Contemplation and Compassion:
A Franciscan Ministerial Spirituality
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1. Setting the Context

The reality of human suffering, physical, spiritual, or mental, challenges believers at the core of their religious convictions. Ministry to those who suffer involves the art of attending to the other in his or her pain, the ability to stand in solidarity with the other without judgment or criticism as the first step toward healing. It calls not for problem solving, which is perhaps the first reaction to the pain of another as evidenced in attempts to take the pain away, or worse to ignore it with statements such as “That’s all right, it will get better,” or, “You need to look at it in this way.”

What this experience of suffering does call for, as Robert Schreiter suggests in his book *Reconciliation*, is an “orthopathema, a right way to suffer, when our orthodoxies have been shattered and our orthopraxies have come to naught.”¹ The suffering to which ministry today must respond is as much emotional and structural as it is the result of physical violence. The signs of the times today must be read in the broken lives and tortured existence of ordinary men and women who struggle to hold on to their humanity in a non-human world.

The Franciscan tradition of contemplation and compassion provides a valuable resource for ministry in this context. It finds its own realized orthopathema in the experience of Francis and Clare of Assisi, an experience which discovered in the embrace of suffering, of one’s own human condition, the very mystery of God. The Franciscan poet Jacopone of Todi (died 1306), living in the turbulent and dangerous period at the end of the thirteenth century, gives

vivid expression to the essential content of this tradition in his laud, *The Three Stages of Divine Love*:

When the soul is in harmony with conscience
It takes joy in the love of its neighbor.
Then without doubt it is true love,
Then we can call it charity.

Love then joins love
To his suffering brethren;
And in his compassion he suffers more
Than the man whose suffering he shares.

While the brother who was suffering
Finds respite from his pain,
The compassionate man suffers anguish,
Day and night without repose.

No man can comprehend how this can be
If the understanding is not infused in him by charity,
That charity which lies hidden in suffering,
Waiting to give birth.²

As Jacopone suggests, it is compassion that gives access to the other without being intrusive, establishing a real connection with the other by participation in the other’s suffering. This way of being human implies vulnerability, availability, solidarity, and empathetic attachment, while at the same time respecting the integrity of the experience of the other. Without providing solutions or answers, compassion brings healing and health in that it allows the other to stand in her or his pain and suffering while resisting evil, confusion and surrender, in order to share in the experience of charity, which is God.

This compassion which the Franciscan Jacopone celebrates is nurtured by contemplation, the ability to see and recognize the charity hidden in suffering. In other words, contemplation allows one to discover God in the other with the other, and invites participation.

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Compassion is a defining characteristic of Franciscan spirituality. This way of being understood as the ability to be with others in their pain as their pleasure. This way of being is sustained in contemplation, the capacity to be drawn out of oneself in attention, awareness, and surrender to the other. This is the shape which "for the footsteps of Jesus Christ" takes in the world. The object of contemplation for the Franciscan, as the tradition reveals, is the person, his or her suffering, concrete humanity—that is where we find and meet and followed.

Contemplation and compassion effect reconciliation. Every reconciliation is the acceptance of one's own human condition, one marked by pain and suffering, incompleteness, fragility, limits. As an examination of the Franciscan tradition will show, contemplation and compassion translate into real presence, grace in the world. Transformation takes place not in the isolated recesses of the heart, but in the body and the blood, in the communication with passion with the other, in unity. At the same time, this mode of spirituality defines a style of ministry that is eminently Franciscan.

2. Examining the Tradition

Francis of Assisi

Raoul Manselli has commented that the novelty and power of Francis and his movement is to be sought not primarily in the character of his personal spirituality, but rather in the social configuration of his life, which characterized and expressed his spirituality. The urban context of the social life of Assisi was characterized by wealth and by poverty; it was made up of both the property and the poor, and those without property or fortune who were homeless and lived on the margins of community. Thus, apart from the nobles and merchants dwelling within the walls, there were those who found themselves outside the community, the sick and those abandoned to themselves, totally dependent on the generosity of those inside the walls.

While the monks remained enclosed in their monasteries, the canons regular were engaged in the cura animarum, for the sick and those on the margins to bring help—a word of comfort, sustenance when it was available, and in the most extreme instances.
ply a sharing in their suffering and unhappiness. This was, according to Manselli, what made Francis so different from religious movements that came before him, as well as what distinguished Francis from all movements, both heterodox and orthodox, contemporary to him. In other words, Francis did not wait for people to come to him for help. He took the initiative and moved toward them to offer them assistance in response to their situation, an attitude and behavior that went beyond the norm of thinking and doing of his times. It was this that made it difficult for people, both ecclesiastics and seculars, to understand what he was about. In fact, as Francis's early biographers note, the social structures of the city itself were seen to be threatened by Francis's actions on behalf of the poor and sick.

This consciousness of the need to attend to the poor and suffering, finds its source in Francis's experience of conversion. As Francis recounted in his Testament, his conversion was a relational and social experience, not a purely private affair between himself and God:

The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterward I lingered a little and left the world.

At the end of his life when he dictated this text, Francis was explicit about the experience that gave meaning and direction to his life. His own "merchant" sensibilities were not only disturbed but clearly offended by the plight of the lepers, who were treated even by the church as if they were already dead. His experience with the leper was overwhelming, upsetting his sensibilities, changing his

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4 This conflict provides the background for Francis's conversion, according to Thomas of Celano in his Vita prima, especially paragraphs 8-15. His father's anger and frustration at Francis's unheard of behavior both symbolizes and expresses the commune of Assisi's response to Francis's social protest.
6 Auspicius van Corsanje describes the liturgical ritual used to consign lepers to their "hospitals" outside the city walls, listing the rights and obligations of the lepers. The cell in which the leper would live is declared by the leper to be his "place of eternal rest" (Corsanje, 1977, p. 38-41). The Third Lateran Council, 1179, in canon 23, allows lepers to have their own churches with their own priest, since "they cannot dwell with the healthy or come to church with others...."
socially conditioned disgust into "sweetness of soul and body." Most important and central to Francis's own religious experience as he tells us, was that in meeting the leper, Francis met God—the suffering of the leper that God led Francis to embrace became for Francis a sweet embrace of God, a mystical experience of human exchange. This movement out of himself toward the other became then the norm of Francis's action and mission, which describes and names Francis's understanding and experience of God. Based on his experience with the leper, Francis began to understand the real meaning of the Incarnation. Above all for Francis, Jesus Christ was one who moved toward humanity in humility. His characteristic approach to the Incarnation is outlined in these words from the Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful:

Through his angel, Saint Gabriel, the most high Father in heaven announced this Word of the Father—so worthy, so holy and glorious—in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from which he received the flesh of humanity and our frailty. Though he was rich beyond all other things (2 Corinthians 8:9), in this world he, together with the most blessed Virgin, his mother, willed to choose poverty.

