

UNDERSTANDING FRANCIS OF ASSISI'S WAY OF LIFE:

Conversion and Self-Transcendence

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Abstrak: Fransiskus Asisi adalah seorang tokoh spiritual yang amat berpengaruh. Banyak orang telah berusaha untuk mengerti cara hidupnya dari berbagai sudut pandang seperti kemiskinan, persaudaraan semesta, dialog, dll. Tulisan ini mencoba untuk mengerti Fransiskus Asisi berdasarkan gagasan pertobatan dan transendensi diri. Pertobatan dan transendensi diri hanya mungkin terjadi berkat karya rahmat Allah. Pengalaman perjumpaan pribadi dengan Allah yang penuh kerahiman, belas kasih, dan kebaikan mendorong Fransiskus Asisi untuk menghidupi kualitas-kualitas Allah itu dalam hidupnya. Proses pertobatan dan transendensi diri Fransiskus Asisi terjadi dalam pergumulan konkret hidup hariannya bersama Allah dalam doa. Dalam pergumulan dan perjumpaan itu, ia semakin mengenal kehendak Allah dan mau menjalani hidup berdasarkan kehendak Allah itu sendiri. Maka dalam seluruh proses pertobatan dan transendensi diri Fransiskus Asisi, discernment menjadi amat penting dan mendasar.

Kata-Kata Kunci: rahmat• pertobatan• transendensi diri• pengalaman rohani•,spiritualitas• pembedaan roh (*discernment*)•

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Introduction

Eight hundred years ago, 1206, Francis of Assisi underwent an important turning point in his life journey. Many people have written about him. They have tried to understand his way of life and his spirituality. They developed their own image of Francis based on their experiences, stories, hagiographies,¹ and Francis' own writings in dialogue with their own context. To this fact, Thaddée Matura

¹ Hagiographies (hagios means holy) tend to see the person as 'a heroic figure, whose life, words, virtues, and miracles were described in loving detail'. See Thaddée Matura,

writes, '[P]eople have drawn their own picture of Francis according to the way they understood him' (Matura, 2004: 6). Francis himself never wrote a biography, only some thirty texts (*Ibid.*, 2004: 8). Moreover, he did not systematize his thoughts. These left us many questions to be answered.

There is always a danger when we see Francis as a saint. He is too holy for us to follow. In the same time many people love him and want to follow his way of life. Matura reminds us, 'By idealizing Francis excessively, after all, we risk making of him an inaccessible model, an object of nostalgic admiration who is irrelevant to the concrete circumstances of our lives as weak and sinful human beings' (Matura, 1994: 265). For this reason, I would like to understand Francis as an ordinary human being who responds to God's invitation to love.

My deepest desire is to understand Francis' idea about way of life. I have struggled to find a key word that can help me to understand Francis' mind and thought. This struggle has brought me to a key word that is *conversion*. I believe that conversion is central to understand Francis of Assisi's mind and thought in his writings.

Conversion is a key word in Christianity. It is grounded in the Scripture from the Greek word *Metanoëō* which implies the openness to change one's mind and one's life (Boring, 1995: 167). This word is translated as 'repent' in the gospel. John the Baptist and Jesus used this word, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand' (Mat 3: 2; 4:17). It is an invitation to turn or return to God.

Francis through his life and writings has tried to share the important message of conversion to ordinary people (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 41-44). The life of Francis of Assisi can be described as a journey of 'doing penance' (poenitentia), and of conversion. According to *The Anonymous of Perugia* Francis and his brothers called themselves as 'penitents' from Assisi (Armstrong et al. (eds.), *op.cit.* 2000: 43). According to Matura, there are twenty-eight times that Francis used the word penance in his writings (Matura, 2004: 143 - 144). Eighteen are related to the process of conversion and the others concern the sacrament of penance.

The word 'doing penance' in Francis' *Testament* was related to the movement from sin which he explained 'too bitter for me to see lepers' (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 124). In this context, 'doing penance' means

Francis of Assisi: the Message of His Writing, ed. Roberta A. McKelvie and Daria Mitchell (New York: St. Bonaventure University, 2004), p. 3.



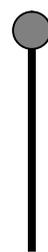
'showed mercy' to the lepers. Sin then is the opposite of mercy. 'Showed mercy' to the lepers is the appropriate response from Francis in his life to God who first show mercy, love, and good to him. Doing penance is the only response from Francis to the overflowing mercy and love of God in his own struggle. Without this perspective, 'doing penance' will be understood in a negative way as a sacrifice to please God. In Francis, 'doing penance' was a result of his personal experience of being loved by God who is mercy, love and good.

