

The Development of a Spirituality of Poverty in the Early Franciscan Movement: Br. David Flood, OFM

“Francis was never poor!”

Who were ‘poor’ in the Middle Ages? The vast majority of people lived under very sparse conditions that we would consider as ‘poor’. However, according to David Flood, ‘poor’ was reserved for those who lacked social support, alone, without work or sustenance. A family in the 1200 – 1300’s was often a man and wife with 3 to 4 children. There was often an aunt living with them. She had no wealth of her own, most of her belongings were the families, but she was not poor. She had family, friends, and sustenance.

“One is poor when they lose connection with others.”

In this sense Francis was never poor. As with many young people he had difficulties in his early adult years. Especially at the time he renounced his family starting his mission from God, to ‘rebuild my church’. But even at this time he was supported somewhat from the Priest at San Damiano, from some of the religious he encountered. By the time more began to joined Francis, one cannot claim that Francis had lost connection with others. In fact, the early Friars formed a social support group. So how does a spirituality of poverty begin in the early Franciscan movement?

Chapter 9 of the Early Rule (Begging for Alms) Becomes an Area of Critical Reflection

In the early version of the rule, poverty is mentioned in Chapter 9. It is very important to note that many of the early brothers were tradesmen and did continue to work even after joining Francis. Here the popular notion of the brothers all begging in the streets of Assisi is not historically correct. Some brothers were encouraged by Francis to continue working in their trades, others worked in the fields around Assisi, while still others worked at the Leprosarium’s and Alms-houses.

Chapter 7 Covers the Ways of Work and Services: (p73). Read Chapter 7

The brothers working as tradesmen were linked to the world of the Medieval Guilds. Br. Flood emphasizes that the Franciscan movement actually begins to take shape as in this working environment. The spread of the first order and development of the third secular order is likely as a result of this a movement within the poorer levels of the working class. While the brothers working in trades or on farms received sustenance for payment, the brothers at the Leprosarium’s and Alms-Houses often received nothing. Moreover, there was often little sustenance and supplies provided to these institutions by the wealthy in Assisi. These brothers might accept alms if presented or would be forced to beg in the streets of Assisi. This was not received well in Assisi. As the majority of new brothers were young men, they were often admonished in Assisi for not working. Why should a young healthy man capable of daily work be begging in the streets? This is a common criticism of the poor today in our own society. Many of the brothers began to implore Francis to not ask them to beg in Assisi.

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Chapter 9 Specifically Deals with Begging for Alms: Read Portions

Chapter 9 reminds the brothers that to follow Christ is to follow poverty and there is no shame in that. As we have seen the rule also

“Alms are a heritage and a right due to the poor, won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ (p79).”

Hence we see the tension between working and begging is clearly having an effect on the development of the early Franciscan movement. We suspect this may have resulted in some heated discussions as **Admonition 20 & 21** provide instruction of how brothers should talk to one another. More importantly the brothers start to ponder the problem of the necessity of begging not only for themselves working at the Leprosarium’s but also for the lepers themselves. Assisi, as fairly successful and rich town, not only had an obligation to support these early forms of a hospital, but had pledged to do precisely that in its own Charter. Christian society demands that there be justice for those in need. The begging is not begging for the brothers own need, but a reminder to the wealthy of their obligation to support the sick. This reminder is what elicits such an angry response from Assisi!

Within the forming movement, not yet an order, the Brothers are obliged to take care of each other so no Brother is left in need without care and support. Fasting rules are designated only for those who had the means to fast!

“Necessity knows no law.”

Specifically a Brother starving in service to the sick and marginalized was not required to fast as the need for sustenance to continue their mission was acknowledged. Francis and the Brothers further reflect on the reaction of Assisi to their movement. While the Brothers seem to be good Christians, they care for the sick, they don’t usually cause trouble, but their message is too radical to a town which is accustomed to dominating its neighbors through force. It occurs to Francis and the brothers that people did not understand Jesus and his disciples as well. Jesus and his disciples often elicited the same hostile response from the wealthy as Francis and the Brothers. The early Franciscans realize that in living as Jesus did, they will receive the same treatment from the world as Christ. Here they realize they are on the right track. They realize they need to live the same poverty and humility as Jesus. Poverty is the natural consequence of living as Jesus. One should rejoice when the world reacts as it did to Christ, for then one knows they are on the right path.

