

## A Response to Daniel Maria Klimek's "Saint Francis as Mystic: The Multifarious Mysticism of Francis of Assisi"

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I am delighted that Brother Daniel Maria has offered us Franciscans, in his two-piece presentation in these pages,<sup>1</sup> such an in-depth approach discussing his interpretation of Francis of Assisi's mysticism. With this article I'd like to suggest some other points to consider that may serve as a nuance, if not a corrective (at least to this writer), to his insightful reflections. Perhaps, even more than a nuance or a corrective, led us hope they may be just another contribution to "the multifarious mysticism of Francis of Assisi."

First of all, let me say I think his insights in the last two publications of this journal offer us one of the finest discussions of the topic of Franciscan Mysticism I've seen in a long, long time. He uses the classic sources on mysticism very well, especially Origin, Bernard McGinn, Ewert Cousins and Evelyn Underhill (whose definition of mysticism he highlights as containing elements of experientialism and immediacy [free of cultural mediation] I accept). Having reviewed these and various other authors on the topic, I was somewhat surprised he didn't include another classic offering: William James' *The Variety of Religious Experience*. Maybe, if he had, he would have recognized the critical need to distinguish between the "visionary mysticism" which he attributes to Francis' Mt. La Verna experience and what I call Francis "mystical experience" which came with his encounter with the leper as he himself describes it in his *Testament*. Consequently, rather than seeing Mt. La Verna and the stigmata as revelatory of Francis' mysticism, I see it as a culmination and divine approbation of the mystical experience he had with the leper which grounded his whole subsequent effort to "live the gospel" in the manner of Jesus and Paul.

Where I find myself differing with the heart of Daniel Maria's reason for classifying Francis as a mystic comes in the first of his two-part series where he declares: "Francis as a mystic achieved this in two major ways: 1) through his mystical experience at Mount La Verna in 1224, resulting in his stigmata,, and 2) through a sensual spirituality which he inspired dedicated to contemplating and immersing oneself in Gospel scenes that depicted the life of Jesus."

Regarding the first of Daniel Maria's rationale, I do not think the La Verna event represents so much a "mystical experience" as much as what he earlier calls a "visionary experience." The distinction is critical. This distinction is found in the sixth and seventh mansions discussed by Theresa of Avila. I think almost 35-40% of *The Interior Castle* is found in her reflections on what happens in the Sixth Mansions. This involves her various articulations of peoples' "visionary experiences." Much of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experiences* does the same. However, both of them (Theresa and James) move on to discuss the uniqueness of someone's mystical experience that is beyond someone's experience of a vision. The vision is outside of them; the mystical experience is unmediated insofar as it

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Maria Klimek, T.O.R., "Saint Francis as Mystic: The Multifarious Mysticism of Francis of Assisi," Part I, *Franciscan Connections: The Cord—A Spiritual Review*, 65. 3 (September 2015), 32-37 and Part II, *Ibid.* 65.4 (December, 2015), 29-33.

is experiential and immediate. I believe that Francis' original mystical experience that came in his encounter with the leper in 1206 or 1207 (years before LaVerna) in whom he discovered Christ being crucified again. This led him to a whole new worldview that changed him in "soul and body." It got expressed in his unique way of creating a community that reflected this *evangelical* vision of being one with lepers and all others suffering violence in the world. In this sense I also disagree with Bernard McGinn, whom Daniel Maria quotes: "However we evaluate the significance of the 'mysticism of the historical event,' one thing is clear: the Franciscan contribution to mystical identification with Christ, especially his passion depended primarily on Francis' unprecedented identification with the Savior through his reception of the stigmata."<sup>2</sup> In other words, I believe that the event early on in the process of Francis' conversion with the leper was the "historical event" that represented his mystical experience which launched his subsequent life rather than the "visionary experience" of LaVerna that highlighted the end of his life. Furthermore the "change" in his soul and body that he experienced upon his encounter with the leper was ultimately ratified when he received in his body the stigmata that Jesus Christ experienced in his at the end of his life. But, like Jesus Christ, Francis' proclamation of the gospel toward the lepers and others (see Mt. 11:2-6) was the confirmation of something begun at the beginning not at the end of his life.

Why do I interpret Francis' mysticism in this way?

In my recent book, *Fruit of the Spirit: Pauline Mysticism for the Church Today*<sup>ii</sup> I argue that the umbrella we call "mysticism" involves four key areas: 1) **the mystical environment** (such as taking quiet time for a retreat or to reflect and pray, including the practice of mindfulness and centering); 2) **mystical prayer** and praying (as described in writers like Theresa of Avila in her *The Interior Castle* or Peter of Alcantra), 3) **the mystical stance** (such as I try to describe in my book noted above) and 4) **the mystical experience itself**.

In my study of peoples' accounts, I believe we find at least three, if not four, elements involved in what can be called a "**mystical experience**" itself: 1) it is an inbreaking that comes unannounced; 2) which takes over one's whole being; 3) in a way that makes us aware of our connectedness to everyone and everything; 4) which now becomes the basis for what we consciously believe/consider to be "real." This brings about a radical change in the one with the experience a totally new worldview. For people who believe in God, this experience is called an experience of God. The classic narration of this event is Paul's Damascus experience.