To understand conversion, I will use James W. Fowler's definition: 'Conversion is a significant recentering of one's previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action' (Fowler, 1981: 281-282). In conversion people rework their stories to understand them and to review their beliefs and values. In this definition, conversion is a journey from the lesser to the better. In regard to conversion, Bernard Lonergan believes that conversion is 'basic to Christian living' and 'understood [as] a transformation of the subject and his world' (Lonergan, 1999: 130). He writes from a different perspective to Fowler:

[C]onversion is a change of direction and, indeed, a change for the better. One frees oneself from the unauthentic. One grows in authenticity. Harmful, dangerous, misleading satisfactions are dropped. Fears of discomfort, pain, privation have less power to deflect one from one's course. Values are apprehended where before they were overlooked. Scales of preference shift. Errors, rationalizations, ideologies fall and shatter to leave one open to things as they are and to man as he should be (Lonergan, 1999: 52).

Both Fowler and Lonergan speak about change in one's life. They understand life as a process, not static. It seems human consciousness is very important in the process of change. This change is for the better. It is 'the commitment to reshape one's life' from 'unauthentic' to 'authentic' where value, power and story need to be reworked again and again.

Many contemporary writers have used different words in speaking of conversion, that is, self-transcendence. Self-transcendence means going beyond what the self has achieved (Sauer, 2001: 125). Bernard Lonergan points out the importance of self-transcendence in human beings lives. He wrote, '[A human being] achieves authenticity in self-transcendence' (Lonergan, 1999: 104). According to Luigi M. Rulla, self-transcendence is 'a term by which we can mean the overcoming of one's own self on the part





of the individual who chooses to realize in his own life some objective values which transcend himself' (Rulla et al., 1986: 484-485). Then, the goal of self-transcendence is authenticity (Lonergan, 1999: 104). In other words, authenticity is the result of self-transcendence.

The capacity for self-transcendence becomes complete, according to Lonergan, when we fall in love with God, Ultimate Concern (Lonergan, 1999: 105). It means that being in love in an unrestricted fashion is the proper fulfilment of that capacity (Lonergan, 1999: 106). Therefore, being in love with God as fully as we are able is an ultimate fulfilment of our capacity for self-transcendence (Lonergan, 1999: 111). Rulla points out how important God is in the process of self-transcendence as he writes,

... the ideal self, that is, that which the individual wants to become, does not consist in the simple realization of one's potentiality (self-actualization or self-fulfilment), but corresponds to a call which comes from God and therefore which goes even beyond the project of man, which he accepts, however, in a vision of faith (Rulla et al., 1986: 484-485).

Walter E. Conn expands on this understanding of self-transcendence in the context of Christians' lives:

Self-transcendence, incorporating both authentic self-realization and genuine self-denial, embodies the radical dynamism of the Christian spiritual life. Through self-transcendence the self is not sacrificed, but realized in its authentic being. But the realization of the true self in its drive for meaning, truth, values, and love rejects any self-centered striving for happiness through fulfillment, requiring that one empty oneself (even losing one's life) in the loving service of the neighbor. Self-transcendence, then, insists on the paradoxical view that authentic self-realization results not from an attempt to fulfill one's wishes, but from a movement beyond oneself in an effort to bring about the good of others (Conn, 1998: 35).

Self-transcendence and conversion then describe a journey from being self-centred to God-centredness. In that journey, the Self or Subject is able to embrace anyone and everything from God's perspective.

Spirituality is an important aspect of Francis' story. Sandra M. Schneiders defines spirituality as 'the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives' (Schneiders, 1991: 73). We call God the Ultimate or Ultimate Concern. In that definition, we



are invited to be aware of our own experiences and integrate them in a process of self-transcendence (beyond self sacrifice and self fulfilment) with God, the Ultimate Concern. In her definition, Schneiders focuses on our response to the ultimate value. These definitions focus on an effort to live authentically. Maryanne Confoy points out the difference between spirituality and mysticism. She writes, 'Thus while spirituality described *our* efforts to reach out to God, mysticism emphasizes *God's* initiative in reaching out to us in and through the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of our lives' (Confoy, 2003: 110). In God's 'reaching out' to us we can understand spirituality as a loving response to God who is love. In Christianity, the Trinity love becomes the foundation of our love. We contemplate God's self-giving in love, and in return we find ourselves trying to do the same to everyone and every thing in the world. For this reason, I will emphasise the importance of religious experience and especially that of Francis, as the experience of being loved by God as the starting point of our journey to God.

Francis' Conversion Experience

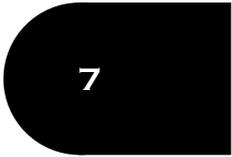
The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I *showed mercy* to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 124).

