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MONTHLY CONFERENCE

A Commentary on the Psalms:

Father Jerome A. Kelly, O.F.M.

PSALMS 120 AND 124

Imagine the appearance of Jerusalem when the Temple still stood on Mount Sion. Along the slopes of the mountain huddle many of the city's homes and buildings. Others of them climb the sides of Mount Moriah, lying to the west, across the Tyropoeon Valley, which bisects the city from northwest to southeast. Beyond Moriah the mountains rear up like sentinels of the city. Jerusalem is guarded on the south by the Mount of Evil Counsel and mountains which dwindle away, one after another, to the Judean desert in the distance. The Valley of Cedron runs between Mount Sion and the mountains which border it on the east, the Mount of Offense, the Mount of Olives, the Mount Scopus. The circle is closed by the mountainous range which heaves its way north from Jerusalem to the faraway peaks of Lebanon.

These are the physical details of the panorama that a man sees

who, after passing from the courts of the Temple, pauses and gazes all around him. There before him lies Jerusalem, the city which the Lord loves, "his foundation upon the holy mountains" (Psalm 86:1). And on every side loom the mountains that enclose and protect it. Let such a man be as imaginative as he is pious, and he will see immediately that the natural scene perfectly symbolizes spiritual realities. If he should write a poem, it would, most likely, begin thus: *They who trust in the Lord are like Mount Sion,*

which is immovable; which forever stands.

Mountains are round about Jerusalem;

so the Lord is round about his people,

both now and forever.

These words are actually the two opening verses of Psalm 124, one of several Pilgrim Songs in which reference is made to the mountainous terrain of the Holy City. The references are indirect

in Psalms 121, 127, 131, 133; they are direct in Psalms 120, 124, 132. By this distinction I mean to suggest that references of the latter type are related to the very origin of the poems in which they are found. Psalm 132 does not appear in the Little Office; Psalm 120 is the second Psalm at Terce, and Psalm 124 is the third Psalm at Sext. It is these two Psalms that I shall consider in this conference, beginning, rather arbitrarily, with the second one.

In relation to the first verse of Psalm 124 I have already suggested that there is more in the poem of the poet who wrote it than we might suspect from a cursory reading of it. The very structure of the poem helps to acquaint you with the poet. What, for example, is the significance of the fact that the Psalm has just three strophes? Well, they certainly serve to reveal that the speaker is a man of firm and unshakable convictions; that he is sustained by these to bear manfully the most discouraging circumstances; that he is likewise strengthened by them to pray confidently to God for relief. And why should each strophe have just two ideas? Each of these complements the other, and thus a balance, a harmony, is achieved that reflects the peace of the speaker's soul.

The sense of the first strophe, as I have observed, reveals the piety and the imagination of the poet. This is evident in the figurative way in which he expresses

his conviction. Just as Mount Zion, though solidly rooted and immovable, nevertheless depends for safety and protection upon the mountains around it, so the confidence of God's people must be grounded in him and protected by him. There is an additional aptness about the poet's choice of similes because of the emphasis he lays upon the permanence of both confidence and providence. This is the characteristic, in fact, which binds the two verses of the strophe together. As long as Mount Zion stands immovable, so shall true confidence and God's providence endure "both now and forever."

The intense faith of the first strophe is in the second strophe confronted with contemporary facts. It is evident from the poet's words that Jerusalem is under foreign domination; it is even more evident that he expects this domination to be broken. The strophe opens with an eloquent expression of the victory of faith over fact:

For the scepter of the wicked shall not remain

upon the territory of the just.

The lines certainly imply that not only the capital but the entire land is under alien rule. Most likely the poet is describing the period after the exile when the country was still subject to Persia. There are actually linguistic forms in the Hebrew original that suggest this era. And the remaining

words of the strophe could be a reference to the dangerous times under Nehemias.