Francis' account of meeting the leper, notwithstanding our lack of details about the actual event and its unraveling, as well as its subsequent impact on his "evangelical option for the poor" represents for me an almost step-by-step parallel to Paul's Damascus experience which impacted his whole subsequent theological articulation of us being "in Christ" and Christ being "in us." Where we who believe are very willing and desirous of calling this experience our "experience of God" and who God is and what God is about in us, people like the atheist Sam Harris will not call this "God," even though he will accept the four elements of the mystical experience.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 59/

Let me articulate the parallels between Paul's Damascus experience and Francis' leper experience that make me conclude that they both are examples of a mystical experience:

1. **An Inbreaking:** Saul was on his way to Damascus to do violence to the Christians when the experience *happened to him*. Francis was "led" somewhere with the violent attitudes society had inculcated in him toward the leper when the experience *happened to him*. Neither had anything to do with the experience; it came unannounced. I think this reflects what Underhill (and Danial Maria) describe as
2. **An Overpowering Reality:** The experience for both Saul and Francis (on his way to ultimate conversion when he heard the passage of the Scripture) took over each of them; It claimed their whole being and subsequent stance in life. It moved them from one world view to another (but I'm jumping the gun here).
3. **A Feeling of Not Being Separated but Part-Of Everyone/thing:** This made them feel connected to the very ones whom from whom they were separated in varying forms of violence: Paul persecuting the Christians and Francis who had embraced the culture of persecution and marginalization of the lepers (who, along with heretics, Moslems [and other unbelievers] and homosexuals) were the recipients, at that time, of religiously-sanctioned violence.
4. **Leading to a New Understanding of Reality:** This experience made them realize that the very ones suffering their violence were "the Christ." For Paul the realization came in the words: "Why are you persecuting me." For Francis, Celano later tells us, it was his realization that whoever violates someone who is poor is crucifying Jesus Christ (1 Cel. 28). *This* experience contributed to the decision of both of them to embrace and proclaim what is called "the Gospel."

Saul, now Paul, was transformed in soul and body and so was Francis: to such a degree that they could say that they no longer lived (a normal life) but that Christ had come alive in them. Here I am in full agreement with Daniel Maria:

There cannot be a more appropriate Scriptural passage that captures the essence of Francis' mystical transformation than that which came from Paul, who himself (very similar to Francis) underwent profound transformation through a mystical encounter with Christ. Paul's poignant phrase in Galatians 2:20 encapsulates the mystical transformation that Francis of Assisi, both literally and spiritually, experienced: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (ESV, 2001).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sam Harris, an avowed atheist, elaborates on the mystical experience, which he believes comes to people independent of their belief in God in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), exp. 221. He himself indicates, in a later book, a mystical experience he had at the Sermon on the Mount, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), wherein he reveals the mystical experience he had at the Sermon of the Mount, he also argues why he believes in mystical experiences but doesn't believe in God (p. 81). For comments on Harris narrative of his mystical experience by a "believer" see Frank Bruni, "Between Godliness and Godlessness," *New York Times*, August 30, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Klimek, Part II, 32.

However, just as I argue in *Fruit of the Spirit* that Paul's mystical experience was the launching pad for his totally Christology and Ecclesiology,<sup>5</sup> so, I contend, Francis' mystical experience that occurred in his encounter with the leper, launched his whole spirituality of inclusivity as well as his launching of the Order to "observe the Gospel of Jesus Christ" which was to bring "good news" to the poor and the planet. Both Paul and Francis called their experience not only "the Gospel" but the result of divine revelation (the in-breaking itself). For Paul it was *apocalyptic* (Gal 1:12c); for Francis it was his conviction that he had become divinely inspired: "the Lord led me."

Given this understanding of what I consider to be Francis' formative "mystical experience," and recalling that is one of the four forms of mysticism, I want to offer my nuance to a key element of the second part of Daniel Maria's two-part article.

A key consideration he makes flows from "Origin's understanding of 'mystical' was exegetical in character, pertaining to a comprehension of the deeper, 'hidden' mysteries of Scripture and, it was not the hidden mysteries themselves present in Scripture that Origin considered 'mystical,' but the process—spiritual in nature—by which one would come to understand these hidden mysteries." Here he finds an application of this to Francis in Bonaventure's eleventh chapter of *The Major Legend* where the Seraphic Doctor talks about Francis' "unflagging zeal for prayer" and "a continual exercise of virtue." He (Daniel Maria) sees in these two elements that which "helped him to penetrate the hidden mysteries of the holy texts . . . despite his lack of formal education in Scriptures."

My reading of Francis' *Testament* offers another interpretation. Here Francis makes clear that the seminal divine inspiration that changed around his life and worldview was his experience with the leper. He then says that it was the same kind of divine inspiration that led him to create a community of brothers to make real (i.e. "live") the Gospel. Thus, the "Gospel" way of life was for him as it became for Paul, now inseparably linked to a transformed life that would bring good news to all those people who were/are marginated insofar as he found Christ in them. Again, the mystical life of Francis began with his mystical experience but naturally led to the other two critical dimensions of mysticism: 2) the zeal for prayer which led to his effort to develop a mystical approach to prayer and 3) a "continual exercise of virtue" that represents what I call in my book the "mystical stance" in life. That he often found places where he could go deeper into prayer and devotion represents the fourth dimension of mysticism: 4) the mystical environment.

In the large scheme of mystical theology, my points of difference with Brother Daniel Maria may be minor but I do think they are important for a more thorough discussion of "the multifarious mysticism of Francis of Assisi." However neither his nor mine are that significant in light of the absolute implication that all of us Franciscans have received from the Jesuit, Karl Rahner that is applicable to all Christians:

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<sup>5</sup> I also note in *The Fruit of the Spirit* that this contention is argued. See 70ff.

“The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has experienced something, or he will cease to be anything at all.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Klimek, Part II, 31.

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christian living Formerly and Today,” in *Theological Investigations VII*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 15. Also Karl Rahner, “The Spirituality of the Future,” *Theological Investigations XX*, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 149.