

Traces of the Mystery: the Light of Franciscan Stories on Contemporary Issues



Inaugural speech by
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TRACES OF THE MYSTERY: THE LIGHT OF FRANCISCAN STORIES ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

PROF. DR. W.M. (WILLEM MARIE) SPEELMAN OFS

Lecture

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1. Restoring the ruined house

Rector Magnificus,
colleagues,
students,
brothers and sisters,

Long ago, in the dilapidated little church of San Damiano, Francis heard the crucifix speak to him, “Francis, don’t you see that my house is completely falling apart? Go ahead, restore it for me!”¹ Francis did not know what these words meant, but he was immediately set in motion. He restored the little church, and a few more. But the words that the crucifix of San Damiano spoke to him are about restoring a house: place to stay, where man can be himself, at home in the fragrance of presence. Our common home is the earth, Pope Francis said in his second encyclical *Laudato Si’*. And in his third encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, our home is society, where brothers and sisters are at home with each other. Do we not see, then, that the house of the earth and society has fallen completely into disrepair?

We live in a world that seems to be the completion of an era that was started in the time of Francis: the development of the city, the money economy, technology, and the human person as an individual. These new developments were and are not just a blessing for human beings: they led to problems then, as they do now. The strengthening of the monetary economy brought prosperity, but also poverty. The rise of cities brought a new culture, but also war. Man was given a certain freedom of choice, but there were also masses of losers. Francis recognized that these problems would continue to arise as long as man failed to see the mystery of the perfect in the defects. While he himself experienced the problems of his day firsthand, he restored the spiritual reality of the mystery in which man is truly at home.

Francis made something visible that is incredibly valuable. And that has not gone unnoticed. In his day, the greatest rulers and thinkers were inspired by this *fratello*, and in our day, the greatest church leaders and artists are touched by this *poverello*. What is special about Francis is that he did not shy away from problems, but underwent them, recognizing them as a call of the new life and new man. In the depths of his pain, he started to sing the *Canticle of the Creatures*, the song that has been sung around the world for 800 years.

¹ 3Com 13: *Francisce, nonne vides quod domus mea destruitur? Vade igitur et repara illam mihi*, in *Fontes Franciscani*. A cura di Enrico Menestò e Stefano Brufani. Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1995, 1386, [From here FF].

Understanding Society is the motto of this University. The Franciscan Study Center takes this motto as a question of the good life in this world. Today's "wicked problems" are fighting poverty, providing good care, educating for responsible leadership, working for real peace and restoring the ecosystem on a global scale. These problems are "wicked," because they are not just problems; they are also pains that the mystery of life fires at us, "What are you people really doing?" And to that question science will also have to find an answer.

2. What are we actually doing?

To the question “what are you guys actually doing?” I will first offer an answer by giving a brief account of what the Franciscan Study Center is doing. The FSC did research on poverty, health care, leadership, and sustainability. And it is striking that the problems we face as a society are always inextricably linked to life itself.

If you look at the problem of **poverty** not from the perspective of the capitalist, but as Louke van Wensveen did through the eyes of a bee, it immediately strikes you that poverty – suffering from lack – is part of life, and therefore requires an adjustment of life.² A phrase like “help eliminate poverty” then suddenly sounds very threatening, because life without poverty is not possible. Franciscan light on the lack that poverty entails begins with the recognition of the poverty of life itself. The poverty of the bee, which is perfect in its nakedness, should not be taken out of the world, but put into the world. Francis and his brothers and sisters became poor with the poor,³ developing a life that David Burr calls “a very attractive form of being poor.”⁴ Their life in touch with their own needs and flaws led to an economic miracle of poverty alleviation. This is also the experience of Jeanine Schreurs with her *Lift Your Life* program.⁵ In his research on poverty in Nigeria, Anthony Nwachukwu notes that poor people are not always able to tell the story of their poverty.⁶ Their poverty becomes different when the value of their lives is recognized, and their story heard. When people can tell their story, and thus develop an identity, the story shows a way out of misery into a good life, a way they themselves can follow.

Providing good **care** is also a problem of our time. How does our country keep its healthcare system afloat, and affordable? According to Gabriel Marcel, good care is not just solving a problem, but first and foremost seeing the new human being in his or her defectiveness. In other words, how can the very lack be a means of access to perfect living?⁷ Francis experienced his defectiveness; after a lost battle and a year of captivity he returned home, according to Paul Moses, with what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder.⁸ Fortunately, he did not know what that was and approached it as a disorder in the relationship between him and God. Therefore, he did not find a solution to the problem

² Louke van Wensveen, ‘Poverty Analysis from a Bumblebee Perspective’, in W.M. Speelman, A. Hilsebein, B. Schmiess, Th. Schimmel, *Poverty: As Problem And As Path / Armut: Als Problem Und Als Weg*. Munster / St. Bonaventure: Aschendorff / Franciscan Institute Publications, 2017, 293-312.

³ Jan van den Eijnden, Commentaar bij de tekst, in Bonaventura, *Volmaakt leven. Over verlangen, volharding en vervulling*. Budel: Damon, 2011, 88.

⁴ David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans. From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis*. Pennsylvania: University Press, 2001, 10.

⁵ zie: <https://www.stichtinglift.nl> [Accessed 19 May 2022].

⁶ Anthony Nwachukwu, *The Reign of Poverty in Nigeria*. Promotieonderzoek (2021-2025).

⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: I. Reflection & Mystery*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1950, 209-210; Thomas C. Anderson, *A Commentary on Gabriel Marcel's The Mystery of Being*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2006, 93.

⁸ Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam, and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace*. New York: Doubleday Religion, 2009.

of this disorder, but asked God for advice until he got an answer, and then immediately acted on it. Francis became a saint, with PTSD admittedly, but perfect in his imperfection. In the research I did with Ellen Oosting into physical therapy, one of the things that came to light was that medical care and spiritual care have two different perspectives: solving a problem on the one hand, and preserving the mystery in people's lives on the other.⁹ This double question is also reflected in my research on good care in the view of healthcare workers at the Amphia Hospital in Breda during the first wave of the Covid crisis.¹⁰

Research on responsible **leadership** often focuses on effective forms of leadership. But leadership, like health care and poverty, begins with leading life itself. Or as Francis says to Brother Leo, "In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprints and poverty, you may do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience."¹¹ In a pilot study of young people's personal leadership, conducted with ULO students, Monique van Dijk and I find that asking the question of the good life prompts young people to see for themselves in their own answer the sun of perfection rising. In this new perspective they can take steps on the road that has become visible to them.¹² Research by Krijn Pansters and myself into the personal leadership of Franciscan sisters and brothers in transition to a new community life leads to a similar observation, now based on the question of what the good was that brought them to this point and kept them there.¹³ Finally, preparations have been made for a pilot research project on the personal space for action and personal responsibility of employees of the Tax Administration. Students interested in research on the Good Life among Young People and Leadership at the Tax Administration are welcome!

Research on **sustainability** is usually about identifying problems and proposing solutions. Researcher Martine Vonk, who now lives with God, showed that a completely different kind of research is also possible, namely, the question of what the new life is that people would

⁹ Ellen Oosting e.a., Personal meaning in relation to daily functioning of a patient in physical therapy practice. Narratives of a patient, a family member and physical therapist, *Disability and Rehabilitation* (IDRE 1290153) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2017.1290153>.

¹⁰ Willem Marie Speelman, Bericht uit Amphia Ziekenhuis. Narratieve analyse van een artikelenreeks uit de Volkskrant over de eerste coronagolf, in *Religie en Samenleving* 17:1 (2022) 26-48; Idem, Stories of Healing. How a Franciscan story may cast light upon COVID 19 stories, in *Franciscan Studies* 79 (2021) 287-305; idem, Dialogische ruimte: een narratieve benadering van de spiritualiteit in de zorg, in S. Goyvaerts, K. De Groot, J. Pieper (red.), *De hardnekkige aanwezigheid van het Christendom* (Utrechtse Studies XXII). Almere: Parthenon, 2020, 116-135.

¹¹ EpLeo 3: "*in quocumque modo melius videtur tibi placere Domino Deo et sequi vestigia et paupertatem suam, faciatis cum benedictione Domini Dei et mea obediential*"; in FF 92. See also Willem Marie Speelman, Sicut Mater. Het spirituele leiderschap van Franciscus van Assisi, in Willem Marie Speelman (red.), *Volg de Liefde. Leiderschap in het licht van Franciscus en Clara van Assisi*. Almere: Parthenon, 2020, 222-242. (Utrechtse Studies XXII)

¹² Willem Marie Speelman, Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, et alii, Awaken the Question: A pilot study of the question of the good life among young people, in *Journal for Religion in Education* [accepted].

¹³ Krijn Pansters en Willem Marie Speelman, *Voltooiing. Naar een spiritualiteit van de eindigheid* (2021-2023); *Transitus. Franciscaanse spiritualiteit tussen eindigheid en het uiteindelijke* (2023-2025).

like to lead, and what impact that new life has on the environment and on other people.¹⁴ Horrifying news paralyzes people; the question of the good life sets them in motion. In Vonk's research, it appears that this question leads to sustainable living. Sustainability does not mean clinging to the life you have always led, but to the life you would like to lead even if it costs a lot of the old life.

¹⁴ Martine Vonk, *Sustainability and Quality of Life: A Study On The Religious Worldviews, Values And Environmental Impact Of Amish, Hutterite, Franciscan And Benedictine Communities*. 2011 (Dissertation Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam).

3. Eye for the mystery
of life

All the studies mentioned above show that problems are never separate from life itself, and that the solution to those problems is often a side effect of leading the new life itself. Life is not a problem, but a mystery, which should not be solved, but led, cared for, endured, and let go of.

Recognition of the mystery of life as a complement to its common problematization is not new. Already a little over a century ago, Gabriel Marcel pondered the question of being, only to discover that this question cannot be posed as a problem, and that behind a problem there is always a mystery.¹⁵ The mystery is not an unsolved problem, but a positive reality, which sometimes presents itself as a problem. It is like a pain, which before fighting it you have to feel, to know what is going on. The problem asks not to be there, but the mystery asks for presence.¹⁶ If the mystery asks for presence, then the mystery exists in relationship: the relationship with the present. The mystery can present itself in another human being, whom we must never approach as a problem, in life itself, which must never be solved as a problem, and in God, whom Karl Rahner recognizes as the unity of all mysteries.¹⁷ As the background that drives, directs, and arranges our lives, mystery is an area that is approached in spirituality.¹⁸

The mystery, as mentioned, exists in relationship. If we want to think the mystery, we have to think in relationships. Thinking in relationships is something we do in mathematics, in music, in the body, and in stories. I find math difficult, I like music, and I have a body, but in my work I'm going to focus on stories. Relationships allow themselves to be translated into stories. Therefore, the story is a way to access the mystery. We can trace the mystery by listening to people's stories, not to collect "data," but to follow relationships and see perspective. The knowledge gained from stories is always related: to a momentary situation, to a unique narrator, and to the narrative order of the story. In those unique

¹⁵ "[A] problem conceals a mystery...", in Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*. Translated by Katharine Farrer, Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949, 111.

