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MATHEW SCHMALZ

## Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Francis Galasi



**Francis Galasi** completed his PhD in History at Johns Hopkins University in 2022. He is turning his dissertation, "The Privilege of Sickness: Discalced Franciscans and Exclusionary Healing in the Spanish Philippines, 1578-1775", into a book to be published under the auspices of The Academy of American Franciscan History. He is currently a history teacher at Hathaway Brown School and will also be a lecturer in history at Case Western Reserve University.



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**Mathew Schmalz:** Well, welcome, everyone. My name's Mathew Schmalz and I'm the executive editor and founder of the Journal of Global Catholicism. And it is my pleasure to introduce Francis Galasi, who completed his PhD at the Johns Hopkins University in 2022, and is author of the forthcoming book, "The Privilege of Sickness: Discalced Franciscans and Exclusionary Healing in the Spanish Philippines, 1578-1775" He's presently teaching at the Hathaway Brown School and will be a lecturer in history at Case Western Reserve University. Francis, welcome.

**Francis Galasi:** Thank you, thank you, thank you for having me.

**MS:** Yeah, it's great to see you.

**FG:** Great to see you too.

**MS:** Tell us a little bit about your intellectual journey and what got you interested in health and healing in hospitals and global Catholicism?

**FG:** Of course, of course. Well, you know, I grew up in the Philippines. I grew up in Manila. And if you know, if there's something to be known about the Philippines, one of the things to be known about the Philippines, it's a very, very Catholic country. So I went to Catholic school from kindergarten up to college, and I have been schooled by, you know, I've been taught by nuns, by priests, and all and what

have you. I've always had religion classes and together with these religion classes are, of course, my history classes. And sometimes they would tell us, contradicting things. You know, I would always like try to make sense of, you know, the opposite points of view that they tell us. You know, my religion teachers who are, most of the time nuns would tell us how welcoming the Catholic church is, how merciful and loving and forgiving. And then my history teachers would say how the Spanish missionaries abused the indigenous Filipinos, how they were, you know, worked to the bones, how they were sometimes never paid at all for the labor they did. And so growing up, I've always wanted to make sense of that contradiction, to establish where that disconnect is coming from. When I got to college, I majored in history, but I really didn't get to delve into those like issues in college because, you know, because college gives you like a survey understanding of history. But when I got to grad school, I was given the opportunity to really research, you know, these issues, to really make sense of why there was a disconnect between what my religion teachers were saying and what my history teachers were saying. And it's not always as as easy as, you know, as some of the explanations out there are, you know. I don't want to accept a facile explanation of like, you know, oh, maybe they just got not so good missionaries, or maybe the missionaries who went to the Philippines were like, you know, the ones who were not really, you know, well trained enough or well prepared enough. And we know for a fact that's the opposite, because people who are signing up to be sent to overseas missions are some of the most well-trained and most, you know, pious of these missionaries. And so I really wanted to make sense of that. Which is why when I started writing my dissertation, I told myself I really wanted to engage with the spirituality of the order to make, to really understand where they're coming from, to really understand how they see things and how they understand things.

**MS:** Right. So, I mean, that's so interesting in terms of the kinds of mixed messages that often you get about Catholic missionary activity. So what did you find?

**FG:** Yes, I found out that there is, you know, a deeper explanation, a more coherent and a more satisfying explanation to all of this. My research focused on the Discalced Franciscans and their work in the Philippines and I found out that there is

very much a reason for, you know, why they did what they did in the Philippines. And I also like, because I work in Spanish Philippines, I was also researching as an added to to my work, what was going on in Latin America, you know, what the Franciscans were doing in Latin America. And I also like, was satisfied with the results of my investigation. Basically, what my research yielded was that the Franciscans, the Franciscans really were going through a very challenging and very, you know, interesting time in the early modern period. They pretty much had an identity of crisis. A lot of them wanted to go back to the original concept of what a Franciscan was or how Francis conceived the order to be. And a lot of these people in the early modern period, the Franciscans believed that the Franciscans have somewhat lost sight of that original vision. And in regaining that original vision, they kind of like established their own branches, which is why we have splits back then between, you know, the Observants and the conventionalists. And eventually the Observants would have a radical group, the discalced Franciscans, which is what we have in the Philippines.

**MS:** Okay. So one of the interpretations, at least that I'm familiar with of Catholic missionary activity, at least when it comes to health and so forth, has to do with biopower. And that this is, you know, a way of extending Catholic power, extending Catholic influence in a very effective, but also surreptitious way. What do you think about that as an explanatory framework?

