

“Gratuitous And Minority Love” Of The Franciscans In Relation To Ecology

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Introduction

Problems which relate to ecology or social environment and which demand our attention today are very well known. Our world is ill and is threatened. The impoverishment of many nations has become a threat to social co-existence and a death sentence for millions of poor people. As a crisis it is not new; only in its gravity and its urgency is it new. This is true of the contaminated rivers, of the burning forests, of the increased speed of production and consumption right on to the extreme poverty that threatens one third of the human race. These problems have been dragging on for decades. The increase in poverty and the depredation of natural resources, which disappear and cannot be renewed, and the unjust lack of equality of the rich and the poor, all strengthen the conviction that peace is threatened and that violence will become more and more aggressive. This deteriorating environmental and social situation challenges us and at the same time warns us that we cannot continue with certain policies of development which allow for the production of goods with a high environmental impact, taking the place of

natural bio-diversity and causing a repercussion at all levels of the ecosystem. Neither may we favor policies of superiority in international relations or of the oppression of some countries more than others by the creation of unbreakable economic chains of dependence. In that dramatic situation an appeal is being made to ecology.

It is still necessary to speak of ecology as one of those open themes in which we Franciscans who are ushering in the third millennium must be engaged. For many years now the ecological movement and the science of ecology have given warning of the crisis and the danger of arriving at the exhaustion of the ecosystem if we continue with the model of development that we have been using. Non-governmental organizations and the United Nations are constantly speaking of new sustainable models of production and development. It is a question of a present day challenge and our replies have an effect on our tomorrow. It is not a matter of an arbitrary or romantic return to nature but of an ecological return that respects nature itself. ‘The civilization of science and of technology’, as it is presented to us until now, cannot survive, since it develops and advances through the destruction of nature. Since we have the same origin and a common destiny, how are human beings and the environment to survive together? In what measure do we each collaborate, starting out with an ethical preoccupation of responsibility for safeguarding creation?

It is right and proper that we Franciscans address that reality and speak of our spirituality and theology. That is why we propose:

Francis and his manner of relating to his sister creatures: something that is fundamental to his spiritual experience and has given rise to an original theology; and (to move) from this spiritual inheritance to the theological (inheritance) by reinterpreting the thought of the masters of the Franciscan School, so as take over in a responsible manner the presence of our charismatic identity in the work of being pro-life, regarding it as the mission of Friars Minor in the world.

This agenda can help us to meditate on our decisions, both personal and as a Community, which must take account of a complex interaction of factors, ecology among them. But it also urges us to make a deeper study of Franciscan Theology as an alternative interpretation, which cannot be excluded at the moment of interpreting the situation and the ecclesial mission of Charism, and evaluating the theories that guarantee spiritual identity in dialogue with reality. The novelty of a charism is new only when it proves true, that is, when it is being practiced and becomes true in human commitments and alternatives which have the force of establishing new motivations and stirring up the meaning of life.

We shall proceed to identify some of the causes that are giving rise to a situation of ecological crisis and a brief diagnosis

in the hope of finding some of our own contributions towards helping to come out of the crisis.

A. The Exclusion of Social and Ecological Justice

Our model of society and the meaning of life are in crisis. After facing up to the actual state of the ecology, one concludes: "It is no longer possible to ward off, sector by sector, the by-products of development (pollution, noise, refuse, etc.) Perhaps we must consider them not just as by-products but also as unavoidable consequences of this type of development. We would not then be facing some undesirable consequences which would need correction but rather a qualitative leap in the evolution of our civilization, before which our technological solutions, and only those, appear to be insufficient." The ecological crisis is a moral question. The crisis presents itself in that model of living, which invites us to look for the greatest benefit in the spontaneous functioning of the market, to live together in competition and to accelerate the rate of consumption. And today it is discovering its own limits and finding out its own true nature: the myth of limitless increase is not possible. Also, it finds itself in an economic order which is affecting the least developed countries and is leading them into a vicious circle as hostages and prisoners within that model: the debt for development is impeding a new model of growth, and that situation continues to increase the debt. In order to satisfy their financial

obligations, the countries of the Third World are sinking deeper into poverty. There is a demand on relatively poor countries to accept even greater poverty. The External Debt harasses many countries and it is being invested as payment of interest (on loans) at the cost of hunger, misery, unemployment and the sale of the environment. At the same time injustice is on the increase because access to the goods of the earth is not open to all in the mad greed of the system. We record with sorrow that each day “there are more poor and there is less quality of life”; there is an ever-greater exclusion of social justice and ecology.

The ecological crisis has many faces of sorrow and suffering in the different areas of poverty in which we live. On a social level the ecological crisis includes two basic realities: excess consumer goods on the part of the rich and lack of consumer goods on the part of the poor. It is the globalized crisis of a way of life. In the countries of the third world the figures are overwhelming. They speak of the negative results in the application of the neo-liberal ideologies and the spectacular growth of poverty and social inequality while in the richest countries there is the emergence of pleasure and entertainment, of consumption and indifference. If we continue with this plan of production and of social co-existence, we may end up with irreversible effects for the environment and for human life. The economic and political variable and the scientific, these together are indispensable for an understanding of the crisis and

for furnishing solutions, but they are not sufficient because the problem of the environment is fundamentally one that is human, ethical and cultural. Many scientific analyzes show that a “world-wide ecological crisis” is being produced; however, many prefer to make such a relative statement. I believe that the evidence and the accumulated indications in recent years permit us to speak of a “social-environmental crisis.” Ecology establishes a relationship between the various agents of our life system – natural, cultural, social and political and offers us the basic elements for the recovery of equilibrium and justice. Today’s world presents itself to us as the site of human possibilities and the affirmation of the power of man. In an ecological presentation authenticity and ethical responsibility are invoked for the reconstruction of the paradigms, which sustain the presence of man on the earth. It undoubtedly has become necessary to humanize ourselves once more on the model of a new kind of co-existence in a liberating commitment to the service of life, in reciprocal equality without domination, in the ecumenical experience of solidarity with the sources of justice and in the community experience of the God of life.