Francis describes the descent of God in Jesus into the world in terms of movement, movement from a position of glory and riches to one of frailty and poverty. For Francis, it is this movement of God in humility toward humans and their world which is salvific. The companions of Francis recounted how he would often say that

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7 The western contemplative tradition associates sweetness (dulcis) with mystical experience of God. Augustine uses this language in describing his mystical experience at Ostia with his mother Monica in his Confessions IX, x, 23-26. Edith Scholl studies the usage of the terms dulcis and suavis in the Cistercian sources (Scholl, 1992), a language and theology that would become familiar to the Franciscans through the presence and preaching of Cistercians at the general chapters of the friars and poor ladies as a result of the Fourth Lateran Council decree.

8 Consult Michael Cusato’s paper in this volume, “Hermitage or Marketplace: The Struggle for an Authentic Franciscan Locus in the World.” p. 125, for a similar approach to the conversion of Francis and the life of penance.

“although the Lord may work our salvation in his other festivals, 
yet, because he was born for us ... it was his concern to save us.”

Francis’s Christology focuses on Jesus the “Word made flesh” in 
frailty and poverty, who in his suffering flesh reveals the glory of 
God. Francis’s experience of and approach to the Incarnation in 
terms of suffering and limitation, reflects the Victorine emphasis on 
Incarnation as compassion, rather than the Cistercian emphasis on 
Christ’s humanity as the first step of a ladder leading up and above 
the world to the contemplation of the divinity. It is the pattern of 
Jesus’s life on earth that Francis holds out as model for Franciscan 
behavior and action because it is the life of Jesus in its very fragile 
 humanity that is salvific. The rule and life of the Franciscan thus 
becomes life “according to the form of the Holy Gospel,” by follow-
ing “the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This has concrete implications for Francis. For example, we 
should love our enemies because “our Lord Jesus Christ, whose foot-
prints we must follow (cf. 1 Peter 2:2), called his betrayer ‘friend’ (cf. 
Matthew 26:20) and gave himself willingly to those who crucified 
him.” Franciscan life is determined by this following of Jesus, not 
merely as a spiritual reality within one’s heart, but even more impor-
tantly as a physical expression in the body, reincarnating the actions 
of Jesus in a new context, moving toward humanity, brothers and sis-
ters, in humility.

Francis clarifies this approach in his exhortation to preachers in

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11 Norbert Nguyen Van Khanh has demonstrated that the strongest New 
Testament influence on Francis’s writings are the Johannine writings. He 
states that “a careful study of his writings leads us to conclude that, 
the viewpoint of theological depth and by natural disposition, Francis was 
closer to John than we might imagine” (Khanh, 1994: p. 219). He bases this 
conclusion on the frequency of citations, the fact that Francis had the friars 
read from the Gospel According to John prior to his death, the precedence 
given to Johannine texts in Chapter 23 of the Early Rule, and by the 
Christological expressions of Johanneine origin used by Francis (Khanh, 
12 Of the many Victorine texts that express this approach to the Incarnation, 
that of Richard of Saint Victor (died 1173), “The Four Degrees of Passionate 
Charity,” is central, and would certainly have influenced Bonaventure’s 
theology.
15 RegNB XXII:2; Armstrong, 1982: p. 127.
Chapter 17 of the *Regula non bullata* as he contrasts the spirit of the flesh with the Spirit of the Lord. The spirit of the flesh desires attention and hence is all talk and no action. Francis comments, "The spirit of the flesh desires and is most eager to have words, but [cares] little to carry them out." 16 In contrast, the Spirit of the Lord wishes the flesh to be mortified and despised, worthless and rejected. And it strives for humility and patience, and the pure and simple and true peace of the spiritual person. And above all things it always longs for the divine fear and the divine wisdom and the divine love of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. 17

The Spirit of the Lord transforms human flesh into the flesh of Jesus Christ, a human flesh that is "mortified, despised, worthless, and rejected." These divine adjectives derive from the songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, used by the gospel writers in narrating the passion of Jesus, and here used by Francis to describe the experience of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. True understanding of the gospel comes from experiencing the gospel, made possible by the working of the Spirit of the Lord. 18 This would suggest that for Francis, following in the footsteps of Jesus means compassion, a participation in the suffering of the other, not in a narrow sense understood in terms of pain for the sake of pain, but rather, in the

17 RegNB XVII: 14-16; Armstrong, 1982: p. 123. In the *Regula bullata* Francis exhorts his brothers to "pursue what they must desire above all things: to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy manner of working, to pray always to him with a pure heart and to have humility, patience in persecution and weakness, and to love those who persecute us, find fault with us, or rebuke us, because the Lord says: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute and slander you' (Matthew 5:44)" (RegNB X:8-10; Armstrong, 1982: p. 144). Note the repetition of the virtues of humility and patience in the context of persecution, and the connection of these virtues with the behavior of Jesus in his passion as noted by Francis in RegNB XXII:2.
18 Francis's *Admonition* VII (Armstrong, 1982: p. 30) speaks of the same dynamic in terms of the interpretation of Scripture: "And those are given life by the spirit of Sacred Scripture who do not refer to themselves any text which they know or seek to know, but, by word and example, return everything to the most high Lord God to whom every good belongs." Here again the characteristic emphasis of Francis on enfleshing the meaning of Scripture in action (example) is underlined.
broadest sense of suffering as the human condition. Again, the experience with the leper for Francis was one of self-discovery in which he came to understand himself and his life in terms of the mission received to live according to the form of the gospel. The gospel, following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, describes the human condition, the real humanity embraced by God in the Incarnation of the Son. Compassion becomes another name for Christian living in the vocabulary of Franciscan life.

