

A Byzantine Franciscan and the Coincidence of Opposites

By Robert Lentz, OFM

The Franciscan tradition of art is as alive as the Franciscan movement. Some centuries have been more glorious than others. History—the judgment of those who follow you—will judge our work in this 21st century. I introduce myself to you as someone intensely interested in both Franciscan aesthetics and evangelization. As a Byzantine iconographer, I feel the need to introduce a greater expression of transcendence in our religious art, while, as one who is involved in evangelization, I do not want to lose our Franciscan charism of glorifying God in the “ordinary”. For almost thirty years I have been an active agent in making iconographic symbolism more relevant to people of our time, and have noticed in the last ten years that my new images are being copied by other artists, both in the Americas and in Europe. In 2004, as I was walking towards the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, for example, just before I reached the main piazza, I glanced in the window of an ecclesiastical art store and saw an exact copy of my icon, *The Meeting of St. Francis and St. Clare*, (fig. 1) painted by an Italian artist. Two years later, a different exact copy sat in the same window when I walked past. This iconographic type has now entered into the tradition. Back in the 90’s, I depicted St. Clare with a cat. I now see cats with St. Clare, in other contemporary icons. In 1986, I placed bandages over Francis’ stigmata when I painted his bust. Now bandaged Francis are popping up in the work of other artists. I have just finished a nine by seven foot panel icon of the Holy Trinity, based on the theology of St. Bonaventure, for a church in Houston, Texas. At its blessing, the archbishop referred to it as a new standard for images of the Trinity in our time. Through this image, Franciscan theology, with its exciting insights, is re-entering the life of the contemporary Church at large. As the maker of these images, which are influencing the art tradition you study, I offer you this paper, which is a reflection on my own life as an artist and a friar.

At the turn of the last century, just before the 1905 Revolution, my paternal grandparents left what was then the Russian Empire. Their coming to America was a traumatic event that left family roots both broken and tangled. After settling in Massachusetts, they moved to Buffalo. Anti-immigrant sentiment sent them across the

continent to the Colorado Rockies, where their Model T Ford broke down and they could go no farther. To their dismay, they found that the Ku Klux Klan controlled the Colorado state government with the Grand Dragon sitting in the governor’s chair and Klansmen in full regalia marching down Colfax Avenue, several blocks



from here. They watched crosses burn in their neighborhood. I grew up with these stories.

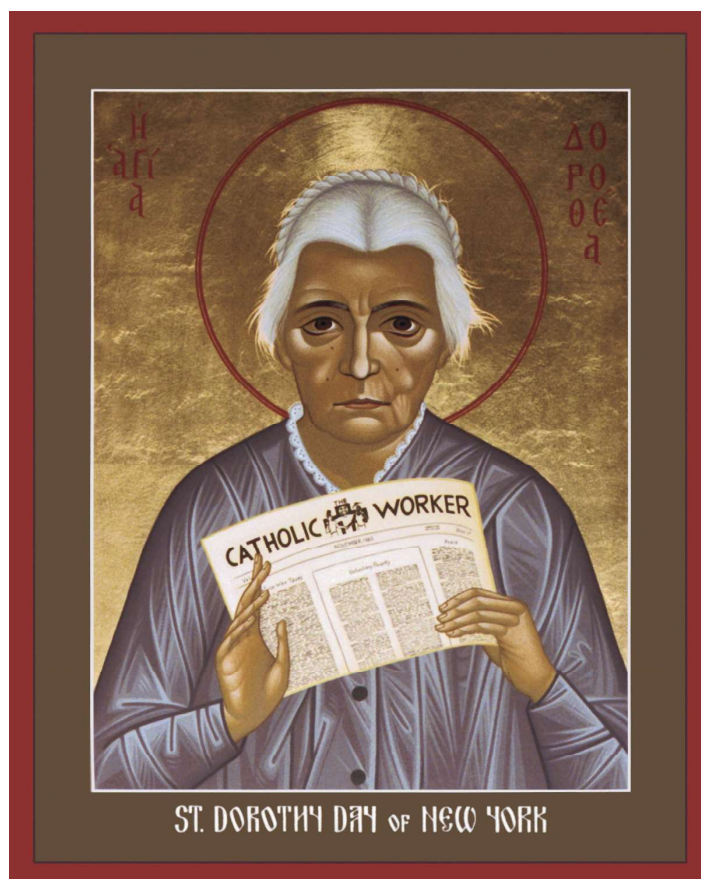
I also listened to more magical stories as a child: stories of bands of wild Cossacks riding through villages in southwestern Russia, of endless fields of sunflowers, and of monastery churches full of icons. My grandmother’s small house was full of images of saints, and I soon had the wall next to my bunk bed covered with paper holy cards. I learned to pray in the vast expans-

es of prairie that once opened to the horizon, east of Denver. My image of God was that of the transcendent Pantocrator, a face I had seen in my grandmother's icons, reinforced by my experience on the American steppes.

