Early Franciscan Theology: Discussion

As you will learn from the lecture and the notes on the website attached to the previous class, as opposed to what is widely believed, there is not one but different types of truth. Our society usually accepts only one type of truth, the “truth of correspondence” or factual truth, when belief is created by being able to make a logical argument and link statements to actual facts in a scientific way. However, early Franciscans, when they discussed what theology is, recognized other types of truth, in addition to the “truth of correspondence” or factual truth:

- affective or emotional truth (what you are emotional about is the truth)
- truth of coherence (what is coherent and complete is true)
- “thick description” (what can be described “thickly,” or in concrete detail is true)
- practical truth (what leads to valid practical results is true).

Correspondingly, early Franciscans understood theology in the following ways:

- as an affective or emotional method that creates belief by way of experiencing emotions
- as a method that creates belief by creating a coherent picture of reality
- as a method that creates belief by concrete examples, historical narratives, telling stories of concrete people and places, i.e., by “thickly describing” what is to be believed
- as a practical method that leads to valid results; thus belief is assured by true results, not correspondence to facts or logical arguments

Concrete tasks for presentation/discussion:

Based on such an understanding of truth and nature and goals of theology, for the class presentation/discussion do the following:

Peruse the notes and excerpts from early Franciscan theological texts linked to this section of the class website and choose one model of truth and one type of theology to use: affective/emotional; coherent; “thick description”; practical (see above). Formulate briefly this type of truth and theology for the presentation, documenting with statements from early Franciscan theology.

Find an example from human culture/history or from your own experience where this model is used (not necessarily in religion or theology!), as opposed to arguments based on logic/rationality or the truth of correspondence (factual truth, verifiable facts).

The four possible models with examples:

a. Affective/emotional truth/theology. Find an example when people are driven not by facts and rational argument but emotionally, by developing an affection (strong opinion, belief, hope, sympathy/antipathy, etc.). For example, it is known that Trump supporters totally reject scientific facts (such as global warming and climate science), rational arguments (that the type of economic policy pushed by Trump will empowerish many of his supporters), etc.
b. Truth as coherence. Find an example when people’s behavior and beliefs are influenced not by logic, argument, or verifiable facts, but by a coherent description or picture. For example, aboriginal and native societies have a mythological picture of the world that cannot be verified scientifically or logically (not “true” in terms of correspondence) but is complete and coherent and therefore believable, so it works for them to modify their behavior and life. Ancient people believed in their cosmological pictures (e.g., the Ptolemaic model of the universe) because they were coherent. But now think about our own “science.” Can everything it says be verified (e.g., the quantum theory) or is it simply a coherent picture that is believable because it is coherent?

c. The “thick description” model of truth and theology. Find an example when people learn, or people’s behavior and beliefs are influenced not by logic or argument, but by a specific and detailed story or description (a historical account or a story about their contemporaries). For example, it is well known that hearing a concrete story or account with concrete details, names of concrete persons, and so forth (or seeing a report on TV with concrete pictures or videos, witness interviews, etc.), rather than a general rule, argument, or logical explanation, is often more persuasive. It does not have to be scientifically verifiable, it just needs to be detailed and concrete.

d. Practical truth/practical theology. Find an example when the information or story that is presented is not “true” in terms of correspondence (it does not correspond to verifiable facts) but the result that is achieved is valid or “true.” The simplest examples are the “placebo” effect when the drug is not “true” but the result is, or stories told to children (such as that about Santa Claus) that are not factually true but are supposed to achieve valid practical results.