

Christian spirituality has been described as a person's lived relationship with God. But this is not to say that there is only one Christian spirituality. In fact, there are many. Each of the Gospels can be understood as expressing a distinct spirituality, each faithful to the gospel Jesus proclaimed yet each grounded in a specific understanding about Jesus and meant to address the specific needs of the people for whom the evangelist wrote. Yet as Christianity spread so too did other spiritualities: each faithfully expressing the Christian understanding about God, God's relationship with the world, and the human person in the world in a manner that reflected the historical and cultural setting from which it arose.

The first glimpse we have of an early Christian spirituality is found in the Acts of the Apostles. We are told that the early Christians "devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers... All who believed were together and had all things in common... Every day they devoted themselves to meeting in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exaltation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people" (2:42-47) – but this idyllic image was not to last.

At first, the Christian community was perceived as simply a Jewish sect and was thus accorded the same tolerance as the Jews. But as their numbers increased, toleration diminished and persecution began. The persecution took a terrible toll on the community, yet it had the positive effect of identifying persecuted Christians with Jesus in his own suffering and death. In fact, the word 'martyr' (from the Greek *martus*, meaning 'witness') came to refer to Christians who had witnessed to their faith by suffering and death. Martyrdom thus came to be looked upon as the ultimate expression of faithful Christian discipleship and holiness.

The Roman emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity and later Edict of Milan (313) ended the religious persecution, but when Christianity quickly became what was almost the official religion of the Roman Empire, many Christians were left questioning the nature of authentic Christian life. Until then, Christianity had been counter-cultural and martyrdom had expressed one's ultimate dedication to Christ, but when martyrdom ended, dedicated Christians had to seek another way to express their faith.

It is important to recognize, however, that there was another dynamic at work here. For centuries, Rome and the Roman Empire had, for better or for worse, provided social, economic, and political stability and protection. But by the early 4th century, all this was breaking down, and the incursions by the barbarian tribes were only part of the problem. From the very beginning, corruption and abuse of power had been rife throughout Rome and the Roman Empire, but the situation was now becoming increasingly worse. Moreover, the growing collapse of the social, economic, and political stability and protection gave rise to a considerable increase in personal and public immorality. In brief, it was a world in which living a dedicated Christian life was becoming increasingly difficult.

Almost from the earliest days of Christianity, men and women had gone into the deserts and wilderness regions to fast and pray, but what, we may wonder, drew them there? First of all, this flight to the desert can be seen as both a protest against a decadent world and an affirmation of the gospel message. But it was more than that. The word 'desert' suggests spaciousness, dryness, and solitude. Although a desert is barren, isolated, and unforgiving, it is also a place of profound peace which can quiet and center those who venture into its solitude. In the Bible, the desert was depicted as a place to encounter God: "I will lure her into the desert and there speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:14). But no person could encounter God without coming face-to-face with one's own self. The desert was thus understood as an arena situated between the material and the spiritual worlds for personal struggle with the demonic powers for control of the human spirit. Men and women sought these places to encounter God as well as their own inner and outer demons. In time, small groups of these hermits began to gather around a 'spiritual father' or 'mother' for guidance. Gradually, these small groups came together to form larger communities of men

or women, which provided both security as well as emotional and spiritual support. Thus between the 4th and the 12th centuries, Christian spirituality came to be dominated by what came to be known as the 'monastic' form of life.

Monasticism (from the Greek *monos*, meaning 'alone') is a way of life characterized by the renunciation of worldly pursuits to devote oneself to asceticism and prayer. In its beginnings, monasticism was a lay movement. Only later were those pursuing this way of life considered to be religious. Males pursuing a monastic life are called monks; females are called nuns or sisters. Traits typical of monasticism include wearing a common habit; residing in some enclosure from which members leave only by necessity and from which non-members are excluded; and following a daily schedule that includes communal meals, work, and communal oral recitation of prescribed prayers at several fixed times during the day.