Key Moment in Francis' Conversion Stories

Francis had many experiences of conversion in terms of changes in his life. Conversion is an on-going process of self-transcendence until we die. However, there is a certain moment that we like to claim as a very important one. For this essay, I would like to pay attention to Francis' key turning point in his life. In this turning point, we will see his struggle to review his life, his reflection on God's, his response and the sweetness of it.

Francis' Struggle

Francis was born 1182 in Assisi. He was the son of Pietro di Bernardone and Lady Pica. He was born in the absence of his father. His mother named him John. When his father returned from his business, he renamed his son.



He called him Francesco, which means little Frenchman, which had connotation with 'gracefulness, wealth, poetry, troubadours, courtly manners' (Rotzetter, 1994: 3). His father was a wealthy textile merchant, ambitious and harsh (Armstrong & Brady, 1982: 3). His mother was very gentle and had a 'maternal *instinct*' (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 192). Celano wrote about his father's harshness when he knew the 'madness' in Francis' new life,

With no restraint, he pounced on Francis like a wolf on a lamb and, glaring at him fiercely and savagely, he grabbed him and shamelessly dragged him home. With no pity, he shut him up for several days in a dark place. Striving to bend Francis's will to his own, he badgered him, beat him and bound him (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 192).

Bernardones' families did not belong to the higher, noble class (the *majores*), but from the lower class (*the minores*) (Rotzetter, 1994: 9). Through business they built up their status in the society. Francis was born in a feudal society. In addition, when he was five years old, Jerusalem was taken over by Saladin, the sultan of Egypt (Rotzetter, 1994: 11). This context had a certain influence on Francis' life and development later in his life. Francis was educated at the parish school of St. George when he was nine-years old (Rotzetter, 1994: 12). At the age of fourteen, Francis started to involve in his father's business as well as enjoyed his life with his friends. He loved party, singing, jokes, dancing and very modish (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 182-184). He was the leader of his group (Armstrong et al. (eds), 2000: 246).

Another important context is civil war. Francis experienced a civil war between the *minores* and *majores* when he was seventeen. The *majores* had to leave Assisi for Perugia, which was the enemy of Assisi (Rotzetter, 1994: 13). When Francis reached twenty, the war between Assisi and Perugia began. Francis wanted to be a knight and to fulfil his desire for glory and popularity. He went to war. Sadly, he was imprisoned in Perugia (Armstrong et al. (eds), 2000: 67-71) for a year (Brunette, 1997: 1). In that prison, Francis was sick and continued his illness after his release (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 184-185).

The desire to be a knight still preoccupied his mind. A few years later, he wanted to go to Apulia with a nobleman from Assisi for war. In relation to this, Celano wrote, 'It is difficult to leave familiar things behind, and things once instilled in the spirit are not easily weakened' (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 185). Francis insisted that he would go. One night he got a vision which the Lord visited him in a dream. *The Legend of Three Companions*



wrote, 'That night while he was sleeping, someone appeared to him, a man *calling him by name*. He led him into a beautiful bride's elegant palace filled with knightly arms and on its wall hung glittering shields and other armor of knightly splendour' (Armstrong et al. (eds), 2000: 69-71). Francis was overjoyed. He interpreted this vision in serving his desire to be a knight. He has not understood what God asked of him. On the way to Apulia, at Spoleto there was another vision. *The Legend of Three Companions* wrote,

... as he was falling to sleep, half awake, he heard someone asking him where he wanted to go. When Francis revealed to him his entire plan, the other said: "Who can do more good for you? The lord or the servant?" When Francis answered him: "The lord," he again said to him: "Then why are you abandoning the lord for the servant, the patron for the client?" And Francis said: "*Lord, what do you want me to do?*" "*Go back to your land,*" he said, "*and what you are to do will be told to you.* You must understand in another way the vision which you saw (Armstrong et al. (eds), 2000: 71).

In Spoleto, away from home, his father and those who put high expectation to him, Francis underwent a discernment process: '*Lord, what do you want me to do?*' Reflecting on this question, Francis was able to make a decision 'not to go to Apulia' even though he was not sure of the next step he should take,

Therefore when it was morning, buoyant and happy, he quickly returned to Assisi, expecting that the Lord, who had revealed these things to him, would show him His will and give him counsel about salvation. Changed in mind, he now refused to go to Apulia and desired to conform completely to the divine will (Armstrong et al. (eds), 2000: 71).