My favorite holy card was one of St. Francis of Assisi, with birds in his left hand and on his shoulders. I remember the gilt edges of the card and the bright colors of the print. It was no icon, but it became a window for me into heaven, nevertheless. From the time I was six years old, I knew I wanted to be like this saint. When I was eight, I made myself a habit out of gunnysacks and a rope. My father wasn't pleased at all. He had little use for priests and looked forward to having as many grandchildren as possible.

When I was 17 years old, I left for Detroit to become a friar in the Province of St. John the Baptist. I was drawn especially to the contemplative side of Franciscan life, which seemed to recede, like an ocean wave on a sandy beach, each year in the 60s. In theology, I longed for something more, too young to know that it was the mystical theology that lay behind my grandmother's icons. When the time came to make solemn vows, I left, instead, and began a pilgrimage of almost 35 years, which has led me back into the Order, now as an old man.

This pilgrimage took me through Latin America to a Russian Orthodox orphanage in Santiago, Chile. I lived in several Russian and Greek monasteries, where I learned the tradition of hesychastic prayer and how to paint icons. I heard fascinating stories from exiled men and women who had fled the Bolsheviks in the 1920s. I listened to crazed Orthodox monks who expected the imminent arrival of the Antichrist and had found caves in nearby mountains where they intended to hide when he did appear. I entered fully into the ghetto of the Russian Church in Exile, exploring my family's roots and



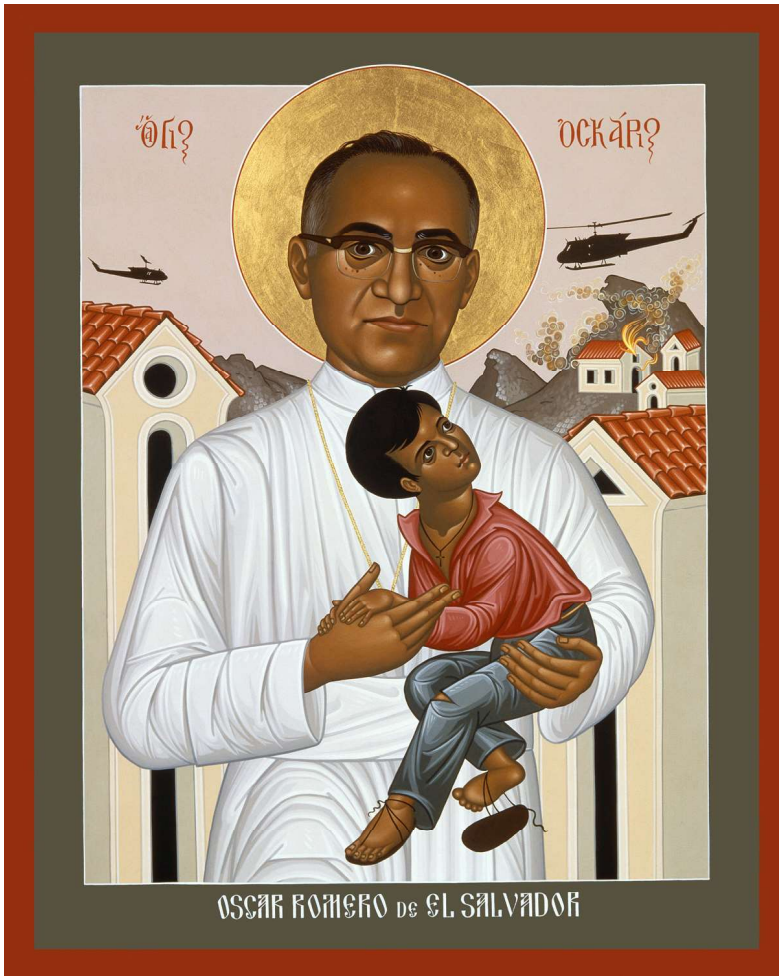
the theological world of the Byzantine East.

