The Spirituality of St. Francis: "To Adore the Lord God" Francis's Prayer

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he Holy Spirit calls the brothers away from their families and binds them together in a Fraternity of celibates. He shows them that they are the fruit of His saving love and teaches them to strive earnestly to come ever closer to Him in faith and with thankful praise.

This drawing closer to God is the beginning and the goal of all human fulfillment. It demonstrates that the Fraternity represents the new creation (cf. Col 3:9f), united around Christ, the Son of our Father and truly our Brother.

The Fraternity, then, is, above all, a praying community, conscious of God's presence and trying by all possible means to respond to that presence in a practical way, welcoming it and making it bear fruit in prayer and good works. But this does not remove the individual brothers' responsibility to achieve their own personal meeting with God. The Fraternity is a praying community because the brothers achieve and live out their true identity through prayer; they must be aware that they have been "touched" by the Spirit, who urges and leads them to seek the face of God.

Francis and the other brothers saw that meeting God was the basic requirement for every believer. So it was that Francis built his whole life around prayer to such an extent that, as Celano says, he did more than pray, he became a prayer himself (2Cel 95).

Even allowing for some devout exaggeration on Celano's part here, we know that Francis can be understood only in the light of his meeting with God. True, he made no great literary contribution to the theology of spirituality, as did St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. Yet, by his uniquely personal approach to God, he showed us that we become truly

human only when we allow God into our hearts and minds to rule and guide our thoughts and actions.

Francis learned from God how to love and serve Him; and those who know how to love and serve, also know how to pray because praying is essentially standing before God or walking in His presence, so opening ourselves to the immense love which the Father showed us when He sent His only Son to live and die for us.

Three elements are needed for prayer—God, the person who prays and the meeting between them. But when we examine this meeting more closely, we shall see that the way each of us envisages God, and the manner in which we approach Him, depend very much on our individual cultural and religious formation.

If, then, we are to investigate the personal, intimate area of Francis's life in which his meeting with God took place, that is, his prayer, we must examine the different elements that went into forming his image of God—family, school, liturgy and art.

All these factors contributed to Francis's visualizing God as One who, although transcendent and incomprehensible, was still near at hand and approachable to the extent of becoming man; He was all-holy yet able to take our sins upon Himself in order to remove them. This was the God of contrasts, who revealed Christ to us and whom Francis experienced in prayer.

Among the elements which contributed to Francis's idea of God, the liturgy was the most influential. There, in the liturgy, he discovered the Scriptures, as they were proclaimed and preached, first by the Church and then brought to life by the people in their customs, feast-days and festivals, in their homes and in their social life. It was from the liturgy that he obtained the colors with which he painted his mental picture of the God who inspired his faith, the colors with which he made his God imaginable and visible to his mind's eye. So the liturgy was the main factor in shaping his approach to God. The idea he formed of the Godhead determined his prayer-life, because it is to the God whom we visualize that we open and give our hearts.

I. Contemporary Influences

Not only did the liturgy help Francis to form his image of God, it also gave birth to, and nourished, his prayer. Then, as now, the prayer of the Church was, basically, the liturgy. The monks were the models for the prayer of praise because of their dedication to chanting the Divine Office. They also carried out the other liturgical rites and meditated on the mysteries those rites signified and effected. It is not surprising, then, to find

that medieval prayer in general followed the pattern of the liturgy and para-

liturgy.

Nevertheless, there were other ways of communicating with God, especially for the ordinary faithful who did not participate actively in the official, public prayer of the Church. Theirs was a more personal, imaginative and natural way of experiencing God and of opening their hearts to Him. This was popular piety, which was sustained and nourished by the liturgy, but which had different motives and was performed under very different circumstances.

Francis had the advantage of having learned Latin in school, which allowed him greater access to the liturgy in his parish church and to the Divine Office, which he heard the canons and monks chanting. His knowledge of Latin, then, was another factor that shaped his method of

praying.