We have already learned about these times in our consideration of Psalm 84. They were surely discouraging enough to tempt even the just to "put forth to wickedness their hands." And what would be the wickedness? To give up the law, to accept the ways of their neighbors, to grasp at any compromise which, however much it might damage their souls, would spare their bodies, their goods, and their lives. In the mind of the poet it is a tribute to the kindness and fidelity of the Lord that he will surely break the power of the wicked over the land of the just

*Lest the just put forth
to wickedness their hands.*

You have probably noticed a subtle contrast between the first and the second strophe. In the first the poet fixes his attention on the similarity between things stable and enduring. In the second he stresses the antithesis between the just and the wicked. He states it twice, in fact, once in each of the distiches that make up the single verse that is the strophe. This emphasis on the two classes of men flows over into the third strophe and shapes it into a twofold prayer. The strophe must be twofold to round out the poet's concern with the just and the wicked. It must be prayer to complement and to climax the confidence which has been building up in the preceding strophes.

The prayer begs God to reward the just and to punish the wicked.
*Do good, O Lord, to the good
and to the upright of heart.*

*But such as turn aside to crooked
ways
May the Lord lead away with all
evildoers.*

Although the petitions are quite different from each other, they do have something in common. The poet prays that God will reward or punish in a way that will be fitting recompense for each man's conduct. "The good . . . the upright of heart" are merely two designations for the man

*who follows not
the counsel of the wicked
Nor walks in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the company of the
insolent,*

*But delights in the law of the Lord
and meditates on his law day and
night.*

(Psalm 1: 1-2)

To such a man the poet confidently prays that God may do good.

*Not so wicked, not so;
they are like chaff which the
wind drives away.*

*Therefore in judgment the wicked
shall not stand,*

*nor shall sinners, in the assembly
of the just.*

*For the Lord watches over the
way of the just,
but the way of the wicked
vanishes.*

(Psalm 1: 4-6)

You ought to watch a poet closely every minute you are with

him. I give you that advice here because the composer of Psalm 124 seems to be doing more in the last verse of his poem than you may give him credit for. Obviously he is praying that the Lord may punish the wicked. But do you catch the warning to the just mentioned in verse three of the condign penalty they will suffer if "they put forth to wickedness their hands"? If they "turn aside to crooked ways"? They become the very ones whom the Lord will lead away with the evildoers."

Their way like "the way of the wicked vanishes. The poet closes his poem, do you see, with a verse that stands in sharpest contrast to the verses with which he opened it. The whole poem, therefore, becomes a contrast between goodness that stands, sure and immovable, now and forever, and the wickedness that disappears, in God's time, "like chaff which the wind drives away."

Actually, the sense and the structure of Psalm 124 are completed by the words of the fifth verse, which we have been considering. But the poem does not close with these words. It has one more line:

Peace be upon Israel!

But words are not so isolated and detached as I may seem to have implied. They express a wish that is a logical corollary of what the poet has said and prayed for. With tyranny overthrown, the wicked punished and the good rewarded, then, surely, will come security.

peace, prosperity, and happiness. And all these material blessings, to an Israelite, spelled peace.

The words, too, are an ardent ejaculation with which the poet ends his prayer. How he happened to choose them need not be a complete mystery. His poem, I have suggested, was occasioned by the panorama of Mount Zion and its environs. What he saw before him in the soft morning light was enhanced and transfused by his recollection of what he has just seen, heard, and felt in the Temple behind him. The fresh and moving memory of his joy when the lamb was sacrificed as a burnt offering in the name of the whole people of Israel. And of the offering of the unbloody sacrifice of the wheat flour, sprinkled with oil and wine. And of the smell of the incense, sharp and fragrant on the altar of the Holy Place. And of the sound of music played by the Levites as the worshippers sang the sacred songs of Israel. And of the priests, his vesture resplendent in the morning sun, pronouncing Aaron's blessing over the bowed and silent people:

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee;

The Lord smile on thee, and be merciful to thee;

The Lord turn his regard towards thee, and give thee peace.

It is this blessing, I think, which echoes in the words with which the poet closes his prayer and completes his Psalm:

Peace be upon Israel!

You might say that Psalm 124, therefore, springs from and records the experience of a pilgrim who has reached his goal. This characteristic of it—not to mention its suitability as a prayer for Jerusalem and Israel—could explain why eventually it was included among the Pilgrim Songs I mentioned at the outset, Psalm 120.