¹⁶ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: I*, 204: "Perhaps the shortest way towards our needed definition of the notion of mystery would be to begin by working out the distinction, at the spiritual level, between what we call an *object* and what we call a *presence*."

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, Über den Begriff des Geheimnisses in der Katholischen Theologie, in *Schriften zur Theologie* Bd. IV, Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1960, pp. 51-99, 57; vgl. Marcel, *Being and Having*, 118 – "We must carefully avoid all confusion between the mysterious and the unknowable. The unknowable is in fact only the limiting case of the problematic, which cannot be actualised without contradiction. The recognition of mystery, on the contrary, is an essentially positive act of the mind, the supremely positive act in virtue of which all positivity may perhaps be strictly defined."

¹⁸ In the Preface to the volume J.B.M. Wissink & Th.H. Zweerman (red), *Ruimte van de Geest: Over ascese, spiritualiteit en geestelijk leiderschap*. Kampen: Kok, 1989, 7-10, the compilers describe spirituality as life-élan, life-direction, and life-design. However, we also make use of a more process-oriented description by Kees Waaijman who describes spirituality a relational process between God and human, in which God and the human are mutually being shaped, in Idem, *Spiritualiteit. Vormen, Grondslagen, Methoden*. Kampen: Kok / Gent: Carmelitana, 2000³, 424.

stories, the mystery can light up as the horizon of the good life, in which the human being is perfect in his or her situation, however deficient it may be. This mystery is not an ideal, but a perspective from which light comes, illuminating the situation here and now.

Because the mystery evokes presence, the scientific listener, too, will need to include himself in that story, and in that position acquire knowledge, practice skills, and articulate insights. What Alasdair MacIntyre says about human beings in general also applies to the researcher: he or she plays a role in a story, and derives responsibility from it.¹⁹ The recognition of the mystery does not lead to a solution – via another route – of the “wicked problems,” but supports society by – and now I quote Charles Taylor – asking not only the question “what is the right thing to do?” but also the underlying question “what is it to be good?” and thus making the good visible and powerful.²⁰ *Understanding Society* is not just about solving problems, but first and foremost about making the good visible and powerful in society.

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007³, 216: “A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989, 3.

4. The mystery requires
a narrative approach

The mystery is a relationship, and that relationship can be traced in the narrative. I will try to show how the story can help us discover the mystery. For this I will make use of narrative semiotics. Narrative semiotics clarifies how a story receives reality and transforms it into its own narrative order. Narrative semiotics also elucidates how the story weaves the ungraspable mystery into its plot. Finally, narrative semiotics clarifies how the reader is put on a track in the story that both leads back to the source of that story – the moment when an impression becomes an expression – and leads forward to its destination – the moment when that expression makes an impression. Thus, the story provides insight into the world it is about – that is the semantics –, into the order of the story itself – that is the syntax –, and into the condition of the narrator and addressee – that is the pragmatics.²¹ I will briefly describe how these three fundamental narrative relations make the story a recipient, an event, and a message.

The semantic relations describe the story as **recipient** of reality and therefore also of mystery. Every human situation is received in the form of the story. From Thomas Aquinas we know that all that is received is received in the way of the receiver.²² This means that the analysis of the story requires an understanding of the way in which the story receives reality. That manner is described in semantics. Semantics describes the transformation of impressions of the world and what is happening there into narrative figures and themes, allowing the listener to know what it is about. The reality as it is portrayed in the narrative – Aristotle calls it *mimesis* – also shows the defects and how to deal with them. The flaw is the motif of the story: it sets the plot in motion. The movement of the plot is aimed at realizing values, which make a difference and thus shape meaning. Thus, semantics provides a view not only of the defects but also of the abundance of possibilities for incorporating those defects into a whole.

The syntactic relations describe the story as an **event**. In the story, events acquire a syntactic order, within which the figures of the world, time and space, and characters appear in a narrative form. Thus the story is a depiction of an action. And that action turns an old situation into a new one. The action accomplishes this by realizing values and connecting them with the narrator and the listener, making them envision a new identity and a new life. Thus, from the reality it has received, the story creates a new possibility: a new identity and a new life. The mystery at work in the story thus becomes visible and passable as a path to a new reality. The listener need only follow that trail.

²¹ This three-part division is described by Charles Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. (International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Vol I, Nr. 2) Chicago: Chicago university Press, 1938.

²² *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 75, a. 5; 3a, q. 5. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 12, a. 4. “*Cogitum...est in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis*”. See further *Summa Theologiae*, q. 14, a. 1, ad 3; q. 16, a. 1; q. 19, a. 6, ad 2; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 79, 7; *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 3. Dunstan Robidoux, ‘Applying a Thomist Principle: Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur’ <http://lonergan.org/2009/10/16/applying-a-thomist-principle-quidquid-recipitur-ad-modum-recipientis-recipitur/> [Accessed, 3 March 2022]

Third, the story is a **message**. The story is told and heard. This is where pragmatic relations come into play. Pragmatic relations describe the transformation of the narrator and listener into an enunciator and enunciatee.²³ The narrative terms indicate that these people have become part of the narrative order in their roles. Thus, the enunciatee is the narrative listener,²⁴ connecting all listeners then and now. At the same time, the narrative listener reaches out to the real listener, who carries with him a whole world: a language, a society, and a time. As a message, the story asks for a response from that real listener: “Who wants to be my listener, who wants to take on this mystery in his or her life?” And the moment the story impresses, and touches the soul of the listener, the listener responds to that question and enters into the recounted situation. In all the stories of Francis, we see how the story plays with the identity of the characters: is not the wolf of Gubbio a friar minor? Is the leper not Christ? Isn’t the harp player an angel? And who, listener, are you in this wonderful event?