The Legend of the Three Companions

The author of the Legend of the Three Companions portrays Francis as a person of compassion. After narrating Francis's embrace of the leper, the author describes the experience in the dilapidated church of San Damiano where Francis received from the cross a mission to repair Christ's house, which was falling into ruin. The impact on Francis of hearing the Crucified speak to him is described by the author in the following words:

From that hour his heart was stricken and wounded with melting love and compassion for the passion of Christ; and for the rest of his life he carried in it the wounds of the Lord Jesus. This was clearly proved later when the stigmata of those same wounds were miraculously impressed upon his own holy body for all to see.

As described here at the beginning of Francis's conversion, the text

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19 Jurgen Moltmann comments that "Anyone who has compassion participates in the suffering of the other, takes another person's suffering on himself, suffers for others by entering into community with them and bearing their burdens" (Moltmann, 1990: p. 179). This is an appropriate description of Francis's service of the lepers which characterized his conversion as described in his Testament 1:3 (Armstrong, 1982: p. 153).

20 The dating of this text has been a point of controversy. I accept the dating of Pierre Beguin (1979). Beguin demonstrates convincingly the dependence of the text of the L3S on the Anonymous of Perugia which he dates between March 4, 1240 (the death of Brother Sylvester), and August 22, 1241 (the death of Gregory IX). Further, the L3S was used by Celano in compiling the Vita secunda in 1247. Therefore, the L3S was written between August 22, 1241, and 1247 (Beguin, 1979; pp. 9-20, 137-144). The critical edition of the L3S was prepared and published by Théophile Desbonnets (1974).

goes on to say that it was the compassion which characterized his entire life that transformed his flesh into the image of the crucified Christ on Mount La Verna two years before his death:

Rapt in divine contemplation, blessed Francis was absorbed in seraphic love and desire; and through the tenderness of his compassion he was transformed into a living crucifix. Thus the inmost desire of his burning love was fulfilled.  

For the author of this *Legend*, compassion describes the ability Francis had to reach through separateness and distance, to pass beyond and through externals and touch the very hearts of men and women. In particular, the text comments on the effectiveness of Francis’s words, which

were not greeted with ridicule, neither were they spoken in vain; for they possessed the strength of the Holy Spirit and went straight to the hearts of the listeners, rousing them to vehement astonishment.

Here, the text describes a style of ministry that was motivated by an accomplished in compassion.

The text goes on to describe how Francis sent the friars out on mission telling them to prepare their hearts "to suffer everything humbly and patiently." In other words, the friars were not sent out so much to "do" something for others, but rather, they were sent to "receive" from others, to bear the pain of others, to listen to the stories of others, and in this receiving from them to connect their lives to the story of the gospel, of which the life of the friars attempted to exemplify the "form."

The mission and ministry of the Franciscan movement as articulated by Francis in this text, represents the lived experience of Francis and his brothers in their attempt to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Addressing the chapter of the friars at St. Mary of the Angels, Francis admonishes them with the following words:

Since you speak of peace, all the more so must you have it in your hearts. Let none be provoked to anger or scandal by you, but rather

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may they be drawn to peace and good will, to benignity and concord through your gentleness. We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way. Many who seem to us to be children of the devil will still become Christ's disciples. 25

The emphasis is placed on the behavior of the friars, the manner of their relationships in the world, their gentleness in a ministry of healing and reconciliation, which challenges the friars to open themselves to the truth of the other by going beyond the surface and penetrating to the heart. In short, the ministry of Franciscans is here described as a “heart-to-heart” encounter. By entering into the experience of the other in compassion, one is able to penetrate beyond the appearance all the way down to the reality, to the truth of the other in contemplation.

This Franciscan style of ministry, though approached from a different perspective, yields the same meaning in an episode described in Thomas of Celano's Vita secunda. It describes Francis's encounter with a Dominican theologian who asks Francis to explain the saying of Ezekiel 3:16-20, where the prophet is reminded that if he does not point out the wicked person's sin, the death of the sinner will be held to be the responsibility of the prophet. The traditional interpretation and ecclesial use of the passage underlined the responsibility of the hierarchy to renounce sin as well as the sinner. Gregory VII used the text in his letters to justify his active role in seating and unseating princes and kings. The Waldensians used the text to justify their preaching against the abuses of the clergy. Francis's exegesis is simple yet novel:

If the passage is to be understood in a general meaning, I would take it that the servant of God should be so aflame in his life and his holiness that he would reprove all wicked men by the light of his example and by the words of his conversation. So, I say, the splendor of his life and the renown of his fame will proclaim to all their wickedness. 26

Francis suggests here that the example of a life lived in poverty and

26 2 Cor 103; Habig, 1973: p. 447.
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service is the most effective call to conversion—more effective words of condemnation. Example and conversation should be invitation to holiness and coherence of living; "Let them not judge condemn," exhorts Francis in his Rule. "And as the Lord says, should not take notice of the little defects of others (cf. Matthew Luke 6:41)." This praxis of ministry and invitation to compassion places great emphasis on the need to recognize the other as an integral part of Jesus Christ: engagement with the other is at the same time an encounter with God. This characterizes Franciscan spirituality focused out of the self and toward the other and defines encounter, meeting, being with in compassion.

Thomas of Celano’s Vita prima.

