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CORDE

A FRANCISCAN

SPIRITUAL REVIEW

VOL. XII, NO. 5, MAY, 1962

THE CORD, a monthly magazine specifically devoted to Franciscan spirituality, is published under the sponsorship of the Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N. Y. Acting Editor: Rev. Innocent Dahm, O.F.M. Entered as second class matter on November 25, 1950, at St. Bonaventure P. O., New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879. All communications, whether of a business or a literary nature, should be addressed to THE CORD, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure P. O., New York. *Quon parvum superiorum*

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## A Commentary on the Psalms:

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

### Psalm 126

Of the twelve Psalms used in the Little Hours, only one remains to be examined, Psalm 126. Students of the liturgy may well be imagined as wondering why this Psalm appears twice in the Little Office, once at None and again at Compline. On the other hand, students interested in Sacred Scripture, and particularly the Book of Psalms, might more likely wonder whether we are dealing here with one song or with two songs joined rather loosely to make this one Pilgrim Song. Let us concentrate on the second of these problems and see what answer we may discover by a critical reading of Psalm 126.

The first strophe of the Psalms, identified by some writers as a distinct and separate song in its own right, consists of eight lines, grouped into four distichs or couplets, two of which form the first verse, two the second. Here is the first pair of lines:

*Unless the Lord build the house,  
they labor in vain who build it.  
Certainly the first thing to notice about the distich is the pronounced balance of thought between the clauses which compose it. Not agreement of thought, now, but*

*balance of thought, a symmetry obtained by placing one idea parallel, you might say, to another.*

As a matter of fact, I ought to remind you, perhaps, that this balancing of thought is a distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry and is called "parallelism". When the thought in the second line merely repeats and echoes the thought in the first line, with some slight modification, of course, we have what is known as "synonymous parallelism". Sometimes, however, the second thought offers a sharp contrast to the first to give us what is called "antithetic parallelism". There is a third type which is termed "synthetic" or "progressive parallelism", in which the thought expressed in the first line is further expanded, elaborated, or completed in the second line. This last kind of parallelism frequently—more frequently, too, than the other kinds—runs over into three and sometimes four lines. I can not recall where I read a rather ordinary but enlightening description of this poetic device, but I am going to mention it in the hope that it may help you to associate the name and the description of each of these three types. In synonymous parallelism,

You are dealing with twins. In antithetic parallelism, you are dealing with a brother and a sister. In synthetic or progressive parallelism, you are dealing with a parent and his child or children. Anyway, all three types occur in this poem, as we shall see, the first to do so being progressive parallelism in the first distich:

*Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it.*

The tenor of these lines is the need of God's blessing for the success of man's undertaking; it is presented in terms of carpenters or masons building a house. The same motion is illustrated in the next two lines by reference to the city watchmen keeping vigil on its walls:

*Unless the Lord guard the city, in vain does the guard keep vigil.*

Here we have a second example of progressive parallelism. Notice, moreover, that the poem gains effectiveness and a kind of integration by the similarity now established between the first and the third lines—

*Unless the Lord build the house,*

*Unless the Lord guard the city—*  
and between the second and the fourth lines—

*they labor in vain who build it, in vain does the guard keep vigil.*

It may strike you here that the poet seems as much to be repeating himself as to be getting on with whatever he has to say. The observation is valid and pertinent because it serves to remind us that

the Psalms, composed in the first place for a Hebrew audience, conform to oriental notions of poetry.

This is why sometimes their thought is, you might say, circular, not linear; what is said does not move along uninterruptedly in a straight line from one thought to the next and then on finally to a conclusion, but revolves once or twice or three times about one one thought and then goes on to repeat the process with another and then another thought. It is this repetitiveness of the Psalms that makes them such good exercises in meditation: we keep turning over in our minds the same idea, revolving it, looking at it from different angles, considering it from several sides. One of the reasons that some people find the Psalms tedious is that they expect consecutive thoughts and are disappointed when their minds are kept hovering about a single theme, presented over and over again, sometimes with only the slightest variation in the diction and the imagery. Such people want to fly in a long, straight line as the wild geese go, instead of circling around and round a steeple like so many swallows. They fail to see—to use another figure—that the theme or central thought or important idea of a Psalm is a brilliant ray of pure white light, refracted into all the colors of the rainbow by the facets of a prism. And the theme, so shining forth in Psalm 126, is the vanity, the

complete futility of any work's being successful unless the man who performs it acknowledges his need of the Lord's blessing upon it.

This is the lesson taught in more general terms and more embracing imagery in the next verse of the poem:

*It is vain for you to rise early,*

*or put off your rest.*

This is, incidentally, an example of synonymous parallelism. You must have met people, I am sure, who are forever getting an early start so as to finish in a day all that the world expects of them, as if the running of the whole world were entirely and exclusively their responsibility! Vanity! Foolishness! That is what the psalmist would call it. These are the same people who can never get to bed on time, either, because they have to be sure that the whole world is tucked away to rest before they lie down to sleep! And that is vanity, too, the psalmist thinks.

If I seem to be making the poet talk directly to his hearers, that is precisely what he is doing: talking to people who think that everything depends on their work to win the things they need or to accomplish what has to be done. They are the ones whom he warns: *You that eat hard-earned bread.* And in the very next words, which make the verse a good example of progressive parallelism, the poet complements the advice by showing why it must be true:

*For he gives to his beloved in sleep.*

I want you to remark about these lines, too, that they reveal the artistry of the poet as well as his wisdom. In the preceding lines he first mentions the Lord and then those who labor. Now he reverses the order: first he speaks of men who labor, then he speaks of the Lord. Thus he climaxes the strophe and closes it as he had opened it, with reference to the Lord without whom men can do nothing.

We have some words of Jesus which aptly comment on this insistence that God works for "those who fear him . . . those who hope for his kindness" (Psalm 32:18), even to the extent of blessing "his beloved in sleep." The words are recorded by Saint Mark. They picture a man who would "sow a crop in his land, and then go to sleep and wake again, night after night, day after day, while the crop sprouts and grows, without any knowledge of his. So, of its own accord, the ground yields increase, first of the blade, then the ear, then the perfect grain in the ear; and when the fruit appears, then it is time for him to put in the sickle, because now the harvest is ripe" (Mark 4:26-29). And the Lord, of course, is behind it all "for he gives to his beloved in sleep."

Mention of Christ logically reminds us that this Psalm states in germinal form the supreme duty of trust in our heavenly Father which Christ laid upon us in the doctrine which he taught. This is

one of the very things to which Saint Paul refers when he reminded his listeners, and us, too, that "God spoke to our fathers in many ways and by many means, through the prophets; now at last in these times he has spoken to us, with a Son to speak for him . . . (Hebrews 1:1-2). And this Son said to his disciples, "I say to you, then, do not fret over your life ( how to support it with food, over your body, how to keep it clothed . . . See how the ravens never sow, have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them; have you not an excellence far beyond theirs? . . . See how the lilies grow; they do not toil or spin, and yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these . . . You should not be asking them, what you are to eat and drink, and living in suspense of mind; it is for the heathen world to busy itself over such things; your Father knows well that you need them. No, make it your first care to find the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be yours without the asking" (Luke 12:22-31).

the importance attaching to the family in oriental countries, it is not unnatural that the Psalmist should enlarge upon its advantages, though he is led away thereby from the point with which he started." Agreeing that it seems unnecessary to make two short poems of this Psalm, I take objection, nevertheless, to the suggestion that the latter part of it—verses 3 to 5—dealing with God's gift of sons wanders from the point with which the first two verses are concerned. Let me give you my grounds for holding that the Psalm is one, whole, and entire poem, unified in thought and imagery.

Ambiguity, double meaning, the capacity of a word to be taken in several senses is an inevitable and basic aspect of language. Lawyers and scientists, for example, do not like this trait that words have, so many of them. That is why such people try very hard to use words so that they can have only one possible meaning. To keep their statements pure and single in sense, they even invent words that nobody else will use. Poets, on the other hand, revel in ambiguity because they know that it enriches their statements and makes them effective in several ways at once. One word will suggest two, three, even four related thoughts and images to the reader. How economical and useful a way to enrich your statement without loosening it or lengthening it! Not to make an excursion through the museum

of poetical examples, let me remind you of one superb illustration of ambiguity. This one was used by Christ himself on a most solemn occasion. *Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam*. "Thou art Peter"? Yes, surely, but also and at the same time, "Thou art a rock." "And upon this rock"? Certainly, but also and at the same time, "Upon this Peter right here in front of me."

