

A Tribute to Fr. Francis Martin (1930–2017)

WILLIAM M. WRIGHT IV
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, PA

FR. FRANCIS MARTIN, a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, and retired professor of Sacred Scripture, went to meet the Lord face to face on August 11, 2017. I was greatly blessed to have been a friend and colleague of Fr. Francis for almost twenty years. I first met Fr. Francis at the annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association in 1999. I was about to start my graduate studies in Scripture, and Fr. Francis was then launching a task force at the CBA devoted to the integration of historical criticism with the doctrine of the spiritual sense. After working with Fr. Francis for several years in this working group, I collaborated with him to produce two coauthored books: *The Gospel of John* in the series “The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture” and the forthcoming *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation*.¹

Fr. Francis made innumerable contributions to the life of the Church through his priestly ministry, role in the Catholic charismatic renewal, pastoral and spiritual direction, classroom teaching, and efforts to help clergy become better preachers of God’s Word. By way of a memorial tribute, I would like to reflect on four areas that I believe stand out as particularly important contributions of Fr. Francis Martin to the study of Scripture.

¹ Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John*, The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015); William M. Wright IV and Francis Martin, *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming 2018).

First and foremost, Fr. Francis was intellectually and personally in touch with the capacity of Sacred Scripture to mediate a genuine encounter with God to properly disposed readers. When he was twenty years old, Francis entered a Trappist monastery and spent his next fifteen years living the monastic life. As he himself attests, it was through the monastic life and the place of Scripture within it that he came to realize intellectually and experientially this capacity of Scripture.² Given this setting of Cistercian monasticism, Bernard of Clairvaux had a particularly important influence on Fr. Francis in this regard. In a number of places, Bernard speaks of God coming to indwell the soul through the prayerful contemplation of Scripture.³ Fr. Francis recognized that what Bernard spoke of in terms of his mystical experience was ingredient to the doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture (theologically articulated by Henri de Lubac). After receiving the STL in Thomistic theology from the Angelicum, Fr. Francis went on to receive the SSL and SSD from the Pontifical Biblical Institute. He was well-educated in the methods and scholarship of modern biblical criticism and was very much appreciative of how modern exegesis can increase our understanding of Scripture. At the same time, Fr. Francis remained ever convinced of the essential value of the doctrine of the fourfold sense and sought to integrate ancient and modern interpretation in his own teaching and writing.

Second, Fr. Francis had a long-standing appreciation for the literary and narrative dimensions of Scripture. Literary criticism is now a fixed feature on the landscape of biblical studies. But Fr. Francis was introduced to this valuable approach to Scripture before its rise to current prominence. He was a student, collaborator, and translator of Fr. Luis Alonso-Schökel, S.J., a forerunner in Catholic circles of this mode of interpretation.⁴ Fr. Francis likewise wrote his SSD thesis (“Encounter Story: A Characteristic Gospel Narrative Form”) under the direction of Donatien Mollat, S.J., Marie-Émile Boismard, O.P., and Francis McCool, S.J. Among Fr. Francis’s published works, three pieces stand out as voicing his thought on the importance of narrative

² Francis Martin, “Introduction: The Story of a Pilgrimage,” in *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), ix–xvi.

³ See, for instance, Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 74, as well as *Advent Sermons* 3, 5.

⁴ See Luis Alonso-Schökel, S.J., *The Inspired Word: Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature*, trans. Francis Martin, O.S.C.O. (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1965).

and literary theory for biblical interpretation. In *The International Bible Commentary*, he contributed to the essay “Truth Told in the Bible: Biblical Poetics and the Question of Truth,” in which he discusses how and why narrative is particularly apt for mediating divine revelation.⁵ Next, his essay “Literary Theory, Philosophy of History, and Exegesis” uses Mark 14:32–42 as a case study to reflect on the theological dimensions of narrative disclosure with reference to work of Paul Ricoeur.⁶ Finally, Fr. Francis writes generally about narrative and the application of narrative theory to ancient Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman texts in the introduction to his *Narrative Parallels to the New Testament*.⁷

