

Francis and Art: An Aesthetic of Becoming and Relationship

Opening: Art as a Franciscan Question

Dear artist brothers,

we gather with joy to celebrate together the 800 years of the Canticle of Brother Sun. This is not just another anniversary: the Canticle represents the highest moment in which Francis brought together mystical experience, poetic language, and vision of creation in a single expression of praise. It is Francis' work of art.

You, who know art in its multiple expressions, are here to question yourselves together: what Franciscan aesthetics is possible today? How to live art as an evangelizing vocation?

Pope Francis wrote shortly before his death: "*Art is not a luxury, but a necessity of the spirit. It is not escape, but responsibility, invitation to action, appeal, cry. To educate in beauty means to educate in hope.*"

This afternoon is not a conference where I speak and you listen. It is a workshop where together we try to understand: what does it mean today to be friar artists? How can our art evangelize? What concrete projects can we imagine together?

I have divided the reflection into three thematic blocks. After each block, we stop for 10 minutes to discuss. At the end, we dedicate 25 minutes to projectuality: what can we do together, concretely, as a network of friar artists.

Let's begin.

Block 1: Incarnation and Body - The Art of Spiritual Senses

Francis and the incarnate experience

When Francis asks God before the Crucifix of San Damiano for "sense and knowledge" - *sensus et cognitio* - he is invoking something profoundly corporeal and sensory. *Sensus* means the capacities to see, hear, taste, touch. Through the five senses we encounter the world and, ultimately, also the meaning of life.

Francis inserts himself into the great patristic tradition of the five spiritual senses: the soul's capacity to see, hear, touch, taste, smell Christ. As Origen writes:

"Christ is grasped by every sense of the soul. He qualifies himself as the true light that illuminates the eyes of the soul. He defines himself as the Word, to be heard; the Bread of life, to be tasted."

Let us look at Greccio, at Christmas 1223: Francis wants:

to see with his eyes the poverty in which Jesus was born. To see recalls the physicality of Francis' faith: it is not enough for him to think, but he wants to see with his eyes,

touch with his hands, smell with his nostrils, hear with his ears, taste with his tongue. His whole person, his senses, are set in motion by desire. **Faith is simply life for him.**

The stigmata at La Verna are not just a mystical sign - they are inscription in the body of the experience of crucified love. The illness and infirmities that Francis calls "sisters" become places of transformation.

This corporeal inscription of spiritual experience finds its theological foundation in the mystery of the Incarnation. In the visibility of the Word that "became flesh" the image in Christianity has acquired a particular meaning. As John Paul II wrote:

"By becoming man, the Son of God introduced into the history of humanity all the evangelical richness of truth and goodness, and with it he also manifested a new dimension of beauty."

Franciscan art cannot be disincarnate - it must involve the entire person of the artist and the spectator.

PROVOCATION AND QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

1. Does your art involve all the senses, or only sight? Give a concrete example of a work of yours that sought to involve multiple senses.

2. How could we create more "incarnate," more Franciscan artistic experiences? What contemporary artistic languages speak better to the body beyond the mind?

3. KEY QUESTION: Does your art evangelize through incarnate experience, or does it remain only "intellectual"? Is there a difference between making religious art and making art born from Franciscan faith?

Block 2: Fraternity and Relationship - Art as Network

From representing to offering experience

For Francis, the elements of nature are not simple objects, but symbols. Francis does not represent creatures - he transfigures them through relationship. Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire are not poetic descriptions: they are modes of experiencing creation as family, as network of fraternal relationships, as transparency of the Creator.

In the Canticle, Francis says of the sun:

"And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor: of you, Most High, he bears signification."

He does not say "represents." He says:

bears signification - it is a dynamic process of reference, of opening, of transparency. **Art does not represent reality, but offers it as transformed experience.** The Franciscan work of art is not an object to be looked at, but an event that generates transformation, that "bears signification" of the Invisible in the visible.

Cosmic fraternity as relational art

In the Canticle, Francis builds a cosmic relational network. The universe is ordered as one family. Fraternity is not an accidental attribute, but a deep structure of reality. Creatures are not isolated entities but nodes of a relational network that originates in the common Father.

Here opens a fascinating dialogue with contemporary relational art. Relational art shifts the accent from the artistic object to the social interactions that the work generates. Francis anticipates this intuition: the Canticle is not a work to be contemplated in solitude - it is a choral invitation to praise.

The Franciscan artist today does not create isolated objects for galleries, but generates spaces of relationship, occasions of encounter and community experiences. Many of you already work in this direction - think of participatory art, site-specific projects that involve local communities, artistic residencies that create exchange networks.

The necessary "non-necessity"

In the Canticle, Francis sings not only the utility of creatures, but also their gratuitousness. And the earth "*produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.*"

Fruits nourish us. But colored flowers? What are flowers *for*? They simply fill the eyes with beauty, gratuitously, exceeding all logic of utility.

Here is the paradox of art - and of Franciscan life: they are "non-necessary" realities according to the logic of utility, yet they are "more than necessary" to live humanly. Like colored flowers, art does not produce anything "concrete" in the economic sense. But without it, life would descend below the threshold of the human.

Art, like flowers, like consecrated life, can appear an intolerable waste.

"*What do you produce? What concrete changes?*" And the Franciscan answer is scandalous: nothing "concrete," nothing "measurable." Simply, like sentinels in the night, artists and friars minor stand with open eyes to grasp and share the signs of that "more" that goes beyond the useful and the necessary.

PROVOCATION AND QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

1. Do your works create community, generate relationships, or remain in the closed circuit of the art world? Give an example of a work that created fraternity.

2. Are you willing to defend the "uselessness" of your art? How can this "uselessness" become an evangelical sign in a society obsessed with efficiency?