Now if you read the first line of Psalm 126—as many an exegete seems to do—as if it were a sentence in a theology book, it means precisely what it says: *Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it*. Simple and clear, no ambiguity! Bricks, mortar, trowel, ladder, scaffold, work, and here you have it, a house. That is what is meant by "build a house." But if you read the lines as poetic statement—which dots on ambiguity—and not as a scientific statement, is that all they mean?

Well, when God repudiated Heli, he announced his choice of Sadoe in these words: "I will raise me up a faithful priest;" and God spoke of Sadoe's posterity in these words: "I will build him a faithful house" (I Kings 2:34). And when God sent Nathan to assure David of the continuance of his line, the message ran like this: "The Lord will build thee a house" (I Paralipomeon 17:10). And when God sanctioned Jeroboam and his descendants as

rulers of Israel, he said so through Ahias the prophet: "I will be with thee and will build thee up a faithful house, as I built a house for David" (III Kings 11:38). There are more examples of a similar kind to show that "build a house" can be taken as a figurative way of describing the founding of a family, the establishing of a lineage, the begetting of children and heirs.

You can say, therefore, that the very opening reference in this poem to the building of a house poetically justifies special mention later on of God's gift of sons. The second strophe of the Psalm is thus an echo and an expansion of a theme implicit in the first lines of the poem. If it be vain to rely on your energy and ambition to get what you want; if it be vain to depend on your own care and vigilance to guard what you have; it is equally vain to make your plans for what the future will bring to your name and your fortunes. For,

*Behold, sons are a gift from the Lord;  
the fruit of the womb is a reward.*

By this synonymous parallelism the poet reminds Israel that, as the Lord had gratuitously bestowed upon them the land of Canaan through no merit of theirs, in his mercy and generosity he will give them the blessing of numerous children to populate and to cultivate the land. This was a truth

that needed reiteration, especially at the time in which the psalmist is speaking. There is only slight reason to accept the opinion that Solomon composed this poem.

The attribution of it to him in the title is due, most likely, to the resemblance of its language to that of the sapiential books; to the mention of building a house, which statement some scribe took to be a reference to the Temple which Solomon had built; but, above all, to the fact that Solomon was called "Beloved of Yahweh" and had, in sleep, received from God his gift of wisdom.

The poem, however, really seems to date from the time, after the Babylonian Captivity, when the Jews had returned to find Jerusalem devastated and desolate. "Far and wide the city stretched, and its citizens were few and far between; the houses in it had not yet been repaired" (Nehemias 7:4). But the returning exiles set manfully to work at once. Meanwhile, their jealous neighbors made common cause to stop them, even attacking the city. But, as Nehemias tells us, "We ask help of God and set watchmen on the walls, day and night, to defeat their purpose" (Nehemias 4:9). How desperate things actually were Nehemias goes on to relate: "Already the Jews were complaining that they had no strength left for carrying burdens, that the ground was choked with rubble; our task

would never be finished; and now our enemies thought to steal upon us unawares, and put an end to it by taking our lives" (Nehemias 4:10-11). This was precisely the moment when the Jews needed to be reminded that everything did not depend upon their brains and brawn alone. God watches over his people; he will build up their houses and protect their cities, and he will do both by giving them children in abundance to dwell in them and to defend them.

This is the thinking, I feel, that lies behind the simile which the poet uses in the next two lines of the strophe. Not only a "gift from the Lord" and a "reward" to those who rely on him, but

*Like arrows in the hand of a warrior*

*are the sons of one's youth.*

It is the sons who are born when their parents are young and vigorous who will grow up to succeed and to defend their aging parents.

That is the point of using the figure of a warrior with arrows in his hands, a fighter with his weapons in his grasp. In the Psalm that follows this one in the Psalter, Psalm 127, the poet again celebrates the blessings of family life. The lovely intimacy of it, its hidden vitality and fruitfulness, these are the aspects he singles out for comment. You can tell that is his intention by the very words he uses, the figures he uses:

*Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine  
in the recesses of your home;  
Your children like olive plants  
around your table.*

Quite a contrast, these words, with the warlike figure of Psalm 126! And the poem grows even more war-like in the closing verse:

*Happy the man whose quiver is  
filled with them;  
they shall not be put to shame  
when they contend  
with enemies at the gate.*

You may think there is a fierceness here that is out of place, but how else could the poet have pointedly reminded his hearers that ultimately the welfare of their city and the safety of their lives depend upon the strength and bravery of the sons the Lord gives them to be the instruments of his Providence and the reward of his beloved who trust in him? I suppose that I ought to put in here, as a kind of aside, the reminder that the third and the fourth verses of this strophe illustrate the use of progressive parallelism.

The burden of this song is that God takes care of those who believe in him, a fact that men tend to forget, but one which affects every minute of their lives. This Providence of God is exercised usually indirectly and through secondary causes. The poet illustrates his theme by insisting that no one builds a house without the help of him who "at the beginning of time, created heaven and earth" (Gen-

esis 1:1); that no one guards a city without the help of him who "neither slumbers nor sleeps, the guardian of Israel" (Psalm 120:4). He addresses those who rise early and work late, who fret and worry and sometimes doubt and so "eat hard-earned bread." Meanwhile, to those who repose in calm confidence in him God gives the blessings that others work in vain to obtain. He does it indirectly, sending them sons in their youth, who will establish their houses, populate and multiply their cities, protect and defend them in their old age, and insure their triumph over "the enemies at the gate."

It is customary to see in this last verse a reference to the oriental habit of settling legal disputes at courts held in the large, open space just inside the city's gate. The interpretation is that a man who comes to such a tribunal surrounded by a band of sturdy sons shall be assured of fair play and "shall not be put to shame when they contend with enemies at the gate." I think this interpretation is much too facile and not very well founded. It fails to notice that it is not the father who is contending and is rescued from shame but the sons; not "he" but "they." It overlooks the martial tones suggested as early as the second verse of the Psalm. These tones grow in intensity as the poem unfolds. And all the imagery of the second strophe seems practically wasted if all we are expected to see is a

The whole poem collapses and dribbles away unless we see in its conclusion an assurance that Israel, if he remains faithful to God, need never fear that God will desert him in his hour of need or that he will have to rely upon his own frail powers alone in such times. God will fill the hearts of his people with the courage that inspired Nehemias and his men; God will strengthen them to say in the face of any enemy what Nehemias said in the face of his: "Fear no assault . . . bethink you how great, how fearsome the Lord is, and fight well, each for his own kindred, for son and daughter and wife, for house and home" (Nehemias 4:14). It is only when and if such faith inspires men that "they shall not be put to shame when they contend with enemies at the gate." Our challenge is that we, who know what happened to the Chosen People, make not the mistake they made in missing the message of this Psalm.

group of sons marching with their father to the city gate to overawe their adversaries and to intimidate a judge. This is a very shabby thing to gladden a just father's heart!

## St. Peter Of Alcantara

Encyclical Letter of Most Reverend *Augustine Spinshi*,  
Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor

Most beloved sons and daughters in the Lord:

St. Peter of Alcantara, outstanding promoter of a purer discipline in the Order of Friars Minor, died very peacefully on the 18th of October, 1562, at Arenas in the diocese of Avila, Spain.

Four centuries have passed since then and two provinces in particular are striving to mark this anniversary with equal solemnity: the Castilian Province of St. Gregory of the Philippines, which possesses the precious remains of the Saint, and the Province of Andalusia-Granada wherein is located the friary known popularly as "El Pedroso". Moreover, we are happy to learn that in Spain a civil and religious assembly has been arranged to pay due honor to the memory of so great a man.

Such observance is clearly fitting and praiseworthy and We most willingly give our consent to it. For as "a sun rising over the Iberian lands", Peter spread the rays of his light so that he might impel his own countrymen to the peak of sanctity, support every effort of his

own time towards the restoration of religion, and, what cannot at all be overlooked, enable Spanish literature by his own writings.

