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Eucharist: Kenosis

with

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EUCHARIST: KENOSIS

To explore a Franciscan understanding of the Eucharist as kenosis, or the relationship between eucharist and kenosis I would like to revisit the death of St. Francis, something the Franciscan family celebrates every October 3 as the "Transitus". Francis was not an old man when he died, but he arrived back in Assisi frail and broken. After several days of prayer with his closest followers, on the evening of his death, he asked that John's Last Supper Discourse be read to him, beginning with the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Because he so often quoted passages from these four chapters of John's Gospel, some scholars believe he wanted to listen to the entire discourse. Afterwards he asked them to strip him of his habit so that he could embrace death naked, lying on the earth.

A story is a valuable way to approach a profound concept like kenosis. Kenosis is a Greek word that translates into English as self-emptying. Seeing the naked Francis lying on the earth is an experience of kenosis in the life of someone we honor and love. I believe that the Gospel he requested his brothers to read to him is an even more profound image of what kenosis means in healthy Christian spirituality.

The discourse begins with the simple statement that Jesus, like Francis, knew his hour had now come to depart from this world and return to his Father. To show his disciples the depth of his love, he rose from supper, laid aside his garments and, dressed like a servant or slave, washed their feet. "When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do

them.'" This is the only account that St. John gives of the supper at which Jesus instituted the Eucharist the Church has celebrated ever since.

Certainly the account of Jesus humbly washing his disciples dirty feet is a profound example of kenosis: The Son of God, the Word of the Father, performing a task belonging to slaves. The remaining three chapters of the discourse, however, are even more profoundly kenotic as they extend this kenosis into what the Church came to recognize as the life of the Holy Trinity. In his "Earlier Rule", the First Admonition, and other writings, Francis referred to these chapters as he described God's humility and encouraged his followers to live humbly. Francis was a simple, uneducated man. Thomas of Celano tells us in the biography he wrote of Francis that love, not scholarship, is what opened the meaning of the Gospels to Francis—that what he knew of God had come from love, not books.

It is important now to spend some time examining the word "love". The Gospels were originally written in Greek. Greek has three words for "love": *agape, philia,* and *eros.* The Gospel writers used *agape* to refer to God's inclusive love for all humanity and *philia* to refer to brotherly love. They avoided the word *eros,* because *eros* was also the name of the Greek god of love. Aside from naming a pagan god, however, *eros* had originally referred to a cosmic force that had drawn the universe out of chaos, bringing the disparate elements of reality together to form the human world. It was a dynamic life-giving energy with both creative and destructive potential. While providing the essential vitality of life, it could also consume and destroy. A life without eros would be cold and empty, but the untamed passion could also drive a person mad.

Beginning in the fourth century, theologians in the East began using the word *eros* without qualms to refer to both human and divine love. The pagan world was dying and they no longer shared the fears of the Jewish Gospel writers. They felt that *eros* expressed the super-

abundant love of the Trinity in ways that *agape* could not. Together with *eros* they spoke of *exstasis* to describe God's love.

We believe that we are created in God's image. Bearing God's image, we have a natural longing for our origin, God. From prehistoric times human beings have stood in awe of the forces of nature, recognizing in them, something greater than themselves. Primitive religions have worshipped these forces, trying to control them and placate them. Eventually the forces took on personalities as "gods" in ancient times, with mythologies explaining their meaning.

We have a longing for God, but God also longs for us. God breaks into our individual lives to reveal himself. As St. Maximos the Confessor tells us, God thirsts to be thirsted for and longs intensely to be longed for and loves to be loved. In the fulness of time, God entered into our history as Person, revealing himself more and more clearly to Abraham, Jacob, Moses and the Jewish prophets. Finally he revealed himself in his Son Jesus. This self-revelation is an *exstasis*, a self-gift that the Greek theologians felt could only be adequately described as *eros*.

Before we return to the life of St. Francis, it is important to say a bit more about eros. Eros names the vital energy that animates all of creation. It lies at the source of our desires—for friendship and love, for fruitful work, for life in abundance. Eros is the force that quickens our hearts when we encounter suffering and moves us to help and heal. Eros is our desire for closeness, the visceral hope that moves us out of solitude and motivates us to chance the risky relationships of friendship and love. Eros is about union with the other, with a suffering person, with the world of nature waiting to be embraced and protected. Eros finds expression in our longing to close the gap between ourselves and others. Eros finds expression in our deepest desires, in our holy longings.