B. A Policy and an Ethic Without A Heart

The presentation of the themes we are about to consider cannot isolate us from the many cultural phenomena which are part of life among the poorest people,

most of all in the poverty belts around large cities and in the processes of migration. These are very important for our Franciscan commitment and mission. It is not possible to speak of injustice, of neo-liberalism, of models of development or post-modernity without denouncing the lack of popular participation in the democratic decisions, the marginalization of the pastoral-theological currents of liberation, the crisis of political parties, the disenchantment of the young with politics, the advance of the culture of consumerism and the destruction of local economies. We are shocked at the sight of commercial pragmatism as a daily phenomena of life. If everything is resolved in terms of the market, in its spontaneous and free operation and nothing can stop it, the excluded poor should then incorporate themselves into the plotting of initiatives without solidarity. The poor end up as those who best of all demonstrate the success of the market since they, in spite of their marginalization within the power system, cannot cease to consume or separate themselves from the system. The internalization of the unjust order brings those excluded to the reproduction of relations of subjection and marginalization. They begin to share the same logic and the same ambition. Many of their efforts to break out of social poverty seem to be already determined by the class framework and the principles of the system. The poorest have to submit and renounce their personal dreams simply in order to go on living. There is no alternative; it is the only world in which it is

possible to survive. The making absolute of the market becomes inseparable from the exclusion of the great majority of the poor. Those who merely survive have to support the demands of the economic model.

In this rapid cultural analysis we observe the loss among the poor themselves of a belief in solidarity. The poor are opposing other poor, the method is competition and the environment is being poisoned and pillaged. The life of the poor person continues to be the most threatened for not only is his survival at risk but he is being dehumanized through incorporation into a market ideology and market practice. We are speaking of the primacy of a new rationality: a social and ecological co-existence that is submitted to the logic of the globalization of the market.

The fundamental characteristic of our model of relation is that of power/domination; in our political organization as well as in the use of technology, the primordial force of relation is constructed on power/domination. Between us, the rest, and nature the culture of power is interposed. Man sustains the right to impose himself and maintains his sovereignty expressed in an ethic, which legitimizes the desire "to have power over nature." This ethic is implemented in models of development and in an order of international economy that takes for granted the sacrifice of human life and natural life. A point is reached where ethical activity means adhering to the

new order. It is a matter of an inversion of values and a negation of Human Rights, where it is demanded that one must change heart and forget about solidarity. This logic is breaking up the fragile equilibrium of the universe. In these latter years man feels himself isolated in a world that is considered as an enemy that he must subject and conquer. The right to life is privatized; it ceases to be a problem for the community so as to be a problem for the individual. The indebtedness of the poor countries helps to increase the reality of death and suffering of peoples and persons who are used as depositories of certain commitments, which they have never agreed to make. Dignity of person and dignity of life are opposed to market and price, one is faced with the ethic that rules the current international order.

In *“The Option for the Poor”* as was said some years ago, insists that our point of view is *“from the excluded”* and we formulate our own top priority: the poor and ecology. Not only should the poor and marginalized free themselves; the map of liberation has become so globalized that we are all hostages to a model of behavior, which operates against the ecosystem of life. Therefore the important question for Franciscans will not be: ‘What future has Christianity, the Church or Franciscanism?’ but ‘What future will the life of creation and of humanity have?’ This is how we ask ourselves: ‘In what measure do we Franciscans collaborate with a future based on community and solidarity?’

C. Francis of Assisi and His “Minority Relationship” with his Sister Creatures

Francis lived the beauty, which God had impressed on creation. That is a new experience that has come down to our times. Francis uses the word “creatures” so as to approach each created being in love and in each one of these he meets its Creator. Creation loved and admired has incorporated in it all the signs of creative wisdom and together with them it realizes its journey towards God. “All creation appears as a symphony revealing Jesus Christ, the “firstborn brother of every creature”(Col.1, 15) and speaks of the goodness of the Creator. Creation is the place of meeting between God and the Spirit. The world recovers the faculty of speech; it is inhabited by the sacred. Francis lived with all the elements of the cosmos. The brotherhood possesses radical importance for the thought that will be developed between the “lesser brothers”. And so Thomas of Celano writes:

“To enumerate and recount all the things our glorious father Francis did and taught while living in the flesh would be a lengthy or impossible task. Who could ever express the deep affection he bore for all things that belong to God? Or who would be able to tell of the sweet tenderness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom, power and goodness of the Creator? From this reflection he often overflowed with amazing, unspeakable joy as he looked at the sun, gazed at the moon or

observed the stars in the sky. What simple piety! What pious simplicity!”(1Cel.ch.XXIX, 80)

He discovered the amazing beauty and dignity as he interpreted the message and sang the joy of communion of creatures. And from that religious gazing creation reveals the divine and everything is transformed into a “sign,” “an image,” a “presence,” and a “revelation” of the Creator. The praise of creatures, the brotherhood with them and of them, the benefit of these things bear witness that his life, radically awakened by the goodness of the Creator, had become a song of brotherhood.

*“Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures
Especially Sir Brother Sun
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor
And bears a likeness of You, Most High One” (Cant.3-4)*

Once again the motives of his option for life and the coherence of his existential commitment come to our notice in order to give us direction on the road to spirituality and ethics, which should shape our identity as Friars Minor. The traditional Franciscan cosmic vision is sustained by the conviction of being a profoundly new experience. It is a method of reasoning that involves a life commitment because Francis contemplates creation and praises the Creator while participating with

creatures as a protagonist and brother, with an innocent and profound gaze. Creation is not a stage with spectators; he is the one who takes the chief role in the work of recognizing and revealing the message of love and goodness hidden in each of them. This is his contemplative style: he contemplates while participating in creation as a lesser brother. He lives the audacity of being a creature with the creatures, the audacity of making himself poor and small beside the poor. This relation of Francis with creatures is a new method of reasoning, a new sensibility in the presence of his sister creatures. There exists a new possibility of living the Gospel: a new kind of justice in the relation with nature, starting out with the condition of being lesser, a piety and a devotion as a brother and a servant.