Thomas of Celano develops this aspect of Franciscan life and spirituality in the latter part of Book I of the Vita prima, which culminates in the celebration of Christmas at Greccio. In rebuking a friar who doubted and questioned the poverty of a beggar, Celano tells Francis what he was accustomed to say: "Who curses a poor man does an injury to Christ, whose noble image he wears, the image of him whom himself poor for us in this world." The poor person for Francis was an icon of the poor Christ, as the leper was an icon of the suffering Christ. Both the poor and the lepers placed before the eyes of Francis in a concrete, tangible way, the image of Jesus Christ whose footsteps he was promised to follow. Thus, Celano insists, Francis looked outwards himself to discover the Christ he was called to follow.

This vision of Francis was directed even beyond the human image of the poor and suffering Christ to the entire creation, as C remarks. "All things, especially those in which some allegorical similarity to the Son of God could be found, he would embrace fondly and look upon more willingly." Sheep, lambs, flowers, even worms, revealed to Francis the presence of Jesus Christ looking at both concrete, particular human persons and these si

29 1 Cel 7b: Habig, 1973: p. 293.
and tangible elements of creation, Francis came to know Christ better and was able to follow in the footsteps of Jesus more closely.

The celebration of Christmas at Grecchio connects Francis’s attentiveness to creation with the mystery of the Incarnation. Francis’s intention in recreating the scene of Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem is explained by Celano with these words of Francis:

For I wish to do something that will recall to memory the little Child who was born in Bethlehem and set before our bodily eyes in some way the inconveniences of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he lay upon the hay where he had been placed.\(^{30}\)

The text goes on to describe in detail how Francis celebrated the Incarnation at Grecchio not with plaster statues but with real creatures, human and animal, who had real, concrete histories, and who lived real, tangible lives, and who in their concrete particularity “brought to life again” Christ Jesus, who stood available before everyone’s bodily eyes.\(^{31}\)

Celano returns to this focus on Francis’s seeing in his description of the stigmata. Two years before he died, while at prayer on Mount La Verna, Francis “saw in the vision of God a man standing above him, like a seraph with six wings, his hands extended and his feet joined together and fixed to a cross.”\(^{32}\) It is interesting to note that Celano does not say that the seraph embraced the crucified Christ, but simply and more generally, a crucified man. Celano suggests that for Francis the vision of the seraph is the vision of human potential and identity, fully revealed and made clear in the life of Jesus Christ. In other words, the vision of the “man in God” on La Verna becomes for Francis an icon of humanity.

\(^{30}\) 1 Cel 84; Habig, 1973: p. 300.

\(^{31}\) 1 Cel 86 becomes explicit about this: “The gifts of the Almighty were multiplied there, and a wonderful vision was seen by a certain virtuous man. For he saw a little child lying in the manger lifeless, and he saw the holy man of God go up to it and rouse the child as from a deep sleep. This vision was not unfitting, for the Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant St. Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory” (Habig, 1973: p. 301).

\(^{32}\) 1 Cel 94; Habig, 1973: pp. 308-309.
Unable however to understand fully what the vision meant, feeling both wonder and fear at the sight, Celano continues his rative of Francis's experience:

His soul was in great anxiety to find its meaning. And while he was thus unable to come to any understanding of it and the strangeness of the vision perplexed his heart, the marks of the nails began to appear in his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little before in the crucified man above him.30

This “great mystery” in the life of Francis was first suggested to Celano at the point where Francis renounced his natural fa before the bishop of Assisi. Here Celano reveals that the mystery enfolded in the body of Francis in the stigmata was already a reality, a mystery that the bishop recognized but which remained unspoken until this point in Francis’s life.31 What Francis was doing at the moment of his conversion in the encounter and embrace of the leper until this moment on Mount La Verna was literally looking at what was outside himself—looking to the poor and sick and damned, as well as looking at lambs and flowers and worms, at all of created reality. What Francis saw before his eyes transformed him into the image of what he saw, as the description of the stigmata dramatically recounts.

The transformation of Francis was not therefore the effect of one-time experience of the vision of the crucified man on La Ve Rather, all along the way Francis was following the footsteps of Jesus Christ in what he saw before his eyes. This contemplative visio

30 1 Cor 94; Habig, 1973: p. 309.
31 1 Cor 15: “The bishop, however, sensing his disposition and admiring greatly his fervor and constancy, arose and drew him within his arms covered him with the mantle he was wearing. He understood clearly that the counsel was of God, and he understood that the actions of the man God that he had personally witnessed contained a mystery” (Habig, 1 p. 241). It is important to note that Celano underlines that it is what Fr is doing, his actions, that contain a mystery. Celano later declares that mystery is revealed in the stigmata: “For in truth, that venerable father marked in five parts of his body with the marks of the passion and of cross as though he had hung upon the cross with the Son of God. This great mystery, and shows forth the majesty of the prerogative of love” (90; Habig, 1973: p. 305).
Francis found expression in his compassion, his entering into and sharing the experience of the other, and here on La Verna, quite literally, the crucified man.

For Francis, this is connected to his experience of the eucharist. Francis’s contemplation allowed him to penetrate through the appearance all the way down to the reality, which he celebrated in the eucharist as humility:

See, daily he humbles himself as when he came from the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin; daily he comes to us in humble form; daily he comes down from the besom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest. ... So, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, we too are to see and firmly believe them to be his most holy body and blood living and true.35

Here, humility is revealed as the true identity of Jesus Christ and thus of the human person. And the humility which Francis sees in the eucharist, in God’s humbling movement toward humanity as the ongoing, present, continuing dynamic of the Incarnation, reveals Francis to himself. This becomes a central theme in his Letter to the Entire Order, in which he reflects on the role of the eucharist in the life of the brotherhood. He is so astounded by the mystery of the eucharist that at a certain point he breaks into poetic praise:

That the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation he hides himself under the little form of bread! Look, brothers, at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before him! Humble yourselves as well, that you may be exalted by him.36

What Francis sees in the eucharist becomes the motivation and meaning for a lifestyle of humility, of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

But even more central to Francis is the role of the eucharist in the mission and ministry of the brotherhood. In this same text, Francis, probably more clearly than in any other of his texts, describes this mission: "...He has sent you into the entire world for this reason; that in word and deed you may give witness to his voice and bring every-

one to know that there is no one who is all-powerful except him.

