

GONZAGA-IN-FLORENCE SYLLABUS

Course: RELI 390: Francis of Assisi: Story and Memory
Credits: 3 Credits
Instructor: Dr. J. K. Downey



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DESCRIPTION

In this course I want to investigate the historical challenge of Francis of Assisi. We will spend most of our time becoming familiar with the sources in which we discover his story, but we will also what he has to say to us today. For our picture of contemporary culture and theology we will read new political theology of Johann Baptist Metz. Both Francis and Metz want us to ask who we are, both are critical of the possible lives presented by their cultures, and both call for a tactical attention to human suffering. Our class meetings will be based on reading and discussing primary texts; it will not be a series of lectures. A visit to Assisi will be required. We will also visit important Franciscan art in Florence.

Today religion is often viewed as a trivial Gnosticism or a political tool for the sacralization of exploitative structures. It is excoriated as a relic of the past and a drug for the simple. Such suspicions are not naïve. Yet there is more. The history of Christianity is also a history of liberation and critique, of critical conversation rooted in human dignity. Christianity does not crush human nature but affirms and transforms it. The questions of Christianity and academic theology help us resist becoming voyeurs of our own destruction: they are one way we recall our humanity and resist cultural amnesia.

Francis of Assisi (b. 1181\1182) founded a lay movement, appealing to ordinary folks to redirect their lives in confusing times. Our times may well be similarly ripe for a challenge. Francis reached into a spirituality, a god-consciousness that could address worldly crises around money, violent conflict and shifting identities. If we can translate his impulse into a modern idiom, our memory of Francis today would be more accurate, more interesting, and more dangerous. Francis was a major player in medieval Christian life and remains a major player in the contemporary search for an “anthropological revolution.”

Johann Baptist Metz’s (b. 1928) new political theology also seeks to recalibrate the relationship between religion and society. Metz reaches bedrock by admitting poverty and by facing squarely the suffering of others. For Metz, the political points to both relationship and responsibility; it indicates sensitivity to the cultural, economic, communal, and power vectors in any theory or action. Re-centering human institutions and human congress in being human before God drives both Francis and Metz. Political theology could provide new Francis-friendly categories to protect the integrity of his vision and provide a critical intellectual mediation of his 13th century religious insights for the 21st century. Metz believes that the world needs the dangerous memories of Christianity.

Francis has been famously misread as a sort of garden gnome for the pious. But those who first met Francis of Assisi thought him dangerous and disruptive. Who is he? How can contemporary people and contemporary theology learn from him? We will limit our course to the early documents and art. The historical sources are sparse and there is a conflict of interpretations. If you are not at home with the historical, contextual reading and questioning of religious texts, this class is not for you. If you would value a truly intellectual appropriation of a great man from our Western tradition, then welcome aboard.

HINTS

This course functions as a learning community: we will read, think, and discuss as an academic community of inquirers. The class function as a seminar. This means that there will be readings for most days. Please come prepared to discuss exact statements from the text. You must have the text of the reading with you in class. Make notes and underline when you read and be ready to ask others about their comments on the readings: respectful conversation and questioning are the essence of the intellectual life cultivated by any university. Explain why you take a particular interpretation or have a question; don't just gas. Don't worry about understanding every sentence of every reading; rather, do your best to wrestle with the text and to help the group clarify or challenge our readings. Our class is about reading and thinking over texts, so many class meetings will require a short exegesis of a text or a study guide on the reading.

RULES OF THE GAME

A grasp of theological data and methods from the Religious Studies core is assumed: this course is not an introduction to theological reasoning, but an upper-division application of critical academic discourse you have learned in earlier humanities core courses. Grades will be based on following types of assignments: exams, a group class presentation on themes in Francis, the final project on Francis today, and most of all on the quality of the weekly study guides or quote discussions.

Since much of this course is discussing texts we have read, your presence is required more than it would be in a mere lecture course where you can just get the notes. Final grades will be lowered for each class missed after four.

College level skills in reading, writing, and speaking are assumed. It will be important to keep up with the reading and to contribute to the group. The course is taught in a dialogical style: we work as a group on readings we have done. If these requirements don't fit your personal learning style or travel plans, you may want to find another course.

This course is about Francis of Assisi. The work of Johann Baptist Metz will help us remember his story as a story for our times. By the end of our course you will have a good critical sense of the challenge of the real Francis of Assisi, an educated notion of how theology works, and an experience of how the two intertwine.

TEXTS (tentative)

- J. Downey, ed. *Love's Strategy*
- W. Cook, *Francis of Assisi: The Way of Poverty and Humility*
- R. Armstrong, et al., eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Docs—vol. 1, The Saint.*
- *Additional Readings on Francis and on images*

Instructor: John K. Downey, Ph.D., is Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University. He is co-editor of *Finding Francis in Literature and Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).