As Ronald Rolheiser has said, "Spirituality concerns what we do with desire. It takes root in the eros inside us and it is all about how we shape and discipline this eros. Spirituality, essentially defined, is how we handle this eros." We are created with a deep burning desire (eros) within us that cannot be satisfied with any finite thing or even an infinite number of finite things. Both the great saints and the great sinners know they're created for ecstasy. Both are made of the same stuff: a mad, burning, aching, wild desire for ecstasy, This helps explain why great sinners are often the ones who become great saints.

Abundant eros lay at the core of St. Francis' personality, which explains much in his life, before and after his conversion. He was courteous from his childhood, and courtesy marked all his dealing with other persons—an example of which is his pursuit of the beggar whom he had ignored because he was selling a bolt of his father's cloth to a rich man and whom he then chased through the streets of Assisi in order to apologize and give him alms. His courtesy was a courtly affair. As a young man he and his other wealthy companions fancied themselves part of the world of the troubadours, those medieval poets who celebrated chivalrous love.

While the troubadours were noble figures, they were often accompanied by jongleurs—jugglers and acrobats who entertained audiences in between the songs of the troubadours. There was something foolish about jongleurs. They were jesters, servants, secondary figures. According to G. K. Chesterton, the turning point in the life of St. Francis is when he left the ranks of the troubadours and became a jongleur, a jester, a fool.

When the young Francis marched to Perugia, wearing the finest armor his father could afford, he had no idea he would be captured and thrown into a damp, dirty, dark dungeon, where he would languish with his companions for months before he was ransomed. After he was ransomed he lay sick for months, only to go off once again in fine armor and return home sick. All his courtly pretenses were dashed, one by one, and each time he appeared more the fool to

the citizens of Assisi he had always sought to impress. Chesterton talks about what might happen if a person began digging a hole straight into the earth. As he went deeper, he would reach a point where he would actually start going up. He also talks about the experience of discovering that your life is hanging by a fine thread—something Francis must have felt in the extreme moments of his suffering—and how that intuition would put into better perspective the massive pomp and heavy weight of earthly riches—the heavier the weight, the more precariously it must hang on the tiny thread. He says that Francis heard the word "fool" hurled at him so many times that there was not a rag of him left that was not ridiculous.

Understanding the nature of eros becomes important now. From the divine standpoint, we have God, the Lover, pursuing Francis. We can call this grace. On Francis' part we have a young man blessed with abundant eros who responds to this grace and chooses life instead of darkness. He is called a fool and now embraces his reality with joy. You might say he stuck the insult as a feather in his cap. Instead of tunneling downward, he has passed the center point and now begins to climb up. Instead of being crushed by failure, he has accepted it as kenosis, a self-emptying that begins to open him to loving relationship with God and all humankind.

He eventually encounters Jesus in a profound, personal experience in the chapel of San Damiano when he is praying before the Italo-Byzantine crucifix. Kenosis is an essential aspect of love, both for God and for human beings. Without the moving out from one's closed ego, no man or woman can truly love someone else. Because of our deep seated wounds, we tend to defend our egos with every means we can find. Grace works to erode these defenses because we are created in the image of God who is love and who is constantly loving us towards that which we are meant to be. Letting go of the walls and barriers, the illusions, the lies is always difficult. Sometimes it is very painful. Sometimes it only happens when we seem to be cracked open by suffering. Francis has been cracked open and he is ready to face God.

We often make God in our own image, so that God becomes a projection of ourselves. Christian mystics from ancient times tell us that God is incomprehensible, beyond our language and imagination. The only language appropriate to address God is silence. Broken and ready to listen in silence, Francis encounters Jesus as he gazes at the old crucifix icon. The encounter is between two persons, an intimate and immediate knowledge that surpasses words and which cannot be denied. It is a knowledge that is ecstatic. It can only happen when each person goes beyond their self and "falls" into the gaze of the other. At that point it is the gaze of the other that also tells me who I am, that makes of me a person and not just an individual. As he comes to know Jesus crucified, he also begins to understand two principle features of God—the overflowing goodness of God and the humility of God, both of which are kenotic.

Francis now knows that he is loved unconditionally in his brokenness. As he grows in his relationship with Jesus—the years of self-emptying, kenotic, silent prayer that lie before him—he also understands better God's love for all other human beings in their brokenness. I use the word relationship, but what I really mean is love, eros, the longing to reach out to, to become one with, to embrace. In loving, he begins to understand the nature of God's humble love and realizes that this is how he, too, is called to love. So his life expands to embrace lepers, thieves, the Sultan of Egypt, brothers who disappoint and betray him, and all humankind. Each embrace of the other is an ecstasis, a going out of himself, a kenosis.