“True piety, as the Apostle tells us, is all-availing and it filled the heart of Francis and penetrated its depths to such an extent that the whole life of the man of God seemed to be governed by it. It was this piety which united him to God in prayer and caused his transformation into Christ; his compassion led him to devote himself humbly to his neighbor and by total reconciliation with every creature he returned to the state of innocence. Without doubt his piety caused him to turn towards all creatures with affection.” (LM, VIII,1)

The piety of Francis appeared as a new form of justice with a new mode of think-

ing, a sensibility that transformed all creatures into brothers.

Every glance of Francis is surrounded by infinite tenderness and devotion. Here there is the discovery of a distinct manner of being in the world, not now being placed over things but together with them. A thing is not an object of possession nor is it simply togetherness; rather they exist together in the same place as mankind. There is then begun a new possibility of living according to this criterion of justice: *the condition of devotion (that is) always lesser, a servant and a lover of creatures*. In order to live socially with this model of living we must divest ourselves of all that impedes us. It is a matter of renouncing any life style that promotes the mastery of things, of divesting oneself of any desire for the narcissistic possession of creatures, of affections, of power or prestige. To take possession of some good or some service presupposes the exclusion of another person, of the right that that person has to that good or service. Francis demands that the spiritual nakedness of the Friars be total and necessarily absolute, like material nakedness. In a discussion on poverty and the material possessions of the brothers, the action of friars who believed in the right to possess goods that are the common property of people is condemned. The spiritual value of “no property” is clearly expressed in the two rules because appropriation involves the exclusion of a brother. This poverty of a minor is interpreted socio-economically as a

characteristic proper to the followers of Francis.

“This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue. Let this be your portion that leads into the land of the living. Giving yourselves totally to this, beloved brothers, never seek anything else under heaven for the name of our Lord Christ.” (Rb. VI, 4-6)

Francis revered creation, starting from the real and radical experience of poverty. Poverty frees love from every desire for possession. It creates the anthropological condition so that goodness may express itself gratuitously as a new (form of) justice. It goes beyond the necessity of a (merely) just order, for we in the area of gratuitousness that promotes a new (form of) justice where the motives remain hidden in the heart of the giver. Love is not authentic if it is not lived after the manner of a minor and poverty/minority is not genuine without love. It is the primacy of goodness built up on the way of poverty, of not possessing, that goodness which is present in the commitment for justice, peace and communion with creatures, The Saint of Assisi lives together with creatures in relation to a new justice, with gratitude and devotion, starting with the poverty which he chose. The origin of this new model of relationship is the Incarnation, the Poverty of the Word. The option for

minority finds its base in the meeting with the poor human condition of Jesus. This is the christological vision of Francis. In Jesus, poor and humble, there is revealed the love of God who emptied himself totally of his glory and became humble and poor in his approach to man. The poverty of Jesus is the way in which to live the humble love of a minor as the radical response to the gratuitous love of God.

To live “poor after the manner of Francis” implies following a conduct of respect and devotion for every element of creation and acquiring an immense liberty in disinterested co-existence, walking beneath the same and only tender gaze of the Father as the gift of oneself in humility. Poverty-humility-minority continually manifests points of contact and almost of identity. The concept of minority, however, is that which accentuates the variable of “relationship”, that is, a strong socio-environmental component. Only by living as minors can we live as brothers in communion with all creatures.

Minority is expressed in the quality of new relations. In the option of Francis, a new way of being and social living with creatures is being born in a truly revolutionary way. A novelty that is lived in fraternity and which offers to those who wish to opt for it a secret with the capacity of being converted to the Gospel. The minority of Francis refuses the horse in order to go on foot with the brothers who do not have one, ministers to lepers, does

not worry about clothing, has no need for self defense, works without depending on money; and offers up that which one has. A new method of relating to things is constructed. The humble and lesser individual is the one who recognizes his own limits and his own capacities. It is a way of recognition and personal evaluation in relation to others and to God. This experience is born of the question that Francis was repeating on Mount Alvernia: “Who are you, Lord and who am I”, recovering his true place and self-knowledge on recognizing the true goodness of God. It is the capacity for opening oneself up to a new horizon and offering oneself to creatures as the result of a new spiritual experience, in a system of relations which finds other people in their true otherness, discovering their profound dignity and being preoccupied for their necessities. It is reconciliation with all other creatures by the way of “Minorite love.” The more authentic poverty is, the more we approach the dignity of the creature that at the same time makes a new communion possible for us. A fraternal relation with creation is the result of Minorite practice of poverty with humility. We experience brotherhood/sisterhood with creatures because we are close to them without any desire for possession, without commercial interest. It is here that the method of ecology of the Franciscans is initiated.

D. “Minorite Love” in the Origin of Spirituality

The reason for the endurance of Francis within the Church and in society is that

he inaugurates a new paradigm in commitment to the Gospel: to make oneself little so as to understand the greatness of others. Also, minority is much more than a virtue. It is a way of being and situates us in a relationship of service to others, always open and in dialogue, disposed to communion and sharing all situations with others, many of them conflict situations. It creates a synthesis that had been lost in Christianity: a meeting with God in his “emptying of self,” in his humility/down grading, in poverty following the Poor Christ, embracing Lady Poverty and supporting Perfect Joy, in a spirit of minor brotherhood with our sister creatures beginning with original innocence. It forms relationships and enters into communication by means of goodness and tenderness. It is the same as that which the Father revealed in his “gratuitous and Minorite love” in the Incarnation and in the poor life of Jesus. To that we must come by making ourselves poor and offering pardon.

