creatures. A deeper analysis uncovers Francis' piercing stare at a God who can't stand to hold everything in. So, Francis' God bursts into an enormous act of creation.

Now Francis is going beyond a *gaze* to a meditation, or a *consideration*, to use Clare's terminology. As Francis begins to consider this aspect of creation, he comes to know a selfless God who has no interest in holding anything back. God is not so big that he reserves what he has to himself. This God shares everything, including his existence. Francis senses the feelings displayed on this stage; God and his creation are tight!

Also notice that Francis' consideration shows little concentration on the hierarchy of these creatures. Of course we can find those passages in his writings that ooze amazement at the human creature that is destined to be in the image and likeness of God. But instead of

exploring all the different levels of creatures like Thomas Aquinas might, Francis intuitively that all creatures are brothers and sisters, a metaphor that focuses on creaturely equality. Like human brothers and sisters, all creatures come from the same source.

Once we can appreciate this movement in Francis' prayer, we begin to experience what was described in earlier *Updates* on Franciscan prayer: when you gaze and meditate upon God, you also learn about yourself and others. In this case, that all creatures are brothers and sisters.



Actually, many of Francis' surviving prayers seem to reflect Clare's third stage of prayer, *contemplation*, during which the person praying basks in her relationship with God discovered during the gazing and considering stages. So, Francis left behind prayers that are nothing more than exclamatory names and adjectives for God.

If while reading this you feel even a twinge of desire to do something new or different because of this prayer experience, then you already have experienced the beginning of Clare's 4th stage of prayer, *imitation*. Being in contact with this selfless, unassuming and small God typically leads us to desire to be the same.

Francis and Clare will gaze on more. So, stay tuned for future *Updates*.

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