The Psalm is the song of a pilgrim still making his way to the Temple. This inference is justified by an imaginative reading of the words with which the poem opens: *I lift up my eyes toward the mountains.*

Why does the announcement seem sudden and abrupt? The caravan has finally reached the spot from which the Judean hills can first be seen. Long, flat stretches of land grow gently to verdant hills in the distance. Behind these, hazily seen against the sky, mountains erupt into the range that sprawls northward from Beersheba to Dan. Imagine the emotions of a pilgrim gazing on the scene. So much of the journey safely behind him now, the burning desert, the thirst and the fatigue, the fear of unknown dangers. At last the mountains are in sight. And among them, Zion, "the mountain God has chosen for his throne, where the Lord himself will dwell forever" (Psalm 67:17).

Even when while peering joyously into the distance, he is reminded that these very mountains which surround his goal are

stern obstacles to the easy attainment of it. So the question arises: *Whence shall help come to me?*

The answer is no mystery. Mount Zion, "where the Lord himself will dwell forever," is both the goal of his pilgrimage and the source whence his help shall come to complete it. This conviction prompts the closing words of the strophe:

My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

In the first strophe the poet seems to be talking to himself. But the wishes expressed in the second strophe, for instance, and the sustained use of the pronoun "you" in strophes two, three, and four are evidence that these strophes are addressed to another. In the light of that fact you can wonder whether strophe one is truly a soliloquy or an utterance for others to hear of the poet's own thoughts and feelings. If he has in mind to compose a Pilgrim Song, then the poet, I surmise, would have designed his poem to be, in the opening strophe, a statement to be heard by others and, in the remaining strophes, a statement directly addressed to them.

All this may strike you as inconsequential, but it is necessary, I think, for an appreciation of the poem. Just as it is helpful to know that commentators believe that Psalm 120 eventually became a choral song. The leader would strike up the song and probably sing the first two verses as a solo.

His companions would respond by singing the third verse in chorus. The leader would then sing the fourth verse; the choir, the fifth; and the alternation would go on until the Psalm was over. The alternation is not, either, simply that. Every one of the verses sung by the leader actually reinforces, illustrates, or expands the idea contained in the verse previously sung by the chorus.

This relationship among the verses, which helps to unify the poem, can be demonstrated by an analysis of them. The words of the third verse—

May he not suffer your foot to slip:

My he slumber not who guards you—

are clearly occasioned by the singer's words in the first strophe. His companions wish that he may experience God's help in precise, specific ways suggested by the circumstances of the journey. By day, as the pilgrims climb along over the rocky roads, the supreme danger is a sudden slip, a fall, and the serious injury that results; by night, while the pilgrims slumber, it is the sleepiness of tired guards that leaves them unprotected against marauders. The singer, in turn, reiterates his confidence in God's providence. And he does so by catching up the word "slumber" and using it as a link between their wishes and his reply

Indeed, he neither slumbers nor sleeps

the guardian of Israel.

You should notice, too, that there has been an advance in the description of the relationship between God and the pilgrims. The "Lord, who made heaven and earth," of the first strophe has become "the guardian of Israel" in the second strophe. The use of this title implies that the special grounds the pilgrims have for reliance upon God's protection is their descent from Jacob, to whom God promised, "I myself will watch over thee wherever thou goest" (Genesis 28:15).

When we read the first verse of the third strophe we see the repetition of God's special title as the link between it and the preceding strophe:

The Lord is your guardian; the Lord is your shade;

he is beside you at your right hand.

Notice, too, that the wishes have become strong, positive statements of fact. There is a resemblance, nevertheless, between verse five and verse three: the imagery is still being drawn from the circumstances of the pilgrimage. The help of God will be as refreshing as the welcome pauses which the pilgrims make in the shade of the trees that border the rivulets at which they slake their thirst. His help will be as dependable as the support of the companion at his right side on whom a weary pilgrim leans so heavily for support.

When the singer replies, the like-

wise, calls upon their common experiences for the imagery of his statement. The intensity of the sun's heat by day was the source, perhaps, of the greatest discomfort the pilgrims felt. They had a fear, too, of the bright light of the moon, which they considered the cause of several diseases. Verse six is an assurance of their rescue from these circumstances:

The sun shall not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

You have to notice, too, that this verse has a kind of finality about it. Sun and moon, day and night, and all the dangers either brings, against all these perils of their journey the pilgrims will be protected by "the guardian of Israel."