3. **KEY QUESTION:** What concrete projects could we imagine together - as a network of friar artists - that generate fraternity and are an evangelical sign? Think of something concrete we could do in the next 2 years.

Block 3: Evangelization and Prophecy - The Vocation of the Franciscan Artist

The "seeing-and-believing" as aesthetic category

The fundamental issue for Franciscan art is not choosing between sacred and profane, but educating the gaze to the passage from seeing to *seeing-and-believing*. The gaze is transfigured, not abolished.

In the First Admonition, Francis writes:

"And as [the holy apostles] with the eyes of their body saw only his flesh, but, contemplating him with the eyes of the spirit, believed that he was God himself, so also we, seeing bread and wine with the eyes of the body, must see and firmly believe."

This is a very powerful aesthetic category! It is not about contrasting "sacred" and "profane" art, "figurative" and "abstract" art. It is about educating the gaze to seeing-and-believing: recognizing in reality, whatever its form, the "signification" of Mystery.

The Franciscan artist is not one who depicts religious subjects, but one who helps others to see-and-believe - to pass from ordinary vision to transfigured vision, maintaining contact with the real.

The logic of gift against commodification

The Franciscan artist works in the logic of gift, not in the logic of the market as sole horizon. This does not mean refusing every form of economic exchange - the artist too must live, must eat, must have a roof. It rather means subordinating the market to the service of the community and shared beauty.

The market can be an instrument, never an end; a means of cultural promotion and sustenance, never an idol. It is prophetic in a time of total commodification of art to witness that the work is born first of all as gratuitousness, as excess, as "more" that cannot be reduced to calculation.

The work as praise and restitution

Let us return to the origin: the Canticle is first of all praise.

"Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, yours are the praises, the glory and the honor and all blessing."

All Franciscan art is, ultimately, laudatory restitution. This does not mean making "devotional" art in the narrow sense of the term. It means that the work is born from a movement of gratitude - from the recognition that everything is gift - and itself becomes a restored gift.

Not for gain, not for fame, not to assert one's ego, but as a gratuitous act that restores to the Creator the received beauty.

And this is evangelization: not to preach about God, but to make people *experience* the beauty of God; not to decorate churches, but to open breaches in the everyday where Mystery can shine through.

Reconciled with everything

Behind the Canticle lies the presence of a man fully reconciled with himself, with God and with the world. Francis includes everything in the song: light and darkness, joy and sorrow, life and death. "Nothing remains excluded."

This total reconciliation is the condition of the Franciscan artist. In a fragmented and divided world, the Franciscan artist witnesses the possibility of reconciliation. Not through evasion, but through traversing - passing through the wound, the contradiction, the pain, and finding there the source of beauty.

PROVOCATION AND QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

1. How do your works educate the gaze to "see-and-believe"? What contemporary works (even non-"religious" ones) have changed your gaze on reality?

2. What tension do you concretely experience between the art market and the logic of gift? How do you manage it? Have you found practicable ways?

3. KEY QUESTION FOR EVANGELIZATION: In what specific way can your art evangelize without being didactic, moralistic or simply decorative? Give concrete examples of art that evangelizes.

Synthesis and Projectuality: What do we do together?

After these three blocks, now is the crucial moment: what can we do together, concretely, as a network of Franciscan friar artists in the world?

The Franciscan artist today is called to:

- Not represent reality, but offer new modes of experiencing reality as transparency of Mystery
- Not create objects to be possessed, but works as events of signification
- Not produce exclusively for the market, but generate spaces of fraternity
- Not separate sacred and profane, but educate the gaze to "seeing-and-believing"
- Witness the logic of gift against total commodification
- Celebrate the necessary "non-necessity" of art as prophecy

OPERATIONAL QUESTIONS FOR PROJECTUALITY

1. NETWORK AND COMMUNICATION

- How can we stay in contact as friar artists? Do we need a platform, a group, a mailing list?
- How can we share our works, our projects, our reflections?

2. CONCRETE PROJECTS

- Do we want to imagine a collective artistic project for the Jubilee? For the 800th anniversary of the Canticle?
- Franciscan artistic residencies? Workshops? Workshops for young people?
- Itinerant exhibitions? Performances? Community installations?

3. FORMATION

- How to accompany young friars who feel an artistic vocation?
- What technical skills? What spirituality? What balance between contemplation and production?
- Do we need a "training path" for friar artists?

4. EVANGELIZATION

- How can Franciscan art evangelize in contemporary contexts?
- What artistic languages speak better to new generations?
- How to get out of churches and museums to bring art into places of everyday life?

5. SUSTAINABILITY

- How to reconcile religious life and artistic activity?
- How to manage the relationship with the art market?
- What economic models for sustainable Franciscan art?

Conclusion and Mandate

Francis is not a model to be replicated, but a source from which to draw to imagine new responses to the challenges of our time.

You, friar artists, are called to be pioneers of an art that:

- Recognizes the primacy of incarnate experience
- Generates fraternity and relationship
- Offers spaces for transformation of the gaze
- Witnesses the logic of gift
- Evangelizes not by preaching but by making people experience the beauty of God

It is not about making "religious art" in the strict sense, but about living art as a Franciscan vocation - with the radicality, joy, freedom of the Poverello.

Brothers, the world awaits from us not discourses but works that speak - works that "bear signification," that open breaches, that create fraternity. Works born from "seeing-and-believing" and help others to see-and-believe.

"Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures!"

In this cosmic praise we recognize ourselves as brothers - brothers among ourselves, brothers of creatures, children of the one Father. And our making art becomes, simply, participation in this eternal chorus.

And thus it becomes evangelization.

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