



## St. Francis Answers Nietzsche A Franciscan Response to *Ressentiment*

By Fr. Earl Meyer OFM Cap, M.S.

Friedrich Nietzsche's criticism of Christian charity is perhaps the most serious philosophical challenge to our Catholic commitment to social justice. The phenomenologist Max Scheler wrote an entire book to refute Nietzsche's one word, *ressentiment* (1). Theologian Patrick H. Byrne published an often cited and thorough critique of Nietzsche's dismissal of Christian charity (2). Studies such as these offer a solid academic defense of Catholic social justice.

Many scholarly works have offered valid responses to Nietzsche's critique of the religious virtue of caring for the poor and the oppressed. This essay proposes that the life of St. Francis of Assisi, available to all the faithful beyond the halls of academia, is a quiet but firm rebuke to Nietzsche's negative view of Christian charity.

Such an analysis is important not only for refuting *ressentiment*, but it offers an honest critique of our motives for pursuing social justice for the marginalized and the oppressed. In his attempt to undermine Christian virtue Nietzsche has unwittingly done believers a special favor. *Ressentiment* demands of Christians a very challenging examination of conscience.

### Ressentiment

According to Nietzsche, Christian love of the poor is nothing but a subtle revenge of the weak against the strong. His criticism is developed from his *Genealogy of Morality* which he derived from the etymology of languages, philology being his expertise. His concept of what is good or evil arises from a festering resentment of one's conqueror. This morality he described as a "slave-master morality" since slaves are victims of the powerful. Unlike the classic active moral values which develop from an unselfish affirmation of a good, Nietzsche's revenge is a selfish reaction to the domination of a reputed oppressor. It is a revolt against objective truth, finding strength is one's own standards.

This inversion of values is the foundation of his denial of virtue in helping others, which he sees not as an action but a reaction. To codify this, Nietzsche employs the French word *ressentiment*, which literal-

ly means "re-feeling." It consists of a re-expressing of a repressed anger over being victimized. *Ressentiment* connotes envy, impotent hatred, frustrated feelings of revenge and the inability to act out antagonistic impulses in open conflict.

Having derived *ressentiment* from his slave-master morality, Nietzsche then asserts that Christian charity is infested with it. This follows from his conviction that the God of Scripture is vindictive and Christ was a misguided prophet whose message of love misled his followers to accept human suffering as wallowing in misery. Christian love and charity are therefore but a disguise, alleged positive values and mere rationalizations born of repressed fear and hatred, an attempt to make a virtue out of failure, to transform weakness into positive merit.

This *ressentiment* is Nietzsche's challenge to the integrity of Christian charity in caring for the needy. In his view such acts of kindness foster the sentiments and ideals of love of the poor as a trump card against those more powerful to gain power over those in need. To frame this in popular language: helping the poor is an exercise in feeling superior by making those in need dependent on our largesse; charity is only a means to create a champion of the benefactor. Although the term was not in vogue during Nietzsche's time, his critique would especially target a "preferential option for the poor."

### Francis encounters the leper

The encounter of St. Francis with the leper is the most significant event in his conversion and a living rebuke to *ressentiment*. Thomas of Celano wrote, "When by the grace of the Most High he was beginning to think of holy things, he met a leper one day and, made stronger than himself, he kissed him. From then on he began to despise himself more and more, until, by the mercy of the Redeemer, he came to perfect victory over himself" (3). The historical details of that encounter are uncertain but it is certain that regardless of the specific circumstances it changed his life. In his *Testament* St. Francis wrote, "When I was in sin, it seemed extreme-





ly bitter to me to look at lepers, and the Lord himself led me among them and I practiced mercy with them. And when I left them what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body” (4).

The *ressentiment* of Nietzsche interprets such an encounter of Francis as wallowing in the morbid of life. It is an act of weakness, taking refuge in supposed objective truth rather than honestly revolting by creating one’s own values. But the life of St. Francis is a unique expression of his own sense of the goodness and the holiness of all life, celebrated in his *Canticle of the Sun*. (5) It was that respect for life as a gift from God and not a domination over the life of those in need that impelled his charity. As Celano wrote, “He resolved in his heart never in the future to refuse any one who asked for the love of God. This he most diligently carried out, until he sacrificed himself entirely and in every way; and thus he became first a practitioner before he became a teacher of the evangelical counsels” (6).

It is not primarily the heroic kindness of St. Francis to the leper, but the effect of that encounter on his life that refutes *ressentiment*. His act of mercy did not empower him with a condescending superiority over the poor leper. On the contrary, it awakened in him a sense of his own human frailty and his dependence on the grace of God. The life of St. Francis, because of and after that event, is a dramatic dismissal of Nietzsche’s critique of Christian charity.

### Francis of the Crucified

The Paschal Mystery, with an emphasis on the humble obedience of Christ, is the theological foundation of the life of St. Francis. He frequently exhorted his friars and all the faithful to meditate on the redemptive suffering of the Lord. His longest writing is an *Office of the Passion*, a composition of scriptural colleagues as psalms, with the complete liturgical hours for each season (7). Francis strove to identify with Christ crucified, to the point of enduring the Stigmata, an identity with Jesus on the cross, which contradicts Nietzsche’s quest for domination through bitter revenge.

Francis saw the mission of the Suffering Servant as one of self-emptying service. At the Incarnation God willingly descended, not condescended, to man to become a servant who would die an outcast’s death on the ignominious cross. This was not a negative reaction to the sins of his creatures, as *ressentiment* would imply, but a generous positive act of love. The Passion of Christ did not gain for the Suffering Servant a power over his weaker creatures, but gained for them redemption and new life.