As a layman, Francis was also open to being influenced by those other types of prayer which the general public used and in which the senses and the body played a greater part than they did in liturgical prayer. The prayer of the ordinary lay people in the Middle Ages was based more on bodily actions, gestures and expressions than on intellectual concepts. So, when Francis met his Lord, he prayed with his whole body: he walked in pilgrimages; he sang, sighed and wept, for this was the sincerest and most natural way for him to come before God. Thus, while his prayer remained rooted in the liturgy, the most theological form of prayer, he was able to blend it with popular devotion, and he offered this synthesis of theological and popular prayer to the ordinary faithful in a form that was easy to understand and easy to use.

1. Monastic Prayer

A monk is identified as such by his prayer of praise, by his invoking God unceasingly in chanting the Divine Office and in reflection upon that Office. He lives from the word of God and by that word, devoting his whole life to praising and responding to the God who speaks to him

through His Son.

In the monastic tradition, the life of prayer is twofold—public and private. For the ancient monks, however, there was no great difference between the two. Personal, silent prayer was at the center of their public prayer, and the recitation of the Scriptures nourished both forms of prayer. It did not even occur to these early monks to think that private prayer could suffice without the help of God's word; that is, all their prayer, whether public or private, was sustained by a biblical text, either read or recited.

What we today understand as prayer was originally composed of four different but complementary elements—reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

The structure of the Divine Office began to take shape in the premonastic asceticism of Tertullian and Cyprian. The monks of the fourth and fifth centuries adopted this structure, but gave it a new character: from being a series of private, spontaneous acts of worship, the Office now became an obligatory, community exercise.

In practice, the Office contained two basic elements—psalms and prayers. The psalmody was not, strictly speaking, a prayer but was either a preparation for prayer or an invitation to pray. After reading or listening to a psalm, the monks prayed in silence for a short time. The psalms, the word of God, evoked a response which was prayer, properly so called.

The Irish monks, beginning with St. Columbanus, so increased the number of psalms recited that they had no time for personal prayer, with the result that the second, principal element of the Office, namely, silent personal prayer, disappeared.

These monks interpreted literally our Lord's invitation "always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1), so beginning the practice of continual prayer or *laus perennis* ("unceasing praise"). The monastic Rules which adopted this method lengthened the Office excessively, leaving no time for other activities, such as manual labor. But Latin monasticism, represented by St. Benedict, developed a balanced program of work and prayer, expressed by the well-known motto: "Pray and work" (*Ora et labora*).

St. Benedict saw no opposition between work and prayer. It was possible to work and, at the same time, recite the Scriptures. This "meditation," (meditatio) as it was called, prolonged the time of "sacred reading" (Lectio divina), thus ensuring that the word of God was heard continually. The monk answered the "meditation," the recitation of the Scriptures, with short prayers that varied according to his inner dispositions or the nature of the work he was doing.

So it was that the monastic day acquired a perfect unity. From morning to night, the monk listened to God, who spoke to him in the Scriptures, and he, in his turn, answered in prayer. This unceasing dialogue took place during the recitation of the Office, during the three hours allotted to the *lectio* ("reading"), and during work, by means of the "meditation." Even during meals, while the body was being fed, the reading aloud nourished the soul with the word of God.

By "contemplation" (contemplatio), the early monks did not mean the same as we do, that is, those higher states of prayer towards which the contemplative life is directed. Instead, "contemplation" meant the

combination of those spiritual acts and dispositions of mind that give rise

to prayer.

Towards the end of the eleventh century, a special literature grew up around one form of prayer, methodical meditation, which was, in fact, the normal subject of the *lectio divina*. St. Bernard, for example, wrote a series of meditations on the mysteries of Christ in order to enrich the content of prayer and to center it on our Lord. But, as time passed, what was originally intended to be simply an aid to meditating on the Scriptures became the main type of personal prayer, It acquired the impressive title of "mental prayer" and was emphasized out of all proportion.

2. The Hermits' Prayer

The methods practiced by the hermits were another influence in forming Francis's prayer. From the eleventh century on, the number of hermitages in the West greatly increased, especially in central Italy, which came to be known as "the Umbrian Thebaid."

Yet when we speak about the eremitical life, we must remember that there were many types of hermits. To start with, medieval hermits had little in common with the anchorites who lived in the Egyptian desert and who

were penitents rather than solitaries.

