Introduction: Franciscan education as a transformative experience

The Franciscan intellectual and educational tradition is intentionally transformative. This means that the human rational journey is not simply about learning how to think correctly, it is a matter of learning to feel correctly, to sense correctly, to notice and, most importantly, to act correctly. For the tradition, it involves the development of understanding hearts, men and women of compassion.

As a living spiritual and intellectual tradition, the Franciscan educational mission is a call to be, first and foremost, formative and transformative of whole persons. This educational mission encourages us to promote an experience of integration and synergy in all aspects of the curriculum. This educational project engages each one beyond the content of the texts, or the insights of a thinker. The challenge of this tradition is that of a living praxis: to create and engage with an ever-widening circle of meaning and relationship, a growing and deepening awareness for the world beyond our particular location or point of view, beyond our time and our own ideas.

Because of the particularity of this engaged approach that joins theory to praxis, I would like to reflect upon three essential aspects of Franciscan curriculum from the perspective of one who currently teaches in a Franciscan educational setting. My remarks are meant to complement much of what we have heard these day with the added dimension of the Franciscan tradition as an educational and formational endeavor. In what follows, I focus on three aspects that I consider to be essential to our work going forward: first, the openness of inquiry, second, the recursive
and engaged pedagogy, and third, the existential urgency. For each of these, I offer examples, to illustrate how each engages both content (the what) and pedagogy (the how) of transformation.

Before I begin, I call your attention to a significant historical model which may indeed provide the inspiration for our future work. This model is the School of Toledo. The School of Toledo, founded by Archbishop Raymond of Toledo in the mid-12th century, was a school of translators. These scholars represented different ethnicities, faiths and languages. Together they were the bridge that made possible the rise of the great universities in Europe and, ultimately, the continuation of learning from antiquity into modernity. This intellectual group was an intercultural, multi-ethnic and interreligious ‘community of dialogue’ at a time when those very cultures were politically and militarily at odds. Together, these scholars of different faiths changed the world and they changed history. From their various faith traditions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, they tirelessly translated the great works of ancient philosophy from Arabic into Latin.

As we know, from Toledo, the texts entered the life of the great centers of learning in Paris, Oxford and beyond. Thanks to these anonymous scholars of Toledo, the great minds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance could access the classic texts of human history. These minds and these texts gave birth to our time, to our day.

Why is this such an important and inspiring metaphor for me and for us, as we reflect upon the legacy of Franciscan Intellectual Tradition in both its content and its pedagogical approach? The image of a team of translators, multi-ethic, multi-lingual, representatives of great religious and cultural traditions gives us a fruitful way of reflecting on the insights of the Tradition and its legacy for today.
Why did these scholars spend so much time and energy on the writings of ‘dead’ cultures? What gave them inspiration to carry on? What confidence did they have in the human spirit, the human search for wisdom and transcendence, the shared human desire for meaning and integrity? They were the translator: the one who conveyed the questions, discoveries, truth and insights from one culture to another, from one generation to another. It can’t have been the goal of usefulness, for what could be more useless than reading someone who had been dead for over 1500 years? It can’t have been the desire to impress their colleagues, or improve their earning capacity, or make a better life for themselves. Here there was no utility involved.

It must have been the sheer delight of reading and learning what another person thought about the world. It must have had something to do with a shared human joy in the activity of open inquiry, the engagement of intellectual discourse and debate, of intellectual transcendence, in the recognition of a common human search for meaning beneath diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. And they must have faced challenges of understanding one another. They must have had to draw on all the patience, spiritual generosity and imagination they could muster. How did they deal with their own differences of opinion? How did they get beyond the superficial questions to the deeper issues and values? We will never know. All we can know is what it takes for each of us, in the classroom and throughout the university to stay in the conversation despite our differences, to move forward despite our tendencies to distrust, to have confidence in the common human search for wisdom and understanding that reaches back to the earliest days of every culture.

1) Open inquiry: the living tradition
In light of this model, how might we assess the elements of the Franciscan Intellectual Legacy as a pedagogical experience. First, the tradition is living, and open to inquiry, to questions as well as challenges. As we who study the tradition know, the Franciscan tradition in its intellectual voices is not a uniform, nor a dogmatic tradition; it is a tradition based on inquiry. From the scholars working with Alexander of Hales, whose combined effort gave rise to the first positions of the tradition, to Roger Bacon, who argued that ignorance of other languages and cultures weakened our appreciation of the world as well as missionary encounter, to Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, who argued that divine creativity was measured by the diversity around us, to John Duns Scotus, whose own work was unfolding and exploratory, even to the moment of his death. As a whole, the voices in the Franciscan tradition are more likely to raise questions than to defend answers.

