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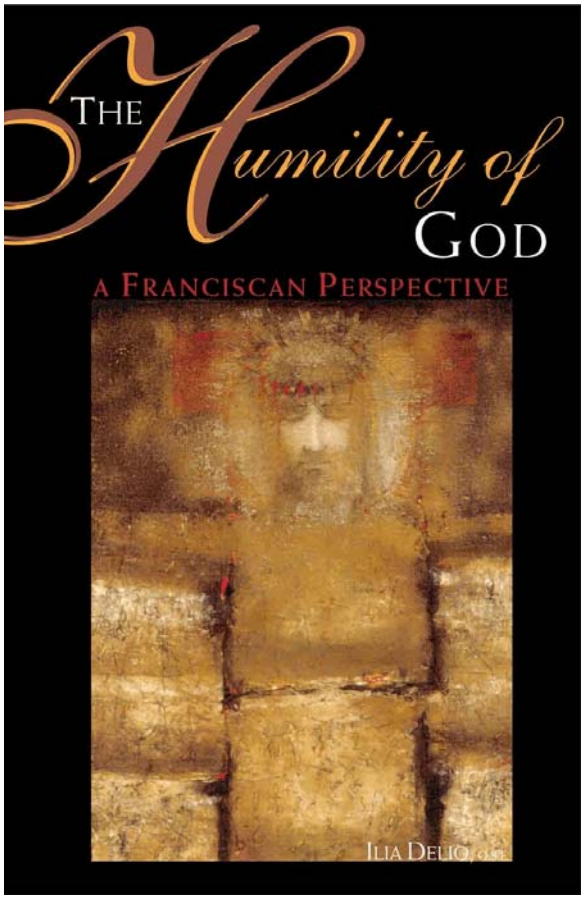
The humility of God

by Bill Hugo, Capuchin Vocation Director

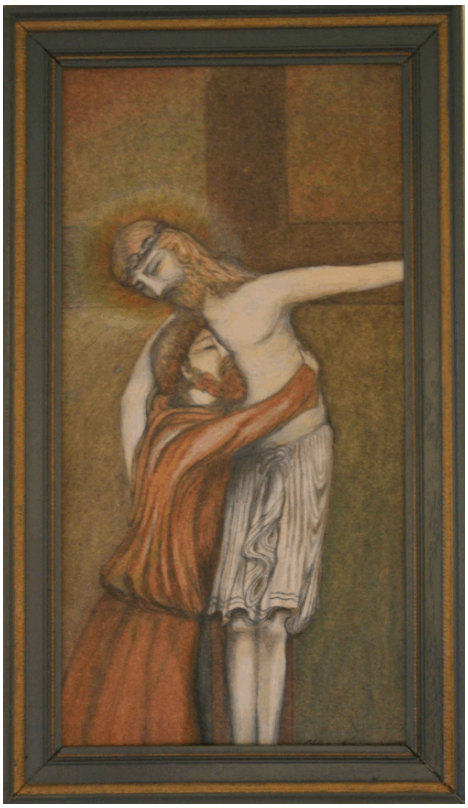
Before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote in *God and the World,* "God does not simply rule by power....His power is that of sharing in love and suffering....God becomes small so that we can grasp his nature" (338-339). Modern Franciscans are recapturing this perspective on God which has always been a part of their spirituality. However, in the recent past, Franciscans have been more likely to think of humility as modesty. Sometimes, this Franciscan "value" has been incorrectly understood to be expressed by behaviors most today would attribute to a negative self-image.

But modern writers and preachers about the Franciscan tradition are putting us back on track by beginning their reflections with the nature of God's life. While Franciscans believe this divine humility is the beginning of everything in God, we only know about it because of the example of Jesus in history. Francis of Assisi was very taken up with gazing at the Incarnate Word, that is the entire earthly life and death of Jesus. In it, he sees a person of the Trinity who forgoes all the prerogatives of divinity to join himself with "lowly" creatures. Francis' favorite words to describe this jumping-off-the-pedestal Jesus were "the poor and humble Christ."



Cover of *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* by Sr. Ilia Delio, OSF. Published by St. Anthony Messenger Press in 2005.

Francis uses adjectives from economics and psychology to describe this dynamic in God's life. It's important to understand that he uses these metaphors from a human perspective, since God neither is economically poor or rich nor has a personality that is arrogant or humble. Still, these metaphors help Francis get at the truth of what God's life is like. Important to this way of thinking is holding in mind that as the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus allows us to know what God is like. It is Jesus' flesh and blood that makes the otherwise invisible God visible to us. So, for Francis, the poor and humble Jesus discloses a poor and humble God. And since God is eternal he cannot jump off a pedestal just once or twice; God is eternally jumping off a pedestal. This means he never really is on a pedestal. It is only we, in our feeble imaginations, who put God on a pedestal.



This depiction of St. Francis embracing the humble crucified Christ was painted by Genevieve Noe in 1979 and hangs in St. Lawrence Friary in Mt. Calvary WI.

Franciscan Sister Ilia Delio is one of the people helping us to better understand how Franciscans have historically thought of themselves, God and creation. She even wrote a book with the title, *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective*. For the inquirer or candidate willing to work a little, this is a very good read. In it, she writes, "Humility...is an essential aspect of God's nature as love" (page 5). That means without humility, God is inconceivable. So, Jesus is humble; God is humble.

For Franciscans, Jesus expresses God's love in a way that invites us to share in that love or, in other words, to share in the life of God, which is humble love. Francis believed what St. Paul wrote when he said, "All of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death" (Romans 6:3). To share in his death is to share in humble love, i.e., his life.

This is why St. Francis was so occupied with imitating Christ as much and as often as he could. Many of his attempts were literal interpretations of Jesus' situation—inspirational for sure, but not always the way for everyone, even those who are called to follow in the footprints of Francis who followed in the footprints of Christ.

Later Franciscan thinkers like John Duns Scotus would unequivocally say that Christ did not come into creation because of what we did, but because of who God is: humble love. Francis really got bowled over by this love, and his response was to try to love in the same way, as much as possible. This is why poverty and humility were so important to Francis. So also was obedience to the will of God which was first the source of Christ's Incarnation. Francis wanted to imitate Christ's obedience to the Father's will as well.

To think of God as poor and humble is pretty difficult for most American Catholics. They are used to thinking of God in grandiose terms that max out every possible application to God. Sometimes, this leads people to think of God as a person so offended that only the most horrific sacrifice by God can appease him. As is clear from what I have written above, the classic Franciscan thinkers and Francis himself have not focused on our offense before God, but on God's love for us which cannot be frustrated by anything.

When people discern whether or not to enter religious life, they also have to discern which religious order or congregation to enter. We have so many different groups because there are so many different spiritualities. If the ideas talked about in this *Vocation Update* resonate with your spirituality or if they grab your interest and you want to learn more, you might want to take a look at a Franciscan group like the Capuchins. Also, if you want to read a little more about these Franciscan thoughts about the poor and humble God, consider reading Delio's *The Humility of God*.

Attend the Detroit Capuchin Ministry Weekend, **October 26-28.**
Learn more about Detroit Capuchin ministries.
Candidates and Inquirers welcomed.
Reservations required.
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