Therefore, kissing your feet with all that love of which I am capa-
ble, I implore all of you brothers to show all possible reverence and
honour to the holy body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in
whom that which is in the heavens and on the earth is brought to
peace and is reconciled to the all-powerful God.\textsuperscript{36}

The eucharist celebrates reconciliation achieved in tl
Incarnation, God’s movement in humility toward the created wor
Jesus Christ the reconciler reveals human identity to be humili
Therefore, Francis’s contemplation of the eucharist leads to t
embrace of creation in compassion. As reconciliation is achieved
Christ’s life on earth, so reconciliation is achieved through the wor
and deeds of Francis in his engagement with God’s world.

In summary, the mystery of God unfolded before Francis’s ey
in the lives of every man and woman, and most clearly in the liv
of those who were poor and those who suffered. In his relationsh
these persons and to creation itself, Francis was taught how con
template God’s own mystery as it unfolded before his eyes
that he in turn might become in compassion what he was in what
saw. The mystery of the stigmata, a mystery of love as Cela
describes it, reveals the motivation and meaning of contemplati
and compassion in Franciscan living.

\textit{Clare of Assisi

While the ministerial experience of Clare and her sisters w
embraced by the enclosure and took a very different form fro
that of Francis and his brothers, the role of contemplation and co
passion in their life mirrors that of Francis and his brot
Contemplation allowed Francis to participate compassionately
Christ’s life, to follow in his footsteps, and to be transformed fr
“the lover into the beloved” in the stigmata. Clare of Assisi also l
this dynamic in the enclosure at San Damiano.\textsuperscript{37} This Francisc

\textsuperscript{38} On Clare’s approach to contemplation as a visual experience consult
Johnson (1993).
approach to contemplation provides the context for an accurate understanding of the implications of what Clare is suggesting in the following passage from her Testament:

When blessed Francis saw, however, that, although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or the shame or the contempt of the world—rather, we considered them as great delights, as he had frequently examined us according to the example of the saints and his brothers—he greatly rejoiced in the Lord. And moved by compassion for us, he bound himself, both through himself and through his order, to always have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers.⁴⁰

This text presents an important description of the succession of events and actions that involved Francis with the Poor Ladies in an ever deepening relationship. First, Clare underlines Francis’s seeing of the Poor Ladies in the difficulties of their existence. Second, Francis is moved to compassion for the Poor Ladies. And third, compassion leads Francis to bind himself to the Poor Ladies in a personal relationship of care and solicitude. Thus, suggests Clare, what Francis saw engendered compassion, which in turn expressed itself in a connection, an inking with the Poor Ladies that Clare names care.

What Francis saw was the concrete expression in the flesh and blood of the Poor Ladies, of their following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. In short, Francis saw their commitment in their physical frailty and weakness, deprivation, poverty, hard work, trials, the bearing of shame and contempt. Francis saw in the Poor Ladies the visage, the image, the picture, the icon of the suffering servant, the crucified savior. Jesus Christ in his most human condition. Real human suffering, or better, the human condition embraced by Jesus Christ in the Incarnation as the most appropriate and most adequate vehicle for revealing God, is what Francis saw in his sisters at San Damiano. In embracing Jesus Christ through their commitment to follow in his footsteps, the sisters were embracing their own human condition, which at the same time was their most appropriate and adequate vehicle for identification with Jesus Christ.⁴¹

⁴⁰ TestCl 28-29; Armstrong, 1993: p. 58.
⁴¹ Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that it is precisely in and through their bodies that women expressed their religious experience (Bynum, 1991: pp. 151-179).
This dynamic of contemplation and compassion leading to transformation describes the religious experience of Clare. She writes to Agnes:

Gaze upon that mirror each day, O queen and spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face within it, that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes.... Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity are reflected in that mirror....

The mirror which Clare invites Agnes to gaze into is the cross of San Damiano, the cross that spoke to Francis and commissioned him to rebuild a dilapidated house. In looking into this image of Christ, Agnes is invited to see her own reflection, as if she were looking at her own mystery. And Clare goes on to suggest that what Agnes will see there is something very familiar:

Look at the border of this mirror, that is the poverty of him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes.... Then at the surface of the mirror, consider the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labors and burdens that he endured for the redemption of the whole human race. Then, in the depth of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity that led him to suffer on the wood of the cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death.

What Clare describes here are very ordinary human experiences—birth and poverty; the burdens and labors of life and humility; suffering, shame, death, and charity. These ordinary human experiences are salvific because they were embraced by Jesus.

There is a clear parallel between what Clare invites Agnes to do in looking at the mirror of the cross and what Clare suggests Francis sees when he looks at the Poor Sisters in their life at San Damiano. Both Francis and Agnes are seeing human life. Francis contemplates the life of the Poor Ladies, Agnes is invited to contemplate the life of Jesus Christ in the mirror of the cross. The juxtaposition of these two texts reveals an important Franciscan insight: Contemplation is the means for the discovery of the truly human without disguise. The humanity revealed in the fragile, weak flesh of Jesus Christ is the

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4EpAg 15-16, 18; Armstrong, 1993: p. 50.
4EpAg 19, 22-23; Armstrong, 1993: pp. 50-51.
truth of human life. The adjectives which describe the life of Christ reflected in the mirror of the cross,\textsuperscript{44} are the same adjectives which describe the life of the Poor Ladies in the mirror of the enclosure of San Damiano.\textsuperscript{45} Clare does not stop at this point, however, and continues with an exclamation and exhortation to Agnes:

Therefore, that mirror, suspended on the wood of the cross, urged those who pass by to consider, saying: "All you who pass by the way, look and see (attendite et videte) if there is any suffering like my suffering" (Lamentations 1:12).\textsuperscript{46}

As the sisters dwelling together within the enclosure are called to be mirrors for each other and for the world, the question posed in this text from the cross with the words from Lamentations begs for an affirmative response: Clare is asking Agnes to embrace her own humanness, her identity, her own experience, as that which makes her most like Christ. At the same time, this text serves as a description of both Clare's and Francis's consciousness of their mission—in embracing their own humanness, weakness, and frailty, they are following in the footsteps of Christ. Contemplation leads to compassion in that what makes one most like Christ and hence, most the image and likeness of God, is one's own frail and fragile humanity.