Benedict of Nursia (480-547)

"There was a man of holy life, Benedict by name, and the benediction of God was upon him."
(St. Gregory, *Dialogues*, II, I)

Benedict was born in the year 480 in Nursia, a town in Umbria, about 100 miles northeast of Rome and 20 miles southeast of Assisi. His family, described as one of "high station," sent him to Rome to study liberal arts. Benedict, however, was disheartened by the immorality he found there and soon abandoned Rome for Enfide, a small town situated on the crest of a mountain, about 40 miles east of Rome. Within a short period of time, men who were sympathetic to his views on life began to gather around him. He stayed at Enfide for about two years before moving to nearby Subiaco, a small town situated in a dark, narrow valley framed by steep cliffs. High up on one of the cliffs, Benedict found a cave, in which he decided to live. On his journey from Enfide, Benedict had met a monk, Romanus, whose monastery was on the cliff overhanging the cave. Romanus had discussed with Benedict the purpose which had brought him to Subiaco and had given him the monk's habit. At his suggestion, Benedict lived as a hermit in the cave for three years.

The three years that Benedict spent in solitude seem to have been a time of great spiritual maturing for him. Although he had little contact with others, he soon became known and respected by those around him. When the abbot of the nearby monastery died, the community begged him to become its abbot. He reluctantly agreed, but the experiment failed. But the character of his life and his reputation for sanctity continued to attract followers. During his years at Subiaco, Benedict built twelve monasteries, each with twelve monks under a superior he had appointed, while he remained the father (abbot) of all. In 529, he left Subiaco and, taking some monks with him, moved south to Monte Cassino, an imposing mountain mass rising up in the southern Apennines. There he established a monastery and began to write his Rule that became the foundation of Christian monasticism. It was there that he died in 547.

Benedict was not the first to write a rule describing the manner of life of men or women living together in community for the purpose of serving God. What made Benedict's Rule significant, however, was that it was both concise and practical. Moreover, it offered a healthy balance of work, prayer, and rest that respected an individual's spiritual needs while uniting him in community under the authority of a superior. In less than 9000 words, 73 short chapters, Benedict presented an image of monastic life as a family of brothers with all its inevitable demands: preparing food and washing up, welcoming guests, maintaining buildings and property, educating children and caring for the sick, while supporting themselves through their labors.

Benedict's Rule organized the monastic day into regular periods of private and communal prayer, sleep, spiritual reading, and work, but first and foremost was prayer, the *opus dei*, the work of God. Although the motto attributed to Benedict was *ora et labora* – pray and work – for him nothing took precedence over prayer. For communal prayer, Benedict turned to the psalms, and instructed that this prayer was to be said at night and at seven intervals during the day. In time, this became formalized as the Liturgy of

the Hours: *matins* (during the night), *lauds* (dawn), *prime* (first hour = 6 a.m.), *terce* (third hour = 9 a.m.), *sext* (sixth hour = 12 noon), *none* (ninth hour = 3 p.m.), *vespers* (at dusk) and *compline* (before retiring). What Benedict sought to instill through the Liturgy of the Hours was continual prayer, prayer that didn't end when the formal prayer ended.

Benedict also advocated the quiet, meditative reading of Scripture and the Fathers of the Church which he called *lectio divina*. With some four hours a day to devote to this private reading, the average monk could absorb an enormous amount of sacred learning in his lifetime. Yet this exercise was meant to be as much an affair of the heart as it was of the head. The goal was not erudition, but spiritual growth. *Lectio divina*, so understood, provided a fine complement to the communal prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours.

In addition to the times for the Liturgy of the Hours and *lectio divina*, Benedict set aside a total of some six hours a day to be spent in manual labor: some kind of farm or domestic work or craft. Here again is evidence of his sense of reality, moderation, and discretion. The monk not only had to support himself; he also needed a change from sedentary mental activity in some form of physical exercise.