This is how the story orders the consciousness and world of the narrator and listener, that they may live in their world in a new way. Because the story as depiction is detached from harsh reality, the world and identity of the narrator and listener are actualized into a possibility. The story makes reality possible.²⁵ In doing so, the story tells us that the situation it describes can be different. Therefore, the importance of the story is not that it ends well and all the flaws disappear, but that the listener sees reality as a possibility, transcending the situation and putting it in pure proportions. Then the listener can be touched, find himself in a new relationship to the situation, and be moved to act immediately. Defects are not ‘removed from the world’, but placed in the world as a possibility, which can also be different.²⁶ The story receives reality, turns it around, and proclaims a new one. Thus the story mediates the mystery, which opens the perspective to that which transcends harsh reality, and directs man to the good life, which rises like a light in the story.

²³ Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, 30 writes “By ‘pragmatics’ is designated the science of the relation of signs to their interpreters.” This relationship was elaborated by the Paris School in the semiotics of enunciation.

²⁴ The “implied reader” applies here; the socio-lingo-historical context that speaks from the story and thus has a particular reader in mind. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974. Wolfgang Iser’s reception theory deserves more attention than I can give it now, because it puts us on the track of what a story does to the reader, or to put it another way: “...how human faculties are stimulated and acted upon by the literary text during the reading process.” Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory*. Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 59. Zie ook Yanling Shi, ‘Review of Wolfgang Iser and His Reception Theory’, in *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3:6 (2013) 982-986.

²⁵ Vgl. Kees Vuyk, *De esthetiseren van het wereldbeeld. Over filosofie en kunst*. Kampen: Kok Agora, 1992, 186. See also Speelman, Bericht uit Amphia Ziekenhuis, 30.

²⁶ Dick Wittenberg describes how a small economy naturally emerges when poor people have prospects and are willing to act on those prospects. Dick Wittenberg, Jan Banning, *Het gezicht van de armoede. Tien jaar uit het bestaan van een Afrikaans dorp*. Utrecht: Ipsa Facto, 2015, 202-231.

5. The Franciscan mystery of the perfect life

More than any other saint, Francis of Assisi is known by stories, wonderful stories, which regularly surface even in our time. People are touched by them. All these stories revolve around a life centered on the mystery of evangelical perfection. To give an example, when Francis recognizes that the break with his father leads to a life of poverty, he does not see this as a problem, but as living according to the “most holy poverty” of Christ. He undergoes the lack, but also sees the wealth that lies in his poverty. Behind this paradox lies an economic principle that links the value of something to the need for that something.²⁷ When a person is in touch with his or her needs, he or she is in an excellent condition to estimate the value of the things connected to those needs. This principle makes it possible for Francis to estimate the value of not having, to see the goodness in bad people, to appreciate the useless, to see the beauty in a meaningless environment. The mystery is hinted at by Francis in various formulations, all of which involve a life program. When he left the world, he wanted only to follow the Lord in his footsteps.²⁸ What those footsteps are is not entirely clear: Are they his reflections on the gospel and the impressions left in his heart?²⁹ Is it the gospel quotes that he uses like stones in a river to provide himself with solid ground?³⁰ Is it the impressions he experiences as from the Lord, like the inner voice he hears just before he meets a leper?³¹ Whatever those footsteps are exactly, they give direction to his life and to his story. When he received his first brothers, the question arose of the form of life they would follow. In his Testament he says, “And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the holy gospel.”³²

²⁷ Willem Marie Speelman, *The Franciscan Usus Pauper as a Practice of an Economy of Hope*, in Milos Lichner (ed.), *Hope: Where Does Our Hope Lie?* Wien: Lit Verlag, 2020, 379-393, 383.

²⁸ *Sequi vestigia eius*. The beginning of his conversion is hearing a voice that says “Go back to your land; there you will be told what to do” (3Com 6; FF 1379). That uncertain way of following is expressed by this gospel word from 1Peter 2:21. It is used in EpLeo, 2; EpFid 2,13; EpOrd, 51; RnB 1:1 (the vow!), 22:2. Further in 1Cel 25, 84 (quoting RnB 1:1); 3Com (on the imitation of Francis), 68 (on the apostles); AC 77; Begin 16b (imitation of the friars); 2Cel 24 (on the imitation of the mother of the Lord), 90, 149, 165, 188 (imitation of Francis); LegMai 1:1, 2:4, 3:3.

²⁹ Augustinus, *Belijdenissen*. Vertaald en ingeleid door Gerard Wijdeveld. Baarn: Ambo, 1985, XI,18,23 speaks of “images of those things, which have, as it were, imprinted traces in the soul, as they passed along the senses.”

³⁰ Vgl. RnB 1,2-5; in FF 185-6.

³¹ 3Com 11; in FF 1383.