This relationship of the redeemed with Christ is essentially different from the master-slave relationship of *ressentiment*. Sharing in the Paschal Mystery does make one a beneficiary but not by a domination that creates dependency. Christ does not have subjects; he has followers. He does not enforce; he invites. Salvation is offered and requires a free response. The redeemed must be active not passive, predisposing themselves to receive this gift. It is a grace that releases one from bondage rather than creating a new one.

The crucified Christ is a reversal of the feigned love that Nietzsche condemns as *ressentiment*, an exercise of power over the weak to gain a selfish mastery over them. The Passion of the Lord, by contrast, is unselfish love that stoops to the sinner, the rich to the poor, the good to the bad, to share the essence of God which is love itself, not simply an act of largesse. The devotion of St. Francis to Christ crucified is the source of his motivation of service to others in the manner of the Lord’s humble obedience on the cross. Such service rebukes the desire for domination which defines *ressentiment*.

Bartolome Murillo’s painting of St. Francis embracing the crucified Christ captures well the devotion of the Poverello to the Passion of Christ that defies every notion of *ressentiment*. Not only is Francis clinging to the body of the Crucified, but Christ is stooping to enfold the saint. Both of their lives were given in humble service to the fallen not to demonstrate power over them but to raise them by sacrificing themselves. Murillo’s painting is itself a visual denial of *ressentiment*.

### Francis vs. Nietzsche

The theological distinction between the distortion of charity by Nietzsche and the authentic compassion of St. Francis is avowing the reality of God. Nietzsche said, “God is dead.” St. Francis said that God is life. “I came that you may have life and have it to the fullest” (Jn 10:19). This underlies Nietzsche’s misrepresentation of Christian charity as a negative reaction to the powerful in order to dominate the poor, rather than an act of unselfish love in the manner of God’s incarnate Son as the Suffering Servant.

Those who deny the presence of God in our world as creator and redeemer will have a natural propensity to *ressentiment*. The philanthropy of secular humanism is boldly challenged by Nietzsche to demonstrate that it is selfless charity and not a selfish reaction to their opponents to assert their own superiority and power over their beneficiaries. Other religious faiths may find a refutation of *ressentiment* in their creeds, but the Paschal





Mystery, as relived in the compassion of St. Francis, offers a self-evident rebuttal.

The polarity of atheists and believers runs deeper than the different motives for secular philanthropy and Christian charity. At issue are the origin, the value and the ultimate destiny of each human life. Yet the church does share the concerns of modern society for those who are suffering. As the Second Vatican Council professed, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (8).

### A Reflection

The opposition of Francis of Assisi to Friedrich Nietzsche is not an unbridgeable gulf of mutual condemnations closed to the possibility of dialogue. Nietzsche’s bitter critique of Christian charity must be taken seriously and not dismissed as the rantings of an atheistic philosopher who sadly died insane. *Ressentiment* has a sober element of truth, not in its denial of the sub-

stance of charity but in the failure of benefactors when selfishness taints their service.

There is the ever present temptation to assume that our own goodness is conquering the evil of the wealthy and the powerful who have abused the weak and the needy, whose victims are now dependent on our generosity. When helping the poor we can easily deceive ourselves by imagining that we have placed ourselves above the selfish rich with our magnanimous kindness to those they have oppressed who are now vassals of our patronage.

The life of St. Francis offers an antidote to that temptation. Advocates for social justice can purify their motives by meditating on his encounter with the leper and his devotion to Christ crucified. “We are but useless servants; we have done no more than our duty” (Lk 17:10). This was echoed by the exhortation of St. Francis to his friars, “Brothers, let us begin again to serve the Lord, for up until now we have done very little” (9).





1. Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

2. Patrick H. Byrne, "Ressentiment and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (June, 1993).

3. Thomas of Celano, "The First Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus of Sources*, ed. M. Habig. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 243.

4. St. Francis of Assisi, "Testament," in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, eds. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 153.

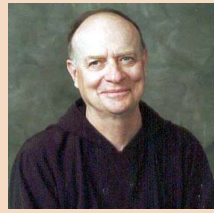
5. St. Francis of Assisi, "Canticle of the Sun," in *Francis and Clare, the Complete Works*, 37.

6. Thomas of Celano, "The First Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus of Sources*, 243.

7. St. Francis of Assisi, "The Office of the Passion," in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, 80-92.

8. *Gaudium et Spes*. The Conciliar Documents, ed. A. Flannery (New York: Costello Publishing, 1987), 903.

9. St. Bonaventure, "The Major Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus of Sources*, 737.



**Fr. Earl Meyer OFM Cap, M.S.**, is a member of the Capuchin Province of Mid-America. He has served as a teacher, pastor, and chaplain. He is the author of *Homilies of Father Earl Meyer, Seasons of Our Souls*, and a number of periodical articles. At present he is retired at St. Fidelis Friary in Victoria, Kansas.

NEW RELEASE

NOW AVAILABLE

[www.franciscanpublications.com](http://www.franciscanpublications.com)



Saint Bonaventure

Friar, Teacher, Minister, Bishop

A Celebration of the  
Eighty Centenary  
of His Birth

Essays from  
*Frater, Magister, Minister,  
et Episcopus: The Works and  
Worlds of St. Bonaventure*,  
an International Conference  
hosted by  
the Franciscan Institute  
at St. Bonaventure University

**Timothy J. Johnson  
Katherine Wrisley-Shelby  
Marie Kolbe Zamora**  
editors