

Past and Present Contemplative Franciscan Fraternities

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In May of 1977, the first national conference on houses of prayer in the history of the Franciscan Order took place in Naples. A valuable contribution of the conference and debates was a clarification of terminology. Thus, in place of *domus orationis* (“a house of prayer”), which has a biblical connotation, Franciscan tradition prefers to call such an institution a “fraternity of retreat.”

The historical papers elaborated the constant influence of the eremitic element in the life of St. Francis and the Franciscan reform movements. A longing for solitude and a desire to retire to solitary places, to dedicate oneself with greater intensity and freedom to contemplative prayer has been continuous down the centuries.

It was also emphasized that no contemporary effort to live the Franciscan life of prayer can fail to take into account the basic importance of the Rule for Hermitages. This little work of St. Francis will always be a source of inspiration for the order. In keeping with the primitive sources, the Naples meeting underlined the importance of the hermitage of St. Mary of Portiuncula as a model for the life and spiritual programs which should inspire every fraternity of retreat.

A study was made of the new constitutions of the various Franciscan families, and it was found that all of them definitely guarantee the right to existence of fraternities of retreat. The conference ended, however, stating that though the principles are clear, there has been little practical implementation.

Our study is concerned with what is being done to revive this important element of Franciscan life. It presents three fraternities of retreat: one Friar Minor and two Capuchin. The three, committed to realize in practice the letter and spirit of the Rule of St. Francis, strive to adapt it to the sociocultural context of the present. All are stimulated and sustained by the new legislation of the order, which earnestly invites us to live these experiences.

I have felt it opportune, in this study, to establish the continuity

between past history and the present. Consequently, I have dedicated the first part to the image and spiritual content of the first contemplative Franciscan fraternities as portrayed in the writings of St. Francis himself. These latter have been the sources of inspiration to which, with more or less success, all Franciscan reform movements have appealed. We shall analyze those writings of the saint in which we find both the terminology and the inspiration for the contemplative experience.

1. The Contemplative Fraternity in the Writings of St. Francis

It is significant that the term *eremus* ("hermitage") occurs only three times in the writings of St. Francis: in chapter 7 of the *Regula non bullata*, in the *Rule for Hermitages*, and in the *Letter to A Minister*. We shall analyze the context in which we find these words in order to arrive at an image of the primitive fraternity and its spiritual dimension.

The Regula non bullata

St. Francis wrote or dictated "several rules and tried them out before the confirmation of the one which he definitely left to his brethren" (TC 35). The Earlier Rule of 1221, although lacking approval by a papal Bull, is one of the richest documents for the order insofar as it provides the means of understanding the life of the first Franciscan fraternity. The chapter which interests us (VII) has a title which seemingly has little to do with the contemplative life. The text reads: *De modo serviendi et laborandi* ("The manner of serving and working"). The fragment which interests us is found in the last two verses:

No matter where they are, in hermitages or elsewhere, the friars must be careful not to claim ownership of any place, or try to hold it against someone else. Everyone who comes to them, friend or foe, rogue or robber, must be made welcome. And all friars, no matter where they are, or in whatever situation they find themselves, should, like spiritually-minded men, diligently show reverence and honor toward one another "without murmuring" (1 Pet. 4:9). They should let it be seen that they are happy in God, cheerful and courteous, as is expected of them, and be careful not to appear gloomy or depressed like hypocrites.

In these lines we find the elements which define the contemplative life of the first group of Franciscans: They speak of "hermitage," a word which in the context of the first Franciscan generation was equivalent to a "solitary place," a "quiet place, out of the way," "a desert," "solitude" (1Cel 72, 91, etc.). There is special mention of the spirit of poverty, as evidenced by the refusal to claim ownership of a hermitage.

The life of the hermitage was not lived out in complete separation from

the world. The text indicates that there was a relationship with some clearly defined classes of people: "friend, enemy, robber, rogue." The group had an obligation of hospitality without any discrimination. Chapter 9 specifies in even greater detail the class with which the fraternity will come into most frequent contact: "They should be glad to live among social outcasts, among the poor and helpless, the sick and the lepers, and those who beg by the wayside" (*RegB IX 2*).