Francis was born into a world that was completely Catholic, a world formed and shaped by the ancient Christian tradition which was over a thousand years old. He had listened to the psalms and Gospels and other books of sacred scriptures from his childhood, perhaps sometimes with attention, perhaps at other times with the impatience of a young man anxious to get back to something "fun". In his encounter with the person of Jesus in the chapel of San Damiano, he

understands for the first time in his life who Jesus is and the depth of Jesus' kenotic love for him and for all the world. He now chooses to turn to the sacred scriptures to learn more about his lover and, in the process, encounters the Holy Trinity.

When I began this reflection by remembering the death of St. Francis, I specifically mentioned the lengthly passage from St. John's Gospel that he wanted to hear one more time before he died. It was obviously his favorite passage, though not a simple one that was easy to understand. It proclaims over and over again the unity, the communion, shared by Jesus and the Father. In it Jesus clearly tells his disciples that he is the exact image—icon—of his Father, that he who sees Jesus sees the Father. Jesus is the Word spoken by the Father, the Word that reveals to us everything we can know about the Father, who remains hidden in absolute transcendent silence. In uttering this Word, the Father pours forth his entire self eternally, like a waterfall, like a Niagara Falls expanded infinitely and without beginning or end. This self emptying of the Father in the eternal generation of the Son, his Word, shows us a God who is humble and poor—kenotic—by nature. Through his Word, he creates the universe. Everything in the universe is a small word of the Word. His eternal love for his Son extends to the universe, which is the finite expression of his Son, the Word. Far from being an after thought of some kind, creation is rooted in God's self-diffusive goodness and emerges out of the depths of Holy Trinity.

In this Gospel passage, Jesus promises us that we, too, are to join him in his glory, that we are to be swept up into the divine life of the Trinity as his brothers. He tells his disciples that he will send them the Holy Spirit, the bond of love eternally showered by the Father on him, his Son, and which he returns eternally to his Father. The Spirit will remain with us forever, as Comforter and Advocate, reminding us of all that Jesus taught and enabling us to enter into this new life, this salvation he has accomplished.

Often Catholics us the word "communion" when they think of the Eucharist. We say I am going to receive communion today, that a child is going to make their first holy communion, as though the Eucharist, the Mass, was a process that produced an object we wanted to take away for our spiritual well-being. The word we commonly use for the Eucharist—the "Mass"—has also become something static, even though it comes from a final command, a verb that tells us to go because we are now sent back out into our broken world that thirsts for God.

The word Eucharist, like the word Mass, comes from a verb. It is not focused on an object but on action. It comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving. To do Eucharist is to give thanks to God for all God has done for us in creation, in salvation history, in our individual lives. To be truly thankful is to step out of our self-sufficiency and acknowledge our debt to someone else. It involves kenosis, humility. When we give thanks to God, we recognize how little we deserve the humble love of God who has stooped down to us in our brokenness, embraced us there, and loved us forward towards what we are meant to be. At the heart of the Eucharist is our remembering the kenosis of Jesus in his incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection. As we remember, we become one with his saving work.

To become one with the saving work of Jesus, to embrace our salvation, we must, like Jesus, learn to love every other human being, every person created in God's image and loved by God, no matter how broken and unlovely they may seem, in fact, in the middle of their brokenness, because this is where God is, as he is in our own brokenness and unloveliness. And it is here that we can speak of "communion" in a way that is theologically correct. Throughout the Gospel passage Francis pondered at his death we encounter the notion of communion: the communion of the Father with the Son and the Son with the Father, the communion between Jesus and his disciples, the communion of his disciples with the Father, the communion that is possible only through the working of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus will send. In every instance, this communion is dependent upon kenosis, upon humble love, beginning with the kenotic love

of the Holy Trinity. To do eucharist is to embrace kenosis, to stand humbly before God with a longing in our heart that we might eventually come to love the world and everyone in the world as God does. To do eucharist is to gather into our heart all the brokenness of the world and to stand with brothers and sisters in peaceful, forgiving, loving communion. To learn to do eucharist well is the task of a life-time. The more deeply we embrace kenosis, as our father Francis did throughout his life, the closer we will come to understanding eucharist. Through the prayers of St. Francis may God grant us this grace. Amen.