Up to this point, there was a change in Francis. Thomas of Celano described it, 'Changed in mind but not in body, he now refused to go to Apulia and was anxious to direct his will to God's' (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 187). In this situation Francis started to share his secret with his close friend. Celano wrote about Francis' relationships, especially with one man,

Now there was in the city of Assisi a man he loved [more] than all the rest. They were of the same age and the constant intimacy of their mutual love made him bold to share his secrets with him. He often brought him to remote places suitable for talking, asserting that he had found a great and valuable treasure. This man was overjoyed, and since he was so excited about what he heard, he gladly went with him whenever he was summoned (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 187).



During this period, Francis spent his time with prayer, asking about his holy purpose. It was a very difficult period. He experienced both certainty and uncertainty. Celano described it, 'Different thoughts followed one after another, and their relentlessness severely disturbed him. He was burning inwardly with a divine fire, and he was unable to conceal outwardly the flame kindled in his soul' (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 187). In our own experience, we often have a certain understanding of our experience, but we could not put words around it to make sense of it.

However, a new awareness gradually grew in Francis. He started to give alms to the poor. *The Legend of Three Companions* wrote, '... he proposed *in his heart*, from then on, **never to deny** alms to any poor person **begging from him for God's sake**, but rather to give more willingly and abundantly than usual' (Armstrong et al. (eds), 2000: 72). One day he took scarlet cloth to sell from his father and gave the money to a poor priest. The poor priest refused to take them and he threw the money through the window. Out of fear, Francis hid himself from his father's anger. What he did were prayer, fasting and weeping,

He prayed with flowing tears that the Lord would free him from the hands of those persecuting his soul and that he could favourably fulfill his fervent wishes. Fasting and weeping, he earnestly prayed for Savior's mercy, and, lacking confidence in his own efforts, he cast his care upon the Lord. Though staying in a pit and in darkness, he was imbued with an indescribable happiness never before experienced. Then totally on fire, he abandoned the pit and openly exposed himself to the curses of his persecutor (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 191).

These changes brought conflict between Francis and his father. His father wanted Francis to follow his expectation. Unfortunately, Francis wanted to continue his new journey. That conflict ended before the bishop. Francis was naked and he returned everything to his father (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 80). Francis experienced aloneness and loneliness. In this moment, only God can explain this foolishness. That moment he called God as Father.

To give alms to the poor priest and other poor people were easier than to kiss and embrace the lepers (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 74). To embrace the leper was very challenging and bitter for Francis. However, after praying about it he had courage to meet them and kiss them. This moment seemed very important to Francis life. He showed mercy to those



who he tried to avoid. This moment continued to remind him to show mercy and love to everyone in his daily life with others and his brothers.

In his struggle, prayer seemed very important. In the context of prayer, Francis got a new awareness to his struggle. This prayer enabled him to put into practice his new awareness of life and the meaning of life.

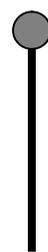
God's initiative: 'The Lord gave me....'

Francis was born in a Catholic family and went to the parish school at St. George. It means he had a certain understanding of God. Undoubtedly, as the biographies tell us, Francis spent a lot of time in prayer to God during his struggle. Crisis often brings people closer to God. Francis nearly lost everything including his own life in war and long illness and then in the conflict with his father. He became vulnerable and alone. These experiences unavoidably caused him to ask to see God face to face.

God is often an idea and object for discussion and debate in modern society; even people want to exclude God from human consciousness. However, God is real for those who experienced God's presence in their lives. Gerald G. May, a psychiatrist, is convinced that people has desire for God. He writes,

After twenty years of listening to the yearnings of people's hearts, I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God. Whether we are consciously religious or not, this desire is our deepest longing and our most precious treasure. It gives us meaning. Some of us have repressed this desire, burying it beneath so many other interests that we are completely unaware of it. Or we may experience it in different ways –as a longing for wholeness, completion, or fulfilment. Regardless of how we describe it, it is a longing for love. It is a hunger to love, to be loved, and to move closer to the Source of love. This yearning is the essence of the human spirit; it is the origin of our highest hopes and most noble dreams (May, 1988: 1).

My point is that our desire for God is our desire to be loved and to love. However, the desire to be loved is most very important in human life. The experience of being loved enables us to love others authentically and the absence of love leads us to manipulation and unauthentic. The experience of being loved by God opens a new perspective of life and of self-understanding. Only unconditional love of God enables us to accept ourselves. This understanding is essential for our healing, forgiveness and self acceptance (Dennis & Linn, 1978: 64-77).



Francis starts his *Testament* with ‘The Lord gave me’. Francis did not start with the ‘I’. He focused his reflection on God’s initiative. Francis’s *Testament* was written at Portiuncula while he was dying. This *Testament* is an expression of Francis’s wisdom and vision of life (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 124). It tells us how Francis encouraged his brothers to move from self-centred to God-centred loving. He himself continued to recentred his life in God. In looking back to his life journey, Francis acknowledged that God has guided him to review his value, power, and story in and with God.