As you read the fourth strophe of the Psalm, you discover almost immediately that the speaker's thoughts have gone beyond the circumstances of the particular journey that occasioned his poem. The notion still persists of God as "the guardian of Israel," and this notion serves to connect the strophe with the preceding ones. Emphasis is still laid upon his providence. But now this providence is described as extending to all the circumstances of life, of which, in a way, this pilgrimage is really the symbol. This is the intent of the words which the pilgrims sing in verse seven:

The Lord will guard you from all evil;

he will guard your life.
Really you can not say that the

leader's response does much more in verse eight than to paraphrase the sentiments of his companions. He embroiders upon their final words, you might say, by casting them into a form that, at one and the same time, widens the concept of life and narrows it to the common every day comings and goings. Here are his words:

The Lord will guard your coming and your going.

But had the Psalm concluded with these words, you could rightly say it sounded like something that had stopped instead of ended! You can accept the abruptness with which it began: that quality reveals something of the suddenness with which the mountains in the distance break upon the sight of a pilgrim on the lookout for them. But here, at the end of the poem, something less curt and blunt is expected to round out the thoughts that have been growing during the development of the poem. And that something should not only bring the poem to completion, but it should draw together and fuse ideas that have permeated the poem, the idea of man's present and ever-changing need for help and God's sure and never-changing will to give it. This is what the poet does by adding four more words to what he has already said:

The Lord will guard your coming and your going both now and forever.

The Example of Saint Francis

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5, 3)

I

The first three chapters from the book entitled *Poverty*—*The "Fontal" Virtue of Franciscan Piety*, by the Rev. Valentine M. Breton, O.F.M., translated by Rev. Paul J. O'Leary, O.F.M., soon to be published by the Franciscan Herald Press and here offered to the readers of *The Cord* with the kind permission of the Franciscan Herald Press.

Our Lord Jesus Christ began promulgating the Gospel, the glad tidings which he came to bring to mankind, by beatifying the poor.

Up to this point he had continued the preaching of St. John the Baptist, announcing the coming of the kingdom: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3, 1). He had confirmed his word by miracles. His renown spread throughout all of Palestine, and countless men and women crowded around him to hear his words. From among this audience he chose twelve men whom he named Apostles. The hour had come to provide for the internal government of the kingdom which was taking shape, to give it a charter, its law and constitution.

"And seeing the crowds," continues St. Matthew, "he went up the mountain. And when he was seated, his disciples came to him. And opening his mouth he taught them saying,

"Blessed!" (Matt. 5, 1-2).

Our Lord then went on to list the beatitude of poverty, of meekness, of sorrow, of hunger and thirst for justice, of mercy, of purity of heart, of found peace of accepted persecution.

Christ's words upset the scale of values then in vogue. He glorified humiliation, exalted lowliness, praised suffering. The Maker intervened in his work to utilize what heretofore had not been used, to make a real being out of what had been of no account, and to confound him who thought himself something. He set ignorance against vain knowledge, contempt against pride, sorrow against voluptuousness, the cross against sin, detachment against cupidity (cf. I Cor. 1, 27-30).

But he began with poverty.

St. Ambrose rightly says that that virtue should be first which is the foundation and as it were the source of all the others. The first beatitude, he repeats, is poverty. It truly occupies first place in the order of virtues, being the mother and, as it were, the begetter of all the virtues: "parents quaedam generatioque virtutum." He reasons as follows:

He who despises temporal things merits eternal ones. No one will acquire possession of the heavenly kingdom who, being weighed down under the cupidity of the world, no longer has the strength to leave it and to emerge from it.

Origen, St. Basil, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and St. Gregory all argue in the same way: the one obstacle to acquiring the blessings of the Holy Spirit is attachment to the goods of the world.¹

2. Jesus had begun to practice what he preached. To come into the world he was to redeem he had chosen complete poverty.

There was the poverty of his fatherland, a despised province in a small country without glory, Galilee; and in Galilee, the town of Nazareth of which someone said: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn. 1, 46)

There was the poverty of his family. It was of royal and pure blood, to be sure; but the stock, which had given but unimportant subservient kings, had been declining for more than four hundred years.