But surely this celebration must strike a responsive chord within the entire Order because St. Peter so effectively promoted the observance of the Rule and kindled the fervor of the seraphic spirit that through his influence a new and most fruitful springtime of sanctity flourished in "the meadows of poverty". Although he cannot be called the founder of Discalced reform, nonetheless, in justice he must be recognized as the pillar of this reform because he gave it prudent and courageous leadership, made it firm with most wise constitutions, and fostered it with the strength of his own spirit. Small wonder, then, that in the course of time, the Discalced Reform taking its name from him became known as the Alcantarine reform. So strong did it grow that later it gave rise to many flourishing provinces in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Mexico, the East Indies, the Philippine Islands, and in Brazil where Peter of Alcantara is honored as Patron by decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

No wonder the liturgical Office regards Peter as a new Francis and grants him the singular praise: "Our Seraphic Father is dead, and yet not so; for he has left one like himself, Peter, whom he has made defender of his home. This Peter follows all the paths of his father: he veers neither to right nor left" (Office, 19 October, Resp. I).

Moreover, Peter is among the holy founders memorialized in marble in the Vatican Basilica and the inscription at the foot of the statue reads: "Renewer of the life of his apostolic Father St. Francis." For these reasons, therefore, We wished ourselves to inaugurate on 22 October 1961 the centennial year in the Church of the Forty Martyrs, Rome, a church belonging to the Province of St. Gregory. Further, We considered it opportune to address the entire Order by this present Letter on how this memorable event might be celebrated with benefit.

It is not Our intention to narrate at great length the life and works of this saint; We wish rather to set forth in simple words his outstanding virtues of *poverty*, *penance* and *the spirit of prayer* for consideration to this end that the example of this faithful follower of our Father St. Francis may incite everyone to renew the fervor of seraphic life. For especially in our times, how eloquently does Peter speak by his wonderful life reproving sluggishness and listlessness in the practice of perfection, stirring up the good will to strive for greater things, showing the supernatural rewards of penance and mortification and, with the Apostle, urging "so run that you may win the prize" (I Cor. 9:24).

## I. — POOREST OF THE POOR

Reforms, as they are called, have been frequent in the history of our Order. For the most part they have had as their aim the safeguarding of the highest seraphic poverty or the restoration of its former purity. Among reformers, indeed, Peter of Alcantara, "poorest of the poor", so faithfully understood and made his own the mind of the "little poor man of Assisi" that it can rightly be said that the most severe way of life he restored surpassed to a certain extent the earliest state of the Order.

On 25 September 1958, when We visited the shrine at Arenas, We were deeply affected by looking at Peter's very narrow cell—itself the most eloquent testimony of his extreme poverty.

The example of the saints speak in vain, however, if they do not move us to imitation. Taught by such great examples, let us strive to approach the height of holy poverty and to lay hold of its summit with all our might.

The true son of St. Francis cannot forget that poverty is the fountain and special characteristic of Franciscan life, a characteristic or ideal that cannot be changed because of changing times without disfiguring the very form of this life. Circumstances change, true enough, and the conditions of life and even the regulations concerning the use of things; but the spirit of poverty must always remain the cornerstone of our spiritual edifice lest we depart from the intention of the Seraphic founder of our Order. The Friar Minor stripped of all things, especially of himself, eager to serve the Lord in simplicity and desiring only heavenly things, "has nothing to do with worldly goods" so that having become all things to all men he may devote himself entirely to God and the salvation of souls.

This freedom of spirit overcomes the souls of worldlings. When modern society sees the friars imbued with his spirit, it will realize itself fettered just as did the thirteenth century when it saw Francis and his companions. Consequently, the more there shines forth a striving for highest poverty, so much the more effective will be the Franciscan apostolate of winning souls to Christ.

Religious poverty does not at all consist in a purely theoretical renunciation of things. Religious poverty especially means a spiritual detachment from temporalities, dependence upon superiors in the use of things and a way of life foreign to superfluous comforts and worldly pleasures. Moreover, Franciscan poverty not only carries with it the inability to possess things even in common; it adds the precept of not using money. The precept of not using money, although at present mitigated in practice by a special indulgent of the Holy See, remains in

force always, so that the use of money becomes permissible only within the limits expressed in the indulgent.

These things must be remembered in regard to communal poverty and personal poverty. Our Order must excel the others in the simplicity of our buildings, in the moderate use of vehicles and all things, in the frugality of our meals, the roughness and humility of our clothing, but especially in the skillful effort to conform to the precept of the Rule "that the friars receive neither coins nor money." Would that in our friaries a single substitute for the apostolic syndic would handle all business matters—to the exclusion of any handling of money by the other friars! Would that our friars who use money by indulgent while travelling or for some other legitimate cause would always remember their obligation to render an exact account of every expense even the smallest!

## II. — WONDERFUL EXAMPLE OF PENANCE

Peter of Alcantara is best known as an admirable *example of penance and mortification*. The instances of its practice which St. Teresa relates (*Vida*, c. 27, nn. 16-21) would seem incredible were they not verified by the witness of one of such position and trustworthiness. For indeed the servant of God had made a special pact with his body "that he would not give it any rest". This pact, doubtless, he kept with utmost fidelity; as a result, he found in eternity the rest he reserved for his body for eternity and so when after death he appeared to the seraphic Teresa, he could exclaim, "O blessed penance which earned me such great glory."

Today the spirit of penance and mortification seems to be made light of even by certain religions, although our Saviour himself openly proclaimed its importance or rather necessity in religious life: "If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me" (Mt. 16:24). On the occasion of this fourth centennial celebration, therefore, it helps to meditate attentively on these words of the Divine Teacher and, earnestly relying on them, to pattern our mode of life according to the example of St. Peter.

On this matter We wish only to present the manner in which our whole life can be and must be a way of penance and mortification. To live a truly penitential life it is enough that those things be accurately fulfilled which are prescribed in the Rule, in canon law, in the General Constitutions and other laws. The precepts of fasting, of the amount and quality of clothing, of not wearing shoes, of the prohibition against using money—these things are clearly not pleasant to human nature to which our strict way of life is not less repugnant because it stands completely against the luxury and comforts of the world

Nevertheless, if we faithfully observe these things, if we carefully shun the ways of the world which, shame to say, too easily force themselves into the house of the Lord, if finally we truly throw off the vanities of the world which we abandoned by our profession, then, as befits true Friars Minor, we will be true followers of the spirit of penance. We will be its heralds "carrying about in our bodies the mortification of Jesus that the life of Jesus may be manifested in them" (II Cor. 4:10).

Besides, the Friar Minor who faithfully observes the common life will not lack other lesser inconveniences: the rule of silence, the practice of the discipline, prompt and exact participation in community exercises, observance of the ceremonies. These and others like them continually provide an opportunity for self-denial. Not without reason is the highest fidelity in little things considered the greatest penance of religious life.

All these things must be borne with a willing and joyful spirit, not rationalizing any excuses nor seeking exemptions or dispensations except there be legitimate cause. For the kingdom of heaven suffers violence; he who refrains from doing violence to himself will not reach it.

### III — ELEVATED BY THE GRACE OF PRAYER AND CONTEMPLATION

St. Peter's zeal for prayer is extolled by the sacred Liturgy in these words: "Gifted with much virtue, the holy father did not relax an unconquered spirit from prayer: with the fruit of good works he brought forth words of divine wisdom. Day and night he did not cease from heavenly conversation and prayer" (Old Office, 19 October, II Noct., resp. 6).

Truly, enlightened "by the gift of highest contemplation" and endowed with the wonderful charisms of the mystical life, he himself not only reached the highest peaks of divine union but, as a wise teacher, he was consulted on spiritual matters by many of the holiest men and women: it is enough to mention, among others, St. Francis Borgia, St. John of Rivera, St. Teresa of Jesus.

Moreover, through his little book *On Prayer and Meditation* he became the teacher of this highest knowledge for future generations. Thus the enlightened "doctor and teacher of mystical theology", as Pope Gregory XV is said to have addressed him (cf. Wadding, *Annals*, 1562, XIX, t. 435, n. 325), still speaks to us not only by his life but also by his writings. He teaches us excellently about the supreme importance of prayer for acquiring perfection, of the need of right instruction and long practice in the exercise of prayer, and of the attaining of supernatural contemplation by the practice of holy meditation.

Moreover, if we find religious in whom the fervor of seraphic life is affected by excessive sluggishness or, what is more lamentable, apparently entirely extinct, we may be sure that the chief cause of this evil is to be found in the lack of the spirit of prayer. For this reason, We cannot urge too strongly that each one strive daily to nourish and foster the spirit of prayer "to which all temporal things are to be subservient." Especially is it to be fostered by conscientious participation in the common exercises of piety. Let superiors place highest value on the daily hour of prayer and meditation prescribed by the General Constitutions and let them not allow it to be neglected in any way. All religious, superiors and subjects alike, should take care that they do not use vain pretexts to excuse themselves from the sacred obligations to give their own soul supernatural nourishment through personal contact with God in holy prayer, be that prayer vocal or mental, communal or private.