In 1982, I met a Catholic priest in San Francisco who worked with marginalized Catholics, not far from the Russian Cathedral on Geary Boulevard. When the flat above his became available, I rented it with another Russian artist. Throughout the week, Father Daniel O'Connor hosted support groups, evening retreats, and simple meals for all sorts of people pushed aside by the Church. For the first time in my life, I found myself surrounded by Communists of every hue, by feminists and gay folk, by atheists and artists. In the contemplative setting of his flat, I learned to listen to new stories and began to

see God's face from different angles. In time, these new perspectives began to demand expression in the icons I was painting.

I cannot remember a time when I have not made images. As a tiny child, it was with crayons. I won a set of pastels in grade school and began to experiment with more sophisticated media. While my family fished in the high Rockies, I taught myself how to sculpt wood. I learned how to build walls with fieldstone and how to weave cloth. But it was the Byzantine icon that always fascinated me, trying as it did to express what happens when God touches a human life. My early attempts at making icons were earnest but comical. In the mid-70s I met an emigre from Leningrad who had studied iconography in a monastery in Pskov, but he was jealous of his knowledge and unwilling to help me learn. Finally, in 1978, I apprenticed myself to a master painter at Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Massachusetts.

In the monastery workshop, we worked in silence, twelve hours a day, six days a week, and six hours on Sundays and holy days. My teacher had studied in Athens in the school of Photios Kontoglou, an Orthodox Greek from Asia Minor who had rediscovered Byzantine iconography while cleaning ancient icons on



me—not even a gilded ghetto topped with a cross.

I began with an icon of Dorothy Day, (fig. 2) and then one of Oscar Romero. (fig. 3) The third was of the Protestant holy man, Martin Luther King, and the fourth, the Hindu, Gandhi. Each step away from the ghetto cost me blood in the beginning. The Orthodox had filled my head with fear of the devil and the punishments awaiting anyone who betrayed the holy Tradition. Father Daniel O'Connor's Irish humor blasted many of my Orthodox demons away, but it was my own experience of finding Christ in the alienated men and women who gathered at his house that eventually silenced the rest. Humor and these grace-filled encounters, held in contemplative prayer, brought the insights I needed to reclaim my life outside the ghetto.

I returned to the New Mexico desert, where I lived as an urban hermit in the barrios of Albuquerque, following the Third Order Rule for almost 20 years. I supported myself painting the icons for which I have become famous. My work has been controversial, especially among Byzantine Christians. I have never sought controversy, however, nor change for the sake of change. As a Byzantine Christian myself, I have a profound respect for Tradition. As I have ventured farther and farther from the customary, I have always tried to remain traditional, wrestling with the Tradition, trying to find ways to say new things. I have, in short, done theology in the margins, exploring christological and ecclesiological questions with my brush.

Mount Athos. In those days we used egg tempera on gesso composed of gypsum and animal skin glue. Each apprentice began with the humblest tasks and advanced to more difficult work when he had mastered simpler things. We worked in silence and followed the typicon of one of the sketes attached to St. Panteleimon's Monastery on the Holy Mountain. My fourth month I was finally allowed to paint faces, and the abbot began giving me old Russian icons to copy for his hermitage in Maine.

I learned iconographic canons as well as painting techniques. I was immersed in Patristic theology. When I left Boston to return to Colorado, I never anticipated leaving the protecting shell of Eastern Orthodoxy. Events in Chile and Colorado broke this shell wide open, but I realize now, from the perspective of so many years, that it was my love for St. Francis that really shattered the shell. In the 60s we weren't as deeply exposed to Franciscan spirituality as young friars are today. What we did receive in formation, however, changed my world forever. Francis opened my eyes to God's limitless love. After Francis, no ghetto could ever hold

The Coincidence of Opposites

Many theologians in various traditions have spoken at length about the role of the coincidence of opposites in the spiritual life. Any consideration of an encounter with the Divine must include the coincidence of opposites beginning with immanence and transcendence. I think, especially, of the great Muslim mystic from Spain, Ibn al-Arabi, whose writings often mirror the letters of Saint Clare to Saint Agnes of Prague. Saint Bonaventure's emphasis on Christ as the center rests upon Christ's role as the ultimate coincidence of opposites. I find in his teaching the key to my own life and





my art.