Some of these medieval hermits came together to form monasteries, e.g. the Carthusians and the Camaldolese, while others lived alone in the forests, although from time to time they would leave their hermitages to preach through the countryside. Consequently, the type of prayer practiced by each of these groups differed considerably.

Generally speaking, we can say that the solitary hermits sought isolation in order to live with God. For them, God was present in the

isolation of the forests, and it was there they went to find Him.

The prayer of these hermits was marked by a search for greater and greater simplicity and self-abnegation and consisted in remaining silent and keeping still, using no words and pursuing no special line of thought, but just being aware of God's presence in an obscure yet certain fashion. They could spend all day in this very simple prayer, even when engaged in tasks that required little attention.

Their prayer was also one of great freedom, not only in their choice of method, but also in their rejecting any form of prayer that was imposed from outside. They tried to ignore anything that did not spring spontaneously from the experience of the moment and the impulse of the Holy Spirit; and they accepted the risk of delusion which this method entailed.

However, not all hermits were exposed to this risk. The monk-hermits achieved such a balance between solitude and community prayer, as set down in their Rules, that normally they were protected from the dangers that threatened the solitary hermits. As an example, the Carthusians made the Divine Office an essential part of their contemplative life, the center from which their community and personal prayer sprang, although, in order to preserve solitude, they did not usually say the whole Office in common.

These monk-hermits retained in their prayer the same elements as those that constituted monastic prayer in general. The Carthusian, Guido II (†1188), wrote in his *Scala Claustralium*:

Reading brings food to the mouth; meditation is chewing that food; prayer is savoring it; and contemplation is a savoring which delights and refreshes.

The monk-hermits gathered in the church in the small hours of the morning for the choral recitation of Matins and Lauds; and they came together again there for Vespers in the evening. They recited the other liturgical offices in their cells, where they also did their *lectio divina*, that is, their reading and meditation on the word of God. On Sundays, both the clerics and the lay-brothers devoted even more time than usual to the liturgy by coming together in the church and reciting the whole Divine Office, which many of them knew by heart, so that they did not need books which could come between them and God.

The Carthusians, like the other monks, engaged in liturgical prayer, but they did so as briefly and as plainly as possible, reducing it to a minimum. In this way, and by devoting long periods of time to individual or private prayer, they asserted their eremitical character. They practiced this liturgical austerity by having only one Mass celebrated and not even that every day, although most of the monks were priests.

We do not know exactly what methods of prayer were used by those solitary hermits who occasionally shared their spiritual experiences in the sermons they preached to the people. We can be sure, however, that the liturgy was not the primary vehicle for their prayer because most of them did not have sufficient education or training for it. Instead, their unsophisticated spirituality led them to a prayer of actions and formulas which consisted essentially in the mechanical repetition of the Our Father.

3. The Prayer of the Laity

We have no literary traces of other forms of prayer during the Middle Ages besides the monks' liturgical prayer. The troubadours' songs, their chansons de queste, contain the texts of some prayers, but it is doubtful if these are really contemporary expressions of personal piety or are, instead, simply literary elaborations on a theme. No doubt, everyone knew the Our Father and at least the first half of the Hail Mary. It seems also that the educated laity, as well as the clergy, used the psalms, which, as a consequence, were soon translated into the vernacular. Still, we don't know how often or how devoutly the laity recited the psalms.

Only by analyzing other forms of medieval piety and devotion can we get some idea of the type of prayer which the laity then used in approaching God. The great mass of people in the twelfth century were unable to think or imagine in abstract terms, so that they expressed their religious feelings and devotion in gestures and rites that put them in contact with the supernatural. They satisfied their great yearning for God by highly-charged emotional displays, which often had little theological content.

They thought that they could not come into contact with God without using such active methods, which they felt in a certain sense, gave

them power over sacred things.

Yet theirs was an age when the liturgy played a fundamental part in the faith of the laity, even though they scarcely understood its real

significance.