Celano speaks of our Seraphic Father Francis as "not so much a prayerer as become totally a prayer" (*Vita Secunda*, n. 95). Would that of every Friar Minor it could be said at least that he was a man imbued with the spirit of holy prayer and devotion. To become so imbued, a great help is the firm determination to consecrate a fitting time every day to the practice of prayer. Constancy begets perseverance; perseverance will be crowned with victory.

For the rest, prayer is the royal road to acquire the virtues proper to our state, to keep religiously all that we have promised and to persevere unto the end in the state of life we have freely chosen. Without the spirit of prayer no one will be able to conquer himself and fulfill the sacred obligations of religious life.

While we recall these things, beloved sons and daughters, We earnestly beseech the Father of lights that the seraphic spirit which St. Peter of Alcantara wisely taught and wonderfully confirmed by his own holy example remain pure in each of us and be constantly increased. We are the sons of saints; therefore, let us also strive to walk in the path of sanctity. As in the sixteenth century, through Peter, "the offspring of Francis shone bright, renewed unto the early way of life," so also in our day through his intercession may virtue grow in our family "by a generous gift of heaven" (Office, 19 October, hymn at Matins). May Christ Jesus, who promised St. Teresa "always to hear those who petition in the name of Peter" (*ibid.*, Noct. III), deign to grant us this most sought after grace as the sweet fruit of the centennial celebration.

(Last two paragraphs which constitute Christmas greetings omitted.)

Given at Rome, 29 November 1961  
(Translated by Father Valentine Healy, O.F.M.)



# St. Francis And Obedience

Rev. Bellarmin Hebert, O.F.M.

By the grace of God, St. Francis of Assisi founded a religious Order whose objective was to live the Gospel and to promote this same evangelical spirit in the world. A community was formed for this end. A community of necessity needs an authority, the heart of any social group. The problem then arises of the relationship of subjects to their superiors—a relationship that protects the vow and the virtue of obedience. This prompts the question: what was St. Francis' idea of obedience? Reliable sources can be found which clearly and directly bespeak the mind of Francis, his writings and sayings.<sup>1</sup>

All these sources can give us a rather true and faithful picture of religious obedience according to the mind of our Seraphic Father. Through these writings we grasp the foundation of Franciscan obedience, the object of the virtue, the manner of obeying, and the spiritual fruits that will result.

## I The Foundations of Obedience

### Love of God and Christ Crucified

Everything in the life of St. Francis finds its ultimate explanation in his love for Christ crucified. At the very outset of his conversion, the vision of Christ on the Cross set his heart aglow with an ardent love that gave him the courage to subject himself to the purifying trials of self-renunciation, the indispensable preliminary to perfect Christian life. According to St. Bonaventure, "the memory of Christ crucified was ever before his mind's eye like a sashet of myrrh in the breast of the Spouse of the Canticle of Canticles, and in the fervor of his ecstatic love Francis desired to be totally transformed into Christ crucified."<sup>2</sup> Love of God and particularly of Christ became the ultimate reason for all his actions; the practice of all the virtues, especially of strict poverty, of sincere humility, and of perfect obedience was motivated by love.

<sup>1</sup> Generous use has been made of the recent French translation of the *Opuscula de Saint Francis* published by the *Editions Franciscaines* of Paris (1956), which was based on the Latin text of Quaracchi, and the sayings of St. Francis which have been collected and grouped in a book entitled *Ainsi Parlait Saint Francois (Editions du Vieux Colombier, 1955)*. One last invaluable source is the sixth chapter of St. Bonaventure's *Life of Saint Francis*.

<sup>2</sup> St. Bona. *Leg. Maj.*, Chap. 9, No. 2.

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In his *Third Admonition* he mentions that a subject sometimes feels that a different situation would be better and more beneficial for his soul than the one imposed by obedience. Such a religious must sacrifice his will to God and comply with the orders of his superior for, as St. Francis writes, "obedience is true and based on charity when it satisfies both God and neighbor."<sup>3</sup> In his *Second Rule*, he clearly affirms the primary motive of obedience: "The friars who are subjects should remember that for the love of God they have renounced their own wills."<sup>4</sup> In his *Letter to All the Faithful*, he wrote: "We should never desire to be above others. Rather ought we to be their servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake."<sup>5</sup>

### Imitation of Christ

By its very nature love tends to identification. When we love someone, we manifest our love not only in words and external acts; but we strive to imitate the loved one in every possible way. For what fosters love is awareness of the good of the person loved. Good attracts and urges toward identification. Such was the case with St. Francis. With perfect insight he perceived all the riches of Christ and strove in all things to imitate his Master. "His supreme endeavor, his most ardent wish, his foremost resolve was to observe the Holy Gospel in all things, to practice the doctrine of Our Lord, and to follow him step by step."<sup>6</sup> He likewise endeavored to put on the way of thinking, the ideas and the sentiments of the Gospel, and in his lifetime he fulfilled the words of the Apostle: "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2, 5)

But the particular traits of the divine likeness which he was intent on reproducing were those in which the Son of God seemed to display greater love and to humble himself the more, the self-abasement shown in the Incarnation and the Redemption. This is one of the profound reasons for his ever-prompt obedience. Because his Master had made himself obedient even unto the death of the cross for the redemption of our sins Francis himself wished to obey God the Father in all things. In a *Letter addressed to the General Chapter*, he wrote: "I say the same concerning all those who wander about disregarding the prescriptions of the Rule, for Our Lord Jesus Christ gave up his life rather than be

<sup>3</sup> *Admonitions*, Chap. III, No. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Second Rule*, Chap. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Letter to All the Faithful*, No. 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>7</sup> *Third Letter to the General Chapter*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> St. Bona. *Leg. Maj.*, chap. 6, No. 1.

disobedient to his Most Holy Father."<sup>7</sup> In another place he said, "If the Son of God descended from the great height which separates the bosom of the Father from our abjection, he, the Lord and Master, did so to teach us humility by word and example."<sup>8</sup>

Complete renunciation of the will

To attain perfect identification with Christ crucified, Francis understood that he must effect the paradox of the Gospel in his life by dying as much as possible to himself and emptying himself fully to be the more enriched with Christ. Obedience promotes this inner renunciation because it touches what is closest and most profound in the human person, the will.

In the opening words of the *Third Admonition*, Francis explains and bases perfect obedience on the following words of the Gospel: "Every one of you who does not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14, 33) and "he who would save his life will lose it" (Matt. 16, 25). He then adds, "That man gives up all he possesses and loses body and soul who abandons himself wholly to obedience in the hands of his superior."<sup>9</sup>

This death of self, this martyrdom through obedience was for Francis a source of apostolic riches, like unto Christ, who by obedience to his Father, accepted death for the redemption of the human race. "If a superior were to command anything against our conscience, we may refuse him obedience, but we must not on that account definitely break with him and leave him. And if we should be persecuted by some for so doing, we should love them the more for God's sake. For he who would rather suffer persecution than wish to be separated from his brethren truly abides in perfect obedience for he lays down his life for his brethren."<sup>10</sup> Here again is the idea of death and martyrdom which perfect obedience implies. "We must deny ourselves and place our bodies under the yoke of servitude and of holy obedience as each one has promised the Lord."<sup>11</sup> This complete self-renunciation in obedience for love of God was for Francis a form of poverty—spiritual poverty. Evangelical poverty is not limited to the humble privation of earthly and material goods. It also personifies the spirit of total self-renunciation. Hence, poverty is truly the way of perfection since it is joined to renunciation, without which neither supernatural life nor Christian perfection is possible. Thus understood faithfully, love not for itself but for Christ and in imitation of him, and practiced rigorously, poverty kept the soul of the Poverello in that state of renunciation

<sup>7</sup> *Third Admonition*, 1-4; cf. *First Rule*, I.

<sup>8</sup> *Third Admonition*, 7-9.