The third area of significant contribution is that Fr. Francis was deeply interested in the theological and philosophical premises of biblical exegesis. He recognized that all exegesis was informed by philosophical and theological principles of one sort or another. Accordingly, if Scripture was to be read and received as the Word of God, its interpretation needed to be set on sound conceptual footing that facilitates (not obstructs) an encounter with the Word. Fr. Francis was especially critical of two trends in modern thought that have had a deleterious (and often underestimated) effect on biblical exegesis. The first was the tendency to conceive of the world as a closed system that can be satisfactorily understood apart from its relationship to the Creator. This account entails a denial of transcendent causality in the world and contributes to the notion that biblical texts and realities can be understood adequately in terms of immanent, this-worldly causes.⁸ The second trend was the far-reaching influence of Kantian epistemology and the critique of theoretical, metaphysical knowing.⁹ Kant’s so-called “Copernican revolution” made the

⁵ Francis Martin and Sean McEvenue, “Truth Told in the Bible: Biblical Poetics and the Question of Truth,” in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer et al. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 116–27.

⁶ Francis Martin, “Literary Theory, Philosophy of History, and Exegesis,” *The Thomist* 52 (1988): 575–604; reprinted in his *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word*, 21–41.

⁷ *Narrative Parallels to the New Testament*, ed. Francis Martin, SBL Resources for Biblical Study 22 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 1–24.

⁸ See Francis Martin, “New Testament Teaching on the Imitation of Christ,” in *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word*, 43–71, esp. 55–63. This article first appeared in *Anthropotes* 6 (1990): 261–87, and in French in *Revue Thomiste* 93 (1993): 234–62.

⁹ While he speaks to these issues throughout his writings, a good sense of his thinking can be found in Francis Martin, “Reflections on Professor Bock-

individual knower to be determinative in the act of knowing. That is, instead of the human knower as being embedded in a community of fellow knowers and receptive to the intelligible voice of being, the human knower (on the Kantian account) is isolated and imposes intelligibility on the world. Both of these trends obstruct thinking about Scripture's capacity to put people in vital, present contact with the Word of God. For, if the transcendent God is not (or cannot be known to be) actively present to the world, and if the isolated human mind imposes intelligibility on the world (and does not receive it), how can the human being receive the Word of the living God mediated through the words of Scripture?

The fourth and final area of Fr. Francis's impact was that, in his thinking and writing, he displayed a fruitful integration of different modes of theological and philosophical thinking. For instance, one finds in Fr. Francis's works a strong Thomistic component. But he also makes extensive use of teachings from other patristic, medieval, and modern writers, as well as figures associated with the *ressourcement* (e.g., de Lubac, von Balthasar, and Ratzinger). Fr. Francis also saw the value in phenomenology, such as the philosophical and theological contributions of his friend Robert Sokolowski and the hermeneutical writings of Paul Ricoeur. Moreover, Fr. Francis also had a great love for Judaism and knew well Jewish traditions of biblical interpretation. He was very alert to what Jewish tradition, with its mystics and saints, can teach Christians about Scripture and living a life according to God's Word. My sense is that Fr. Francis was able to integrate the wisdom from this eclectic group of resources—ancient and modern, theological and philosophical, Christian and non-Christian—because he viewed them all as ways for human beings to come to a better understanding of the Word of God. They helped foster a deeper, richer understanding of that Word by which God created the world, revealed himself at Sinai and in Jesus, and brought about the salvation of all humanity.

In the introduction to his edited volume on Acts of the Apostles in the "Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture," Fr. Francis wrote the following as to why the Fathers of the Church are called *fathers*: "Their faith brought them into living and experiential contact

muehl's 'Bible versus Theology,'" *Nova et Vetera* (English) 9 (2011): 49–74. Also important is Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 54–62, 168–98.

with the realities spoken of in the sacred text which they then serve through their often vast learning: thus, they transmit life, they are Fathers.”¹⁰ This statement, I believe, also holds true for Fr. Francis Martin himself: a learned and holy priest-scholar who knew the Word of God and through whom the life-giving power of this same Word was transmitted to so many.

May he rest in peace.

“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky,
and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever
and ever.”

—Daniel 12:3 (NRSV)

N&V

¹⁰ “Introduction,” in *Acts*, ed. Francis Martin, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Sacred Scripture: New Testament 5* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), xxii.