There was the poverty of his crib: a manger in a grotto which was used as an animal shelter.

There was the poverty of his hidden life, supported at first by the work of a craftsman, and later on by his own manual labor.

There was the poverty of his public life: "The foxes have dens, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt. 8, 20). He lived on the alms of a group of women who followed him.

Finally, there was the poverty of his death. He died stripped of his garments, rejected by heaven and earth, abandoned by God to whom he appealed in vain. His tomb was a borrowed one.

He demanded a similar renouncement from his Apostles: "Do not keep gold, or silver, or money in your girdles, no wallet for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staff; for the laborer deserves his living" (Matt. 10, 9). The closer we are to him, the more positive must be our poverty.

3. All the saints have understood this. All of them, following him, have loved, chosen, and practiced poverty. But no one more strictly than our holy Father, Saint Francis of Assisi.

Francis was not only poor: he was the Poor One, the little Poor Man, II Poverello.

¹ St. Ambrose, *Abraham*, Bk. 1, chap. 2; St. Luke, V, 6; St. Basil, Hom. VII *Riches*, St. Jerome, St. Matthew, V; *Letters*, 125, 127, St. Augustine, Bk. 1, *the Sermon on the Mountain*, Origen, St. Matthew XV, 16, St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia*, 22.

To what lengths he pushed poverty, renunciation of property and destination is hardly necessary to repeat here, so well is it known . . .

His poverty is legendary. He is blamed for excesses, for hardly justifiable exaggerations. One only lends to the rich, says the proverb. Almost superstitious practices have been ascribed to the riches, to the superabundance of Franciscan poverty in Francis and in his three Orders.

Our purpose is to study the concept and the exercises of this poverty in greater detail, since such is the subject of these meditations. With the grace of our Lord and of his Blessed Mother, this we shall strive to do. First, however, we must probe into the origin and nature of the poverty of St. Francis.

II

St. Ambrose, as we have already mentioned, in agreement on this point with all the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, justifies the choice of poverty as the foundation of the spiritual life, for the very reason that its opposite, namely covetousness, cupidity, avarice, is the root of all evil,² and that the soul freed from the slavery of earthly things is free to devote itself to conquering those of heaven.

St. Francis, however, did not proceed in a *dialectic* way.

4. He loved Christ; he wanted to be like unto him. He saw the poor Christ, teaching poverty by example and word. Francis, too, wanted to be poor. And so he lived as a poor man and exhorted his followers to live in poverty and from poverty.

He was not led by theories. He was carried away by love. He did not justify his renunciation by texts, but by his deeds. He found, he recreated in his conscience and in his life the interpretation of the Gospel according to the Fathers of the Church, without study and with no pretense of learning. His keenness of supernatural realities made him grasp the value of poverty: freedom, liberation, exaltation. But that was not where he began, that was not his starting-point. He began with the idea of conforming himself literally to Jesus Christ, his love.

Francis was completely, and who knows? . . . perhaps voluntarily a deliberate stranger to the theories of systematizers. Their theories are true and beautiful and are signed by men worthy of our respect. They can, furthermore, certainly help us to understand his spirit. But these theories were deduced from his examples, and not the opposite, his actions from a theory.

² "For covetousness is the root of all evils" (1 Tim. 7. 10). "Take heed and guard yourselves from all covetousness, for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk. 12. 15).

"Let the friars appropriate nothing for themselves, neither house nor land nor anything, and as pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go confidently for alms; and they should not be ashamed of this because the Lord made himself poor in this world for us.

"This is that summit of highest poverty which constitutes you, my dearest brothers, heirs and princes of the kingdom of heaven; which has made you poor in earthly goods, but raised you up in virtue. May this be your portion, leading into the land of the living. Dearest brethren, clinging wholly to this, may you never wish to have ought else here below for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Chap. VII, of the Rule of the Friars Minor).

There, in simple and plain words, stripped of all speculative thought, is the mind and will of the Saint as he transmitted them to his sons in the sixth chapter of the final Rule (1223). The first Rule (1210-1221), more diffused, spoke at greater length on contempt of money, on the value of the quest, on positive renunciation. But it remained concrete, very practical, and justified solely by the example of our Lord.