<sup>9</sup> *Letter to All the Faithful*, No. 40.

which consists in preferring God to all that is not of him. Consequently, Francis subjected himself in absolute dependence on his superior in order to dispossess himself completely. "I firmly purpose to be obedient to the Minister General of this Order and to any other whom he sees fit to make my Guardian; and I wish to be so submissive in his hands as neither in my movements nor in my work to overlap his obedience and will, for he is my master."<sup>12</sup>

Always Doing the Will of God the Father

Love necessarily seeks a union of wills. He who loves strives to fulfill the desires and wishes of the person loved. "If you love me, keep my commandments," Jesus said (Jh. 14, 15). Consequently, St. Francis thought of obedience as a clinging of his will to that of God. In concluding his *Letter to the General Chapter*, he prays fervently to God: "Grant us to do what we know you want and always to will what is pleasing to you."<sup>13</sup> *To a certain minister* who was having trouble with his subjects, he wrote: "You ought to regard this as a favor. You should want it that way and not otherwise. Regard this as true obedience to the Lord God and to me, for I know positively that this is true obedience. Love those who do such things to you and do not wish anything else from them save in so far as the Lord may grant you."<sup>14</sup> In this way are we true brothers of Christ since the first-born among us and the true Son of God ever did the will of his Father. "We are his brothers when we do the will of his Father who is in heaven."<sup>15</sup>

Obedience wins merit

Another factor which induced Francis to practice obedience was merit. His life seems a form of barter. To obtain the gifts of Christ, especially love, Francis sacrificed everything, even his own will, basing himself on the text of the Gospel "he who loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk. 9, 24). Thus Francis preferred being a subject to a superior. And in this we may certainly see one of the reasons why he renounced his title of General of the Order to Brother Elias. St. Bona-venture states, "Francis, like the merchant in the Gospel ever seeking to earn more and make every moment produce greater yield, chose to be a subject rather than a superior and to obey rather than rule."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Testament*, 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> *Letter to the General Chapter*, No. 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Sixth Letter to a Certain Minister*, Nos. 2, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Letter to All the Faithful*, No. 52.

<sup>16</sup> St. Bona., *Leg. Maj.*, Chap. 6, No. 4.

"In truth," said Francis, "obedience has this immense advantage that once we bend our neck under its yoke not one minute is without some merit."<sup>17</sup> That is why he promised obedience and obeyed the friar who ordinarily accompanied him in his travels.<sup>18</sup> "I know," he said, "the fruit of obedience: not one second can go by without merits for the man who bends his neck under the yoke of another."<sup>19</sup> At first sight, this outlook may seem self-centered and imperfect. But not so, for Francis sees the automatic result of a loving exchange in the reward. To live one must die; to enjoy union with Christ, one must practice complete self-detachment.

## II. The Object of Franciscan Obedience

### The Church

St. Francis was outstanding by reason of his feeling for the mind of the Church. His reform was wrought in the Church, contrary to that of the dissident sects of his time, the Waldenses, the Albigensians, the Humiliati of Lyons, and the Cathari. St. Francis saw in the Lord Pope the Vicar of Jesus Christ; in the authority of the magisterium he acknowledged the very authority of God. He asked for a Cardinal Protector for his Order.<sup>20</sup> His *Rule* had to be approved by the Church, and he forbade his friars to go and preach in dioceses without first obtaining the authorization of the bishops concerned.

He indeed had that *sentire cum ecclesia* and our liturgy grants him the title of *vir catholicus*. The first object of Franciscan obedience is the Church. In the prologue of his *First Rule*, Francis in his own name and in that of the future Generals solemnly promises obedience to the Holy See: "Brother Francis, and whoever may be at the head of this Order, promises and will promise obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Innocent and to his successors."<sup>21</sup>

### The Rule

For Francis obedience to the Rule is at the same time obedience to the Church which approved it. He strongly insists on this in several places in his writings. He wrote his *Testament* so that his brothers could observe the Rule in a more catholic way.<sup>22</sup> In virtue of obedience

to the Rule, the Minister General, the other ministers and the custodes can add nothing to it nor subtract anything from it. He moreover asks them not to add any gloss or interpretation to it. To obey the Rule is to obey Christ since it was he who enjoined this form of life on Francis: "As the Lord gave me to speak and write the Rule . . .<sup>23</sup> He exhorts his brothers to love this Rule, to keep it, and to practice it.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, he identified obedience with observance of the Rule: "Let them (the candidates) be received to obedience, promising to observe always this form of life and Rule."<sup>25</sup> Francis himself gives the example of his deep submission to the Rule by the confession he makes in a *Letter to the General Chapter*: "In many ways I have offended through my grievous fault, in particular because I have not kept the Rule I promised the Lord and I have not said the Office as the Rule prescribes, either from negligence or due to infirmity, or because I am an unlettered and simple person."<sup>26</sup>

### The Superior

The superior represents God; he is the intermediary of the will of God in behalf of his subjects. The true Friar Minor should see the will of God in that of his superiors and obey them as he would God despite their faults. Francis said: "A subject should never consider the man in a superior but only him for whose love the religious has subjected himself. The more contemptible the superior is, the more pleasing to God is the humility of the obedient friar."<sup>27</sup> Was not St. Francis ready to obey a novice of one hour?<sup>28</sup> We must then obey our superior in all things, except what is contrary to the Rule and our conscience. "Let all my other blessed friars readily obey them in all that concerns the salvation of their soul and is not contrary to our Rule."<sup>29</sup> Consequently, we must obey superiors with faith and promptness, even when the will of our superior is not formally manifested.<sup>30</sup>

### III. The Manner of Obedience

In the well-known allegory of the corpse,<sup>31</sup> Francis has given us an even more perfect example of obedience. No matter where a dead body is laid, it offers no resistance. So too a religious must not complain if he is changed. If he is left in the same friary, he will accept this willingly and in silence. It is well-known that in the Middle Ages, a

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 39.

<sup>24</sup> *First Rule*, Chap. 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Second Rule*, Chap. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Letter to the General Chapter*, 39-40.

<sup>27</sup> *II Cel.*, Chap. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; St. Bona., *Leg. Maj.*, Chap. 6, No. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *First Rule*, Chap. 4, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *II Cel.*, II, c. 22.

<sup>31</sup> *II Cel.*, Chap. 112; St. Bona., *Leg. Maj.*, 6, No. 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>19</sup> *II Cel.*, Chap. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Second Rule*, Chap. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *First Rule*, Prologue; *Second Rule*, Chap. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Testament*, Nos. 34-40.

period of pilgrimages and crusades. Mendicants as well as the laity wanted to be constantly on the move. Let us then accept the honors of certain demands with the humility of a corpse which, if seated on a throne keeps its eyes cast down or if dressed in purple looks only the more pale. This for Francis is the picture of the perfectly obedient soul.

Such a soul does not set himself up as the judge of his own reason for a transfer, does not intrigue to get himself moved to a particular house, is not constantly asking for a change. If he is changed, he remains humble; the more honors he receives the more unworthy he considers himself.

#### IV. The Fruits of Obedience

For St. Francis the truly obedient soul receives the blessing of God, for he maintains a filial attitude toward the Father, as did Our Lord Jesus Christ. He is truly a good servant. On the contrary, if he disobeys, he incurs the malediction of the Lord. "Yet them know that they are under a curse outside of obedience . . . ; and when they persevere in the Commandments of the Lord which they have promised by the holy Gospel and their life, let them know that they abide in true obedience, and are blessed by God."<sup>82</sup>

The disobedient religious lives under the empire of Satan.<sup>83</sup> "I saw the devil," he said, "on the back of my disobedient friar strangling him mightily. Conquered by such a horseman, the religious, having despised the yoke of obedience, followed the guidance of the devil blindly."<sup>84</sup> This is altogether psychological. By disobedience, the will grows weak, grace disappears from the soul, and the religious remains powerless to fight against his passions and the suggestions of the devil. God withdraws his protective hand, as he did to our first parents after their fall. On the contrary, holy obedience gives strength to accomplish what is asked of us. The religious receives actual graces and the graces of his state in life. And so we must never be alarmed at a command, however impossible it may seem. We must not even envision its impossibility.<sup>85</sup>

Holy obedience goes even further. It "confounds all bodily and fleshly desires and keeps the body mortified to the obedience of the spirit and to the obedience of one's brother, and makes a man subject to all the men of this world, and not to me alone, but also to all beasts and wild animals, so that they may do with him whatsoever they will,

<sup>82</sup> *First Rule*, Chap. 5, 19-20.

<sup>83</sup> *Admonitions*, II, 2.

<sup>84</sup> *II Cel.*, Chap. 2.