³² *Vivere secundum formam sancti evangelii* (Test 14; FF 228). Not without a sense of humor, Jacques Dalarun responds in his *Francis of Assisi and Power*. St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute, 2007, 38, to the “no one showed me...” with: “Really!” Francis wanted to be guided only by the Lord Himself!

This led to an apostolic life,³³ without any possessions,³⁴ in which the mystery shines forth as undivided good.³⁵ The first and last sentences of his Rule of Life speak of *sanctum Evangelium observare*, with Sigismund Verhey translating *observare* as “voor ogen houden (to observe or keep in view).”³⁶ And when Clare and her sisters ask for a form of life, Francis pledges to care for them because they have chosen “to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel” and have thus committed themselves exclusively to the Triune God himself.³⁷ In the stories of Francis’s conversion and of the birth of the brotherhood, it is always made clear that Francis, like Clare, seeks a life that is under the direct guidance of the Lord. He therefore wants to sanctify life itself,³⁸ does not seek refuge in the existing orders, but always keeps in mind the mystery of the perfect life, as proclaimed by the Gospel.³⁹ I would like to elaborate on the formulation he uses in his Form of Life for the Poor Sisters: *vivere secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii*, and I will discuss it word by word.

- *Vivere* → The mystery of the perfect life is to be found in life itself. This is different from seeking the mystery in the church or in the sacraments. It implies that the transcendent is inseparable from the immanent. We see this reflected in the relationship of Francis to his body: he distrusts his body, but believes bodily.⁴⁰ Where others are concerned

³³ Duane V. Lapsanski, *Perfectio evangelica. Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung im frühfranziskanischen Schrifttum*. München: Schöningh, 1974, 42.

³⁴ *Vivere sine proprio* (RnB 1:1; RB 1:1; Adm 11:3).

³⁵ Peter John Olivi, *On Evangelical Perfection*, way 3,1, p. 129: “Hence it [the highest Poverty, WMS] seems to contain in itself celestial riches, over which, although we can fully possess them, we are, properly speaking, not able to have control. It is precisely this that Christ seems to have openly hinted at when, giving advice about poverty, he added: *and you will have treasure in heaven* (Matthew 19:21).”

³⁶ Sigismund Verhey, *Naar het land van de levenden: Regel van Franciscus van Assisi voor de minderbroeders*. Nijmegen: Valkhof, 2007, 127.136. *Observare* the observance of the Franciscan form of life is used in RB 1:1, 2:3 (about faith), 2:11, 10:3.4, 12:4. See also RnB 6:1, 20:2 (about penitence); RegCl 10; TestSiena, 4 (about the holy poverty); Test 34, 39, 40; EpFid1, 2:4 (about penitence); EpFid2, 39, 64 (about penitence), 86; EpCler 13, 15; EpRect 9; EpOrd, 40, 43, 44 (about prayer), 48; EpMin 21 (about the rule of this letter); Adm 28:3 (about the mysteries of the Lord). According to Verhey, it is especially manifested in prayer, the greeting of peace, proclamation, fellowship and the three evangelical councils. Sigismund Verhey, *Der Mensch unter der Herrschaft Gottes. Versuch einer Theologie des Menschen nach dem Hl. Franziskus von Assisi*. Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1960, 88-95.

³⁷ RegCl 6:34; in FF 119. “Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most High, most Exalted King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them.”

³⁸ In focusing on life itself, Francis moves into the borderland of important late medieval question: does the church sanctify order (*ordo*) or life itself (*meritum*), should we rely on the *successio apostolica* or the *vita apostolica*? For Francis, however, this contradiction does not apply. See Lapsanski, *Perfectio evangelica*, 29-30.

³⁹ As in the dramatic scene during the Chapter of the Mats as described in AC 18; in FF 1497-8.

⁴⁰ Willem Marie Speelman, *God aan den lijve ondervinden. Lichamelijke spiritualiteit volgens Franciscus en Clara*. Utrecht: Franciscaans Studiecentrum, 2012, 11-12.

with the organization of the good life, as in the slogan “hunger must be abolished!”, Francis searches for the perfect in life itself and in the sensations of his own body. From that search a form of life is developed.⁴¹

- *secundum* → The life of Francis is a following; according to the expression in the Gospel, he follows in the footsteps of Christ. This following, unlike following a logic, is an expression of a bodily way of understanding. The walker who follows in the footsteps of the one who walks in front does not follow a route but moves step by step along a road. For the good life there is no route and no plan; and those who follow life itself are open to surprising turns.
- *Perfectionem* → Perfection is a concept that, like ‘following’, derives its meaning from the semiotics in which it is used. In language, a semiotics that consists in oppositions, perfection is the realization of all positive values. Thus ‘pure good’, ‘mere light’, ‘merely present’, et cetera until all values are realized in their positive extreme. In music, a semiotics that consists in proportions, perfection is the realization of a pure interval, i.e., a proper proportion between the various values.⁴² Perfect, in the musical sense, is the pure relationship between good and evil, light and dark, poor and rich, present and absent. The pure relationship is also sought in bodily and narrative semiotics. When man enters into a bodily relationship with the mystery, by being present to its presence, then reality is transformed into relationships while oppositions are abolished. The mystery exists in relationship, and a pure proportion is the truth of relationship.⁴³ Perfect is the one who stands in a pure proportion with the mystery, with his environment and with himself.
- *sanctus* → according to Émile Benveniste, *sanctus* describes “the sanctified,” a holiness made explicit by the impending sanction of its desecration.

⁴¹ Zie Verhey, *Naar het land van de levenden*, 17. This is also the thesis of Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty. Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, in idem, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer IV*, 1. Stanford University Press, 2017, 881-1009, 996.