Francis understanding of God gradually developed from an idea to a real God as a person. The conflict with his father gave him a real understanding of God as Father. *The Legend of Three Companions* wrote:

And going into one of the bishop’s rooms, he took off all his clothes, and, putting the money on top of them, came out naked before the bishop, his father, and all the bystanders, and said: ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Until now I have called Pietro di Bernardone my father. But, because I have proposed to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so upset, and also all the clothing which is his, wanting to say from now on: ‘*Our Father who are in heaven,*’ and not “My father, Pietro di Bernardone” (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 80).

This event was very important for Francis’ understanding of God as Father. God introduced himself as a Father who is mercy, love, and good to him. Matura points out that the Father is very important in Francis prayer. He wrote, ‘Francis prays to the Father, at the heart of the Trinity, the Origin of all activity, to whom everything returns’ (Matura, 2004: 58). In this understanding, the Father is the initiative and the source of love.

Out of love, the Father creates everything and he sends his beloved Son to the world. Father-Son relationship was the source of Francis understanding of God and how he tried to live by it. Therefore, Scripture becomes important to Francis. It was in the Scripture that he learned how Jesus responded to His Father. He understood that the way to the Father is ‘to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ’ with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 63-64).

Francis’ Response ‘doing penance’

‘Doing penance’ in Francis’ *Testament* means ‘*showed mercy*’ to the lepers. Sin then is the opposite of mercy, ‘too bitter for me to see lepers’. ‘Showed mercy’ to others is the appropriate response from Francis in his life to God who is mercy, love, and good to him. A person who has experienced of



crisis, lost, abandonment and vulnerable, has a deepest desire to be loved. Francis understood this deepest desire because he had experienced it. In his experience, God showed mercy to him. God is the fullness of his desire.

Francis' own experience of God's mercy enabled him to embrace everyone and everything as brothers and sisters, including enables him to embrace the lepers, the bitter one. Doing penance is an expression of love to God which he shared with others and other creatures.

To love God, we must be 'dying first'. This disposition helps Francis to discern God spirit and the life in God. In *A Salutation of the Virtues*, Francis emphasised the importance of 'dying first' in order to possess any one of the virtues (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 164). This idea is similar to Jesus' words: 'Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it' (Mat 10:39). It is an invitation to become empty or surrender to God as the only centre of our life journey. This idea have challenged his brothers to be free from everything that blocks them from love and being authentic. Francis wrote,

There is surely no one in the whole world who can possess any one of You without dying first. Whoever possess one and does not offend the others possess all. Whoever *offends one* does not possess any and offend all. And each one confounds vice and sin. Holy Wisdom confounds Satan and all his cunning. Pure holy Simplicity confounds all *the wisdom of the world* and the wisdom of the body. Holy Poverty confounds the desire for riches, greed, and the cares of this world. Holy Humility confounds pride, all people who are in the world and all that is in the world. Holy Charity confounds every diabolical and carnal temptation and every carnal *fear*. Holy Obedience confounds every corporal and carnal wish, binds its mortified body to obedience of the spirit and obedience to one's brother, so that it is subject and submissive to every in the world, not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well that they may do whatever they want with it insofar as it *has been given* to them *from above* by the Lord (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 164).

Francis' understanding of life was very integrated. We cannot understand wisdom, simplicity, poverty, humility, charity, obedience without a personal disposition called 'dying first'. This inner disposition enables us to be free and responsible in our life. In this point, Francis firstly focused on human motivation. A good motivation will be known through our behaviour. A "good behaviour" does not always come from a good motivation. Francis



continued to challenge his brothers to be free and let God become centre of our life. The good example for this is Jesus who he calls our brother.

The Change from Bitterness to Sweetness

To see lepers was too bitter for Francis. The presence of God in his life enabled him to show mercy to them. In this new perspective the bitterness has turned to sweetness of soul and body. *The Legend of Three Companions* wrote,

One day, while he was praying enthusiastically to the Lord, he received this response: “Francis, everything you loved carnally and desired to have, you must despise and hate, if you wish to know my will. Because once you begin doing this, what before seemed delightful and sweet will be unbearable and bitter; and what before made you shudder will offer you great sweetness and enormous delight.