<sup>85</sup> *II Cel.*, II, Chap. 112.

insofar as it may be granted to them from above by the Lord."<sup>86</sup>

The Franciscan soul truly in love with God becomes identified with Christ through perfect obedience to the Church, to the Rule, and to his superior. Such a complete renunciation gains for him incalculable merits: peace of soul, self-mastery along with heavenly favors. St. Francis held disobedience on his part and on the part of others in horror.

One day, a friar guilty of disobedience was brought to Francis and, seeing his genuine repentance, Francis was very lenient with him. But to prevent others from imitating him, since it was so easy to obtain forgiveness, he ordered that his capuche be pulled off him and that it be thrown into the fire, thereby showing with what vigor violations against obedience should be punished.<sup>87</sup>

*Translated from the French, by  
Fr. Paul J. Oligny, O.F.M.*

## Felician Foundress Upholds St. Francis' Love For The Eucharist

*Sister Mary Jacinta Sczygielski, C.S.S.F.*

### CHAPTER III

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES CONCERNING MOTHER ANGELA

The noblest being of God's magnificent world is man. He possesses tremendous powers of body and soul; he fulfills the very purpose for which he was created to know, love and serve his Creator, his Heavenly Father. The Seraphic Doctor refers to man as a microcosm, a lesser world, Man is a creature that has intelligence with the angels, feels with the animals; he lives with the plants and has being with the stars. The book of Psalms (8, 6-7) extols man, "And thou hast made him a little less than the Angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor." The dignity of man is such that the Son of God deigned to assume to Himself a human nature. Hence, every man, the loftiest of God's creation, must find his way back to Almighty God. Countless pages will tell of one such soul, Servant of God Mother Mary Angela Truskowski, Felician Foundress.

<sup>86</sup> *Salutations to the Virtues*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> *St. Bona. Leg. Mdl.*, Chap. 6.

*Early Milestones*

On May 16, 1825, Sophia Camille Truszkowska was born in a somewhat older city in western Poland, called Kalisz, at that time under Russian rule. Her father, Joseph Truszkowski, was an aristocrat and lawyer by profession. He pursued his studies at the University of Warsaw. Her mother was educated by the Visitandine nuns in Warsaw. Both parents were God-loving and devout in the practice of their faith.

Sophia was by nature impulsive and of frail health. Although not externally very attractive, she was richly endowed with gifts of mind and heart. Recognizing her potential her parents had hoped to educate her to the best of her ability. Her early education was entrusted to the care of Miss Anastasia Kotowicz, a private tutor.

At the age of twelve, she continued her education in a private and exclusive school known as Madame Lehmann's School in Warsaw to which the family had moved in 1837. After a short period Sophia was threatened with tuberculosis. Upon the advice of her physician she was sent to the Swiss Alps. Her parents engaged Miss Kotowicz to accompany their daughter. During this time she studied French intensely. In her life she made good use of this knowledge which enabled her to read and appreciate wholesome spiritual works published in French. The atmosphere and beauty of the Alps captivated her soul and she perceived the wisdom, power, and goodness of God in the vestiges of Creation. Upon regaining her health she decided to embrace the religious life. Like many others, she had to make the decision between the active and contemplative life. Her confessor advised her to enter the Visitandines, a contemplative order. The hand of Providence, however, intervened; her father became ill. Sophia was asked to accompany him to a health resort in Salzburg, Germany. During her stay there she visited the Cathedral of Cologne. Sophia was so deeply impressed with this visit that she referred to it very often. Undoubtedly, the Holy Spirit urged her to embrace Christ's poor and suffering through works of mercy, consequently, she abandoned the idea of the cloistered life.

*The Birth of a New Congregation*

After returning to Warsaw, Sophia enrolled in the St. Vincent de Paul Society. The director of the local unit, Rev. Victor Ozarowski (1799-1870), introduced her into the new Apostolate. Sister Mary Bronislaws describes Sophia's enthusiasm for the poor and needy. "Sophia not only performed the proposed works of mercy but also embraced them without limit."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sister Mary Bronislaws Dmowska, *Matka Maria Angela Truszkowska, Zalozycielka Siostr Felicjank.* 1825-1899. (Buffalo: Wydawnictwo Felicjana, 1949), p. 15.

In 1854, at the age of twenty-nine, Sophia, aided financially by her father, opened a two-room orphanage known as the "Institute of Miss Truszkowska". Sophia's cousin, Miss Clothilda Ciechanowska, soon joined her to help carry on this work. During the day the children were instructed in religion, reading and writing, for the night they were entrusted to an elderly woman. After some time both Sophia and Clothilda left home to live permanently with the children.

On November 21, 1855,<sup>2</sup> Sophia and Clothilda consecrated their services to God before an image of our Lady of Czestochowa, who ever since that memorable day has been called the "Foundress." Thus, a new religious Congregation was brought into being. When other generous souls joined the newly founded lay-institute, the provincial superior of the Warsaw Capuchins, Rev. Benjamin Szymanski, arranged to have them organized into a religious community of the Third Order of St. Francis. Rev. Honorat Kozminski was appointed director of this organization. After a trial period of community life, the first ten novices were invested in the Franciscan habit on April 10, 1857, on which day Sophia received her religious name, Sister Angela. Her patroness is Blessed Angela Foligno. Four months later, on July 9, 1857, Mother Angela made her first profession. The sisters did not make any religious vows during the first nine years of existence. They simply made promises to live according to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Neither Sophia or Clothilda realized that God had chosen them to be the first members of the new congregation. It is a noteworthy fact that in Poland up to that time there were only contemplative women, and other forms of religious life were unknown.<sup>3</sup>

Ernest Marie de Beaulieu describes Mother Angela as a person very competent of carrying out this project. "Sophia Truszkowska, was a woman not only outstanding in faith and great piety but, also, intelligent and wise, especially active and generous; one of those women, briefly, who was made to govern a kingdom."<sup>4</sup>

The people of the city were really shocked when they saw the young women of the "Truszkowska Institute" dressed in a religious garb. This was a bold adventure since at that time a certain unrest was caused by the Russian government, which sought to liquidate all existing religious orders and communities unable to maintain a stable capital or who wore a religious habit and lived a common life at one place of residence.

<sup>2</sup> Siostry Felicjanki, *Historia Zgromadzenia SS. Felicjanek no Podstawie Rekopisow.* (Krakow: 1924) Czesc I, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Sister Mary Tullia, *Domian, Mother Mary Angela Truszkowska.* (Livonia, Mich.: Felician Sisters, 1954) p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Dmowska, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

The decree of Leo X, "Dum intra"<sup>5</sup> provided for tertiaries living together to be garbed uniformly. Bishop Benjamin Szymanski petitioned Czar Alexander II to grant a three-year permit for the establishment of the Institute of St. Felix for orphans and aged directed by Rev. Honorat, a Warsaw Capuchin. The Institute was under the patronage of St. Felix and was conducted by Mother Angela and her sisters, since they were seen frequently praying with the orphans at the altar of St. Felix of Cantalice in the Capuchin Church, the people began to call them the Sisters of St. Felix, known to many today as the Felician Sisters. The number of candidates increased rapidly and Mother Angela began to solicit funds for a new house. On July 10, 1858, the sisters and orphans were solemnly transferred to their new location, the former Zaluski Library, thanks to the benevolence of some good friends. In the same year, Father Salvator ab Oziero, the Capuchin minister general, incorporated the new religious group into the Capuchin family. The Papal nuncio, Archbishop Flavio Chigi, during his stay in Warsaw also visited the Institute and imparted his priestly blessing.

The young congregation took on several new apostolic activities; namely, homes for delinquent girls and fallen women, Third Order secular units, social centers among the peasantry under the auspices of the Agricultural Society, a catechumenate for Jewish girls and other religious denominations such as the Ruthenian Uniates, the preparation of youngsters for their First Communion, and sponsoring retreats for the laity. The Congregation attracted many vocations, and as was stated previously, it was the first community of women in Poland to lead a mixed life of prayer and social action, well adapted to the needs of the time. This apostolate of prayer and sacrifice was fostered according to the Franciscan pattern at all times.

#### *A New Branch and Disbandment*

Several members of this growing congregation felt inspired to embrace an entirely contemplative life. They felt that the apostolic works of the community ought to be supported by prayer; secondly, they wanted to sacrifice their lives for the needs of the Church and strive to make expiation for the sins of the world.