The Rule required candidates to the community to vow stability (to remain in the same monastery), *conversatio morum* (a Latin idiom suggesting a 'conversion of manners'), and obedience (to a superior, who was understood as holding the place of Christ). Scholars have suggested that the three vows can be summarized as "to live in this place as a monk in obedience to its rule and abbot."

The vow of stability seems to have been at least partially a response to the vagabond monks who roamed from place to place, spending weeks or months in one monastery before moving on to another, in search of an ideal that simply did not exist. The vow of stability meant that the monk accepted this community, this place, and these people, as his way to God. In pronouncing that vow, the monk said, in effect, that his contentment and fulfillment did not consist in constant change and that his true happiness could be found nowhere other than in this place and this time. In his book *The Genesee Diary*, Henri Nouwen reflected on his seven-month stay in the Trappist Abbey of the Genesee in upstate New York. He spoke of looking back over his life and recognizing how disjointed it was, and how his lecturing and traveling and counseling and praying made for a life that was terribly scattered. At Genesee he was able to stand back and see the contrast between what was happening in his life and what he most truly desired. This sought-for 'groundedness' is what the vow of stability is really all about.

Whereas the vow of stability spoke of the need for 'groundedness' in a person's life, the vow of *conversatio morum* spoke of the need for change and growth. Although the Latin *conversatio morum* suggests a conversion of manners or of a person's way of life, it understands conversion not as a one-time event (which would be expressed as *conversio*) but as an ongoing process or journey (or *conversatio*). The Christian is understood to be essentially a pilgrim on earth "having here no abiding city" (Heb. 13:14). The vow of *conversatio morum* expresses the monk's continual openness to God and to God's direction and guidance in one's life, and it confronts his desire for coziness and security. The vow expresses the monk's commitment to total inner transformation; it is his response to the invitation of Jesus, "Come, follow me."

The person of Christ runs like a thread throughout the entire Rule. The Rule presented no abstract or theological treatise on God. Rather it is pervaded by the idea of sacramental encounter with Christ in the circumstances of everyday life and in the world of creation, but most especially in people in all their diversity. It was because of this that the hospitality of a Benedictine monastery became proverbial, and it was a hospitality not only of the open door, but also of the open mind and open heart. The guest was to be welcomed as one would welcome Christ: *hospes venit, Christus venit*, that is to say, "when a guest comes, Christ comes."

Finally, no discussion of Benedictine hospitality should omit mention of the popular legend that claims that the Rule of St Benedict contains the following passage (it does not):

If any pilgrim shall come from distant parts with wish to dwell in the monastery, and will be content with the customs of the place, and does not by his lavishness disturb the monastery but is simply content, he shall be received for as long as he wishes. If, indeed, he shall find fault with anything, and shall expose the matter reasonably and with the humility of charity, the abbot shall discuss it with him prudently lest perchance God hath sent him for this very thing. But, if he shall have been found contumacious during his sojourn in the monastery, then it shall be said to him, firmly, that he must depart. If he will not go, let two stout monks, in the name of God, explain the matter to him.

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During the twelfth century, Christian spirituality underwent a considerable change. Four factors seem to lie at the root of this change: the Gregorian reform, the *vita evangelica* movement, the ‘Twelfth-Century Renaissance,’ and the rebirth of cities.

The Gregorian reform was a series of reforms, begun by Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085), directed toward purifying the Church from secular and political domination. Although the reform accomplished its basic goal, it unleashed a spiritual fervor among the laity that the Church hierarchy found difficult to contain. It gave rise to a spiritual climate that favored evangelical simplicity and piety, and then a movement outwards from the world of the cloister, and a growing resistance to forcing the spiritual life into organized systems.

The *vita evangelica* was not so much an organized movement as it was a widespread spiritual fervor that centered on a return to gospel values expressed in simplicity, the literal imitation of the poor and homeless Jesus (which was expressed in ‘mendicancy,’ i.e., begging and wandering) and preaching. All of this gave rise to new forms of religious life.