The laity took part in the liturgy, the Church's official prayer, principally through the Mass. Because the other sacraments were not often repeated at public functions like the Mass, they scarcely had any relevance for the daily life of the common people, with the possible exception of the sacrament of penance, which was seen mainly as a preparation for receiving the Eucharist. Even so, the laity assisted at Mass more to see the Body of Christ than to receive It.

When we are speaking about the prayer of the medieval laity, we must not take a simplistic view that would distort the reality. Besides the great mass of the people, who were uneducated and who had almost no interior life, there were some lay groups who were more educated and had a more intense spiritual life. The few nobles and rich townspeople who had learned to read the Psalter, had their "Books of Hours" and their prayer-books to help them in their devotions. Similarly, the various groups of "Beguines" and "penitents," all of whom were lay people, led a sensible, organized spiritual life and had skill and time enough for a form of prayer that was suited to their state in life. Finally, the radical poverty movements, whether itinerant or settled, also made prayer an integral part of their Gospel life.

Even the heretical groups, who may have seemed to be far from having any true piety, insisted on prayer as one of the components of the Christian

life. So it was that, although the heretics of Arras rejected all forms of ecclesiastical structure, they acknowledged the necessity of prayer but demanded that it should not take place in any church. The heretics of Monforte, who were much more radical still, proclaimed in their profession of faith:

We practice continuous fasts and unceasing prayer. Always, day and night, our ministers take turns at praying so that no hour passes without its due prayer.

In spite of their diverse views, these lay groups had some prayer practices in common which distinguished them from the monastic and clerical establishments. Meditation and the cultivation of the interior life were the privilege of the more educated classes who could use them to approach God. The ordinary faithful relied on praying aloud and praying with actions (e.g. the sign of the cross, prostrations, genuflections, etc.) so as to come near God, a type of prayer which could be superficial if those who used it did not have an adequate knowledge of the faith, the source from which it flowed.

The peoples' prayer was made up of actions rather than of long meditations. Pilgrimages, devotional practices, religious drama, processions, etc., were the mainstay of popular piety, which allowed the ordinary lay people to pray and know that they were in the presence of God.

II. Francis's Prayer

The various forms of prayer which we have been discussing spring from the different strands of spirituality that developed in the Church. We can divide these forms into two main categories—the official prayer of worship, and popular prayer. Due to Francis's spiritual formation and his firm resolve to live the Gospel life in a special way within the Church, the two categories, official and popular prayer, met and blended in him.

Over a long period, the spirituality of official worship had taken shape and had been increasingly enriched while little or no provision had been made to meet the needs of the ordinary faithful. Faced with this neglect by the official Church, the people had no choice but to create their own forms of piety to channel and express their desire to make the same progress in fostering their relationship with God as they were then achieving in their social relationships.

Although we cannot say that the two forms of prayer, official and popular, had different sources, we do know that they were structured differently and that a chasm had opened up between the two methods of relating to God. But the two streams came together in Francis to form an approved type of prayer in which the liturgy was made more accessible to the ordinary people, and popular piety acquired a greater theological content.

When we examine Francis's writings and his biographies closely, we realize that his prayer had its roots deep in both the official prayer of worship and popular piety. For example, in his Rules he uses a monastic vocabulary when he is speaking about prayer, showing that he had assimilated the principles of that form of prayer. In more practical terms, his Rule for Hermitages describes a mode of conduct which was similar to that of the other hermits and which all the biographers enlarge on graphically. The biographies also give us information about the popular nature of some of the forms of prayer which Francis used, such as miming, singing in French, going on pilgrimages, etc.

But before we inquire more deeply into the exact nature of Francis's prayer, we should try to learn how and in what frame of mind he approached that prayer. From his attitude, we learn that we should not pray mechanically or haphazardly, that is to say, we need to prepare for our personal meeting with the Lord. And when we are in His presence, we require an atmosphere which will help us to retain the impressions which that presence makes upon us.

Francis, then, came to prayer with a contemplative attitude of enduring gratitude to God, whose presence filled his life so that it became a continuous journey in search of the fullness of the divine Mystery. Contemplation and fidelity were the two realities with which Francis strove to incorporate God's presence into his life.