The embrace of Lady Poverty with a “Minorite love” sets free the fountains of the heart and becomes enthused for every thing and for the brothers. It is love freed from possessions and leading to relating with all creatures. Francis is a small man, but one filled with holy and transparent desires, which identify him with those who are crucified and with all the beings of creation. His manner of living is that of ‘living with,’ of sharing and being in communion with creation. It is a practice of living with a knowing tenderness that builds up to an “inclusive relationship”

with creatures, especially with the poor. It is the poverty and the embrace of God in the Crib, on the Cross and in the Eucharist. This poverty, always minor, is much more than not possessing; it is allowing things to be and to communicate with them, accepting the diversity without placing people or creatures under our dominion.

The spirituality of Franciscans is born and refreshes itself in that heritage lived by Francis. It is a spirituality that looks at and penetrates the world from the standpoint of the gratuitous goodness of God. The Franciscan is called to make a concrete living in this inherited spirituality, in creative fidelity, a re-discovering of creatures and of history in the depths of his being. God has not thought of, nor has he required of creatures, that they be good or amiable; rather is it that creatures and we are good and amiable *because* God has loved us first. The beginning of goodness and love is the gratuitous love of God. The origin of “minorite love” is the Divine Goodness. A continual celebration of the gift and thanksgiving forms the basis of our spirituality and our theological reflection.

“Let us, then, desire nothing else

Let us want nothing else

Let nothing else please us and cause us delight

Except our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour,

The only true God, who is the fullness of good

All good, every good

The true and supreme God, who alone is good. (RnB XXIII, 9)

In fact there is no reason why anything should exist. Nothing in the world is necessary, not even the world. All is pure gratuity. Creation is the cry of loving freedom. It is the gratuitous freedom of the love of God, who willed it thus. And he willed it because he willed it. He always wills the good. No one creates himself. People and creatures are not born enclosed in being. We were desired and needed, loved by the will of God. We are born and grow in a climate of liberty, of gratuitous reciprocity, opening ourselves to each other, overcoming our limits, with the capacity to go beyond ourselves, to transcend ourselves. Goodness is the journey that permits us to be open to the call of that First Love. Franciscan life is a long road on which we learn to celebrate the Goodness in the creative act of the Father. Therefore for Francis and also for Clare penance as Minorite and humble love is the return to God by the way of voluntary poverty. It is a road that shares in the logic of gratuity with the liberty that alone is able to live in a love that is minor and divested of self.

1. From the Spiritual Experience to Theology

The particular way of seeing the world, of being in it and of relating himself to creatures that belonged to the Poor Man of Assisi was afterwards expressed in thought and system by the great Fran-

ciscan Masters. This interest in the motivations of Franciscan spirituality brings us to meet with those who lived and thought within the logic of that same spirituality. It leads us to study more deeply the theology created by the Franciscans and to discover once again the novelty that they were able to contribute in their time, that still remains in our days. It enables us to formulate some reasons to help find the deep unity that presents the spirituality in theological thought. This allows us to dialogue with our present situation and its actual challenges today. Faithful to their founder and to life, the Franciscan theologians became noted for considering love, communion and liberty as reflections coherent with the legacy of the charism they had received. They expressed in thought what Francis had felt and lived.

We do not intend to recapitulate all the theses of the Franciscan school but just to outline the more specific intuitions of St. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus. They make known the Franciscan spirit in relation to the search for harmony and co-existence with our sister creatures. They also identify the Franciscans presence in the problem of society and the environment. In anticipation we can speak of unity in the multiplicity of ways. In consequence of a profound orientation, which relates the Franciscan school with what has been defined as the metaphysics of love, the primacy of the good, the primacy of the will (and) the philosophy of liberty.

2. The Trinitarian Communion in St. Bonaventure

The Seraphic Doctor has integrated the experience of St. Francis in his theological system. The thought of Bonaventure is that which has best interpret. His work shows the centrality of the love of God that communicates itself and donates itself gratuitously to the cosmic vision and the sensitivity to creatures that we have considered in previous paragraphs.

For St. Bonaventure God is the great good, the supreme good and as such he is effusive, diffusive and self-communicating. Starting out from the ontological principle of the good as diffusion and communication: God “who loves with gratuitous love” expands himself, rendering himself a totally communicative being. That is the foundation that explains the Trinitarian procession. Whoever does not penetrate the mystery as a creating cause cannot understand creation that can only be deciphered by a Trinitarian key. If God is the supreme fountain and supreme fecundity, he is also the first being to expand himself into a trinity of persons. The being of God, as regard to unity, consists in being in community. God is Father, Son and Spirit in reciprocal communion. In the beginning there is the communion of the Trinity and not the solitude of one. Communion is the most profound and fundamental reality that exists. This communion opens itself to outside itself, and all of creation is an overflowing of life of communion of the three divine persons, who invite all creatures to participate in that same com-

munion. It goes out of itself to meet with difference and in that way integrate itself in a common project. In this communitarian interpretation of the Trinity there is a coherent existential and vital analysis that is characteristic of the Franciscan school. St. Bonaventure, faithful to the founder of his spirituality, is an observer of daily life. Living as a friar he discovers that charity is the basic reason for happiness, for fruitfulness and for joy in interpersonal relations. Peace is not possible without a sincere and gratuitous charity. Charity is what opens us to a permanent tension regarding others, since it is the foundation of divine and human communion.

J.A. Merino writes: “When love lacks the dimension of otherness and of gratuitous communicability, it becomes corrupt and is changed into egoistic love, which Bonaventure curiously calls ‘libidinous love.’ Love is the real force that transforms a person into heterocentric openness or into egocentric storm cloud. Love in God, which manifests itself as ‘infinite ardour’ (Hex.11 12).”

