

BOOK REVIEW — CONTINUED

EAGER TO LOVE: THE ALTERNATIVE WAY OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI

By Richard Rohr

NEW BUT SUBSTANTIALLY PERENNIAL

Rohr follows his observation about the freshness, the newness and the simplicity of all things Franciscan with another that is equally if not more significant in understanding Francis:

There are always new vocabulary, fresh symbols, new frames, and styles, but Francis must have known, at least intuitively, that there is only one enduring spiritual insight, and everything else follows from it:

The visible world is an active doorway to the invisible world, and the invisible world is much larger than the visible.

Here Rohr is underlining a key element in the thought of Francis and of the Franciscan movement to which his life and witness gave birth—the essential union of the material and the spiritual world as revealed and culminating in the Incarnation of Christ.

The Franciscan vision of the union of the material and spiritual is not limited to our relation to Christ or one another but embraces the whole of creation. And this wideness and fullness of scope may point us to one of the reasons Francis of Assisi is of vital, continuing significance to the Church today—an attention to a view or doctrine of creation sufficient to guide us into a future in which climate and environmental changes present us with daunting challenges.

WHOLENESS

Rohr emphasizes the wholeness of the life of Francis. He writes:

“We see that Francis was at once very traditional and entirely new in the ways of holiness, and he is still such a standing paradox.

He stood barefoot on the earth and yet touched the heavens. He was grounded in the Church and yet instinctively moved toward the cosmos. He lived happily inside the visible, and yet both suffered and rejoiced in what others thought was invisible. Again, and again, he was totally at home in two worlds at the same time, and thus he made them into one world.

Yet, Francis’s holiness, Rohr goes on to say, like all holiness, was unique and never a copy or mere imitation.

In his “Testament,” he says, “no one told me what I ought to do,” and then, at the very end of his life, he says, “I have done what was mine to do, now you must do yours.”

Francis and Clare knew that the love God has for each soul is unique and made to order, which is why any “saved” person, always feels beloved, chosen, and even “God’s favorite” like so many in the Bible. Divine intimacy is always and precisely particular and made to order – and thus “intimate.”

Rohr points out that the uniqueness of Francis’s life in Christ is abundantly illustrated by the many images artists from various ages have given us of him. Rohr asks:

Have you noticed that Francis of Assisi is hardly ever pictured with a book, like so many of the teacher saints? Or holding a church building as great church men are often painted, or even with his Rule, as Benedict or Basil might be?

He is usually pictured glowing, or dancing, in ecstasy, with animals, or with his arms raised to the sky. His liberated body—touch with everything— is itself his primary message. I have even noted that many paintings of him do not have a halo, as do most holy icons. He is so clearly transformed that we do not need to be reassured that he is among the holy ones, it seems.

Francis made room for the new with a willingness to let go of the old—a quite rare pattern of behavior in the history of formal religion. But it isn’t simply ditching the old for the new. It involves courage and the clarity of vision to sort out what is perennial wisdom from what is ‘unreal, passing, merely cultural, or even destructive.’ There is some canonical authority for this view, e.g. Jesus describes the disciples of the Kingdom as those who are like “householders who bring out from their household things both old and new” (Matthew 3:12). John the Baptist describes Jesus as a “winnowing fan” within religion itself— that separates the grain from the chaff (Matthew 3:12)—instead of just presuming that religion is all “grain” and the outsiders are all “chaff.”

THE BABY AND THE BATHWATER

Having introduced us to the depth of the newness of life and spirit Francis brought to the Church of his day, Rohr qualifies or balances this emphasis with another:

Francis both named and exemplified that first churchless incarnation of faith in the human heart, but then he somehow also knew that it was the half-knowing organized Church that passed this shared mystery onto him and preserved it for future generations.

This meant Francis had the humility to know that whatever is true is always a shared truth—
and only institutions, for all their weaknesses, make this widely shareable, historical, and communal. He understood the humility (kenosis) and the patience of incarnation.

LIFE ON THE EDGE OF THE INSIDE

In an assembly of friars, with a cardinal in their midst addressing them, Francis said to the cardinal:

“I do not want to hear any mention of the rule of St. Augustine, of St. Bernard, or of St. Benedict. The Lord has told me that he wanted to make a new fool of me.”

What was Francis doing? Rohr suggests his words are consistent with the prophets and seers and seekers of Eternal Mystery of old preceding him. Such people always seem:

dangerously new and heretical to old eyes and any current preoccupations with security. The prophets lived on the edge of the inside of Judaism.

And John the Baptist later does the same with Temple Judaism, and Paul then sharply disagrees with Peter and the new Christian establishment in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1-14). Rohr says Francis and Clare continued this classic pattern in their own hometown as they physically moved from upper Assisi among the *majores* to the lower side of town and the *minores*.

Living among the lesser, they enjoyed there the freedom to find their ‘True Center.’ Rohr muses that it is ironic that you must go to the edge to find the center. But that is the wisdom of the prophets, the hermits and mystics.

Only there were they able to live at the edges of their own lives, too, not grasping at the superficial or protecting the surfaces of things, but falling into the core and center of their own souls and their own experiences.

In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis challenges his readers to consider the implications of Jesus’ claims about himself. Jesus cannot simply be regarded as a great moral teacher while denying his divinity. According to Lewis, if Jesus claimed to be God and was not, he would be either a liar or a lunatic. In this beautifully written book, Rohr challenges us to wrestle with the reality of Francis of Assisi. Who was he? What sort of man was he? To my own mind, influenced by reading Father Rohr, I see Francis as something fresh, new, and unique and also something quite conservative, perennial, and orthodox—and a little unsettled, a bit mad.