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Franciscan Prayer: (First in a series)

by William Hugo, Capuchin

Anyone considering entrance to the Capuchin-Franciscans must wonder, “What makes this group different from others?” *Vocation Update* plans to offer a series of articles that attempt to answer that question regarding the uniqueness of Franciscan prayer. Each issue will discuss a small part of this large topic. Hopefully, by the end of this series, each of us will have a better understanding of how Franciscan prayer generally has fit into the mosaic of Franciscan and Capuchin life.

This first issue focuses on the *pattern* of Franciscan prayer. The assumption that this pattern comes from Francis of Assisi is only half true. Certainly his experience, recorded in numerous medieval legends, tells the *story* of Francis’ prayer in action. But, oddly, his writings do not systematize his pattern of prayer. Instead, it is Clare of Assisi, Francis’ partner in defining the Franciscan way of life, who gives us the four-part Franciscan approach to prayer in her second letter to Agnes of Prague: to gaze, to consider, to contemplate, and to imitate (20-21).

Francis and Clare sought a gospel way of life that would be different from that of monks. Yet, in fact, Clare’s prayer method included three steps that characterized monastic prayer before the Franciscan period, though she used her distinctive words. *To gaze* was akin to the monastic *reading* of Christ’s life from a gospel or a different scripture to get the story.

Clare’s term *to consider* was much like the monastic meaning of *meditation*, i.e., imagining that one is on the scene of the scripture with all its smells, sounds, sights, tastes, feelings and movements. This second step was the work of imagination. Clare’s idea of *contemplation* even used the word of many monastic methods. It was the prayer of being with God and all the intimacies of conversation and presence after sharing the biblical experience through meditation.



Clare and Francis of Assisi in prayer *gazing* at Christ crucified. Painting behind the altar at the Capuchin World Headquarters (Curia Generale) in Rome.

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However, Franciscan prayer stands out as different when Clare lists her fourth component as *imitation*. Monks typically did not include anything like imitation in their definitions or descriptions of prayer. By highlighting imitation of Christ and God who is our partner in prayer, Franciscans clearly announce that prayer changes their lives. The goal does not end in union with God during prayer, but a transformation of life brought about through the influence of prayer. Thus, Franciscan prayer and life become closely intertwined. Fashioning your own prayer according to this four-fold pattern, spending 5-10 minutes on each step, can be a great way to deepen your prayer.

Future *Updates* will look at other characteristics of Franciscan prayer. But for now, a good way to begin an appreciation of the Franciscan style of prayer is to ask how your own prayer changes the rest of your life.



(William Hugo is Director of Postulancy and teaches Franciscan spirituality and history. He authored *Studying the Life of Francis of Assisi: A Beginner's Workbook*, Franciscan Press, 1996.)

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New inquirers are welcome!

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