This demands a tri-personal community as a necessary horizon of its creative and binding expansion and insofar as a binding dimension with another must come from liberality or gratuity. The theology of Bonaventure offers an incomparable reflection of Trinitarian communion, which is a paradigm of the inter-personal relations of our communities and the theological and metaphysical foundation of a sociology of equality, of otherness and

of meeting. It opens up for us new horizons towards a community life based on openness, on relation, on peace and total gratuitous otherness.

As Franciscans, this understanding of Trinitarian communion can be converted into a motor principle of the aspirations for greater participation and respect for ecology. We desire (to have) a society and a culture that promotes and strengthens a social project based on this Trinitarian theology i.e. on a trinity of persons in eternal interrelation, without dependencies, without domination, in an infinite communication of love. Just as the Trinity lives in a mystery of inclusion, of relation and of interpenetration, by which we are unable to understand one person without the other, creation is conceived as a scheme of happenings always related in such a way that no one can explain itself on its own without reference to the others.

Bonaventure teaches that the whole Trinity shares in the act of creation, contributing in that communication its identity. Quoting J. A. Merino again:

“The creative act itself is a Trinitarian action since a Deus creator does not exist but rather a Trinitas creatrix o creans. ‘The Father creates by the Son in the Holy Spirit’ (Brev.2 4 5).”

The world directs itself to the Father in community with the Son and the Holy Spirit. Therefore the very felicity of man consists in the participation in the mystery of communications and inter-Trinitarian manifestations and not in the contemplation of the one.

Creatures are the expression of the wisdom and the love of God that send us back to their author. The mystery of creation has its origin in love and in the loving Word pronounced in time; for this reason creation is also a word, it is message, it is logos, and it is theophany. God has communicated himself outside of himself, communicating his love. As Bonaventure understands it, all is reference and participation. (Created) things express ideas and ideas lift us to God. Creatures hide within themselves the divine mystery as vestiges, images, and likenesses. Man meets with exterior things as a “vestige,” to penetrate the interior ones. There he discovers the image that orients him above himself so as to comprehend the Trinitarian mystery. Man has a particular mission, because he is the beneficiary of the gifts of God and because by his intelligence he can “read” creation as a word of God, must create words that reflect the eternal Word. St. Bonaventure considers himself as having been found by the absolute being, lived in by God. It is necessary to make an effort so as to understand the exemplary cause, so as to know what happens in the interior of Trinitarian life. God is the exemplary cause, being one and three at the same time, he who lives in communion, in mutual interpersonal relations. Man, who is the bearer of the Trinitarian image is established in solitude and in co-existence; he is ‘for himself’ and ‘for the other,’ he is autonomy and self-surrender, he is individual and relational. Out of his individuality and his dignity he opens himself and enters into communion with a plurality of persons.

Francis of Assisi, stripped of all things, opened himself to this love of God and through that love was able to discover and communicate with all creatures. Vested with the presence of absolute love he finds and dialogues as a minor brother with all creation. From his radical poverty in worldly goods, he was changed from a man of ambitions and desires into a brother at the service of a new communion. His custom of calling creatures brother and sister had its origin in his own lived experience of the paternity of a God who is love, gratitude and Trinitarian communion. St. Bonaventure has systematized in his exemplarism that presence diffused throughout creation. The world, full of presences, has been transformed into a sacrament. Creatures evoke the Creator. The world reflects the Trinitarian mystery and leads us to a 'you' who is community, for the structure of the creative trinity fashions the intimacy of each being and each person. With this capacity for profound reading, Franciscan thought is always being born in its own spirituality. It springs from life and from an experience never completed. It takes on the structure of its foundational charism in permanent dialogue with the characteristics of each epoch.

3. The Option For Liberty as an Overcoming of Possessive Nature in John Duns Scotus

The poverty, humility and minority of St. Francis guided Scotus towards a reasonable thought, using his reflection with respect, knowing that which he can and

ought to know for itself, without falling into the pride of a reason trapped in its own horizon. The exaltation and the acknowledgement of the infinity of God are not a humiliation of man but rather recognition to a person in need, with limits and possibilities. It is a radical thought in that it presents God not as a reality-object of his reason or knowledge but as a reality-basis of his existence. For it is not God who absents himself, rather it is man who withdraws himself before the demands of the Absolute. Here is the poverty of Scotus: to recognize the limit of knowledge and to grant God absolute and limitless recognition. The proposal of Scotus is an invitation to mature and radical thought; it is the recognition of the possibilities and the limitations of one's own reason. In that horizon, the concept of infinitude in God is that from which he understands and interprets all of reality. Because God is infinite he is a unique being, most particular and free. Therefore the Divine will wishes because It wishes, not in the manner of a capricious will, since it is autonomous and free, but because the divine essence is infinite coherence. In order to demonstrate the existence of God Scotus does not recur to any rationalization or illumines; rather he makes clear that the absence of contradiction in God is the supreme reason for his existence.

The world is an expression of the free and liberating love of God that reaches our will. A God in need cannot create freely. Liberty in God is an original principle, it is the unfolding of itself: "it

wishes because it wishes.” Man comes to a halt before the liberty of God; therefore when he asks: Why has God created the world? The answer is *Deus vult quia vult* (God wishes because he wishes). Reality is more an effect than a volition. It is the logic of gratuitous donation that holds primacy, not the logic of necessity. Coming from God the gift is gratuitous and can only be so as an expression of his infinite loving will. On the part of man, the gift may be received or may be rejected and is therefore a place for liberty. Having received reality as a present, as a gift, this then becomes an object of intelligence and of analysis. Just as liberty is an expression of the absolute dominion of God and his total self-sufficiency, liberty is (also) the greatest dignity of man, his true capacity for transcendence of reality. The will is the place of liberty; it is that which enables us to become small and lesser so as to rise up our gratitude or to shut ourselves up in the darkest of egoisms or in the proud solitude of reason.

