

# FRANCISCAN LIVING

## God's Love

By Francine Gikow, OFS

Once I was asked by a priest:

Does God love you?

Does He *really* love you?

Does He *really, really* love you?

So I also ask you: How do you know this?

How much does He love you?

Do you “know” His love?

Do you feel this love?

What makes you realize His love?

How have you experienced His Love?

What is your image of His love?

For the longest time, I felt have I have always loved God. It was something I was taught from childhood—to love God. I knew the *Baltimore Catechism* by rote. The first question was: “Why did God make you? Answer: God made me to know, love and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him in the next.”

But there wasn't a lot about *Him loving me* in the pre-Vatican Church. Notice the *Catechism* answer doesn't even mention God's love for me. The effort to love God seemed one-sided. It was my duty as a Catholic to serve God and so I did. I grew up with the idea that I was to love God (and in the words of the Catechism again) “with all my strength.” Since I was a good Catholic girl, I tried to do so.

Yes, there were times when I was told about God's love for me—especially when He died for me on the cross. But at the time, this love seemed to me to be universal for everyone and not specifically for me. I had book knowledge of “God's love,” but no personal experience of it.

Eventually, this wasn't enough. Entering my early teen years, a family crisis shoved me into prayer. I was looking for a God who loved me, just for myself- and not for what I could do for my family. I cried out to God. I shared with Him my hurts, my aspirations and my sacrifices for my family and He (the image of God as I was taught) was

largely silent. It was a spiritual crisis, and it felt like I was alone.

This painful time, however, nurtured in me an appreciation of silence—of being alone but crying out my anguish to something or someone unknown and unfathomable. This Presence consoled. This Presence healed. This Presence companioned me in love.

I eventually realized that my image of God was not what I had been given in school. Popular images of Jesus holding lambs or sitting with school aged children did nothing for me at the time. It was that sense of Presence that held me as my image of a loving God. This “sense” of God's Presence is what has driven my yearning for Him the rest of my life.

Francis “knew” God's love for him. He met God in the leper. He met Him in his companions. He met Him in prayer. God was real. God was ever-present. But for Francis, yearning for God never ended. That is why Francis was tempted to leave his apostolate and enter a life of contemplation.

Our yearning for God also never ends. So many times, people come to me complaining of dryness in prayer. They have previously discovered God in prayer, but now God seems absent. Consolations are gone. They pray but it seems pointless.

Unfortunately, dryness in prayer is to be expected. I think God gives His love to us so that we yearn for Him more. Do you realize that in the great love story of the Bride and her Lover in the “Song of Solomon” the yearning is never consummated? This is the last verse:

“Make haste, my beloved,  
and be like a gazelle or a young stag  
upon the mountain of spices!”<sup>1</sup>

It is in the yearning that I find God's love. It will never be totally fulfilled until I am in heaven with Him...for my God is such a greedy lover!

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<sup>1</sup> NRV, Song of Solomon 8:14.