This aspect is very important, especially today. To see this intellectual tradition as engaged with the key human questions is to appreciate its connection to what inspired the School of Toledo. Too often, scholars of medieval philosophy measure every thinker, every insight, against the thought of Thomas Aquinas. While this approach has some advantages, it also runs significant risks. To measure any tradition, or any thinker against the framework of another thinker misrepresents at worst and confuses at best. Rather than view the Franciscan tradition as a counter to Thomism (or from within Thomistic categories), how might this realization, and the example of the School of Toledo, inform our ongoing study of the tradition?

I suggest that this shift to appreciate the tradition on its own terms, and in light of the diversity of voices and approaches in the followers of Francis, requires an interdisciplinary and open methodology. Historians, specialists in literature, philosophers, linguists, theologians can
offer a fruitful dialogue as together we mine, not just the insights of these great thinkers, but more importantly, what we can learn from them today.

2) Recursive and engaged pedagogy: the *Itinerarium*

This opens to my second element: a recursive and engaged pedagogical approach. Because the Franciscan tradition is more than an intellectual tradition, indeed it offers a spiritual pathway toward healing and wholeness, the pedagogy that is proper to such a tradition is intentionally recursive and self-correcting. Here I want to highlight the centrality of beauty, indeed, the Franciscan *via pulchritudinis* or ‘pathway of beauty’ as fruitful for our reflection. Such an approach is dynamic and captures within it the experiential and transformative power of the tradition.

The centrality of beauty opens the doorway to wholistic pedagogy. It both uses language and transcends language. It is expressed in nature and in art, in science and in literature. Beauty is the foundational human experience that unites mind and heart, imagination, spirit and body, activity and passivity, embracing and transcending time, culture, and point of view. Creation of beauty in art, literature, poetry and music is a distinguishing characteristic of the human person and every human culture.

This way of thinking about *wholeness as integration* points again to synergistic relationships; to expanding and interpenetrating *circles* of meaning. Such synergy is made possible by virtue of the power of human rationality as well as the human spiritual desire for meaning and transcendence. The synergy is grounded on our conviction that the reality we seek to understand is so great, so intricate and so manifold that no one approach, no one methodology, is capable of attaining it alone.
What are the different stages of a recursive pedagogy that makes up the Franciscan tradition? I suggest three stages for this map, inspired by two Franciscan classic texts, Bonaventure’s *Journey of the Mind to God* and Clare of Assisi’s *Letters to Agnes of Prague*. I name them ‘Behold! Consider! Respond!’

The spiritual/intellectual journey surrounding beauty begins with a preliminary moment of *awareness* and *recognition*, the moment when we notice something beautiful in the world that is present to us. We also notice our experience, our feelings, thoughts and reactions, to it. This object of our attention delights us, and we rejoice in its beauty.

Paying attention to the world around us is the first step; paying attention to our own internal world, to our attitudes, feelings, thoughts and reflections is the far more difficult second step. The path of understanding involves analysis, synthesis, critical reasoning and creative thinking. It is here that the academic disciplines play the central and essential role.

This second step or stage of the journey involves the *reflective unfolding*, a deeper consideration of the experience. Key to the journey, this moment involves a shift from what is going on around me to what is going on within me: this is the movement toward the *inner person*. Attention to subjective awareness opens to greater *interiority*: to an awareness of God’s presence within.

The third and final aspect of the Franciscan transformation lies in the dynamic *transformative embrace* of Beauty, the ultimate communion with the source of all that is beautiful. This is not an end, but a new beginning. In Bonaventure’s *Legenda Major*, we follow the transformation of Francis through nine different encounters. In each one, the saint pays attention to what he experiences and then responds. For Bonaventure, these moments are captured by the Latin *attendere* and *intendere*. Proper attention to the experience gives birth to *intendere* of
response. At this moment interiority and exteriority seem to collapse: the God within me becomes the God within whose embrace I am held and loved. Inner/outer, upper/lower, ascending/descending: now all the categories of the journey collapse into one another: there is only Love. From within this experience of communion, each person is transformed and called to respond.