⁴² Willem Marie Speelman, De albeweger die nooit iets zegt. De betekenis van muziek in het geloof, in *Handelingen. Tijdschrift voor Praktische Theologie en Religiewetenschap* 44, 4 (2017) 7-15.

⁴³ This can be recognized in the Biblical concept of perfect, which refers to efficiency, and thus to relationship. “Be perfect (τέλειοι) as your Father in heaven is perfect (τέλειός)” (Mt 5:48). τέλος - circle, completion, end, goal, mature, highest power, task and duty (to sacrifice), the perfect, sacrifice. Luke 6:36 reads οἰκτίρμων, merciful. Deut 18:13: A undivided whole (*tamim*) you shall be with the One, your God. Lev 19:2: Be unique (*kadosh*, holy, separate), for I, the One, your God, am unique - and then the commandments follow. When asked “what is the good thing I must do to have eternal life - τί ἀγαθὸν ποιήσω ἵνα σχῶ ζωὴν αἰώνιον?”, Jesus first refers to God, then answers you must follow the commandments, and finally advises, “if you want to be perfect (τέλειος), - go, sell your possessions and give them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” (Mt 19:21).

The implied holiness, that is sanctified by *sanctus*, is expressed in the word *sacer*.⁴⁴ That is the place where the mystery resides. So *sanctum evangelium* is the sanctified story in which the mystery makes its mark.

- *evangelium* → The gospel itself is not the protection of the sacred, but its communication which – because the mystery is one – shares in that mystery. In Francis's *Canticle of the Creatures*, it is the message that all creatures bear the sign of the mystery that brought them forth, carries them, and receives them back.

The mystery of Francis is found in the perfection that transcends this life and puts it in pure proportions. This perfection is inseparable from this life, but life itself, being imperfect, cannot contain it.⁴⁵ The Bible speaks of this mystery as a perspective to which life reaches out, as in Psalm 1; that it transcends and overcomes, as the end times in Daniel 12:2, the proclamation in Mark 1:14, and the beatitudes in Luke 7. In all these images, the mystery of the undivided good life is the one perspective, the horizon of sacred Scripture.⁴⁶ Francis gives new names to this one perspective, which keeps lighting up in encounters and in stories.

⁴⁴ Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. Vols. 1-2. Paris: Minuit, 1969, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Karman. A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture*. Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford University Press, 2018, 14-15. *Sacer* means “dedicated to God.” In law, it can also mean surrendered to the devil, so that the man made *homo sacer* can be killed without being charged as murder. Émilie Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*. Translated by Elizabeth Palmer, Chicago: Hau Books, 2016, 463-5: “There is not only the difference between *sacer* as a natural state and *sanctus* as the result of some operation. One said: *via sacra*, *mons sacer*, *dies sacra*, but always *murus sanctus*, *lex sancta*. What is *sanctus* is the wall and not the domain enclosed by it, which is said to be *sacer*. What is *sanctus* is what is defended by certain sanctions. But the fact of making contact with the “sacred” does not bring about the state of being *sanctus*. There is no sanction for the man who by touching the *sacer* himself becomes *sacer*. He is banished from the community, but he is not punished any more than the man who kills him is. One might say of the *sanctum* that it is what is found on the periphery of the *sacrum*, what serves to isolate it from all contact”.

⁴⁵ Vgl. 3EpAgn 17-22; in FF 2276. ... *Altissimi Filium, ... quem caeli capere non poterant, ..., cum caeli cum creaturis ceteris capere nequeant Creatorem, ...*

⁴⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, II, 4. Stanford University Press, 2017, 363-641, 596: ‘Olam indicates the divine world and the eschatological reality, aion designates a special quality of life, and, more precisely, the transformation that human life undergoes in the world to come.’

6. How following the
perfect life transformed
Francis himself

The question of the mystery behind the problems is a question of the life itself behind the story. It is also the question of Francis himself behind the stories. From the moment that interest in Francis grew, stories began to dress him up. But the narrative clothing of Francis also masked his soul. Thus it could be that, from the very beginning, there was a constant struggle over these stories, to what extent they truly expressed Francis. In the beginning, there was the issue surrounding his biography and the concern of friars who believed they knew him better than his biographer; they identified themselves as “we who were with him.”⁴⁷ To this day, the so-called “Franciscan question,” which revolves around the question which sources are closer to the origin and therefore more reliable, is at play.⁴⁸ The protection of Francis’s identity has made him *sanctus*, sanctified.⁴⁹ But this same sanctification also keeps the access to the *sacer*, the holiness, of his soul closed. To get to the soul of Francis, we will have to disrobe him, who followed the naked Christ naked.

The identity that Francis is given in the stories is a narrative, biographical identity: the one who is recognizably the same in his life story, the man with characteristics. But the life itself of Francis revolved around the mystery of the gospel, which transformed him into who he really was. To that real identity the brothers testified who interacted with him, and with who he was: Francis himself.⁵⁰ Francis himself, the core of his identity, exists in relationship: it is the self that knows itself addressed by another, and that responds. And because that self exists in the relationship, it is changeable, always new, always open, or in a word by the poet Martinus Nijhoff: “Singing and without memory.”⁵¹ The interchangeability of the self made it possible for Francis to recognize Christ in the other, who spoke to him through his brothers and sisters and to whom he kept his word. Francis himself, his soul, is inseparable from the Lord whose footsteps he followed on the way to

⁴⁷ *Nos qui (vero) cum eo (illo) (beato Francisco) (ipso) fuimus (eramus)*. AC 11, 14, 57, 82, 86, 88, 93, 101, 106, 111; in FF 1485-1652.