Upon their request, on the feast of the Seraphic Father in 1860, twelve candidates were chosen by ballot to begin an austere life, sometimes known as the "sepolte vive", according to the primitive Rule of St. Clare. Mother Angela, was one of the twelve. She spent two years of her life in the cloistered branch. Thus, the young community was divided into two parts: Mary, contemplating the Savior in His Eucharistic Life and expiating on behalf of the Mystical Body;

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

Martha, exercising herself in various works of mercy. Mother Angela, as the Superior General, took care of both choirs. Although she lived with the contemplative branch, she devoted every Friday to the needs of the active members.

On July 26, 1871, the cloistered branch of the community became independent of the active branch. In that year they moved to Przasnysz, where the only house of the order exists today. These sisters are known as the Capuchin Sisters of St. Clare and claim Mother Angela and Rev. Honorat as their founders.

Meanwhile there was a growing hostility among the Polish people toward their Russian oppressors. The despotism of the Czar finally resulted in the insurrection of January 22, 1863. The Felician Sisters opened their institutions for use as hospitals to wounded soldiers, making no discriminations as to countrymen and enemies. Unfortunately, due to this fact, the government later used this point as a pretext for the suppression of the Congregation.

During this period of unrest, Mother Angela was re-elected superior-general on July 27, 1864. Soon afterwards, on August 28, 1864, Mother Angela consecrated her community to the Immaculate Heart of Mary at a solemn ceremony.

In the meantime, the Russian police began liquidating religious communities. On November 28, 1864, the Capuchin Fathers were exiled, and with them the co-founder of the Felician Sisters, Father Honorat. The "ukase" or verdict of suppression, authorized by the Russian government befell the Felicians on December 17, 1864. The cloistered branch of the community was not affected by the act of suppression, but was ordered to join another contemplative community. In a spirit of charity, the cloistered Bernardine Sisters at Lowicz graciously accepted the refugees. The sisters of the active branch were forced to don secular garbs and live with their families and friends. Mother Angela encouraged the sisters to be firm in their religious promises and with an aching heart bade each one goodbye. During the period of suppression Mother Angela, in great distress and under obedience to Father Honorat, departed for Lowicz at the end of December.

On the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in 1865, through the intervention of Bishop Galecki, the ordinary of Cracow, the Austrian Emperor Joseph granted permission for the re-establishment of the Felician order in Austrian Poland. Each sister, however, had to pledge her citizenship to the Austrian domain. Accordingly, a provincial Motherhouse was opened in Cracow. A few months later, on November 21, the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin

Mary, the sisters took up their abode in the new convent. Since Mother Angela had become seriously ill, she was not able to join her sisters until the following May, 1866.

Mother Angela pronounced her perpetual vows on November 21, 1868, and the General Chapter, held the same year, again elected her as superior general and spiritual mother. Mother Angela accepted this office reluctantly, since her health was steadily failing and her hearing was fading away. Mother pleaded with Father Honorat to accept her resignation as superior general and as a result a special chapter was called in 1869 to vote for her successor. Mother Mary Magdalen Borowska, one of the pioneer members trained by the Foundress, was appointed superior general of the Congregation. She held this position for forty-four years.

#### *Mother Angela's Last Days*

Throughout the next thirty years, until her death, Mother Angela led a very quiet and unassuming life hidden in the Heart of her Eucharistic Spouse. The hours of her day were spent either at prayer adoring the Blessed Sacrament, in the garden tending flowers for the decoration of the altar, or in the community room sewing church vestments. She herself conceived it her mission, now, to pray for the sanctification of the Congregation that it might fulfill God's designs and to entrust it unceasingly to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Mother Angela suffered not only the physical pains of cancer, but also the crucifying, spiritual night of the soul. The last days of her illness found her calm and peaceful. With great love and understanding, she received and blessed her visiting daughters. By a strong will and constant prayer, she patiently bore her pains to the very end. The doctors, who knew what pain Mother was undergoing, admired her courage and fortitude, since most people suffering from this type of cancer become delirious.

The cancer developed steadily causing Mother Angela untold pain. It seemed inevitable that Mother Angela would be doomed to a death of starvation. On the feast of St. Clare in 1899, she received the Viaticum. Her greatest happiness in those trying days was the notification from the Holy See, on July 19, 1899, of a final approbation of the Congregation and a temporary approval of its Constitutions. On October 10, 1899, at the age of seventy-four, Mother Angela was beckoned by Sister Death. At her bedside was the Superior General, Mother Mary Magdalen, and many other spiritual daughters.

Fifty years after her death, on October 28, 1949, the cause of beatification was undertaken by the ecclesiastical authorities of Cracow. An intense study of her life and virtues has been undertaken ever since.

The exhumation took place on May 23, 1950, in the catacomb chapel of the Cracow Mother-house in the presence of His Excellency Cardinal Sapiecha and many other priests. The fifty questions of Canon 2023 were addressed to the assembled group at the time of exhumation by P. Hippolytus Eberhardt, O. Min. Conv., Promoter Fidei. The informative process was formally concluded on January 12, 1951, and the documents transferred to the Sacred Congregation of Rites in the Vatican.

#### QUERY TO A SILENT SENTINEL — ON THE RESURRECTION

Lo! How it lies!

What didst thou see,

A precious stone?

What heavenly thing transpired

That one celestial touch

Could cause thee, in thy

Grey, granite glory,

To yield?

O sacrosanct of portals,

Behind which did lie

The God-made Man

Then dead!

Answer me, O Silent Sentinel,

What met thy grey, granite gaze?

Then came this solemn reply:

"Can stone reveal

What to the human eye must fail?

To put into words what here transpired

Would be to no avail. Yet.

I must needs say this: When men

With all their guilt and wile,

Unmoved, did hide their crime

Behind a stone . . .

It was their stone, its role regaining;

At a touch from the Master—

His glory revealing!

—Fr. Thomas More Malsch, O.F.M., Cap  
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# In Christ Jesus Our Lord

Valentine M. Breton, O.F.M.

(Translated from the French by Michael D. Mellich, O.F.M.)

(Continued)

On the Fourteenth Nisan, which was the vigil of the Great Sabbath in that year, a Man died on a Cross a short distance from Jerusalem's Ephraim gate.

He had invoked God's help with a loud cry, but God had not heard Him.

His enemies, all about Him, had dared God to defend Him, but God had not accepted their challenge.

A wise pagan was there, shocked at the crime and seeking in the tragic event before his eyes some answer to the doubts that flooded his mind. "If there were a God," he finally concluded, "He would surely show Himself now." Therefore, God does not exist . . ."

A member of the Sanhedrin was there too, who did not know what to think of Jesus' mission. He believed in God, but God's silence pointed inexorably to the conclusion that this Man could not possibly be the Son of God.

John and Magdalen doubted neither God nor their Master; but this catastrophe which seemed to end all their hopes raised an agonized question in their hearts: WHY?

Mary alone understood.

The empirical facts were the same for her as they were for the others: the silence of God and the dereliction of Jesus. But how completely different was her understanding of them! For she saw in them the most conclusive proof imaginable of God's love and her Son's divinity. Indeed, she alone among all human beings has fully grasped the true grandeur of her Son's Redemptive death.

Obviously, then, the Passion makes sense only to the extent that Jesus is known. Those who do not know Him take little or no interest in it; they usually misunderstand it completely, and on occasion they are even scandalized by it. St. Luke tells us of people who saw in it only a side-show, a circus (Luke, 23:48). And then there were the soldiers who regarded it as a routine job, and the thief who blasphemed. Love certainly does presuppose knowledge, then; but it also enlightens and inflames it. This may seem to be a vicious circle from the viewpoint of logic, but nevertheless it is *fact*—it is a vital and basic fact in the real order where Love reigns supreme.

That is why we had to consider Scripture, the Liturgy, and the

## IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD

Interior Life first, to get to know Jesus. But in reality, all of these are but various aspects of the Passion.

All of Scripture, first of all, can be reduced to a prediction, narration, and explanation of the Passion. Hence St. John could write: "And now Jesus knew well that all was achieved which the Scripture demanded of its accomplishment; and He said, I am thirsty" (John, 19:28).

The whole Liturgy is likewise centered about the Passion; for in its essential rites of sacrifice it renews the Passion, explains it, and applies its merits to the Mystical Body.

And finally, our interior life also can be fully understood and accounted for only in relation to the Passion. Only in the light of the Cross can we understand what is taking place within us; only by the strength of the Cross can we cooperate with the divine action; and only by the merits of the Cross can we make our interior life truly holy.