5. This verbal sobriety was perhaps sufficient for Francis and his first disciples who, being in immediate contact with Francis, were on fire with love for his Lady. Later, St. Bonaventure, either to exhort his brothers to keep the family heritage intact, or to defend, against those who despised it, the right of the Order to exist; or perhaps even for a very human and scholastic need to theorize and reduce his work to principles, took up again the assertions of the Fathers and dialectically exalted this noble Lady Poverty whom the Patriarch of Assisi had been content to love and serve.

Two cities are set against each other, says St. Augustine: the City of God and the city of the devil, Jerusalem and Babylon. Their opposition dates from the very beginning, for the cornerstone of Babylon is cupidity, and that of Jerusalem is charity. The more we are removed from cupidity, the farther are we from the devil and his city. Now, poverty, whereby we renounce both the affection and the desire to possess anything in common or in particular, is as far removed from avarice as possible.

6. Contempt for riches has various degrees:

the first is the wish to possess nothing unjustly;
the second is to wish to possess nothing superfluous;
the third is the wish to possess nothing in this world and to suffer need even of things that are necessary for life because of God. It is this degree which is the most efficacious remedy against cupidity.

"Contempt for riches is the opposite to desiring temporal goods; and from it comes what is called *the poverty of spirit*. This is recommendable for four reasons:

Love of riches draws man away from the love of God and the things of God, and hence retards his conquest of the virtues. On the contrary, contempt for riches makes meriting and the increase of merit easier. In brief, the perishableness of earthly things more than justifies this whole attitude.

"Poverty is as it were the principal counsel, the fundamental principle, and the sublime foundation of evangelical perfection.

"It is useful, good, and efficacious,
in rooting out sin,
in exercising the perfection of virtue,
in making preaching easier,
in possessing interior joy.

"Who is better prepared for contemplation than that man who is relieved of temporal burdens, whose treasure is in heaven, whose kingdom is not of this world and who has here below no lasting city? Now is not that man the poor one? An abundant poverty disposes the soul to mortify the flesh and to renounce our own will completely. Are not these the conditions of purity of heart which enable a man to see God?"

7. The spark stirred in souls by the words and examples of Francis was so animated, the reactions which he caused even among those who were not his followers were so violent, that St. Thomas of Aquinas became involved in the battle and voiced some decisions like unto those of his rival St. Bonaventure, decisions of course, that bore the stamp of his own genius:

"Poverty of spirit," he says, "includes two elements: the first is the abdication of temporal goods, provided this is completely voluntary and inspired by a supernatural motive. St. Ambrose and St. Jerome are of the same opinion. The second is a crushing of pride. That is why St. Augustine calls it: "exinanitio inflati spiritus," a draining-off of an inflated ego (literally, an emptying of pride). Voluntary poverty is likewise indicative of very deep humility."

Elsewhere he gives the following reasons why our Lord chose poverty. "The first is the one St. Paul gives, namely: his poverty enriches us spiritually; secondly, voluntary poverty befits a preacher of the truth who in that state cannot be suspected of preaching for reasons of cupidity. Finally, and here he approves of St. Francis' thought, God's power is more strongly manifested by the help he gives to the apostle who has voluntarily deprived himself of human means.⁴

8. Men of our times, in love with at least a literary Franciscanism, have written with no less wisdom and abundance on the poverty of St. Francis. We shall confine our citations to that of Father L. Roure, S.J. who has studied the subject with great sympathy and insight:

"Each saint," he writes, "has his or her own characteristic. Neither have the contemporaries of Francis nor for that matter has posterity erred in calling him the *Poverello*.

"His poverty was not only a spirit of simplification proceeding from a more or less conscious personal motive. It was a need of love. The saint detached himself from creatures because for him the Creator sufficed. The creature as creature became indifferent to him because the

³ From the writings of St. Bonaventure in the following order: *De pauperitate Christi*. Qu. 1, a. 1; *de Perfecta religio*. Bk. 2, chap. 42, 45; *de paup. Christi*, a. 1; *Apologetica pauper*.. resp. 3, chap. 3; *ibid.*, art. 1. The biblical allusions were to Matt. 19, 21; Lk. 12, 33; Ja. 18, 36; Hebr. 13, 14.