**FG:** That is a very good, that that's a very interesting, you know, structure to understand what, how the Franciscan did what they did, especially in Latin America. Biopower as, you know, the definition that I'm working with is like, you know, when a government or a sovereign or an institution imposes its will on the personal will of the people, you know, on a personal will, and usually this happens when there's a state of exception. You know, when there is a, an era or a period where what is right and what is wrong or what is legal and what is legal is somewhat suspended for the good of society or for the good of the community. And we've had this very recently. We've had this during COVID, you know, when the government decided that, all right, you have to be vaccinated or you have to be, you follow all these rules, you have to, you have to wear a mask. And that's an example of bio-

power, when the government pretty much like intervened that way with personal will. In the case of the Franciscans, we can approach this in, you know, two different ways. The Franciscans in the early modern period, also in like the late Middle Ages, were very much influenced by this concept of Millenarianism. You know, it's a very difficult word to pronounce.

**MS:** I got it.

**FG:** Millenarianism. And this is the belief that the end of times is near. That, you know, that the apocalypse is upon us, that it's going to happen at any minute. And this is the kind of point of view or framework that they brought with them when they first got to New Spain. They got there, they actually believed that, you know, that the apocalypse is coming. Jesus is coming for his, you know, for the second time. And they've been working on this based on, you know, the events that were happening all over the world. You know, they saw the unification of Spain as a signal to this. They saw the fall of the Muslim empire in Spain as a signal to this, you know, and they believed all these things. So that when they got to Spain and had this apocalyptic attitude, they imposed pretty much their will on the people, on the indigenous people of Latin America. Because they believe that what they're doing is actually for the good of the people. And one example of this is, you know, their engagement in mass baptism.

**MS:** Right.

**FG:** For them, mass baptism is not really, you know, forcing them to believe something that, you know, well, it is pretty much forcing them to believe something that they don't believe in, you know, beforehand. But for them it is for their own good because they believe that if they're baptized, then that's the only way they can get into the kingdom of heaven. And that's what they're working on, because that's an apocalyptic thinking, you know, for the good of the community that apocalyptic attitude that they had. That's one way of understanding Franciscan efforts on biopower. But there's also another way of understanding this, and that's by reconnecting with the virtues that they hold dear. And some of these virtues are like, you know, humility and poverty. And if you connect back to that, what it really means

is that they believe that the sacrament of baptism was all powerful, that no human will is necessary for conversion to happen. That when they receive the sacrament, it is absolute in, in its absolute power, in its absolute grandeur and majesty, there is no decision making that was needed on the part of the human to believe in God, because their belief in the sacrament and their belief in God is total and unquestioning. So those are the two ways that you can see, you know, somewhat biopower come in into Franciscan efforts of missionizing.

**MS:** Oh, excellent. And this is fascinating. I mean, from your work too, what are some misconceptions about Catholic missionary work and Franciscan missionary work in particular that you would like to dispel?

**FG:** That is an interesting question, yes. I mean, one major thing that I would like to dispel is, you know, the belief that, Catholic missionaries were just doing this because they wanted to, they were doing their missionizing in the colonies mindlessly, or they were just like trying to exploit the natives for their own good, or they were just trying to, for some reason act on, you know, personal interest, which is most of the time totally not the case. There must be a reason for the actions that they're doing. And this is pretty much, you know, why I do what I do, to understand where they're coming from. And as I said, most of the time, if not always, there is always a reason for their actions. You know, these missionaries are very, very, very religious people. They're very pious and they know their Catholic doctrine inside and out. They're not going on blind into the mission fields. They always have a reason for it. And as like, as modern day observers of what happened in the past, we kind of forgot the commitments and the priorities that these people had just to be out in the mission fields.

**MS:** Okay, excellent. So what were some of the indigenous responses to this missionary activity?

**FG:** Yes. So in the Philippines in particular, in the early modern period, you have their, you know, a more, you know, an easier, acceptance of the Franciscans, of the Discalced Franciscans, because the Discalced Franciscans was very similar to their understanding of a healing religious person in indigenous society. In the Philip-



piners, that person, which is called the Babaylan, also had both healing and religious responsibilities. So the Discalced Franciscans coming into the Philippines kind of occupied that place. It's not difficult for them to understand, oh, this is a, a healing religious person in the same way that the Babaylan, which is indigenous to us, is also a healing and religious person. And in that way, I think the Franciscans had a leg up over the other orders. You know, the Jesuits and the Dominicans were very much involved in education, so they were like, you know, they were religious people establishing schools all over the place. So that was quite different from their understanding of what a religious person was. You know, the the indigenous Filipinos. But for the Franciscans, it kind of came more naturally, which is why actually, you know, I came across a few documents where, you know, the bequeath of property to Discalced Franciscans, would have contract stipulations that go like, that went like, you know, this bequeathment of property or this bequeathment of land is valid, so long as the property stays within the hands of the Discalced Franciscans. You know, something like that, because they totally understand what Discalced Franciscans, you know, what their work was. So that's one way, you know, the indigenous response was in the Philippines.

**MS:** Okay. You talked a little bit about Millenarianism among the Franciscans. Could you talk a little more about the intersection between their specific spirituality and what they were doing as missionaries or what they thought they were doing?