It is this experience of contemplation and compassion that provides an essential context for understanding the role of enclosure for Clare and the Poor Ladies. The enclosure does not cut the sisters off from the world or shut the world out. Nor does the enclosure focus the attention of the sisters on the spiritual realm of the divine as opposed to the earthly realm of the natural. Rather, the enclosure is meant to foster real authentic humanity—its purpose is to protect humanness, its dignity, value, and worth.

Clare's description of the mirror parallels her experience of the enclosure. Poverty is the border, the "wall," as it defines the space of human reality without disguise; poverty defines a space where real humanity is protected, cherished and nurtured. Poverty encloses the Poor Ladies in their love and care for one another. In this sense, the enclosure provides the space for human life sine glossa, without gloss or clarification. The center of this enclosure is charity whose surface

\textsuperscript{44} 4EpAg 19, 22-23.
\textsuperscript{45} TestCl 28-29.
\textsuperscript{46} 4EpAg 24-25; Armstrong, 1993: p. 51.
is humility. Hence, enclosure bears Christological meaning for Clare. She writes to Agnes:

May you cling to his most sweet Mother, who gave birth to a Son whom the heavens could not contain. And yet she carried him in the little enclosure of her holy womb and held him on her virginal lap.\(^6\)

The enclosure is thus the space where Christ is conceived in human flesh and is nurtured and grows in poverty, which, as Clare exclaims “the Son of God never wished to abandon while he lived in the world.”\(^6\) And, “Out of love of the God who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross,”\(^7\) Clare insists on preserving poverty till the end.

It is this poverty, the border of the mirror of the enclosure, that gives Clare access to God. Most high poverty gives birth to and engenders Jesus Christ in the flesh and blood of the human person who contemplates the mystery of God. One enters into the mystery through compassion expressed in active charity, love, and care for others. This is the dynamic that defines the enclosure, and it is this which Francis sees and imitates in his compassion and care for the Poor Ladies. Here again, Francis becomes what he sees in the enclosure of San Damiano just as he becomes what he sees in the stigmata.

3. Retrieving the Tradition

Patricia Hampel has commented: “The Franciscans read Franci and Clare not for stories but for signals.”\(^59\) This final section of the paper will look at the signals that the Franciscan tradition, examined above, makes available for us today.\(^5\)

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\(^6\) 3EpAg 18-19; Armstrong, 1993: p. 46.
\(^6\) TestCL 35; Armstrong, 1993: p. 58.
\(^6\) TestCL 45; Armstrong, 1993: p. 59.
\(^5\) Hampel, 1992: p. 120.
\(^5\) Zachary Hayes distinguishes between the religious experience of Francis and the theological reflection on this religious experience, emphasizing the need for attention to both of these elements which describe the Franciscan charism. See his paper in this volume, “Franciscan Tradition as a Wisdom Tradition,” p. 27. Similar to Hampel, Hayes states in his paper, “If Francis bequeathed anything to later generations, his bequest would be a vision of human life and an insight into the meaning of the gospel that demands and deserves serious reflective thought.”
Contemplation

For both Francis and Clare, contemplation was primarily a visual experience, something like a "penetrating gaze" that gets to the heart of reality. Recently, Elizabeth Johnson has described contemplation "as a way of seeing that leads to union. It arises from an experience of connection with the sacred at the very core of life."\footnote{E. Johnson, 1994: p. 13. Along the same lines, William Shannon describes contemplation in terms of awareness: "Awareness, which is central to contemplation, is a very different experience from thinking: it tends always to be unitive" (Shannon, 1993: p. 209). Patricia Hampi also places her experience of contemplation in the realm of the visual: "Prayer as focus is not a way of limiting what can be seen; it is a habit of attention brought to bear on all that is" (Hampi, 1992: p. 224).} This contemplative seeing functions for both Francis and Clare as the experienced fruit of poverty: it uncovers the truth, lifts the veil. As Francis was fond of repeating, "For what a man is before God, that he is and nothing more."\footnote{Admonition IX:2; Armstrong 1962: p. 33.} The truth which contemplation uncovers is anthropological and theological. The mirror of the cross functions to reveal that one's identity is discovered in the real humanity of Jesus Christ.

In this context the ministry of the Poor Ladies at San Damiano can be understood precisely in their being and becoming mirror and example for the world. Like Christ, the Poor Ladies show humans who they really are, they reveal the human person to him/herself. In their life of poverty, contemplation and mutual love, the sisters become what they are looking at in the cross of San Damiano, as Francis becomes what he sees in the vision of the crucified man on La Verna.

Thus, far from being otherworldly, or cutting one off from the world, contemplation turns one toward the world. Franciscan contemplation is "horizontally ecstatic." That is, it takes one out of oneself and into the other; contemplation de-centers, making one receptive to the revelation of the truth of the other. Again, the ecstasy is horizontal—the movement is out of oneself and toward the other as the effect of vision. Here, contemplation as a visual experience would underline the relationship between the contemplative...
and the other in terms of continuity, presence, similarity, immediacy, and even union between seer and seen.\footnote{The traditional understanding of the visual experience from Plato through Augustine to Bonaventure is analyzed by David Chidester (1992). The visual is contrasted to the aural experience throughout, but see especially pp. 2-8. Nicholas Harvey speaks of the new relationship between self and world effected in contemplation: “to be contemplative is to be becoming fully alive in this world. ... The reality is that in putting us in touch with God contemplation brings a new birth in which everything is transformed. What was formerly a closed, oppressive universe now has open horizons” (Harvey, 1991: p. 155).}