⁴ St. Thomas, 2a, 2ae, qu. 19, a. 2, c; 3a, qu. 35, 7 c; cf. 3a, 40, 3 o.

Uncreated One absorbed Francis entirely. Francis put all his loving enthusiasm, all his ardent love into this detachment. God now became the subject of his undivided attachment. Later in his life, Francis sang of poverty in the same way as the author of the *Imitation* sings of divine love and its wonders . . .

"His life is proof of the exactitude with which he practiced poverty. It became the logical, rigorous, implacable application of an essentially Christian maxim, namely, to cast aside everything which does not serve our final end, to strip ourselves of everything but the *one thing needful*.

"Is not our life cluttered with a heap of superfluities, overburdened with many vain anxieties? It must be lightened and simplified. Poverty, with its deprivation of what for many has become through routine and laziness indispensable, will accomplish this. It will impose painful renuncements. It will require costly sacrifices of our self-love, for most men regard their fellow-men as their riches. But once the soul has decided to make these excisions, what liberty will it not acquire? With what soaring strength will it not hasten toward the Ideal! . . ."

William James was correct when he deplored the fact that his contemporaries, and especially his compatriots, despised the moralistic value of poverty. He wrote: "We have grown literally afraid to be poor. We despise anyone who elects to be poor in order to simplify and save his inner life. If he does not join the general scramble and pant with the money-making street, we deem him spiritless and lacking in ambition. We have lost the power even of imagining what the ancient idealization of poverty could have meant: the liberation from material attachments, the unbridled soul, the manlier indifference, the paying our way by what we are or do and not by what we have, the right to fling away our life at any moment irresponsibly—the more athletic trim, in short, the moral fighting shape."⁵

Once again, we do not hesitate to recognize and to repeat that these considerations are beautiful and pertinent. But they would have left St. Francis sceptical or at least indifferent, except perhaps that he might have looked upon them as a canticle to his Lady Poverty.

9. The same must be said for the argument taken from the needs of his times, namely, that only by returning to evangelical poverty could peace be restored.

The contemporaries of Francis were, like our own, bitterly divided into two classes: the wealthy or those who were accused of owning too much and of not being willing to part with any of it. The other lacked, or pretended to lack, the bare necessities of life and could not obtain them save by extorting the rich.

Historians have brought to light, and some of them have widely exploited, the evils caused by rich monasteries, by feudalism of the Church, and the revolts of the consciences of the masses which led to brigandage and heresy. Francis could not help but see this, for his illuminated mind was keen. But he did not want to set himself up as a reformer, to take sides for or against the lawfulness of private

⁵ L. Roure, *Figures franciscaines*, Pion, 1913, pp. 45-47.

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1902, p. 368.

property. He respected the foundations on which the society of his time was built. The only thing which he deliberately and perseveringly wanted was to imitate and follow the poor Christ.

His example, his preaching, the growth of his Order wonderfully answered his aspirations and provided for the vital needs of medieval Christianity. Yet, it was simply an enlarging of the promise of the hundred-fold made to those who seek first the kingdom of God and his justice. Such was not the plan of Francis. He accepted the social consequences of his love for Christ as a blessing from on high. Anyone knowing him would not dare maintain that he had ever seen, understood, and even wished the opportunity and the benefits deriving from it. Nevertheless, even if these temporal repercussions of his apostolate had been wanting, he would unquestionably have acted in the same way.

III

10. Following his Father's footsteps, the Franciscan soul makes evangelical poverty, better yet Jesus Christ, the Poor One, his ideal, his model, the rule of his life, the form of all holiness.

The Franciscan soul no longer lives only in poverty, as every disciple of his crucified Son must live if he is to please God, but he is inspired by poverty. It is through poverty that he vows himself to imitate Jesus. He does this in such a way that his poverty, which in other schools of spirituality is only a virtue—and a secondary one at that—derived from the cardinal virtue of temperance, is in Franciscan spirituality the mother and queen of all the others, the means of interior unification and of transformation into God.