We might be tempted to think that such a shift is linear; that it is a passage from this world to the next, from here to there or from now to then, as from one point on a line to another. The examples from the Giotto frescoes show clearly how the journey of Franciscan pedagogy is not linear. Rather, it culminates in ongoing praxis: an ongoing transformation of mind and heart, in response to the world of beauty and to the beauty of each person, each being.

3) Existential urgency: Respond!

Among the Giotto frescos in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi we find an image that recalls an important conversion moment from the saint’s early life. In this scene also recorded in the Legenda Major, a young Francis, still dressed comfortably, encounters a poor knight and, without hesitation, removes his cloak and offers it to him. In a moment of spontaneous generosity, the legend recounts, the young man performs two acts of pietas: he gives away what he owns to someone who is impoverished, and he affirms the dignity of one who has been humiliated by the events of life.

The Giotto frescos capture the human journey, Francis’s own transformation, from the selfishness of youth to his conversion and transformation into Christ. Together, the images serve as icons: they hold before our eyes the dynamic nature of the Franciscan vision of human perfection as growth into love. Like icons, they invite us to enter into the perspective, to engage with a
personal transformation into beauty. The Giotto frescos offer examples of the central Franciscan insight: that all life can be best understood according to a *via pulcritudinis*, a journey or way of beauty, a transformative experience.

For the Franciscan tradition, the experience of beauty is central to the journey toward the fullness of our humanity. The final transformation can be understood as that of becoming artists of beauty, those who give birth to beauty in the world. Here is the stage of ongoing performative excellence, ongoing praxis that points to the third essential element of the tradition: the existential urgency of response. I believe the Franciscan tradition offers a most compelling challenge to our own day: the challenge to understand poverty as *poor use, otherwise known as self-restraint*. This challenge touches the ecological crisis, the crisis of poverty, the crisis of refugees. It calls upon us to respond with the same generosity as the young Francis did to the humble knight.

Time does not allow me to go into much detail on this last point. The issue of Franciscan poverty has long been a point of discussion and debate within the order. It is however, the work of Peter John Olivi that I find most helpful for the problems faced by our world today. Olivi argued that true poverty has less to do with what we own and more to do with how we use the goods of the earth. How we consume beyond our need, how we waste what we have, how we hoard and worry about our own needs.

The existential urgency of today is, quite simply, the urgency of survival: the survival of our planet, of our cultures, of our sense of meaning. Self-restraint, or as Olivi would say, *poor use*, involves restrained use of what we have, of the earth’s resources, of what we collect and consume. This existential urgency of response defines the Franciscan tradition as a praxis tradition, whose purpose is that we might better love one another, better serve one another and better promote the beauty and bounty of our world for the next generations.
Conclusions

Together, these three elements of open inquiry, recursive pedagogy and existential urgency offer to our own day, and to our future, a way forward. Like the scholars of Toledo, we are called to work together as scholars, beyond our differences and even our disagreements, for the future of our world. Like the spiritual masters of the tradition, we are called to internalize the journey of beauty to deepen our own human understanding and appreciation for the gift of what is around us. And finally, like the prophets of the tradition, we are all called to respond with the existential urgency of love. In our response, we contribute to the birthing of beauty around us and in every corner of the world.

The challenges we face today are many and compelling. The Franciscan tradition, in all its complexity and diversity, has many answers, many ways forward. Franciscan centers of learning are not simply academic institutions, they are transformational institutions drawing on the great tradition of universities going all the way back to the Middle Ages: to places like Oxford and Paris, where the great Franciscan masters studied, lived and taught.

As we consider the legacy and significance of the Franciscan tradition today, we might ask ourselves the following questions:

1) How might we build upon the energies within the tradition to reach out to other traditions, to other inspirations, just as Francis reached out to the Sultan? How might we be transformed by the encounter?

2) How might we integrate the intellectual insights of the Masters with the spiritual path of the saints? How might a pedagogy of beauty, framed and informed by beauty, shine a light on the deepest truths of the tradition?
3) How might the urgency of love fuel our reflections on the critical role Franciscan life can play in a world torn by violence, suffering and pain? What is ours to do today?

May our work going forward be guided by the Holy Spirit and informed by the profound joy of knowing the importance of who we are, what we do, and the values that inspire us.

Thank you.