The mutual relationship among the brethren is defined by the word "spiritually," that is to say, they are to conduct themselves as brothers given one to the other by the Spirit of the Lord. Therefore they constitute one brotherhood with bonds stronger than those of their human family. Finally, they must manifest to the other brothers joy and friendship, seasoned with courtesy: "cheerful and appropriately courteous."

The Rule for Hermitages

This very short rule is one of the most beautiful testimonies to the primitive life of the Friars Minor. St. Francis himself wanted to attach it as an appendix to the life of the brethren who desired to consecrate themselves to a more intense contemplative life:

Not more than three or at most four friars should go together to a hermitage to lead a religious life there. Two of these should act as mothers, with the other two, or the other one, as their children. The mothers are to lead the life of Martha; the other two the life of Mary Magdalene. . . . At sunset they should say compline of the day. They must be careful to keep silence and say their Office, rising for matins. Their first care should be "to seek the Kingdom of God and His justice" (Luke 12:31; Matt. 6:33). Prime and terce should be said at the proper time.

We shall limit ourselves to stressing the most significant elements:

- (a) "To lead a religious life." St. Francis speaks of those who wish to live out a contemplative experience outside the regular friary; but they must do so as religious and for a limited space of time.
- (b) "Not more than three or four." This sentence insists that the Franciscan contemplative life not prescind from its primary and essential element, which is fraternity.
- (c) "The life of Martha and that of Mary." The brethren are to take turns in serving. The fraternity is at once active and contemplative.
- (d) "They must seek first the Kingdom of God." The one Gospel quotation of this rule is taken from the Sermon on the Mount and points out the basic reason for the experience – the desire to seek God in prayer and in the silence of retreat. Consequently the Divine Office occupies the center of the prayer-life of the fraternity.

The Letter to A Minister

The precise concept Francis had of the contemplative community appears in another writing of the saint, which has been called "A document in which appears the humaneness and the realism of St. Francis." A hermitage could be looked upon as a temptation to avoid responsibility and commitment to service which fraternity life implies. Francis dissuades the minister from taking this escape route.

Discouraged by the difficulties of fraternity life, the minister had recourse to St. Francis for advice and received a totally unexpected reply: "You must love those who behave like this toward you (referring to the friars who had caused him grief). And you should want nothing else from them except what God permits to happen to you. You can show your love for them by wishing that they should be better Christians. This should be of greater benefit to you than the solitude of a hermitage."

Reading these documents, we can form an authentic image of an early contemplative fraternity: (a) It is an experience centered in the absolute primacy of God and of His justice, lived out in various forms of prayer and a life of poverty in the midst of the poor; (b) It thereby bears an evangelical witness for the underprivileged social and cultural classes of the time; (c) A decision to live this kind of experience must not be carried out peripherally and independently of community. Without this fraternal element, it runs the risk of degenerating into an alienating experience, and in the last analysis, an ego trip.

2. Today's Contemplative Fraternities

A study of Franciscan history suggests a question: Is it possible to draw a distinction between houses of prayer and reform movements? Even though a distinction may be made in theory, it is difficult to realize in practice. The reforms follow a fixed pattern. They begin in hermitages, move to houses of recollection, and end up in convents of retreat.

Whenever the Franciscan Order felt the need of reform, the initiative and original dynamism came from groups who were living in prayerful solitude or in houses of retreat. Let me mention just one example of a reform, the work of Juan de Guadalupe, because of his influence in the evangelization of Mexico. This religious obtained from Pope Alexander VI permission "freely and legitimately to build and construct, without any further permission, a house or hermitage for the use and permanent residence of those friars who were to live therein the pure observance of the Rule of St. Francis and according to the life-style of this saint, wearing the type of habit worn by the saint."