The primary Franciscan metaphor for contemplation is “footprint.”\footnote{It is interesting to note that Clare’s self-designation in her Testament 37 (Armstrong 1993: p. 59) as plantula sancti paireis, which is rendered into English by Armstrong as “the little plant of the holy father,” could also be translated as “the footprint of the holy father.” The sense of “footprint” carries a better Christological sense of the relationship between Francis and Clare, centered as they both were on the footprints of Jesus Christ.} This is a distinct break with the Neoplatonic-Augustinian tradition which experiences contemplation as an ascent above, beyond and out of the world to God.\footnote{While Augustine’s theology is deeply interested in “vestigis” of God in this world, the vestige functions primarily as the first rung of a ladder meant to be climbed upward toward God, while at the same time leaving the vestige behind and below as belonging to the earth.} It is also different from the Benedictine ladder of humility described in Chapter 7 of Benedict’s Rule, which takes the monk up the twelve steps that lead him out of the world to God. A significantly different “geography” of Franciscan experience emerges with the metaphor of footprint. Contemplation is not an ascent of a ladder but a looking down at and a following of footprints. It is this focus on Christ’s footprints in this world that gives to Franciscan contemplation its own unique and particular dynamic. Different from both the monastic lectio, as well as the Ignatian composition of the senses, Franciscan contemplation is horizontally ecstatic. In this vein, Francis’s comment on the beatitude “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8), is significant:

The truly pure of heart are those who look down upon (despicere) the things of the earth and seek the things of heaven, and who never
cease to adore and behold the Lord God living and true with a pure heart and soul.

If contemplation is understood as an activity that Francis engages in as he goes about the world following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, then this admonition suggests that in looking at the things of earth we can adore God with a pure heart.

This further implies that contemplation is above all a relational experience—it brings one out of oneself to creation, to other persons, to the leper, to brothers and sisters, to the word of the gospel, to the eucharist. In the seeing, one enters into the mystery and becomes united with what one sees.

Thus, Franciscan contemplation describes the proper mode of being human. This sense is embedded in the Franciscan tradition. It has to do with the Franciscan understanding of obedience in terms of being related as brother or sister. The Franciscan notion of person derives from this insight—person is defined by relation, especially as Bonaventure would develop this in his Trinitarian theology. Human beings are personal, they exist only in and through relationships to self, to another, others, and God. To be is to be in relation—horizontally ecstatic—out of oneself and toward the other.

If the goal and purpose of ministry is to serve the other in imitation of Jesus Christ, then the Franciscan nuance is given by its contemplative identity—following in the footsteps of Christ means contemplating the other, attending to the other so as to enter into the other’s experience and name grace.

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57 Admonition XVI:2: Armstrong, 1982: p. 32. Armstrong translates despicere in this sentence as “despise,” which carries a negative connotation regarding the things of the earth. While certainly this negative reaction to the world was part of the inherited, medieval world view, nevertheless, this sense seems foreign to the meaning of Francis in this statement. Given the sense of the things of the earth celebrated in his Canticle of Brother Sun, the sense of Franciscan contemplation as developed in this paper would suggest “to look down upon” as a more appropriate expression of Francis’s meaning. For a similar view consult Matura, 1994: pp. 4-14.

58 Mary Catherine LaCugna names Bonaventure as a “notable exception” to the Latin tradition which focuses more on substance and nature than economy in theology. For the Greeks and Bonaventure, notes LaCugna, “the heart of theologos, as also of oikonomia, is therefore relationship, personhood, communion” (LaCugna, 1991: pp. 247-248).
Contemplation and Compassion  171

Compassion

Franciscan contemplation is relational, it directs one out of oneself and toward the other in compassion. Contemplation is not primarily something which one does for oneself, its purpose is not primarily self-therapy. Rather, contemplation is a discipline whose practice develops the quality of receptivity, the ability to receive from others. While it engages human feelings, it channels their power for the purpose of authentically engaged encounter.

The purpose of contemplation, according to Clare, is for imitation: one looks upon the object one desires to imitate. Clare expresses her awareness of the need for coherence between the form of life—following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ—and the form of prayer—gazing, considering, and contemplating the poor and crucified Jesus Christ. The imitation is accomplished at the level of compassion. Clare exhorts Agnes,

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory. Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of [the Divinity] itself through contemplation. So that you too may feel what his friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love him.59

The language of Clare is highly sensual—to feel and taste the sweetness of God. This suggests an experience of personal union with God described as sweetness. Clare’s experience of contemplation coincides with the experience of Francis when he embraced the leper and the bitterness was transformed for him into sweetness of body and soul. For Clare this sweetness of contemplation goes hand in hand with ordinary daily living. As Clare writes, the mother should find consolation from her burdens in her sisters “so that seeing the charity, humility, and unity they have toward one another, their mother might bear all the burdens of her office more easily, and, through their way of life, what is painful and bitter might be changed into sweetness.”60 Compassion as the fruit of contemplation is thus ministerial and can be read as a synonym for ministry in the Franciscan tradition.

59 3EpAg 12-14; Armstrong, 1993: p. 45.
60 TestCt 69-70; Armstrong, 1993: p. 61.
4. Spirituality for Franciscan Ministry

Christian ministry has to do with communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. Edward Schillebeeckx says:

The real norm and justification for competent proclamations of the gospel message is the praxis of Jesus himself embodied in the life of the preacher. The Christian who is really competent to preach today is one who, in his or her faith, is able to enter into the sequela Jesu fully.\(^1\)

The following of Jesus’s life-praxis gives one the authority to proclaim the gospel. The praxis of Jesus is described as the way Jesus turned toward others. Schillebeeckx goes on:

The competence to proclaim the gospel is only part of a more complete, all-embracing reality, expressed in Jesus’s life and praxis and ratified in his death. That reality is his turning toward those around him, the foundation of which was the “compassion” he had on the crowds (Matthew 9:36).\(^2\)

What Schillebeeckx describes here is the Franciscan sequela Jesu, the Franciscan following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. As Jesus turned toward those around him, so Francis and Clare in contemplation and compassion incarnate the praxis of Jesus as they follow him in their world by turning to those around them.