⁴⁸ I mention only Raoul Manselli, *Nos qui cum eo fuimus. Contributo alla Questione Franciscana*. Rome: Istituto storico dei Cappucini, 1980; Jacques Dalarun, *Vers une resolution de la question franciscaine. La Légende ombrienne de Thomas de Celano*. Fayard, 2007; Idem, *Proposta franciscana*. Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2017.

⁴⁹ Consider, for example, the knights of Assisi who protected Francis only when he was near death; the saint’s body was more interesting to them than his message. AC 96; in FF 1632.

⁵⁰ Paul Ricoeur would speak of “the same” Francis, his *idem* identity, versus Francis himself, his *ipse* identity. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 167; But I am perhaps even more in tune with the neurologist Antonio Damasio, who distinguishes a biographical consciousness from a core consciousness, or in other words, an “I” as the answer to the question of who feels what is happening right now versus the character who is the protagonist of his life story as a recognizable “someone.” Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Vintage, 2000.

⁵¹ Het Derde Land, in Martinus Nijhoff, *Verzamelde Gedichten*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2001³, 136: *Zingend en zonder herinnering / Ging ik uit het eerste land vandaan, / Zingend en zonder herinnering / Ben ik het tweede land ingegaan, / O God, ik wist niet waarheen ik ging / Toen ik dit land ben ingegaan. / O God, ik wist niet waarheen ik ging / Maar laat mij uit dit land vandaan, / O laat mij zonder herinnering / En zingend het derde land ingaan.*

his life's destiny.⁵²

Francis himself was formed by his encounters with God himself in life itself. In the encounter with the mystery, Francis connected his narrative identity and his historical situation with the original and new man and the original, always new life. By connecting his biographical identity with his soul he could see the future. I will try to explain this by describing the three aspects of the formation of the self as they emerge in the stories of and about Francis. First, for Francis the mystery of the gospel was God himself; second, this mystery was present in life itself, and thus accessible to all; and third, life according to the holy gospel was an individual encounter that formed each person's individual personality – a self.

For Francis, the mystery is **God himself**.⁵³ In the search for the question of who God is, one could also distinguish between a core identity or the *ipse* of God himself on the one hand, and the God of stories on the other, his *idem* or biographical identity. Francis sought the Lord himself, and his direct guidance. This may indicate – I say this cautiously – that Francis no longer believed undividedly in the God of stories, and that he focused directly on the “You” of God Himself. This directly focused faith is also relevant to the atheists of our time. Gabriel Marcel calls presence the most inherent to reality as mystery. This presence is a reciprocal encounter from face to face, and thus personal. It is not the case that man looks directly into the face of God when he or she is present, for that face is always mediated. Francis, too, looked into the face of a leper, a crucifix, a gospel verse, and ultimately any creature he recognized as a brother or sister.⁵⁴ But behind the face of that leper and others was the mystery of God's presence. He prayed *Deus meus et omnia*, “My God and my all,” a thousand times.⁵⁵ Even atheists will recognize that behind every encounter there is an unfathomably deep mystery that encompasses the other's impregnable otherness. Francis attuned himself to the voice he heard in the gospel, which emanated as much from Christ's mouth as from Francis's ears.⁵⁶

⁵² Of this identification, which is bodily, the French philosopher Michel Henry, writes in his *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*. Paris: Seuil, 2000, p. 23 : “C'est donc en 's'identifiant à la chair du Verbe ... que l'homme pourra 's'identifier à Dieu.’”, p. 29: “Ainsi s'énonce une définition d'un homme invisible en même temps que charnel – invisible en tant que charnel. »

⁵³ Bonaventura, *Volmaakt leven*, 43: “The kingdom of heaven, Lord Jesus Christ, is nothing but Yourself, who are the King of kings and the Lord of lords.”

⁵⁴ In his first Admonition, Francis denotes this mediated seeing as seeing in the Spirit (Adm 1; in FF 25). See also Testament 10: “... in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood ...” (FF 228).

⁵⁵ *Actus beati Francisci et Sociorum eius*, 1:20, in FF 2087. Thomas writes: “He would place before his eyes the One who is manifold and supremely simple.” (2Cel 95; in FF 530).

⁵⁶ We also find this alignment in Bonaventure. The virtues he mentions in his *Perfect Life* all express a relationship of man to God Himself: the humility of Christ, the poverty of Christ, keeping silent only to speak with God, praying with Christ, suffering with Christ, loving like Christ, and persevering to the end in God. The perfect life means to attune oneself to Christ, and thus to know the self. (Bonaventura, *Volmaakt leven*, 27).

The second relevant aspect is that the mystery is sought in **life itself**. Also with respect to life, one can distinguish between life itself, and the story that is told of that life. To discover life itself requires breaking through the usual narrative. That is why Francis often begins this search for the mystery of life with a strange gesture: the spontaneous opening of the Gospel, the asking of the question “What wilt Thou have me to do?”, the hearing of a voice, the letting go of all possessions, and the retreat into solitude. Then an encounter takes place, connecting one’s story with another story. When the encounter is direct, no explanation is needed. The living word motivates to act, the voice exhorts to understand the dream differently.⁵⁷ The new life after the encounter is self-explanatory. And that can be different for everyone. The attunement of one’s situation to the new life that the mystery reveals, that is the very meaning of the penitent, which Francis was.⁵⁸ As the mystery heals the body, it also heals the life.