At first glance, it would be hard to find spirituality closer to the core of the Latin Rite than Franciscan spirituality. Franciscan emphasis on the Incarnation of Christ, especially as expressed in popular devotions like the Christmas crèche and the Way of the Cross, have shaped what the Latin Rite has become in the twenty first century. As a young man in his early twenties who had grown up with a very different kind of spirituality, I often felt lost in the Latin Rite world of the Franciscan Order. I was too young to dig deeper, and, with the limited exposure to Franciscan spirituality I received, I didn't even know *where* to dig. After leaving the Order, I lived as a guest for a while in Sybertsville, Pennsylvania, where Franciscans from the Byzantine Rite Custody of Our Lady of the Angels had a friary, and even there felt more conflict than coincidence of opposites. It seemed the Pennsylvania friars had merely slipped a Byzantine veneer over Latin Franciscan life, a veneer that fit so poorly, their custody had nearly been destroyed several years before by a mass exodus of the friars in formation, who eventually became Orthodox.

As a Byzantine Christian, living once again in this seemingly very Latin Order, I am caught, once again, between opposites. The pull between the opposite poles is sometimes painful, but I am no longer a youngster. I often swim in Bonaventure's texts, as well as those of Ibn al-Arabi, plunging into depths I didn't know existed in my youth. The Christ I have discovered on my long pilgrimage is indeed the coincidence of all opposites. The symbolic center point of his cross, the point of coincidence, is also the center of my own heart. From that

center, I choose how to live my Franciscan life. Having once seen the shell of a ghetto crash around me, I am not interested any more in a veneer. As I have learned to plunge into the depths of both the Franciscan and the Byzantine traditions, so have I learned to search for what is of essence. When I search for the Franciscan "essence," I find ample room for my Byzantine soul.

I have traveled through Umbria four times in the past ten years. None of these times has been an official tour or pilgrimage. Each time I have searched out the various nooks and crannies of Francis' world, lingering where I have felt his presence, rather than where he was supposed to be. Aside from his tomb, Assisi has

never held me. Gubbio and Perugia have been interesting because of their stories, but I weary of them after a few hours. It has been the rugged caves in the Rieti Valley, and the forests of La Verna that have caught and held my heart. I have spent days in St. Michael's cave at Poggio Bustone, so close to St. Francis that I almost felt I could touch his feet. Greccio, with its crowds, eludes me, but the springs at Fonte Colombo hold me fast. On La Verna, I visit the basilica and the chapels and then flee to the mountainside, where I can, once again, spend days. The Francis I have come to know is a wild man burned by our transcendent

God. He is brother to Gregory of Nyssa, Seraphim of Sarov, Gregory Palamas, and all of Russia's holy fools. Francis, the greatest saint of the Latin Church, is universally loved because he has become a coincidence of opposites, like the Christ he so faithfully imitated. The Francis of the caves could create a crèche at Greccio, without losing his spiritual balance, precisely because he was so intimately acquainted with the God who is





beyond all words.

Francis was born into a world with many Byzantine elements, but a world that was slowly slipping towards the Gothic and the Renaissance. The religious art all around him was closely related to the iconographic world of Byzantium. Umbria, especially, bore a Byzantine stamp because of the Syrian monks¹ who had fled there to escape violence in the East. The Crucifix he heard speak was a Byzantine icon painted, perhaps, by one of these exiled monks. This crucifix has become famous throughout the western world and is a central image in Franciscan life. That such a Byzantine image stands at the birth of this most seemingly Latin Order reveals a hidden coincidence of opposites that demands our attention.

On May 17, 2008, I delivered a paper at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, Canada (“Christ In the Margins: Byzantine Iconography In the Twenty-first Century”). Bruce Russell, an art historian at the university, made an insightful reference to one of the frescos in the upper church of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. In this fresco, which depicts the crèche Francis created in Greccio in 1223, Francis and others are behind the rood screen of a church much larger than anything in Greccio’s cave. Above the door of this rood screen is a crucifix in the same shape as that of San Damiano. We see a plain brown panel, crisscrossed with braces and attached unceremoniously to a supporting tripod with a rope. It is the ugly back of an icon, not the luminous front. Bruce pointed out that the artist, one of those who began the tradition of Franciscan vernacular art, depicted Francis as having gone around the icon to its back side, rather than through it to glory.