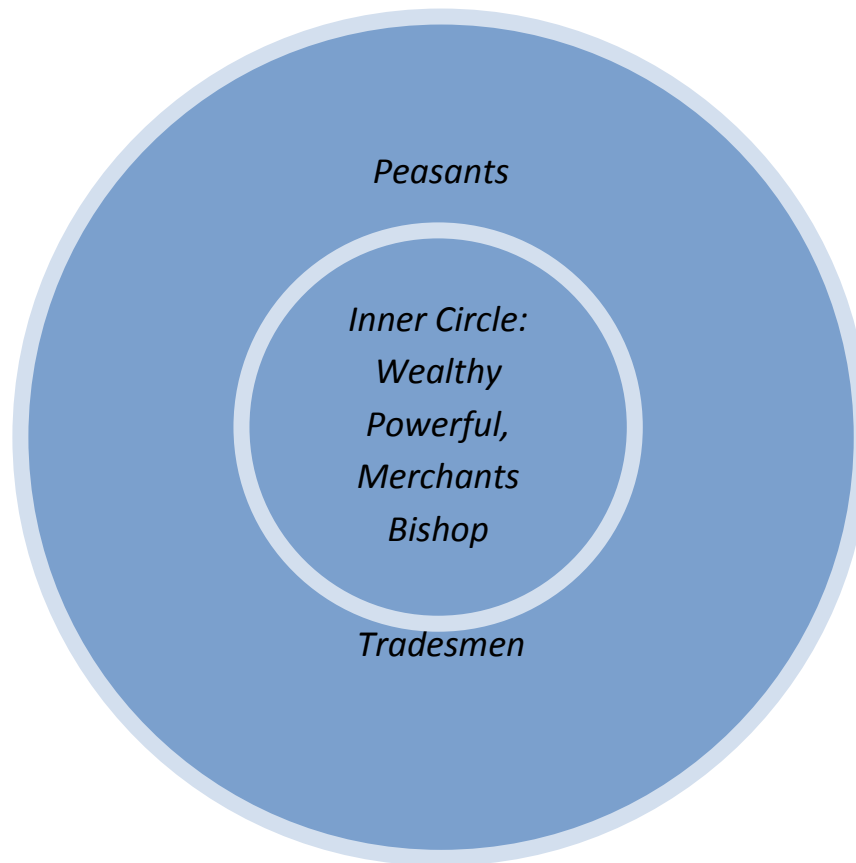
Assisi as a Social Whole

Inner Circle: Wealthy, Powerful, Military: The inner circle of social culture: Upcoming Business Class,

Outer Circle: Lower Class, Peasants, Workers

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Brothers
Lepers
Poor



Assisi is a human construct put together by those looking for an advantage. This advantage is originally the common good of all, but this can be corrupted into advantage for the privileged few over the disadvantaged.

Br. Flood looked at the 1203 Charter of Assisi: It stated that all in Assisi should support one another to safeguard all that Assisi had.

Walking with Jesus: Belongs to a different world, a world which the Spirit evokes WITHOUT injustice. [This is the promise of the Kingdom of God].

Franciscans strive to become part of this world: They realized this was how Jesus, how the Holy Spirit, how God, works in history.

Francis himself called the wealthy BLIND. The Brothers themselves became very critical of themselves: they suggested that anything bad was derived from their humanity, while the goodness derived from the Spirit of Christ.

In the Franciscan literature Poverty appears in two other documents.

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Admonition 14: [paraphrased] If a man is good and devoted, helps others, says he belongs to God, if he is insulted and reacts because he is convinced of his own goodness and holds onto his social position, then Francis states “he is not poor” he does not possess the spirit of poverty.

This demonstrates how the Franciscans viewed themselves. One cannot hold onto what they may have done in the past. [Conversion requires that daily radical change within: SFO Rule 7].

The Salutation of the Virtues: Celebration of the good coming through service. Francis realizes that;

Poverty is that force of life against which social greed and the pursuit of possessions can do nothing.

Letter to the Faithful: A message of recall and exhortation to ‘Judges’. This has caused historians great difficulty until it was realized the Judges were those of the Guilds and not the Magistrates. Br. Flood states this is a poor title as it doesn’t accurately reflect the content. Francis is speaking to the working population in Italy, especially in Assisi. The brothers working in the trades become the point of contact to the working class. Brothers enter as workers, journeymen not Masters. In fact Chapter 7 suggests that they should never rise to the leadership. [This is why in Bonaventure’s time the monasteries are moved away from the city center so the Franciscans are not too close to the influence of the ‘inner circle’]

Medieval Trade Guilds: These are not unions as we know them. The Guilds are established by the Masters for control of the trade (and to ensure the Master’s wealth). Within the Guilds there are Judges. In this letter to the faithful, Francis is addressing these judges (not the magistrates of Assisi), asking them to demonstrate compassion to those in the Guild. Francis is also speaking to the Brothers and Sisters and Laity: Trades refer to each other as Brothers and Sisters, every Guild was a confraternity with religious overtones.

A study of the Wage Laborers and Guilds of Ancient Europe reveals them as a social group with a camaraderie and a mechanism to free workers from financial slavery. [One cannot help but remember that Jesus was a carpenter, a worker, a tradesman.] Jesus chose poverty with his Blessed Mother; he chose to live just like the working people of Assisi. Francis realizes this and tells the working people of Assisi that they ARE CLOSE TO JESUS.

Francis and the Brothers understood the difference between material poverty and spiritual poverty.

[[Mat 5:3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.]

The Brothers did not suffer material poverty, but chose Spiritual Poverty. This is far different than the spirit-crushing weight of imposed material poverty. Francis and the Brothers did not want the

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peasantry, and low-wage workers to suffer material poverty. But as Francis observed, in their condition they might be closer to God than the wealthy that he called 'Blind'. Francis and the Brothers worked towards a Christian society in which everyone would have enough and they might then **choose** the path of Spiritual Poverty!

We bear responsibility for those around us, the children especially. The Brothers rejected material poverty. The begging in Assisi was to ask for donations to the poor **in Justice** and selflessness, to the very poor and sick that Assisi had a responsibility as Christians to support. Even more surprising the early Franciscans extended this invitation to the existing clergy of the time. Francis wrote a Letter to the Clergy" which beseeches them to follow the Gospel path of Christ. However, many clergy enjoyed their role within the society and inner circle of Assisi. This led to a 10 year struggle between the Clergy, Brothers, and Working Brothers.

"What Francis tried to create for his brothers was a community where people escape the preoccupation and the tyranny of possession, of gain, of comfort, and of running after riches. In his eyes the world he lived in was turned too far toward what would ultimately bring not freedom but greater slavery." P 149.

Chapter 24 of the First Rule: p 107.

References:

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