He was overjoyed at this and was comforted by the Lord. One day he was riding his horse near Assisi, when he met a leper. And, even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself dismount, and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. After he accepted a kiss of peace from him, Francis remounted and continued on his way. **He then began to consider himself less and less, until, by God’s grace, he came to complete victory over himself.**

After a few days, he moved to a hospice of lepers, taking with him a large sum of money. Calling them all together, as he kissed the hand of each, he gave them alms. When he left there, what before had been bitter, that is, to see and touch lepers, was turned into sweetness. For, as he said, the sight of lepers was so bitter to him, that he refused not only to look at them, but even to approach their dwellings. If he happened to come near their houses or to see them, even though he was moved by piety to give them alms through an intermediary, he always turned away his face and held his nose. With the help of God’s grace, he became such a servant and friend of the lepers, that, as he testified in his *Testament*, he stayed among them and served them with humility (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 74).

This legend points out how prayer enabled Francis to kiss and embrace the lepers. In prayer he found another face of God in the lepers. In them God invited Francis to show mercy as God has done to him. This led him to a new awareness of human being by saying ‘what a man before God that he is no more’. Living in this new awareness made him become free. He faced his own fears and resistances. Now he could say: ‘what had



seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body' (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 124).

Sweetness can mean joy. Joy is one of the important characteristic in Franciscan spirituality. Francis taught his brothers the real meaning of true and perfect joy. True and perfect joy is not about status, power, and achievement (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 166). It is about the freedom of heart, a poverty of spirit.

Francis is a man of freedom. He challenged his brothers not to seek vainglory. For Francis, every human being is equal before God. He says, 'Blessed is the servant who does not consider himself any better when he is praised and exalted by people than when he is considered worthless, simple, and looked down upon, for what a person is before God, that he is and no more' (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 135). This understanding was a result of his deep relationship with God as Father. It challenges our society's way of thinking and opens it to a new way of thinking where everyone is a brother and sister in God. In this point, Francis wanted his brothers not to be upset over what people say and do to them. This is another story, which he tried to explain the life of the brothers.

The same [Brother Leonard] related in the same place that one day at Saint Mary's, blessed Francis called Brother Leo and said: "Brother Leo, write." He responded: "Look, I'm ready!" "Write," he said, "what true joy is."

"A messenger arrives and says that all the Master of Paris have entered the Order. Write: this isn't true joy! Or, that all the prelates, archbishops and bishops beyond the mountains, as well as the King of France and King of England [have entered the Order]. Write: this isn't true joy! Again, that my brothers have gone to the non-believers and converted all of them to the faith; again, that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and perform many miracles. I tell you true joy doesn't consist in any of these things."

"Then what is true joy?"

"I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night. It's winter time, muddy, and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep strikingly my legs and blood flows from such wounds. Freezing, covered with mud and ice, I come the gate and, after I've knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: 'Who are you?' 'Brother Francis,' I answer. 'Go away!' he says. 'This is not a decent hour to be wandering about! You may not





come in! When I insist, he replies: 'Go away! You are simple and stupid! Don't come back to us again! There are many of us here like you – we don't need you! I stand again at the door and say: 'For the love of God, take me in tonight!' And he replies: 'I will not! Go to the Crosier' place and ask there!

"I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this" (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 166-167).

The story tells us how important our inner freedom is in life. This inner freedom enables people to be patient to themselves, others and the environment. These people can have true and perfect joy in this life and be able to celebrate their life with others.

Self-Transcendence

To speak to people in our context, we need to use language that people can understand. The purpose of conversion is to be authentic. When Lonergan wrote of authenticity he connected it with self-transcendence, going beyond what the self has achieved. In this part, I will write on Francis' developing understanding of God and himself. God continued to invite Francis to transcend himself. Francis journey of self-transcendence is a response of his understanding of the Transcendent God.

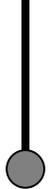
Francis' Developing Understanding of himself

We cannot separate Francis' understanding of God and himself. Through God, Francis finds himself. God as Father who is mercy, love and good, enabled him to embrace his sin, weakness and vulnerability. From this perspective, Francis had a very good understanding of human beings.

Francis understood human beings as being in the image and likeness of God. He writes, 'Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you *to the image* of His beloved Son according to the body and *to His likeness* according to the Spirit' (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 124). He believed that we were created in the image of Jesus, the beloved Son of God and likeness according to the Spirit.

On the other hand, Francis acknowledged that human beings are subject to vice and sins as he wrote, 'We may know with certainty that nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins' (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 75). This awareness of his unworthiness before God has opened himself to the presence of God in his life. Francis saw himself in his





relationship to God. In his writings to his brothers, he used to call himself as little brother, your servant, the least of the servants of God, lesser brother, your lesser servant. These words tell us more of his humility rather than his inferiority. This inner disposition enabled Francis to respect others without put himself down. For Francis, our dignity must be seen in the eyes of God as he wrote, ‘...for what a person is before God, that he is and no more’ (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 135).