Therefore a person is the “ultimate solitude” which can communicate and build up relations, but cannot lose its essential element, since this is his ultimate title to his options, a responsibility that is individual and non-transferable. The solitude of Scotus is not a poverty of personality, not boredom or abandonment; rather it is the solitude needed to be oneself. It is a responsible option of the liberty that has been granted to us. In that sense we can affirm that that solitude is solidarity, communion with ourselves. Therefore to

think on and reflect upon reality is not a gesture of domination; on the contrary, it is there that our gratitude for the gift received is affirmed, a permanent attitude of thanksgiving. This kind of Franciscan thinking has meaning for the primacy of the liberty of God and of man. A man who is open and relational, as an indigent and binding being, who acknowledges himself as “man on a journey”. In the option for liberty the Franciscan reaffirms his responsibility and incorporates himself into the dynamic of the “logic of donation.” The logic of possession humiliates creatures by exalting its own power, whereas the logic of liberty rises up reciprocal gratitude and brings us close to its original foundation that is in God. Reality is not the object of the possession of the reason; rather there is question of being converted to the truth that it hides.

“Franciscan love” is not measured by the parameter of utility. Love is founded and is born in God. It is not necessary nor does it depend on any other thing. In the logic of this love God teaches us that things were not created and redeemed because they are good but that they begin to be good and to have value from the moment they were loved and realized. That signifies that the principle of our being is the gratuitous love of God. In its origin there is the divine goodness. This is the point of departure for the intelligent and communitarian “Minorite love,” which does not rest on the pride of solitary reason, but on the originating love, which directs its realization in the “primacy of the good.” It is by loving without

possessing the one loved that the person loving and the creature loved are exalted, not by subordinating the other to one's own interest or project but respecting their otherness. Franciscan poverty, with its method of entering a relation while being "minor and humble," directs us towards this mode of existence. The secret of this behavior is not derived from reason or from knowledge; rather it comes by the overcoming of our possessive nature, by the road of the goodness that is found in creatures with the mysterious election of God who has loved them. His loving freedom opens us to the meeting of a new depth and puts us in communion with the interior nature of things. The secret soul of reality is in God who has sought it out because he has loved it. This is the true face of God. Only that is good that God has loved, and the way he has loved it and made it. Quoting Merino:

"Setting out from the principle that love is the constitutive mode of God's being and his rationality, and because order and wisdom are the rules of divine love, the Subtle Doctor offers a unitary and architectonic vision of reality. What God intends by his creation is nothing other than to love and to be loved, a manifestation of his power and the happiness of man through his predestination to glory. That is to say, the predestination of man is desired and realized by God for his own glorification. This signifies that the glory of God and the happiness of man do not enter into conflict but are foreseen in the one and same intentional and inter-relational goal."

The full meaning of reality is illuminated by revelation and emerges clearly in the light of Christ. Christocentrism is the supreme theological and metaphysical reason for an understanding of the profundity of reality. It is a unitary and harmonic vision, since all beings participate in the one cause of their being who is Christ. Everything aspires to perfection in him who unites the creature with the Creator. Christ is the way of God towards man and the meeting of man with God. The existence of Christ and the benefits of the redemption derive totally from the free love of God. In this way he lays the base for the primacy and the centrality of Christ, elaborating his doctrine around the mystery of the Incarnation and starting out directly from God and from Man. Christ is not occasioned but is the "First Beloved." Creation itself is considered in the light of Christ, the one and effective term of the action of God *ad extra*, and therefore the only possibility of explaining the presence of matter, the world and man. According to the definition of Scotus, *Christ is the Supreme Work of God, the Supreme Good of grace, and the Supreme Good among beings*. He thus manifests his method of investigation: always starting out with a datum of faith to arrive at rational knowledge by the way of argument and meditation according to the principle: *I believe so as to understand or faith seeking understanding*.

Let us return to our first statements: only from divine love-liberty can we understand precisely the relation between God

and creatures. The essential contingency of creatures finds the reason for their existence in the free love of God. In this celebration of liberty and love that we have briefly presented, Duns Scotus enters fully into the origins of the Franciscan School, plumbing the depths of the intuitions of St. Francis and St. Bonaventure.

4. Franciscan Contribution to the Debate and the Problem: Ecology – Environment

Having enumerated some of the characteristics of Franciscan thought and spirituality, it is necessary to try some kind of projection of that thought on to the problem mentioned in the first part of this presentation. In relation to the themes on liberty and donation, of creatures and communion, of not possessing and in relation to the irrepeatability of the person, we as Franciscans can, help by giving some clarifications for an adequate interpretation of reality. And another important thing: in the search for alternatives, Franciscans are in a position to collaborate in the construction of a new ethic leading towards a new relationship with the world.

4.1. The Sacramentality of life. The Vision of a New View: To Opt For Vital Inter-Dependence

Bonaventure speaks to us as creatures of footprints, vestiges, and considers the world God's great sacrament. Scotus invites us to be attentive to the signs of the times by which we discover the will

of God. *The Franciscan arranges his ethical discourse in accordance with this vision and moves (people) to an awareness that "the natural" and "the created" is not a space to be appropriated, and much less an extension or enlargement of power.* Whoever reduces nature in a bid to manipulate it is falling that much into a relation of proprietorship, possession and consumption, destroying its quality, because nature is an intelligible sign. It will be necessary to conduct scientific and technical reasoning so that it may discover the mysticism of creation, which is called "life," "act," "donation" and what is the unity of nature so that that scientific awareness may discover its own limits. The world is not just the sum of its single beings. There us an original and profound sense which sustains it and of which we may not take possession. That is why we speak of what we know as "otherness." Scientific knowledge and actual technological production are not founded on transcendental motives but on their own reasons. We are not questioning technology and science but its manipulative character and the absence of an ethic, a science that acts out of self-interest without self-criticism.