The story we know of Francis and the San Damiano Crucifix, however, is that he somehow slipped *through* it to the reality of the Christ it depicted. What happened to Francis at San Damiano that day is what has happened for centuries to Byzantine Christians when they have prayed well before their icons: he discovered in the icon a window into heaven. The space between the experience of the holy founder and his followers decades later who sought to spread his teachings is a space that, in this case, eliminates the coincidence of opposites. In eliminating the coincidence of opposites, in emphasizing the immanent, rather than tying it to the transcendent, this artist in Assisi begins the process in Western religious art that eventually results in the sentimental, rather meaningless images we find in our church goods stores today. When Bruce spoke to

¹ Additional information about the presence and influence of these Syrian monks may be found in G. Penco, *Il monachesimo in Umbria dalle origini al secolo XII incluso* (Gubbio: Congress Centro Studi Alto Medioevo, 1962), 258-76.

me of this fresco, I immediately thought of the sense I have had for many years that the revolution initiated by the vernacular artists of the Franciscan movement has sometimes been catastrophic for the Western Church and its mystical tradition.

Though seldom understood by Western Christians, the Seventh Ecumenical Council² was the last of the great Christological councils of the Church. Far from being peripheral to Christian faith, icons, the council decreed, were an essential part of our belief, resting as they do, on the full humanity of the divine Christ. The ancient Church, both Western and Eastern, lived around the icon as a primary symbol of itself. The icon spoke of a sacred center around which human life revolved, a center that held all in its gravity—its focus of meaning—precisely *because* it was sacred. Ancient Christian art, art before the thirteenth century, emphasized transcendence, sometimes at the expense of immanence. With the rise of vernacular art, the sacred element in art was pushed to the side and became a vaneer. Because of the powerful impact of art on the human psyche, an impact much more immediate and more powerful than words, the effect of this revolution, as it has led through the Renaissance to ever more humanistic styles, has perhaps even led us to the “death-of-God” theology of several decades ago. Christianity is a wisdom path, not merely a moralistic movement. Take away the coincidence of opposites and you have a path that leads nowhere.

Depicting sacred themes does not, by itself, make art sacred. In the sense in which I am using the term, neither does using such art in sacred ways. For art to be truly *sacred*, it must struggle to tie together both the immanent and the transcendent in its making. It will then be sacred, regardless of its use—just as a Byzantine icon, a Baule mask, or a Rothko painting is no less sacred when it ends up in an antique store. The sacred subject of a piece of art reveals itself as such, independently of external testimony. Art reveals the sacred solely through artistic devices. Art stands on its own.

In the thirteenth century, the new mendicant orders were faced with a Catholic laity who had been marginalized as much within their Church as they had in the rest of feudal society. Processes reaching back to the time of Theodosius and Justinian had brought about a situation in which all sacred power was concentrated in the hands of the clergy, with the laity going to the clergy in order to receive God. Holiness belonged in

² Footnote: J.D. Mansi, *Seventh Oecumenical Council, Acta, in Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Florence, 1759-98), vol. 12, cols. 951-1154; vol. 13, cols. 1-485. Excerpts in English translation in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, edited by H.R. Percival, Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 14 (Oxford: James Parker and Company; New York: Christian Literature Company, 1900), 523-87.





monasteries, not on muddy streets. The new vernacular art that spun out of the mendicant movement was an attempt to restore importance and dignity to ordinary secular life. As noble as this effort was, it eventually slipped away from the all-important coincidence of opposites, no longer *dignifying* secular life, but further degrading it as it ignored more and more the transcendent center, which is the ultimate source of all dignity.

The more ancient Christian art, whether Byzantine or Romanesque, had as its primary goal communicating a sense of communion between the immanent and the transcendent. Figures in the ancient art seemed to emerge from their flat surfaces, to join congregations in an eschatological “communion of saints.” Manipulation of perspective as well and the use of shadow and light contributed to this illusion. The bodies of the holy persons assumed poses that suggested this movement outward into the space before them. At the same time, even as the saints seemed to come forward to mingle with the faithful, there was no doubt about the holiness they had already achieved in their transcendent state. Light emanated from their faces and bodies. They had become part of God’s “new creation.”

In the new art that began to develop after the time of St. Francis, perspective is reversed and worshippers are invited to enter the images with their imaginations. Instead of heaven exploding eschatologically into worship space, ordinary, daily life enters the church building to tell a story. The stories the artists tell have emotional nuances that engage the imagination of their audience. Deep feeling takes the place of eschatological glory. Drama takes the place of communion.

While poorly executed Byzantine or Romanesque art might simply end up remote and austere, it always points towards an opposite transcendent pole. The new realistic art, however, dependent as it is on imagination and emotion, runs a more dangerous risk of becoming sentimental when it misses its mark. The transcendent pole, which draws salvation history forward, disappears in an emotional fog. Gone is the ancient sense of a transcendent center that dignifies ordinary human life.