The ‘Twelfth-Century Renaissance’ was an extraordinary flourishing of creative intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic currents that took place during the 12th century: the great Gothic cathedrals were begun, the study of theology moved from rural monasteries to urban cathedral schools and eventually to new city universities, and abundant literature, both courtly-poetic and spiritual, came into being.

From the 11th to the 13th centuries, Western Europe underwent a major urban revival. This revival, though relatively modest in relation to a large rural population, created a growing literate merchant class. The increased complexity of European society helps explain the proliferation of new forms of Christian life outside the traditional (and largely rural) monastic cloister.

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

“Preach the Gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words.” (Francis of Assisi)

Francis was born in the year 1182 in Assisi, a town in Umbria, about 120 miles northeast of Rome. His father, Pietro, was a wealthy cloth merchant, while his mother, Pica, seems to have come from a wealthy family. Even as a youth, Francis seems to have been blessed with a gracious, even courtly, manner and was said to be extraordinarily sensitive. When Francis was a youth, a poor beggar, hoping for a handout, entered his father’s shop, where Francis was working. Francis uncharacteristically brushed off the man and went back to work, but the affair bothered him greatly. He realized that he was courteous with the well-to-do, but his courtesy had not extended to this beggar. Contrite, Francis ran after the beggar to ask his forgiveness. Ugliness and physical deformity, however, were another matter. In fact, they seem to have incited a visceral horror in him. He later said of this period that nothing was more revolting to him than a leper, and he made every effort to avoid them. Even his gracious manner had its limits.

Francis received the normal elementary education of the time and soon began working in his father's business. He seems to have developed more than some skill as a cloth merchant, but there was also a very playful side of him, and he greatly enjoyed parties and having a good time with his friends.

When he was about twenty, Francis joined the men of Assisi in battle against nearby Perugia. The men of Assisi, however, suffered a disastrous and bloody defeat; Francis was taken prisoner and held captive for more than a year. The experience took a terrible toll on him. When he finally gained his freedom he had become moody, withdrawn, listless, depressed and suffered from nightmares – symptoms of what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder. Much to his father's dismay, Francis had lost interest in the family business and soon stopped working in the shop. He withdrew ever more deeply into himself. It seems that he was suffering from the self-loathing and guilt often found in survivors of great trauma but, regardless of the state of his soul, he began fasting, giving alms, and spending time in prayer in the church of San Damiano. He soon moved out of his family home and took up residence at San Damiano, where he became somewhat of a freelance penitent.

His parents were terribly concerned about him. Writers have not been kind to Pietro, often depicting him in the darkest of colors, yet he seems to have been a loving father who was greatly pained by his son's agony, and he struggled to find some way to help him. To Pietro, Francis seemed to be out of his mind, perhaps irrevocably. Pietro thus needed to protect his family and his business. If his wife were to die, her dowry, on which the business was founded, would pass to Francis and his brother. The brother was a cooperative business partner, but Francis would probably lose or give away his portion, effectively crippling the family business. Pietro tried to reason with Francis, trying to get him to give up any claim on the dowry. Since Francis did not understand what was at stake, Pietro found himself forced to go to court against his son. The matter was soon turned over to the bishop, who urged Francis to renounce any claim on his family's resources. Francis readily agreed, but to underscore his intention to depend solely upon God, he stripped off his clothes and, standing naked before his father, the bishop and those present, said that from that day forward he would serve only God. The bishop quickly covered Francis with a cloak, but Francis had become the Poverello, the little poor man.