The theme of ecology offers us the possibility of speaking of God as Trinity. The whole ecological discourse is founded on the categories of relations, interdependencies and inclusions that share in our vital systems. There is unity and there is diversity. Understanding this permits us to speak of co-existence

in unity and of diversity in the Trinitarian communion. The Trinitarian vision places us in the theme of relations and reciprocity. God-Trinity is the relationship par excellence. If God is communion and relation, all creation bears the mark of the Creator. Reflection and the Franciscan vision of the Trinity presents itself as one of the most adequate representations for understanding nature from the standpoint of ecological preoccupation.

So that nature may not be changed into a “utility” or a “source of production,” it is necessary to make it part of a wider horizon that allows us to explain ourselves from the standpoint of a new “wisdom” with equal reference to ecology and social/environmental matters. We construct a vital system of integration that does not authorize us to instrumentalist creation. The relation man-nature in science is determined by the interpretation or representation, which is held of that relation. It is conditioned by a preliminary philosophy. Nature does not dialogue with man nor does man dialogue with God in the mystery of creation. Now Franciscanism more than a doctrine is rather a way of being and of seeing which expresses itself in a dimensional relationship with God, with other people and with all the beings of creation. One must learn to see so as to discover a hidden nature in things immediately present. To recognize the message of creation supposes a radical reform of intelligence, so as to dialogue in depth with created things.

The relationship, which Francis of Assisi had with created things and the deep study of that experience on the part of the friars of the Franciscan School, has an orientation very different from that proposed by contemporary science and technology. In the Franciscan vision a situation of sin, rupture and aggression is overcome by a return to what is original in creation and which man with his reason enfolded in the faith comes to understand. All creatures are linked together in such a way that one needs the other for existence; each one has a relative autonomy and has a sense and evaluation of itself. Nobody is outside the web of relations in the supreme law of solidarity. All of us dwell in the universe in one communion. We are all linked and intertwined in the formation of the universe. A great vital solidarity exists which is being threatened. In our current culture there is a continual “losing of links” since now there are objects that can be conquered into unconditional possession. The will for power and the dominion over creation allows us to consume and to pillage. In contrast, as Franciscans we are related to attitudes based on sentiment, admiration, gratitude, communion and gratuity in which there is no space for manipulation and so we resist all desire for appropriation. The permanent rupture of “linking” is overcome with “original linking”. A gaze free of egoism or greed, which eliminates all pride, allows us to be in the world in the midst of creatures, beside them, not over them, (it is) a gaze with a new in-depth dimension.

The interior world of Francis is in tune with his outward (world). *He lived in pro-found intimacy with all created beings.* That is why people are speaking of the necessity of constructing an “interior architecture and an exterior ecology.” Francis attained that synthesis and that is why we can speak of his experience of a “unity and essential communion qualitatively diverse.” It is possible to understand the synthesis that he elaborated in the following affirmation: I can say who I am when I say what the world is, for I penetrate my own interior being in an effort to understand the world.” He sings to creatures because they are the expression of the same love for which he was found. Together with creatures he sings to the author of creation. The creatures preserve their dignity; they do not lose their identity in the meeting. He always goes back with them to the origin from which comes all solidity and consistencies. He lives in brotherhood with creation because he has discovered the goodness of the Creator in them. His life opens up to lepers and to his sister creatures. Everything speaks of God and sends us back to him. The universe in its diversity contains a radical unity; it is a Sacrament of God. The previous glance of God makes it possible for man to be able to recover a new glance and understand the reasons for his “seeing reality” from a new depth. That Franciscan glance is absent from the science and technology of our time. For that reason we speak of a first Franciscan contribution in this area.

4.2. The Franciscan Mission in a “Minorite Relation” with the World: To Opt For Minor Poverty

The glance of goodness and tenderness towards creatures is based on, and supported by the Creator of all life. For a Franciscan to live is to live with and share in peace with all creatures, supported in an ontology of communion and participation. It is a matter of making real a new kind of relationship. Therefore from that perspective social justice assumes also a new duty: ecological justice, as that dimension of the ethic, which is involved with relations in the ecosystem. We do not interact only in the social area but also in the area of nature. And both justices are called upon to investigate the quality of the relation, the ethics of our actions within the same sole system. A political analysis of ecological problems is common enough in our day. At first sight the environmental crisis denounces the undue exploitation of natural resources. They are in fact, however, the same groups. Nevertheless, when it comes to deeds, the same groups who consider themselves to be lords of the earth are also the lords of the poor. The person who submits creation to his selfish interests does not refrain from submitting people likewise. The root cause of exploitation is the same. That is why St. Francis considered himself the brother of human beings and of all creatures. One fraternity is not possible without the other.

This search for being in tune with nature, the quality of the relation with

nature, the attitude of openness and sensitivity to the quality of the relation, these are the things which form the foundation of an ecological ethic. We are speaking of that which ought to be done today for the defense and the promotion of life, and this capacity for responsibility and compassion are the fundamental principles of that ethic. A Franciscan expresses and lives this ethical commitment in his manner of relating to the world, to his brothers and to creatures: we are speaking of minority. The Franciscan spirit has always had the character of poverty and humility. To speak today of our identity in relation to the world we use the most appropriate category of minority in mission.

Franciscan mission consists in being minors as a form of life, which makes us socially minors called to promote justice and peace in living with creation freed of all possession for the sake of the Gospel followers of the life and the minorite love of Jesus Christ.