The poverty of Christ is for a Franciscan the foundation on which he builds his spiritual life, the root whence his feelings and actions bud, flower, and bear fruit. Poverty appears in Franciscan asceticism as the fountain virtue, if we may be permitted the expression, because for the Franciscan soul, there flows from this virtue, as from a spring, all the other virtues which he practices toward God and his Christ, towards his neighbor and all other beings, and for his own self-discipline. Every virtue can be reduced to poverty, for all suppose an impoverishment, a renunciation, an abnegation or resignation of self in favor of God, our neighbor, and even inanimate creatures.

11. The substance of this little book may be briefly summarized as follows:

Does not believing in and accepting revealed truth as the principle of thought and action obviously entail impoverishment of oneself—of one's own feelings, experiences, learning, and knowledge to which, although fallible, the human mind clings to more than to riches?

To hope in God, to hope in the blessings which he promises together with the means to attain them; to seek above all else the kingdom of God in the confidence that the rest will be given as a surplus, to renounce earthly desires and the anxieties connected with their fulfillment, is not this to impoverish oneself of everything which gives human activity its incentive and its end? . . .

Chastity makes the body poor; humility impoverishes the soul; charity toward our neighbor makes the human heart poor by pitilessly

cutting off from their designs every object in opposition to the divine rule . . .

St. Francis expressly said that that man is not a real poor man who, although devoid of money, keeps in his possession the bill-fold of his own will. It matters not whether the goods he abandoned—and they are real goods—be fleeting and of little value, whereas the others, in whose favor we despise them, are lasting, eternal, and spiritual, for it is already by renouncing his human judgment that one can truly evaluate them.

Such is the Franciscan viewpoint of a perfect life. Such is its concept of poverty. To say that this restricts the Franciscan to the use of things, which usage is sometimes restricted to the extreme limits of need, is not to exhaust the meaning of Franciscan poverty. It requires a sincere conformity of the whole man with his status as a creature.

It proceeds from an inward and operative working acknowledgment of his deep-seated essential needs, of his obligatory dependence upon God.

Such is the subject-matter of these meditations. In them our spiritual life will find nourishment and sustenance through the examples and words of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and of his disciple, St. Francis.

12. The age in which we live makes these meditations very opportune. They will remind us that we are disciples of a poor God. They will induce us to give to the world the urgent and much-needed example of the poverty of spirit, that is to say, a poverty of choice, if not of liking, surely a freely accepted poverty. Our interest in the subject is not prompted by historical curiosity, by a simple family devotion, but rather by a vital necessity of our times.

By way of conclusion let us make our own the following prayer which Ubertino of Casale gave to his Father Francis to obtain from Jesus, his Master, the gift of poverty.⁷

"O Lord Jesus, show me the paths leading to the poverty so dear to you. Its love torments me. I cannot be happy away from it! Have pity on me and on my Lady Poverty, for you are the one who made me fall in love with her!

"She is present in sadness, spurned by all. She, the queen of nations, is like a widow. The queen of virtues is vile and despised. Those who ought to cherish her, forsake her. They behave like adulterers, not like faithful spouses. She weeps sitting on a dunghill.

"Yet, Lord Jesus, you left your throne and the company of the angels for her. You came down to this earth and in your eternal love you enoused her so that from, in, and with her you might have perfect sons. She remained united to you during your entire life . . . She was your inseparable companion right up to the cross where she followed you, whereas your sweet Mother was obliged to remain at the foot of the cross. She did not abandon you in death. She procured an alms-given tomb for you, a borrowed sepulchre. You brought her with you

⁷ This prayer was first known through the transcription which Ubertino de Castle gave it in his *Arbor vite crucifixæ*. It was later found in the *Sacrum Commertium*, which we shall speak of later, and rightfully belongs to this work. We of necessity have abridged the prayer.

into heaven, leaving to the world what is worldly. Lastly you gave her the seal of the kingdom of heaven so that she might stamp the elect who wish to walk in the ways of perfection.

"Oh! who could not love Lady Poverty above all things! I ask you to stamp me with her seal! I desire to be enriched with such a treasure. I beg this of you, Jesus most poor, for me and for mine! For love of your Name see to it that I never have anything of my own under heaven, and that as long as this flesh lives, I shall always sparingly use the gifts offered by others in your love. Amen."

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