Today, also, fraternities of retreat are a serious concern of the order. For

the first time in history, the four ministers general, in an encyclical letter to the entire order, recommend this experience as a means of renewal: "In a time of crisis for prayer, and for our religious family, we must look upon the establishment of houses or fraternities of prayer, hermitages, as a sign of renewal. . . . It would seem appropriate that those who preside over such houses should convoke, first of all, regional meetings, and then international. Furthermore, it is desirable that a special international commission of experts dedicate themselves to clarify the contemplative and eremitic aspects of our life and draw up concrete proposals for renewal."

The initiative has been taken by the highest superiors of the order and bespeaks a demand for widespread renewal among the members of the Franciscan families. Our own Constitutions have this to say: "Houses for spiritual recollection, where the friars apply themselves for some time to a more intense life of prayer and evangelical penance, may be erected in each province or region. It will pertain to the Provincial Chapter or to the Conference of Major Superiors to pass judgement on the suitability of such houses, to erect them and to make regulations for their management" (no. 42).

I shall single out three fraternities which reflect the pluralism of the Franciscan charism within the cultural and social context of their respective regions and countries.

An Italian House of Retreat

This fraternity is located in the Capuchin Province of Apulia. The site reminds us of an incident in the life of St. Francis, the prophetic dream which led him to give up his ambitious personal plans in order to dedicate himself completely to carrying out the designs of the Lord:

When Francis decided to march to Apulia to enlist as a soldier, one night, while he slept, someone spoke to him in a vision and asked him: "Who can grant you greater favors, the servant or the master?" To which Francis answered: "The master." The other continued: "Why then are you seeking the servant instead of the master?" Francis replied: "What do you wish me to do, Lord?" And the Lord said to him: "Return to the land of your birth, because I will cause your vision to be fulfilled spiritually" (2Cel 6).

This fraternity starts with the assumption that any attempt at renewal, to live the Franciscan vocation in its fullness, cannot prescind from fidelity to the Rule of St. Francis. This fidelity, the foundation of the life of the fraternity, is not understood by the friars to mean a rigid literal observance of the Rule. It is an attempt to locate it in the mainstream of the rich Capuchin tradition which, from the very beginnings of the reform, strove to realize a fidelity to the spiritual observance of the Rule. Reference is made to the Constitutions of 1536, which begin with the words: "In order

that our congregation, as a vineyard of the most high Son of God, may continue in the spiritual observance of the evangelical and seraphic Rule, our General Chapter, etc.”

Tension between a literal observance and fidelity to the spirit appears, nonetheless, in all the points which the fraternity has proposed as its special path to renewal.

(a) Fidelity to Poverty

Among all the virtues which stimulate the Franciscan spirit to true reform – prayer, penance, poverty – the first place belongs unquestionably to Lady Poverty. The practice of poverty is a crucial problem for the order. Many friars have given up believing in the possibility of a real life of poverty and are skeptical about the beautiful phrases of the documents drawn up in General Chapters and Plenary Councils of the order.

Aware of this fact, the members of the Apulia fraternity (four religious) try to witness their decision to live poverty in its most radical form. They accept the words of the Gospel, which they apply in all their literalness: “Therefore I say to you, be not solicitous for your life, concerned about what you are to eat or drink, nor for the body, concerned about what you are to wear. Is not life worth more than its nourishment, and the body more than its clothing?” (Matt. 6:25). The community accepts no kind of payment for the work they do, for Masses, preaching, etc. Their support is in the hands of spiritual friends from whom they receive necessary food and clothing. Faithful to poverty, the fraternity also renounces all means of personal travel, as well as radio, television, cameras, etc.

(b) Fidelity to Contemplation

In its Second Plenary Council, the order recognized that “a vivid awareness that the need for a practical solution to the problem of prayer is a matter of life and death for us.” It seems that many provinces have suffered a reduction or total disappearance of silent meditation in common, that is, of mental prayer, which has always been a traditional practice of our order.

To be faithful to its Franciscan charism, this Capuchin fraternity has established five hours of prayer, divided as follows: Night Office, with a half hour of meditation; lauds; a small hour, and vespers, each one of these accompanied by a half hour of silent meditation; celebration of the Eucharist in which the faithful participate with the community.