Francis was now free to follow his own path, and it seems that his goal was simply to live his baptismal call in the most authentic manner he could. He began to spend considerable time in solitude, devoting himself to prayer. One day, as he was approaching Assisi, he had an experience that radically changed his life. In a moment of grace, he stopped at a leprosarium, took up residence there, and began to care for the lepers. As he cleansed the lepers' bodies, dressed their wounds, and treated them with kindness, he began to experience, not the revulsion and disgust he had experienced in the past when confronted with ugliness and physical deformity, but rather delight and joy. God, it seemed, was remaking Francis. Not long after this, Francis encountered a leper on a road. He came up to the man and embraced and kissed him. His spiritual nightmare was over.

Francis continued to live and work among the lepers. He took temporary refuge in churches, praying, working and, at least at San Damiano, repairing the building. In the lonely and decayed church, Francis found a substitute for the home in Assisi he had lost. There he became aware of such a powerful divine presence that the once-distant God became for him tangibly present. Changed internally by his ministry to the lepers, and beginning now to feel spiritually at home, he decided to adopt an external sign of his penitential life. He took off his secular clothes and dressed in the subdued plain tunic of a penitent.

At this time, beyond living for the day, ministering to lepers, praying before the painted cross of San Damiano, and repairing San Damiano, the precise kind of life to which he felt called remained unclear. After completing the repairs on San Damiano, he moved to the then-abandoned chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli and began restoring it. He might have continued in this solitary way of life indefinitely had not, two years after he had moved to San Damiano, two young men arrived, expressing their desire to join him in this way of life. Their arrival, however, was so unexpected that Francis was unsure how to

proceed. Seeking guidance, the three men met with the parish priest of a nearby church. They asked him to reveal God's will for them by divination: opening the Bible at random to find a verse that would reveal God's will. Even then, theologians considered the practice simply superstition, yet it was popular in lay piety, and the priest agreed to help them in this. Since no complete Bible was at hand, the priest used the altar missal. The priest and the three men prayed, and then three times the priest opened the missal and read the texts. The texts to which he opened the missal were:

- Mark 10:17-21, which contained the verse "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."
- Luke 9:1-6, which contained the verse "Take nothing for your journey, neither staff, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic."
- Matthew 16:24-28, which contained the verse "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

Taken as a whole, the three passages called for a radical renunciation of the world: giving all to the poor, taking nothing for the journey, and embracing the cross. The three texts became the core of what Francis would later call his "form of life." God, it seemed, had revealed to Francis what he was to do. Although no one present realized it, they had taken the first step to establishing the Franciscan way of life.

A year later, Francis led his followers to Rome where he asked and received the pope's approval for this new way of life. The pope, however, did more than simply approve their intention to give up all things, take up the cross, and follow Christ. Perceiving them to be a group of lay preachers, he commissioned them to preach penance to all. For Francis, this was a wholly unexpected development. He had never thought of himself as telling people, even his followers, what to do. Moreover, he had never learned to preach in the conventional sense. He preached by actions more than words. In time, both Francis and his companions would begin to preach in the conventional sense, but it seems that they always adhered to the maxim "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words."

Francis quickly recognized the need to take up a more ordered and structured way of life. About two miles outside Assisi, he and his companions came upon and occupied an abandoned shed near a bend in the stream known as Rivo Torto. It was the fraternity's first residence; they would stay there for about three months. In order to support themselves, each was to work at whatever craft or skill he had. During this time, they adopted a new form of dress. It was not so much a 'habit,' as religious habits were then understood, as a modified peasant smock. The color and material were unimportant. The famous fresco of "Brother Francis" in the Sacro Speco at Subiaco, painted within two years of his death, if not while he was still alive – although not a 'portrait' in the modern sense, it is said to resemble the best descriptions we have of him – shows Francis in a non-descript grey-brown habit tied with a white cord.