1. Contemplation

Francis was undoubtedly a contemplative. Our technologicallyoriented society judges things on how useful they are or on how much material wealth they produce, so that it is difficult for many people today to understand any other standards of value and conduct. Still, when we moderns succeed in overcoming our mercenary instincts, we can see clearly enough to feel gratitude for the sheer beauty of creation. Contemplation is simply viewing people and all created things with respect so that we can thank their Creator for them.

a) The contemplative and nature

Francis had a contemplative's sensitivity which allowed him to see creation in detail without, however, the cold detachment of a mere onlooker. Contemplation is not a superficial glance at the work of God's hands. Contemplatives engage in an inner dialogue with the world around them, rejoicing in their close affinity with it, not, however, in any reasoned way but intuitively.

Celano points out this contemplative characteristic in Francis when he says that, while the Saint was recovering from a long illness, one day he went outside, walking "with the support of a cane," and began looking at the surrounding countryside with great interest. But he found no delight in "the beauty of the fields, the pleasantness of the vineyards, and whatever else was beautiful to look upon" (1Cel 3). The moral lesson which Celano draws from this to show us Francis's process of conversion did not obscure the Saint's contemplative cast of mind. Instead, it lets us see that his attitude was maturing accordingly as he advanced in the spiritual life, passing from merely aesthetic contemplation of things to another, more spiritual outlook. No longer was his attention fixed on the beauty of creation. Now he saw beyond creation to its Creator. Now creation was for him a sacrament, a sacred sign that led him to meet its Creator, who was also his own Father and Maker.

b) The contemplative and other people

Contemplation is not confined to gazing admiringly at nature. It extends also to our relationships with the people around us, whom we welcome, whose individuality we respect, and whom we have no intention of monopolizing or managing. We are keenly aware that we can never own other people, and so our meeting with them excludes all desire to dominate them. Rather, we encourage and assist them to reach their self-fulfillment in freedom.

In Francis's world, the world of medieval Christianity, it must have seemed only logical that religion should be imposed on others. Yet Francis himself always treated other people with admiration and respect. Also, he was tenacious in stressing his own and his brothers' "minority," their state of being "lesser" brothers, which was often mistakenly seen as an inferiority complex, whereas it really was the attitude which Francis believed every follower of Christ should have towards others.

Francis always regarded himself as a servant, but a servant of the Gospel, "obliged to serve all and to administer to them the fragrant words of (his) Lord" (II EpFid 2, 3). There were many ways in which he was able to do this, but in all of them he showed his respect for others and his dread of enslaving or dominating them, of appropriating to himself that mastery over them which belongs to God alone.

For Francis, meeting others meant discovering in them the work of creation, a work which God loves and respects, a love and respect that

confer on each person the right to be loved and respected as an individual

by everyone.

Francis was able to see that every brother, every person, is a gift from the Lord, reminding us that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. This was so because he had no desire to possess or use anyone: that is, his was a contemplative attitude and one which he retained all through his journey to God.

c) The contemplative and God

Finally, the contemplative attitude also affects our relationship with God. In this sense, contemplation means perceiving intuitively what God is and what we are and the part that God and we play in the personal encounter of prayer. Francis's words after receiving the stigmata show what contemplation meant to him: "Who are you, O my most sweet God, and who am I, a vile worm and your useless servant?" (Considerations on Christ's Wounds).

In his contemplation, Francis condensed his theology, his knowledge of God, and his anthropology, his view of humanity. We have already spoken about his image of God, so that there is no need to go into the subject here. His approach to other people and his relationships with them

are quite clear from his writings, as we shall see.

In contrast to our modern anthropocentric, people-centered worldview, Francis had a God-centered concept of the universe. For him, God was the focus of everything, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. From God's love all creation had come, and to Him it is destined to return. Therefore, we are relative beings whose true fulfillment is to be found only in carrying out the will of God, our Creator.

Adam's sin broke our original relationship with God and plunged us into a whirlpool of egoism and false self-sufficiency. Although Christ has redeemed us by His life, death and resurrection, we have not returned to our original state of innocence and unspoiled friendship with our Creator. Instead, we look for a thousand reasons and resort to a thousand subterfuges to avoid holding the dialogue with God for which we were created and which can lift us out of ourselves and bring us to Him.