What follows is the implication for the Franciscan practice of contemplation in “horizontal ecstasy” and compassion in terms of ministry. Franciscan ministry is not primarily the response to ecclesiastical need determined hierarchically. Rather, Franciscan ministry happens when Franciscans follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. It is not so much what Franciscans do, but more importantly, how they are doing it, the style, the grace of their engagement with the world. If God is named in action toward the other as Schillebeeckx contends, then “how” Franciscans do ministry, how they turn toward others in contemplation and compassion, is much more important than the words used to describe it.

Elizabeth Johnson suggests that a new form of religious life is emerging, indeed, is already a reality in the church. She comments:

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\(^1\) Schillebeeckx, 1983: p. 37.
\(^2\) Schillebeeckx, 1983: p. 35.
This vision of a holistic contemplative, prophetic shape to religious life in the future, glimpsed in the literature, is already a living, growing reality in some cases. It also stands in contrast to the overall shape of religious life in the present, which has become domesticated by too close an identification with the law, structure, and spirituality of the institutional church.

Our own Franciscan origins are characterized by tension between the Franciscan movement and the institutional church in terms of the shape that Franciscan religious life was taking within the church. What Johnson suggests is being born now has been part of the Franciscan tradition since its inception, albeit a forgotten part of the tradition today, perhaps because of its dangerous implications.

However, it would seem that one, if not the, major task of Franciscan pastoral leadership today would be its role in recovering the value and role of contemplation and compassion in Franciscan life and ministry. This is largely a formational issue, for both initial and ongoing formation. The early Franciscans, at least until September 0, 1220, were formed by journeying with the friars as they moved about the world—they learned what it meant to be a Franciscan by working side by side with friars and sisters minor, and lay people in the world. They were not formed in the rarefied environment of a house of formation. And it is quite possible that the move into houses of formation went hand in hand with a domestication of the Franciscan charism by the hierarchical church. Separated from the lepers, how does one turn toward them? One might learn contemplation as a method of prayer in a house of formation, but how does one learn contemplation as a lifestyle, a way of being?

Patricia Hampel’s insight into the Franciscan tradition provides an appropriate summary of what this paper has attempted to explore. She states that the Franciscan vision was not pietistic or lost in interior moments untranslatable to the world. Francis ran first to find the lepers. He didn’t run howling into the woods to help them. He simply went to join them, to be with them.

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63 E. Johnson, 1994: p. 15.
64 On September 22, 1220, Pope Honorius III issued the bull Cum secundum consilium to the order, mandating the novitiate, or year of probation prior to profession. The papal bull was likely issued in the absence of Francis while he was in the Holy Land, and indicates one of the ways the minister of the order attempted to regulate and regularize the movement along the lines of monastic tradition.
He wasn't a do-gooder, not a missionary in the convert-the-heathen sort of way. He was a joyous mystic who needed to suffer the great pain of his age, because not to suffer, especially to miss out on the suffering of the world, was not to live.65

The challenge for Franciscans in ministry today, is the challenge of how to be with people in their human adventures. The tradition of Franciscan contemplation and compassion supplies a valuable resource, essential to the survival of the Franciscan ministerial charism in the present moment.

5. Pastoral Implications

1. Contemplation for ministry in the Franciscan tradition is relational, engaging, and "horizontally ecstatic." This means that the ministry itself, the relation and engagement with others is contemplative and compassionate. Thus, the movement of contemplative ministry takes one toward the other, that is, one does not wait for people to come to be ministered to but rather one moves toward people wherever they are to be found. The early friars worked shoulder to shoulder with men and women in the workplace and that is where the ministry took place. Bringing the good news to the piazza and marketplace as well as to the countryside and fields was part of the novelty of the friars. Can we wait for people to come to us today?

2. This implies that the ministerial agenda is set, so to speak, by the people and their real needs. Programs, no matter how well thought out and prepared, are meaningless if they do not respond to felt needs. The discipline of contemplation and compassion in the Franciscan tradition both demands and fosters attentiveness to what is happening in the world, in people's lives as they unfold. Given the reality of suffering in the lives of women and men in the world, the papers of both William McConville ("Contemporary Ecclesiology and the Franciscan Tradition")66 and Elizabeth Dreyer ("Blessed Are They Who Mourn: Tears, Compunction, and Forgiveness")67 point to a reality that Franciscans cannot bypass to focus simplistically on an upbeat, naive, and painless approach to living. The ministerial word must express and articulate for others the real presence of the Word

66 See p. 113.
67 See p. 179.
in their life and experience. One can only hear this word through attentiveness to the other from their location. This is another way of saying, to paraphrase Tip O'Neil, that all ministry is local!

3. Life in Franciscan brotherhood and sisterhood must also be horizontally ecstatic. This would imply that fraternal/sororal life be outwardly directed and not self-absorbed. Contemplation and compassion go hand in hand and must remain in balance. This would seem to call for renewed understandings and expressions of concrete Franciscan living, allowing new possibilities for concrete patterns of life, e.g., living alone, or with lay people.

4. Institutional and corporate forms of Franciscan ministry appeared early on in our history, e.g., the leper hospice, the parish. Corporate ministries contain a visibility not possible in more individualized apostolates. Particularly in today's world, institutions that give corporate witness to the value of contemplation and compassion in ministry can have a powerful impact on society. This would be a particularly appropriate expression of a charism that is not individual and private, but demanding public and social expression.

5. The regular practice of theological reflection, especially the method developed by Leonardo Boff or Robert Kinast,6 would be essential to sustaining this ministerial life of contemplation and compassion, especially on the corporate level. Especially helpful in fostering the approach to contemplation and compassion as developed in this paper are the work of William Callahan, "Noisy Contemplation," as well as that of Elizabeth Dreyer's *Earth Crammed with Heaven.*

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REFERENCES