(c) Fidelity to Work

With such emphasis on a life of personal and community prayer, it would seem there would not be much time left for manual or apostolic work. But this is not the case. They look upon work as a grace and try to carry it out according to the abilities of the friars and the needs of the people. Their work-program is as follows: (1) house maintenance, without any hired help;

(2) sacramental ministry to the people, especially hearing confessions, either in their own church or wherever the priests enlist their help; (3) religious programs on the local radio station; (4) seminars on Franciscan spirituality, which bring together groups for the study of Franciscan topics; (5) welcoming young people and priests to take share the prayer-life of the community.

(d) Fidelity to Fraternal Charity

This is the most demanding duty. St. Francis taught that complete availability to the holy operation of the Spirit constituted the essence of the following of Christ. But self-love and egoism, which St. Francis calls the "spirit of the flesh," makes us cling to our own plans, our own occupations, tastes and pleasures, our own will, so that we are always self-seeking. With such an attitude it is impossible to give that generous service to the brethren which the saint called "loving obedience."

The Italian Capuchin fraternity has adopted two means to grow in fraternal love: the weekly chapter, and the review of life. The local chapter is an occasion for interpersonal relating, an interchange of spiritual experiences, and study of the problems of religious life. The review of life, undertaken every Friday, is looked upon as the moment of truth and of humility, the opening of one's conscience to the brethren during which their sinful condition is bared. As an inspiration for the future of the Capuchin Order, they aim to realize in a practical way the contemplative dimension of the order.

A French House of Retreat

Founded in 1972, this fraternity of Friars Minor from Provence leads a life of prayer and ecumenical witness in the manner of the monastic community of Taizé. The group is located in a small hamlet of some two hundred souls (La Tour d'Aigues, Grambois), in a de-Christianized environment. In their communal life-style, the friars give priority to the following: Search for God and a life of prayer; fraternity-life viewed as witness and essential mission; opportunity to study and reflect on the Christian and Franciscan life; a warm reception to all who come to the fraternity; to live as far as possible from the fruits of manual and professional labor. The founder of the fraternity is Father Thadée Matura, well known in Franciscan circles as a writer.

(a) Life of the Fraternity

The brethren attach great importance to the celebration of the liturgy, to which all else is subordinated and which constitutes the framework in which the prayer-life of the fraternity is exercised. A period of silent meditation regularly precedes the Divine Office. In this manner they

attempt to follow the norm given by St. Francis in his Letter to the Entire Order: "Let the clerics recite the Office with devotion, in the presence of God, not concentrating on the melody of the chant, but being careful that their hearts are in harmony, so that their words may be in harmony with their hearts and their hearts with God. Their aim should be to please God by purity of heart, not to soothe the ears of the congregation by their sweet singing" (nos. 41-42).

Individual friars may dedicate a period of time to living the eremitic life, according to the tradition of the order, but without any set of rules, so as to remain free to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Once a month, however, the whole fraternity dedicates an entire day to solitude, prayer and spiritual sharing. Community life is simple and familial. There are no fixed periods of recreation. Problems are handled as they occur. Television is banned.

(b) On-going Formation and Activities

Composed of five friars (three priests and two lay brothers with university degrees), the fraternity is geared to the spread of the Franciscan message by means of publications, conferences, and encounters with various groups who come in search of religious training.

A Swiss House of Retreat

The village of Arth, in the German-speaking area of Switzerland, is the place selected by the Swiss Capuchin Province to promote the contemplative life. The scenery surrounding the little town invites one to re-read the Canticle of Brother Sun. The various parts of creation – the sun and moon and stars, the wind and water, fire and earth – all have kinship with the Umbrian scene which inspired St. Francis to compose his canticle.

The life of this fraternity, which considers itself contemplative, is in harmony with its natural surroundings. The very title or name of the house is in itself significant: "An Opportunity for Renewal in Silence." The friary, constructed in traditional style, is sufficiently remote from the village to ensure recollection. The community, composed of five members, does not carry out any pastoral ministry in parishes. The essential work of the group consists in spiritual direction of persons who come to the fraternity to share its life.