**FG:** Yeah, yeah, of course. Millenarianism was more of like a, was more observed in the Latin American context.

**MS:** Okay.

**FG:** Because they're like observance, the observant Franciscans really embraced that. But for the Discalced Franciscans, it's a little bit different. What they embraced was the understanding that healing and healthcare practice is the best way to commune with Jesus, and that's what they really want. Because through the sick, through the wounded, they saw the wounded Christ, the wounded Jesus, And in healing the wounded person or the sick person, they were, in a way, also trying to alleviate the pain and suffering of Jesus, of Jesus. And that's how they understood

it, which is why my dissertation was titled "The Privilege of Sickness." In a way they privileged the sick, they privileged the wounded, which sometimes led to the sidelining, even the putting at risk of healthy people. And there were like chapters in my dissertation, which talked about how their actions sometimes put healthy people at risk at the expense of like trying to make sure that the sick was really well taken care of.

**MS:** Yeah, this is all really, really interesting. And I worked, for example, for the missionaries of charity when I was in India, and there was an interesting tension. On one hand, their spirituality was very much, you know, compatible with what you're talking about with the Discalced Franciscans in the sense that they're ministering to the suffering Christ. But on the other hand, there is, for the missionaries of charity, there was this notion that suffering in and of itself is a gift and an opportunity for spiritual communion with Jesus. So how does that play out in your research and what you've observed, this notion of healing on one hand and on the other hand, the celebration of suffering?

**FG:** Yes, well, for Franciscans, you know, the reason why they heal or the reason why they engage in healing is because they really believe in, you know, they really believe in the dignity of the human body. And for them, the human body is, you know, a worthy vessel of the divine, which is why back then you had the Dominicans and the Franciscans fighting over the doctrine of the Immaculate conception.

**MS:** Oh.

**FG:** Yeah, because the Franciscans were champions of the immaculate conception, you know. We absolutely believe that Mary, even though she was human, her body was worthy of carrying the divinity of Jesus. And because of that, they placed a lot of an emphasis on the human body, on the care of the human body. And so engaging in healing, engaging in, you know, this healing practice, is a way of honoring that dignity that Jesus gave to the human body. And actually, any harm caused to the human body for them is harm caused to the dignity of Jesus.

**MS:** Wow. That's very well put. So what does your research tell us more generally,

not only about Catholic missionary activities, but Catholicism is a global religious institution or global religious movement?

**FG:** Yeah. As a global religious movement, you know, you have the Franciscans who approach healing and healthcare in a very, very unique way. You know, they have reasons why they, why they put themselves in the middle of plagues and epidemics. They have a reason why they engage in mass baptism. They have a reason why they embrace lepers, you know, because it is a way, as I said, to commune with a suffering Christ. My dissertation actually examined Franciscan hospitals specifically, and how these hospitals reflected that very unique spirituality that can only be observed among the Discalced Franciscans.

**MS:** And what do you mean by exclusionary healing?

**FG:** Yes, exclusionary healing is, is when you know, because of their emphasis on the sick, because of their emphasis on the wounded, they kind of develop, and this, I didn't say this in my dissertation, but this is somehow the implication. They kind of develop some sort of myopic vision that they only cared about the sick, they only cared about the wounded, sometimes at the expense of the healthy, sometimes putting the healthy at risk. And I talked about this in one of my chapters, specifically about a leperserium in Manila, you know, the San Lazaro leperserium, where their care for the sick, where their care for the lepers, was absolutely extraordinary. That they let the lepers out of the leperserium, so that they can enjoy life, not thinking or not taking into consideration the contamination that it might, that it might bring to the rest of the city. That's a good example of sometimes putting the healthy at risk at the expense of just making sure that the lies of the sick and the wounded are as best as they could give them or as best as they could make them to be.

**MS:** Are there any echoes of the dynamics that you talk about in your dissertation in contemporary Catholic practices regarding healthcare? That is, is there a kind of historical trajectory here that still is relevant?

**FG:** In terms of looking at Catholic healthcare in the present moment? You know, there is, there's not, one can sometimes, one can sometimes see some, you know, some echoes of this, but there's really not much a very, you know, a direct con-

nection between what they were doing back then and what Catholic healthcare providers are doing now. I guess this is because, back then, when the Discalced Franciscans were running their hospitals, they pretty much had a license to do the way things, they want to do things, the way things they, the way they wanted to do things. Pretty much.

**MS:** Right.

**FG:** The government in the Philippines or the Spanish government in the Philippines were pretty much hands off on the healthcare practices of the Franciscans. They had so much, they had so many things to think of and, you know, and they were kind of thankful that the Franciscans were there to fill in this vacuum of healthcare practice in the colony. Today you have the government, you have private sectors, you know, pitching in or like, you know, making their voices heard in terms of how healthcare is supposed to be.

**MS:** Okay. Well thank you so much. The book is, "The Privilege of Sickness: Discalced Franciscans and Exclusionary Healing in the Spanish Philippines, 1578 to 1775." Francis Galasi, thank you so much.

**FG:** You're very welcome. And thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to you and your readers.