Francis never intended the Rivo Torto shed to be anything but a temporary residence, but as the number of his followers continued to grow, he realized that they needed not only a larger home but also a church in which they could sing the Divine Office. A nearby monastery, which owned the abandoned chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli – known as the Portiuncula, the Little Portion, in reference to the small plot of land on which it was located – agreed to lease it to him.¹ By the time the community had moved there, it was clear that Francis' spiritual vision had radically changed from what it had been when he first began to turn toward God. His conversion, profound though it was, had been simply a private experience. But as others began to join him, he was forced to look beyond his own desires to the care and direction of a community. Yet unlike other founders of religious communities, he presented his followers, not with a coherent rule, but with himself: with the lived example of his own life.

1 The name of that small plot of land is remembered in California's history: The original name of the City of Los Angeles was El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula, that is to say, the town of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels of Portiuncula.

Francis loved all of God's creation: Brother Sun and Sister Moon and wind and water and fire and earth and all living creatures. Each in its own way resembled the lilies of the field and the birds of the air with their beauty and wonder and mystery, with their utter dependence upon God and their ability to delight the human heart and, in doing so, to raise that human heart to God. Late in his life, he gave expression to all of this in his magnificent "Canticle of Creation":

Be praised, Good Lord, for Brother Sun who brings us each new day.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and wandering stars: white beauty bright and fair.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind, for air and clouds and the skies of every season...

Francis felt called to devote himself to a life of poverty. Clad in a rough garment and barefoot, he began to preach in Assisi and soon moved further afield. Soon others joined him, and within a few short years his order grew rapidly, perhaps too rapidly. Francis had written a primitive rule and would later write two later and more complete versions of the rule. But Francis' charisma was difficult to institutionalize. In truth, the identity of no other religious foundation at the time was so tied up with the personality of its founder. Francis himself was drawn to absolute poverty and utter dependence on God, yet the demands of such a way of life quickly found itself at odds with the responsibilities of administering a widespread order, maintaining churches, educating its members, and caring for its sick. Moreover, whereas some of its members found themselves drawn to greater prayer and contemplation, others sought to adapt to the demands of pastoral ministries.

During the first years of their existence, Francis and his followers were known simply as the "Penitents from Assisi," but sometime during the years 1213-1216, they took the name 'lesser brothers,' or *fratres minores* in Latin, or 'friars minor.' These Franciscans, to use the term by which we know them today – like the Carmelites, Dominicans, Servites, and Augustinians, all of whom were established during these same years – became known as 'mendicants' (from the Latin *mendicans*, meaning "begging"). Their lives were devoted to itinerant preaching (often moving from place to place) and serving the poor, and they supported themselves by begging or charitable donations. In the Christian tradition, males pursuing a mendicant life are usually called friars; females are called nuns or sisters. Mendicancy shares many of the traits of monasticism, except for the strict enclosure.

In August 1224, Francis and three companions retired for prayer to Mount La Verna, in the Apennines. There, while he was in a trance, Francis experienced Christ's crucifixion in his own body, receiving the wounds of Christ's crucifixion in his hands and feet, the stigmata. Shortly after this, he composed his great Canticle of Creation. This poetic hymn, although written when he was nearly blind and suffering acute abdominal pain, is a prayer of praise of God offered by a man fully at peace and in harmony with all creation. On October 3, 1226, Francis, at forty-four years of age, died at the Portiuncula.

Francis of Assisi was a man of immense personal and religious appeal. His spirituality was simple and evangelical, characterized by a gentleness and compassion which expressed itself in his great love for the poor. He understood from his own prayer the value of affectivity, image, and symbol; he thus gave us not only the Canticle of Creation but also the Christmas crèche. Francis so completely embodied the Gospel in his own life that during his final days he was graced by God to receive the marks of Christ's passion, the stigmata, in his body. The Franciscan movement did much to renew the Church during the thirteenth century.

The 'Prayer of Peace,' although attributed to Francis of Assisi, seems to date from no earlier than 1912, when it was printed in a small devotional French publication. The prayer seems to capture, however, the inner spirit of Francis and give beautiful expression to the heart and soul of his spirituality:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.