Typical of this experience is meditation practiced with the help of Oriental techniques, especially the practice of Yoga. The Divine Office, Bible reading and personal prayer fill up the daily schedule. Twice a week they meet to discuss spiritual topics.

The fraternity has been enriched by the presence of young men who spend long periods of time with the friars, even two or three years, and who

then usually dedicate themselves to living a Christian life in a secularized milieu.

The fraternity's most important activity is with the priests of the region, who are true friends of the friars and who share with them their pastoral concerns. The bishop of the diocese has recognized this as a ministry of the fraternity and has given it full his support. The local church, a beautiful twelfth-century Romanesque edifice serves the fraternity for community prayer and pastoral ministry. The professional skills of the lay brothers has proved to be a wonderful means of contact with the local people.

In spite of the limitations imposed by their restricted apostolic activity, the fraternity claims to be happy with their experience. The friars believe that it is a wave of the future for Franciscan fraternities called to rediscover the roots of their vocation: the experience of God and of Jesus Christ. On this foundation they must discover life-styles adapted to the times in which we live.

Conclusion

To conclude this study of the fraternities of retreat, I would like to list some positive and negative aspects of these experiments with Franciscan contemplative life.

- (1) All of them have as their objective the observance of the Rule of St. Francis: "Simply and purely . . . and with [your] holy manner of working" (*Test* 39). But this goal cannot be realized without seriously affecting the contemplative life, which must take precedence and "to which all other temporal things must be subservient" (*RegB* V 2).
- (2) None of the fraternities excludes the apostolate, carried out according to the cultural background and spiritual needs of each country. Personal charisms are respected and encouraged.
- (3) In all fraternities, the basic structure of community life rests, according to the mind of St. Francis, on the Liturgy of the Hours, the Eucharist, and personal meditation.
- (4) One characteristic of all the fraternities is an appreciation of the value of silence, which implies not so much absence of noise as an awareness of the presence of God.
- (5) The majority of the friars in the provinces concerned are not interested in these attempts to blaze new paths for the order. However, the number of persons who have taken part in or shared the experience of these friars is a sign of its general acceptance. Take Arth, for example. From January 1974 up to May of 1977, several hundred persons, Capuchins, priests, lay people, and religious of other communities, have spent time in the fraternity. For many of them this time of recollection and silence proved very fruitful.

When they leave, each group is invited to write down their impressions. Almost all stress the following points:

- (a) The cheerful and brotherly atmosphere of the fraternity;
 - (b) Silence in the entire house, except at meal time;
 - (c) Lack of television;
 - (d) Liturgical prayer, simply prepared and celebrated;
 - (e) The opportunity to practice different forms of meditation, traditional or combined with Oriental techniques.
 - (f) General conferences;
 - (g) Many state that they found a genuine model of Franciscan communal life. The community recognizes that the most important experiment is the harmony which prevails among the members. They hope that the superiors will continue to encourage this initiative.
- (6) Not as many religious vocations have resulted as had been hoped. Some young people who shared the experience for a long time leave with the resolve to lead a peaceful and dedicated Christian commitment in their own surroundings.
- (7) In the context of the entire order, these experiments are few and far between and have no connection with one another. It might be helpful to have encounters among themselves, not only that they might come to learn about one another, but also to deepen their Franciscan spirituality and produce experts in prayer and the like.

To conclude, I would like to cite the typical Capuchin envisioned in one of the meetings of the Second Plenary Council of the Order:

And now, I might describe from a historical point of view the Capuchin "type" in one word. To my mind it would have to be: a man of "spirit," a "spiritual" man. In his interior life he is a man dedicated to the spirit of prayer, of conversion, of on-going renewal, given to a continually new and ever-deeper review of his life. The Spirit is his life in eternal, vivifying action.

As for his apostolic activity, he is a promoter of the spiritual life, especially of internal prayer, among the laity. In fact, the history of the church shows him to be not so much a theologian or a jurist, but rather an animator and inspirer, a spiritual guide of the people in all their needs (Optatus van Asseldonk).