Francis acknowledged the danger of sin. Sin means turn away from God and to follow our own way. The dynamic love of the Father, beloved Son and Holy Spirit became his inspiration in life. That relationship inspired his life. That was why he used this prayer:

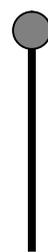
Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, give us miserable ones the grace to do for You alone what we know you want us to do and always to desire what pleases You. Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, may we be able to follow in the footprints of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and, by Your grace alone, may we make our way to You, Most High, Who live and rule in perfect Trinity and simple Unity, and are glorified God almighty, forever and ever. Amen (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 121).

Francis was convinced that the grace of God enabled him to follow the footprints of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God. God’s grace has transcended him into a new person in Christ. Francis, at the end of his life, continued to invite his brother to serve God by saying, ‘Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing’ (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 273). He also said to his brothers, ‘I have done *what is mine; may Christ teach* you what is yours!’ (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 386).

Francis’ Developing Understanding of God

Francis new journey was a journey with God. Only in God he could explain this journey. The important of God is very clear in his writings. Matura writes about this:

On every page of Francis’s writings, we encounter the omnipresence of God. Whether Francis simply uses the term “God” (219 times) or, more frequently, the title “Lord” (364 times), God is the central Reality from whom everything comes and towards whom everything converges. Yet He is not an abstract, ill-defined deity, for Francis always sees and proclaims Him as the Triune God, the Trinity. This title, the Trinity, is not just an empty,





theoretical formula but a term that indicates the interior divine life while stressing the “monarchy” of the Father, who always takes the first place (Matura, 2004: 53).

Matura points out that ‘Francis saw God the Father as the Center and Source of everything’ (Matura, 2004: 53). This could explain his own encounter with God as Father before the Bishop when he said ‘from now on: “*Our Father who are in heaven*”, and not “My father, Pietro di Bernardone”’ (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 80).

Francis’ understanding of God developed through his daily encounter with others and situation. In that encounter, the main question for Francis was ‘Who are You, my dearest God?’ (Omnibus, 1973: 1446) and ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 71). *The Legend of Three Companions* summarizes Francis’ yearnings in a simple prayer before the Crucifix at San Damiano in Assisi: ‘Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command’ (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 40). In these questions and prayer, we see how Francis desired to know God and to live in that God.

In response to his own questions, Francis started to give alms to the poor, kiss and work among the lepers, call God as Father, changed his habit, repair the churches. This life drew people to him. One by one followers joined him. Francis, to some extent, inwardly knew what he was doing but without a full understanding. He could not express his experience into words. However, one day he heard the gospel about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach

... Christ’s disciples should not *posses gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics*, but that they should preach *the kingdom of God and penance*, the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God. “This is what I want,” he said, “this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 201-202).

These words from the Scripture seem the best way of expression of his new journey and deepest desire. He claimed his new value and wanted to live in it: ‘This is what I want’, he said, ‘this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart’. In this point, Francis knew what he was doing and it was very important.



Francis continued to know God's desire for him. He did not deal it within himself and his earlier brothers. Francis and his brothers brought a simple form of life to Pope Innocent III for his approval in 1209 or 1210 (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 63). Francis wanted his brotherhood to stay in the Church. Inevitably, the Church' influence shaped Francis' idea and mind. However, Francis continued to kindle his spirit to his brothers.

When Francis was still alive, there was a big problem about the rule. For Francis the rule and life of the brothers was clear: 'to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own', and 'to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ...' (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 1999: 63-64). However, Francis' idea and way of life was not always understood well by some of his brothers, especially those 'wise and learned' brothers. They were trying to change the rule to a monastic rule. It was because monastic rules contained more specific and clear regulations. The problem of the rule in the order led to the resignation of Francis. It was the Pentecost Chapter held at the Portiuncula in September 1220 (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 142). Let me quote *A Mirror of the Perfection of the Status of a Lesser Brother* to describe this problem:

When blessed Francis was at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula for the general chapter known as the Chapter of Mats **because the only dwellings there were made of rush-mats**, there were five thousand brothers present. Many wise and learned brothers went to the Lord of **Ostia**, who was there and told him: "**Lord**, we **want you** to persuade **Brother** Francis to follow the advice of the wise brothers and allow himself to be guided by them." They cited the *Rule* of blessed Benedict, blessed Augustine, and blessed Bernard, which teach how to live in such order in such a way.