Now we are not trying to act like philosophers here and to trace the effect to its cause; it is far more accurate to say that we must start with the Cause, with the immeasurable Love of God, with the Cross, and descend from there to the effects; i.e., apply the Love of God and the merits of the Cross to our own lives and the needs of our spiritual development.

On the Cross, Jesus shows Himself true God and true Man, King, Teacher, Judge, Prophet, Saviour, Lord of the world to come, Eternal and Universal Priest, Unique and Universal Mediator. He shows Himself as the First-born of every Creature, Who loves us with an unequalled Love. BUT—He loves us only with, in, and through that same love with which He loves the Triune God—His Father and our Father, His God and our God.

As Duns Scotus put it, "Christ willed to suffer thus out of love for God and for us—He suffered out of that Love with which He loved us for the sake of God" (*Ox.* III, 2, 1, 11). And as Scotus explains elsewhere, what pleased God in this Sacrifice of Calvary was not Christ's suffering as such, but rather the immensity and spontaneity of His LOVE! (Ep. 119, c. 8).

We have deliberately sought in Duns Scotus the explanation of what Francis discovered in the Passion; for unless we see things from this Franciscan point of view, we cannot possibly understand the Passion as Francis did; we cannot possibly see in it the all-embracing source of knowledge of Christ. Yes, the Stigmata, the Coat of Arms of our Order—the whole saga of Franciscanism—shows us a Passion whose surface characteristic is pain, but whose real meaning is LOVE.

The Passion, then, is the <sup>\*</sup>Sacrament of <sup>\*</sup>our Vocation—the key to



our Franciscan Life. Only by understanding it and mediating on it can we possibly follow Francis in his imitation of Christ. Let us consider this all-important truth at greater length.

To begin with, it should hardly be necessary to recall that in his devotion to the Passion Francis was solidly in the Apostolic tradition of the Gospels. Nevertheless, we can re-read with great profit the pertinent texts of Scripture.

St. Peter, for example, tells us that "Christ suffered for our sakes, and left you His own example; you were to follow in His footsteps." And elsewhere, the Prince of the Apostles explains these footsteps as "sufferings," "bloodshed," and "rejection at the hands of men" (I Pet. 2:21; 1:11; 1:19; 2:4).

St. Paul, the theologian of the Passion and theorist of our imitation, says that "we must share His sufferings, if we are to share His glory," and "we carry about continually in our bodies the dying state of Jesus, so that the living power of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies too" (Rom. 8:17; II Cor. 4:10). That is why Paul "had no thought of bringing you any other knowledge than that of Jesus Christ, and of Him as crucified," to unbeliever a discouragement and mere folly, "but to us who have been called, Jew and Gentile alike, Christ the Power of God, Christ the Wisdom of God" (I Cor. 2:2; 1:23-24).

And elsewhere the same Apostle says, "Yours is to be the same mind which Christ Jesus showed" (Phil. 2:5). Now by this St. Paul means much more than a mere conformity of ideas, of intellect; we must share also in Christ's sentiments and emotions, in His motives and His virtues. The reason for this is that our sentiments and emotions are often stronger motives than our ideas are. If our ideas are to guide us, they must first become convictions; they become convictions by passing from the ideal, intellectual order into the real, affective, emotional, dynamic order.

But let us return to St. Paul's Epistle, where he contemplates Jesus: "He disposed Himself, and took the nature of a slave (poverty), and then lowered His own dignity (humility), accepted an obedience which brought Him to death (subjection to His Father and to His tormentors), death on a Cross (austerity)" (Phil. 2:7-8). Thus poverty makes us humble; humility makes us docile; docility leads us to imitate the austerity of our Lord.

St. John records the same thoughts in the very words of our Lord Himself: "My meat is to do the will of Him Who sent Me . . . I lay (My life) down on My own accord. I am free to lay it down, free to take it up again; that is the charge which My Father has given Me . . . The world must be convinced that I love the Father, and act only

as the Father has commanded me to act" (John 4:34; 10:13; 14:31).

But St. Francis had no other plan in mind than this, no other thought, no other love. He contemplated Jesus Crucified, and he identified himself with Him. The place of the Cross in his vocation, in his way of life, and in his final consummation on Avernia, is well expressed in the Office for the Feast of the Stigmata. The hymn at Matins, the antiphons at Lauds, and the *Magnificat* antiphon at Second Vespers are all taken from the same poem, a poem focussed upon the Cross from beginning to end.

There is no room here to cite the entire poem, but we can at least give the *Magnificat* antiphon as a representative example:

*Crucis apparet hostia*

Behold the Saviour crucified,

*Tensis in cruce brachiis*

His arms distended by the

*Sex alis tecta variis,*

beams;

*Cum vultus elegantia;*

His visage pure six wings do

*hide,*

And yet its light

*gleams.*

supernal

*Quae Francisci cor attrahit*

Francis, overcome with bliss,

*Augens ei charismata,*

Feels deep within love's burn-

*Suague sacra stigmata,*

ing coal

*In eius carnem protrahit.*

Which carves in hands and feet

*and side*

*The wounds he bears within his*

*soul.*

Whoever the poet was, Thomas of Celano or Julian of Speyer, he certainly rose to his subject, and his poem is without any doubt worthy of the frescoes of Giotto! The antiphons of Lauds, which are taken from earlier verses of the same poem, tell of St. Francis' call at St. Damien's, of his apparition to the Chapter at Arles, of Brother Sylvester's vision, of the *Tau* imprinted on the forehead of Francis, and of Brother Pacificus' vision—all of which concern Francis' intimate relationship with the Cross.

But of supreme importance is the last line of the *Magnificat* antiphon, which tells us that Francis already bore within his heart the wounds that were impressed upon his flesh on Avernia. Both Celano and the Three Companions assure us that those wounds began to be carved into his heart ever since that first day at St. Damien's (Celano, II, 1, 10 and 11; Three Comp., 1, 13, 14).

All these facts, recorded and commented upon by Francis' biographers and commemorated in the Liturgy, are incontestable; Francis

was utterly penetrated with the knowledge of Jesus Crucified. And the abundant testimony and example of his followers confirms this conclusion; e.g., St. Bonaventure's mystical treatises, St. Clare's Prayer to the Five Wounds, St. Margaret of Cortona (1259), St. Catherine of Bologna (1462), Bl. Battista Verani (1527) who wrote a book called *The Sufferings of Divine Love*, St. Veronica Giuliani the Stigmatist (1727), and St. Leonard of Port Maurice (1751) who did so much to popularize the devotion of the Way of the Cross.

And knowing as he did the ineffable love that motivated Christ's sufferings, Francis could pray *sincerely* for a share in those sufferings; "O my Saviour, Jesus Christ, grant me two graces before I die; grant that I may feel, insofar as it is possible, in my soul and in my body, the sufferings which YOU endured in Your flesh during your cruel Passion; and also, that I may feel, as far as a mere creature can, that immense Love which inflamed You and led You to suffer voluntarily so many horrible torments for the sake of us sinners."

The object, the motive, the final goal of Francis' imitation, then, was the Love of Christ, and Duns Scotus, faithful interpreter that he was of Franciscan thought, expressed that fact perfectly: "*Non mors, sed voluntas placuit sponte Morientis*—Not the death, but the Love of Christ Who freely gave Himself up to death is what pleased Francis, as it pleased the Father" (loc. cit).

On the Cross, just as in the Host, "only the spirit gives life; the flesh is of no avail" (John 6:64). Suffering is not an end; it is a means—a means without equal as a proof of one's undying love. "This is the greatest love a man can show, that he should lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

"Through the wounds of His body," says St. Bonaventure in a passage used in our Liturgy, "let us penetrate into the abyss of His love: the Sacred Heart of Jesus."

But it is by the *wounds* of the body that we must pass—by austerity of life, by a docile acceptance, understanding, and love of the Cross. These are necessary steps in our journey to the Sacred Heart: to accept the Cross, to understand it, and to love it. "Let him renounce self, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

We shall come to know Jesus only insofar as we believe in His Love, a Love borne witness to by the Cross and the Host. He loved us, and He gave Himself up for us; in this love alone we find an adequate explanation of Scripture, of the Liturgy, of our interior life, all of which serve to reveal it to us. And this Love will nurture within us the Gift of Wisdom; it will illumine our minds and inflame our hearts; it will make our every act holy.

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