The third aspect is that life is personal, in the sense that it touches each person individually. Francis heard the Gospel as addressed to **himself**. He heard the crucifix of San Damiano speak to him, “Francis.”⁵⁹ After these words, “... compassion for the Crucified One was impressed into his soul.”⁶⁰ Christ, the Perfect One, in his soul, put reality in an original light for Francis. He recognized Christ in all things, so that, for example, his poverty was the poverty of Christ, his suffering the suffering of Christ, his joy the joy of Christ. And not only in reality as he experienced it himself, but also in the experiences of others: in the poor person Christ was recognized, literally! The body is able to identify with others, who are bodies as much as I am. Francis identified with Christ, his sensing and acting always involving Him first. Citing Antonio Damasio, we can say that this sensing and acting immediately awaken Francis’s living self.⁶¹ Francis’s love for creatures and for all people is through the love of Christ, in whose light he regards them all. In that commitment, Francis was transformed into Christ, and Christ into Francis.⁶² Thus Francis clothed himself with the new man, the perfect one.⁶³

The identity of Francis himself, which I have called the nucleus, soul, or *ipse*, is so closely linked to Christ that the question may arise whether he may not be called an *alter Christus* – which, incidentally, contrary to the prevailing view, Bonaventure never did.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Vgl. 3Com 6; in FF 1379.

⁵⁸ Test 1; in FF 227.

⁵⁹ 2Cel 10; in FF 452.

⁶⁰ Idem, in FF 453.

⁶¹ Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*.

⁶² Cf. The description of spirituality by Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 424 (here footnote 18).

⁶³ Lapsanski, *Perfectio evangelica*, 119.

⁶⁴ *Actus beati Francisci et Sociorum eius*, 6:1, in FF 2098. It says *quasi alter Christus*, ‘as a second Christ’. Bonaventure does not call Francis an *alter Christus*.

The stigmata even point to a bodily identification with Christ. Francis and his biographers played with his identity.⁶⁵ In his seeing, his feeling, and his doing, he was so directly guided by the gospel of Christ that he subordinated all other directives to it.⁶⁶ In contrast, Francis used his biographical identity as an anchor of the brotherhood, as in his Testament where the word “I” is uttered thirty-four times. The living Francis is the relationship between the self and the biographical identity, the I and the story, and this applies to each individual person.

⁶⁵ In the lives, Francis is also linked with Moses (1Cel 108; in *FF* 385), Eliseus (LegMai 11:6; in *FF* 874), Job (LegMai 14:2; in *FF* 900) with the expression (*quasi*) *alter*.

⁶⁶ 2Cel 216; in *FF* 630-1.

7. The mystery as source and as perspective in our time

I am approaching the end of my talk, in which I said that the Franciscan Study Center, following Francis, wants to work to restore the home of our society and this earth, and that we want to do this by focusing on the mystery behind the problems of our time. Because the mystery exists in the relationship – after all, the mystery resides in being present – and the relationship can be traced in stories, the Franciscan Study Center pays particular attention to narrative. In the stories, the mystery traces the perfect in all the imperfection of this life. I have interpreted that perfection as a life lived in pure proportions, just as a musical interval can be perfectly pure. Francis sought that relationship in direct relationship with God himself, life itself, and with each creature itself. My final question is to what extent Francis of Assisi is needed to trace the mystery behind current issues.

The background to this question is that of the importance of theology in science. Do we need theology to know the reality in which we live? I think so. Theology, and especially spirituality, ensures that science always keeps an eye on the mystery; that science does not, through its exclusively problem-oriented approach, forget this mystery and become blind to it. This is what Francis of Assisi guards against when he allows his brother Anthony to devote himself to study, on the express condition that you “do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion during study of this kind.”⁶⁷ The spirit of prayer and devotion means that the researcher is always in open relationship with the mystery.

A researcher who has an eye for the mystery does not distance himself or herself from the reality he or she is investigating, but allows himself or herself to be touched by it. Consider here, for example, the familiar question of whether one must be poor as a researcher in order to know poverty. In a sense, this is true, namely in the sense that the researcher must be in touch with his or her own poverty. Every human being is capable of poverty, disease, uncleanness, and loneliness. Always keep in touch with that possibility, because if it can happen to yourself, you will be affected by it. The ability to suffer lack allows the researcher to engage with the story of a poor, sick, unclean, and lonely person. Thus, the researcher not only learns about the flaws within, but also the perspective of perfection in those imperfections. As Francis and his brothers became poor, sick, unclean, and lonely, they also discovered words that transformed the problems into a joyful mystery: “life without possessions,” “being able to be the lesser,” “boundless brotherhood and sisterhood,” “recognizing God in all things,” “true joy,” “true obedience,” “true peace.” *Understanding Society* also means getting to know these words and daring to speak them.

⁶⁷ EpAnt: 1 *Fratri Antonio episcopo meo frater Franciscus salutem.* 2 *Placet michi quod sacram theologiam legas fratribus, dummodo inter huius studium sancte orationis et devotionis spiritum non extinguas, sicut in Regula continetur.* Vale; in FF 55.

A word of thanks

I would like to begin by thanking the members of the Franciscan Study Center Board for the trust they have placed in me and the opportunities they have given me. Also our rich Franciscan brotherhood and sisterhood, which in all its disorderly imperfection always follows the trail of the perfect life, and draws me with it.

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