The cardinal **related everything to blessed Francis, giving him some advice as well**. Then blessed Francis took **him** by the hand, **saying nothing**, and led him to the brothers assembled in chapter, and spoke to the brothers **in the fervor and power of the Holy Spirit**: "My brothers! My brothers! God has called me by the way of simplicity **and humility**, and **truly** shown me **this way for me for those who want to trust and imitate me**. Therefore I do not want you to mention to me any *Rule*, whether of Saint Augustine, or of Saint Bernard, or of Saint Benedict, **or any other way or form of life except the one that the Lord in His mercy has shown and given to me**. And the Lord told me what He wanted: He wanted me to be a new fool in this world. God did not wish to lead us by any way other than this knowledge, but God will confound you by



your knowledge and wisdom. But I trust in the Lord's police that through them God will punish you, and you will return to your *status*, **with** your blame, like it or not (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2001: 313-314).

This story tells us how Francis tried to convince his brothers of the meaning of his way of life. Unfortunately, some brothers did not really understand Francis. For me, the problem was that Francis came from a different level of religious experience and understanding to that of some of the brothers. Those who had undergone the experience in life like Francis could easily understand Francis. However, Francis still insisted his point to the brothers and at the same time he was aware the reality of the differences understanding in the order.

This reality affected Francis in his life in the order. The life he imagined was not the same in reality. Some brothers lived in the opposite of his idea. Bonaventure wrote how Francis dealt with it:

One time when he was disturbed by some bad examples, he anxiously prayed to the merciful Father for his sons, and **brought back** a response of this sort **from the Lord**: **“Why are you so upset, poor little man? Have I set you up as a shepherd over my religion so that you can forget that I am its main protector? I have entrusted this to you, a simple man, so that things that I work in you** would be attributed not to human industry, but to divine grace. *I have called, I will preserve, and I will pasture, and I will raise up others to make up for the fall of some. So that, even if they have not been born!* I will have them born! No matter how severely this poor **little religion is shaken, it will always remain safe by my gift”** (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 588).

This story tried to explain how Francis overcame the problem in the order. In this story Bonaventure put it in the context of prayer. Prayer was the place Francis found new insight. He put this order into God's hand and let him look after it.

In the *Little Flowers of St. Francis* part 2 ‘The Considerations on the Holy Stigmata’, Francis in his prayer and contemplation asked this question: ‘Who are You, my dearest God? And what am I, your vilest little worm and useless little servant?’ (Omnibus, 1973: 1444). When Brother Leo asked him the meaning of it, then he explained:

... when I said those words, two lights were shown to my soul: one of the knowledge and understanding of the Creator, and the other

of the knowledge of myself. When I said: “Who are You, my dearest God?” then I was in a light of contemplation in which I saw the depths of the infinite goodness and wisdom and power of God. And when I said, “What am I?” I was in a light of contemplation in which I saw the grievous depths of my vileness and misery, and therefore I said, “Who are You, the Lord of infinite wisdom and good and mercy, that You deign to visit me, a most vile and abominable and contemptible worm? (Omnibus, 1973: 1446).

This prayer tells us that Francis continued to know God ever more deeply in his journey. There was always a new dimension of God in every moment of his journey. Two years before his death, Francis received the stigmata at Mount La Verna. Bonaventure understood Francis’ stigmata as ‘bearing with him the likeness of the Crucified’ (Armstrong et al. (eds.), 2000: 634). The last two years of his life, he suffered a lot from different kinds of illness.

In *The Praises of God*, Francis recollected his understanding of God and put them together (Armstrong et al. (eds), 1999: 109). Francis wrote this praises by his own hand when he was on Mount La Verna where he received stigmata. These understanding of God tell us about Francis’ own experience of God in many different moments of his life. Through these understanding, we know what were important in Francis life. Francis developed his understanding of God drawing from his experience and his reflection on that experience. These understanding of God became his way of life.

You are the **holy** Lord God *Who does wonderful things.*

You are strong. *You are great.* You are the most high.

You are the almighty king. You *holy Father,*
King of *heaven and earth.*

You are three and one, the Lord *God of gods;*

You are the good, all good, the highest good,
Lord God *living and true.*

You are love; charity; You are wisdom, You are humility,

*You are **patience, You are beauty; You are meekness,***

You are security, You are rest,

You are gladness and joy, You are our hope, You are justice,

You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.

You are beauty, You are meekness,

You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,

You are strength, You are refreshment. You are our hope,

You are our faith, You are our charity,

You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life:
Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown Francis experience of conversion and self-transcendence. He understood it as the God's initiative which enabled him to response by "doing penance." Doing penance is an expression of love, not of fear. In that journey Francis was aware of his tendency to turn away from God and to show mercy to others. However, with the help of God's grace, he experienced "sweetness". Conversion can be understood as a moving from "bitterness" to "sweetness", from self-centred to God-centred. In that journey discernment of God's Spirit and God's Will is very important. Conversion and self-transcendence can be done through God's grace and our response in love.



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