In Francis's vision of humanity, contemplating God meant seeing Him as the Absolute and ourselves as being merely relative, and trying to build up that relationship because it is our destiny and fulfillment. Yet our meeting with God is not a reward for our own efforts, for that would mean that we could force His hand to give us in justice something which we ourselves had earned. Rather, we go to meet Him out of gratitude and with confidence because we know that He alone can fill our emptiness.

It seems that such was Francis's relationship with God—open, respectful, illuminating and fulfilling, in which his whole being became more immersed in God the more he strove to carry out the divine will. His Exhortation to the Praise of God, written after he had received the stigmata, expresses vividly what the contemplation of God meant to him.

Besides being a contemplative, Francis was also a mystic, but, apart from the stigmata, which were in a class by themselves, he experienced none of the more usual mystical phenomena, such as ecstasies, visions and levitation. In addition, he had no formal method to guide him and chart his spiritual progress. But even so, he conducted his relationship with God in an intuitive, direct way which the scholars define as mystical. God was almost "physically" present to him, no doubt partly, but not completely, due to the religious atmosphere of the time.

After his conversion, Francis surrendered himself completely to God and devoted every thought and action to Him. He seemed to have been "taken captive" by God, a captivity which freed him to see clearly what being human really meant, and which, far from confining him, opened up to him many ways of doing God's will. That is the reason for his surprising combination of deep mystical prayer and wide-ranging Gospel activity, an activity which sprang from his need to share with all humanity the treasure he had found, the secret that would help them to see and fulfill the real purpose of their lives.

2. "Always to pray ... "

Those who, like Francis, have been "touched" by God in the depths of their being, feel the need to prolong this experience in order to satisfy their thirst for that meaning without which their lives would seem empty and their daily routine futile. Francis called this prolongation "the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion" (RegB 5:2).

This desire to make every breath a prayer of praise is traditional in the history of spirituality. Inspired by Christ's invitation "always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1), some of the Fathers of the Church and the writers of the fourth and fifth centuries arranged the Divine Office to coincide with the pivotal hours of the day, their aim being to answer this Gospel call to constant prayer. This distribution of the Office throughout the day seems, then, to have been a substitute for the uninterrupted prayer of the first hermit-monks; and it has remained ever since as the norm for the monastic life in general.

It was the lone hermits, especially, who strove to reach the ideal of incessant prayer, although some of those who lived the more solitary forms of monastic life also adopted it in large measure. Nevertheless, the

recitation of the Hours and the readings remained as an acceptable

approximation to the ideal of continuous prayer.

In the fifth century, in Constantinople, the Acoemetae ("the unsleeping ones"), a community of Syriac origin, adopted the custom of chanting unceasingly to God. At the beginning of the sixth century, the monks of a monastery in Gaul followed the example of the Acoemetae and began the constant singing of God's praises, with different groups of monks taking their turn day and night without interruption. This practice of continuous prayer (laus perennis) spread to several monasteries and convents during the Merovingian era_i.e. from the sixth to the eighth century.

It would seem that Francis never took literally the Lord's Gospel invitation to continual prayer. But he did heed the warning to watch and pray lest we fall when tempted (cf. Mt 26:41) and made it the framework within which his brothers should live, a standard which the early monks and hermits had used when drawing up their program of prayer. That is

why he wrote:

Let us be very careful of the malice and the subtlety of Satan, who wishes that a man not raise his mind and heart to God. And as he roams about, he wishes to ensnare the heart of a person under the guise of some reward or help, and to snuff out our memory of the word and the precepts of the Lord....

Therefore..., let us be very much on our guard so that we do not lose or turn away our mind and heart from the Lord..., but... overcome every obstacle and put aside every care and anxiety, (and) strive as best (we) can to serve, love, honor, and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind.... And let us make a home and dwelling place (cf. Jn 14:23) for ... the Lord God Almighty ... Who says: 'Watch, therefore, praying constantly that you may be considered worthy to escape all the evils that are to come and to stand secure before the Son of Man' (Lk 21:36). And let us adore Him with a pure heart, because we should pray always and not lose heart (Lk 18:1) (RegNB 22:19f, 25f, 27, 29; cf. RegB 10:9; Adm 16; II EpFid 19-21).