In the Franciscan mission we relate to the world. Let us recall a quotation from the approved Rule:

“when they go about the world, they should not quarrel or fight with words, or judge others; rather let them be meek, peaceful and unassuming, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming.”(Rb.3, 10-11)

That call to minority is expressed in a lifestyle that assumes the condition of the

little people of society, is at one with the desires for a new justice, and walks in the same hope. And since ecology represents a bond and interaction with all that exists, including culture and society, our Franciscan mission emphasizes the mode and the quality of relation. The Franciscan mission is not limited to any type of work or action, there is no question of an exclusive function but rather to make ourselves present in the world as minors, having nothing in an option of being poor among the poor at the side of our sister creatures. In a state of minor relationship we shall promote the “inclusion” of the poorest in a real participation of the goods of the system and defend life against the culture of death. It is an ongoing realization of the “primacy of the good,” to join us with the world out of a minorite love which sets up a relation without property or possessions. The Franciscan is always in the presence of someone or something and so he will revise his relational bond with things and in that bond be totally free and independent. Francis did not ask himself how much he could possess but how much he could do without. He avoided the accumulative quantum so as to acquire liberty and independence through giving up everything. The logic of goodness and liberty has a means of relating and a social strategy capable of promoting a transformation of reality. The institutions that hold us in and those that we can create ought not to contradict, through their structures, organization and objective, that intuition which is born in our Charism.

We discover the meaning of existence in the simplicity and authenticity of a life shared in that new logic of liberty. It is necessary to come to that widest and deepest relation with all reality constructed in the logic of gratuity, united with all from our indigent being, emphasizing the presence which walks with and shares in a same communion...to break with all dependencies so as to become free beings. We are walking with others and with all creation because we discover a reality of participation and not of possession. When we strengthen our being in solidarity and in communion with creatures, then will be realized the ethical dimension of the Franciscan mission. This is the second contribution coming from our reflection on the theology of the Franciscans.

4.3 The Franciscan Mission with Regard to the Destiny of the Earth and the Hope of the Poor

At the moment there are two questions which preoccupy humankind: What is going to be the destiny of planet Earth if we continue with the culture of unlimited appropriation, to which we have become accustomed in the actual model of development and the market? And what is the hope of the poor people among the human race? That which is at stake concerning “justice, peace and the integrity of creation” is our fidelity to the heritage received after Francis and the possibility of recreating and reconstructing today the logic of the charism that he lived as poverty and “without property”. He initi-

ated conditions of life that make possible a life in liberty so as to gain the objective that transcends poverty itself: identification with the poverty of Christ. To speak of “Franciscan poverty” is the same as announcing peace and the practice of justice, to “be minors” in communion with all creatures. The poverty of which we speak restores our original situation, reforms the genesis of the charism and re-orientates the social and political relations of the friar minor. It is the close relation between the “poor and humble life in minority” chosen by Francis so as to follow Christ poor and humble, as a Franciscan announcement inserted in society. Poverty lived in minority in the world.

In poverty and minority is expressed an ethic at the service of liberation. Francis fought all his life in order to break dependencies and become free. He broke with all that impeded his liberty, his creativity and his personal vocation for poverty. The fathers of the Franciscan School strove to avoid allowing their reflection to betray that charismatic identity. That liberty at the service of a new ethic calls for a long road of liberation and detachment.

We repeat that Franciscan spirituality and theology is that which permeates the world in the mystery of the gratuity of God, freeing itself from adhesion to an unjust order, starting with a mysticism and thought process coherent with an ethic of loving and intelligent liberty. I believe that the Franciscan mission at the

service of our brothers and creation in these difficult times finds its place in this self-understanding of our identity: Minorite poverty and fraternal communion as a style, which qualifies the following of Christ. This is the poverty which enlarges the horizon of our view and which makes us free for a new reciprocity with creation. Perhaps this is the most important mission of the Franciscans today. It is *to read with a new view and to live in our situation with a new justice, promoting the spaces for a change of the situation of injustice and marginalization, with a poor life associated with the hope of those who are the last and the little ones of history.* The ministry of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation expresses the mystery of no-appropriation and of liberty, and places us at the side of the poor in defense of life that is threatened. In a culture of “to be in order to possess,” the Franciscan proposal of poverty and minority, starting out with brotherhood with those who are last, presents itself as the most radical denunciation of this accumulative and deprecating life style. Our commitment to “the highest poverty,” expressed in our pastoral ministry, gives shape and consistency to our being Franciscan, like the reciprocity of love, which responds to the Gratuitous Love of God in a social and fraternal environment among all creatures.

Possible actions that can characterize our Franciscan mission in this ministry:

A prophetic mission of the radical love of God for creation, denouncing

violence against the poor and against creatures, a commitment which involves conflicts and consequently the cross, asceticism and renunciation, and poverty in all its forms, and at the same time a political and social function, become decisive by means of its strategic help to the victims in the form of solidarity and assistance, favoring programs of making conscience, resistance and liberation which supports the road taken by the poor; starting with themselves as historical subjects and organizers of liberation, promoting agreements and relations with organizations which work in defense of life and human rights, and which impede the holocaust of natural life and generates economic models of development which respect the dynamic of the ecosystem. The practice of the “ethic of Minorite love” is an educational proposal, in the fraternities, in the formation processes, in the practical and theoretical plane, in popular and environmental pastoral work.

The theology of the Franciscans expresses theoretically the motives of this concrete commitment to the cause of the poorest and the defense of the life of creatures. The ethical urgency in face of the human and ecological disaster challenges our identity and our charism. Our Franciscan behavior and its theoretical formulation can create a new fraternity based on reciprocal relations, profoundly human, expressed in an ethic of liberty whose first wish is to

direct itself towards justice and goodness. Of all actions, love has the greatest liberty and most perfectly expresses the liberty of the will to determine itself. With the optimism, which characterizes us, we need to return and find ourselves in the situation of a Minorite and loving glance as well as intelligent and an uncontainable empathy with all creatures. We need a practical and theological reflection that seeks to be liberating. The road we must travel needs

great creativity, for we are living in a historic moment of important changes and ruptures. The actual ecological consciousness and the presence of “gratuitous and Minorite love” of the Franciscans are the great forces of integration and convergence towards a spirituality which reconciles us with creation. It is essential that we organize our hope. This the first day of a long life, which must be born because, the universal fraternity did not die.