Encountering this center in the years of his conversion is what enabled Saint Francis to embrace the leper, the wolf, and the Sultan of Egypt. (fig. 4) The same Francis who desired to experience the humility of Christ’s birth in the cave at Greccio, who brought farm animals and straw around the small altar in that cave, would write in a letter to the entire Order, just before he died, “Let everyone be struck with fear, let the whole world tremble, and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest! O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimi-

ty! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread! Brothers, look at the humility of God, *and pour out your hearts before Him!*”³ This mystical outburst is the cry of a saint who has seen the raging furnace that Bonaventure mentions near the end of Chapter Seven (Ch. 7.6) in his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. It reflects the balance Francis found in his own spiritual life through Christ, the coincidence of opposites. While he longs to know Christ’s poverty as a human, he has already seen the glory of his divinity—and all of this first in the icon crucifix painted by a Syrian monk.

Each time I have visited the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, I have tried to appreciate the bright frescos that line the nave of the upper church. It is purely a mental exercise for me, however, as my heart races toward the apse and the blackened, oxidized images of Cimabue. I have heard tour guides tell their groups how Cimabue was a step towards the more advanced art of the nave, the teacher Giotto and other new vernacular artists surpassed. And since my return to the First Order, as I have stood in the middle of the nave, I have wondered about my own icons and my identity as a friar, and how strange it sometimes seems to try to hold the two together.

These past two years, I have begun to see things in a different light as I have worked on a nine-foot icon of the Holy Trinity for All Saints Church in Houston, Texas. (fig. 5) Preparation for painting the icon involved immersing myself in Bonaventure’s teaching about the Trinity. The more I read and digested of his writings, the more similar he sounded to Eastern Orthodox theologians I already knew. Bonaventure knew the Eastern Fathers through Latin sources, and he embraced their theological insights because they harmonized so well with his own evolving Franciscan spirituality. The reading in the breviary from the *Itinerarium* on the feast of Bonaventure always brings tears to my eyes, as he challenges us to seek the spouse not the teacher, darkness not clarity, and to look not to the light but rather to the fire that enflames totally and that carries one into God.⁴ In a sense, from his hermitage on La Verna, Bonaventure tells us to move past the bright frescos in the nave to something more transcendent if we would reach the

³ Francis of Assisi, “A Letter to the Entire Order,” in *The Saint*, Vol. 1 of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 118.

⁴ Cf. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, in Vol. II of *Works of St. Bonaventure*, translated by Zachary Hayes (Saint Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002), 139.





goal of Christian life.

I have spoken of Christianity as a “wisdom path,” and Bonaventure’s short book is called an *itinerarium* or a “journey”. Each of us is referring to a process of growth that challenges what we are and know and leads us towards something far beyond us. While the vernacular art that arose after the death of Saint Francis recognized the life of ordinary people and brought it into the churches, the stories it told led only a few feet down the *itinerarium mentis in Deum*, the path into God. With the passage of centuries, popular devotions like the crèche and the *via crucis* often devolved into sentimental exercises, far from the “sublime humility” and the “humble sublimity” Saint Francis had praised. Separated from Francis’ experience of divine darkness in the caves, these dangerous memories were tamed beyond recognition. As artists concentrated more and more on religious emotion, by the Victorian period Catholic churches and homes were filled with a surfeit of weak, insipid depictions of Christ and the saints. Having forgotten the coincidence of opposites, what began as a

divine drama of opposites ended up as sacrine piety, worthy of the scorn it received after the Second Vatican Council.

Our Franciscan life itself can only collapse when it is not based on Christ, the coincidence of opposites Francis knew and lived so well. In documents, such as *Followers of Christ for a Fraternal World* (General Curia OFM, Rome, 2004), we are challenged to place prayer as the first priority in our life, ahead of fraternity, ahead of our work. Prayer is to our life what Francis’ experience of God’s transcendence was to the crèche he created at Greccio. Grounded in true knowledge of how sublime the Divine Mystery is, its corresponding humility becomes overwhelming. Our Order has been reformed so many times over the centuries, only to fall once again into mediocrity. I suggest that it has been a neglect of the coincidence of opposites, our only safe path, which has brought us so often to this state.

While I once wondered how to hold together my identity as a Franciscan with my Byzantine soul and the icons that are my work, I no longer feel this con-