Francis repeated this insistence on prayer countless times throughout his writings, reminding all his brothers that they should

let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us (from God's presence).... Let all of us, wherever we are, in every place, at every hour..., every day and continually, believe truly and humbly and keep in (our) heart, and love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the most high and supreme eternal God (RegNB 23:10f).

Francis drove home the necessity of keeping ourselves open to God's presence by his almost boring repetition of the word "every"—"every"

place, "every" hour, "every" day. We must remain alert and keep our hearts open so that the Triune God may dwell in us and transform us.

While Francis certainly did spend much time in prayer and strove to maintain "the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion," the biographers, with their usual zeal, seized upon his undoubted love of prayer and often made it seem as if he never stopped praying (cf. 2Cel 96; LM 10:6; LP 119; SpPer 94). Here as elsewhere, this pious exaggeration was well-intentioned: they wanted to hold Francis up to the brothers, but especially to the faithful, as an example of a man of prayer.

Celano himself tells us that this was his intention when he says: "We give here a few of the great things about (Francis's) prayers that may be imitated by those who come after him" (2Cel 94). It is in this sense, too, that we should understand St. Bonaventure when he says that:

Francis strove to keep his spirit in the presence of God by praying without ceasing so that he might not be without the comfort of his Beloved.... Prayer was a support to this worker; for in everything which he did, distrusting his own effort and trusting in God's loving concern, he cast his care completely upon the Lord in urgent prayers to Him.... He used whatever means he could to arouse his friars to be zealous in prayer. For whether walking or sitting, inside or outside, working or resting, he was so intent on prayer that he seemed to have dedicated to it, not only his heart and body, but also all his effort and time (LM 10:1).

This is the ideal of continuous prayer being put into actual practice. While this description may seem exaggerated to us, it is in line with St. Bonaventure's whole purpose in writing Francis's biography, which was simply to make the Saint a holy model to encourage the faithful to pray more. However, if we examine the biographers' accounts more closely, we shall find that they are referring, not so much to the quantity of Francis's prayers, as to his habitually prayerful attitude, an approach which, as we have said, he himself called "the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion."

In this, he was going back to the purest monastic and eremitical tradition, in which the monks and hermits meditated on the word of God and its implications in order to keep their hearts open to Him. We need this openness if we are to receive and render fruitful the Lord's saving visit during our times of prayer. It is not a question here of setting a time-limit to the Lord's healing presence within us. Rather, we should be aware that God gives Himself to us continuously and that we should make our whole lives His habitation and dwelling. When we are so aware, we need time to perceive His presence, and then we need even more time to do so in a responsible way.

3. Francis, God's Minstrel and Liturgist

As we consider further what we normally understand as prayer, we must emphasize the theological depth of Francis's prayer and the different forms it took. St. Bonaventure's description of Francis as God's minstrel and liturgist "This praiser and worshipper of God" (*Dei laudator et cultor*: LM 8:10) is an apt picture of the Saint's relationship with God. As a minstrel, he was able to meet God spontaneously and to use the lively language of the ordinary people to express his own creativity. On the other hand, because he was "a man of the Church," he was also a liturgist who showed his docility to the Holy Spirit and his openness to the Trinity in the Divine Office and in the other ecclesiastical celebrations.

a) "Let us praise God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

As we said before, three elements are needed for prayer—God, the person who prays, and the meeting between them. Now, the God to whom Francis prayed was the Triune God, not merely because he had been taught to do so, but also because the God whom he had experienced at his conversion, the God who had won his heart, who had so disconcerted him and shown him how to be truly human, was the God who was One and Three, one Nature and three Persons. In the light of that experience, and inspired by the story of salvation in the Scriptures, he was to see his whole spiritual journey as a continuous manifestation of the desire of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to make him share in their own life through the ministry of the Church.

This was the theological nucleus of Francis's prayer as we see it reflected in his writings. It would take too long to quote all his references to the Triune God's love in offering us the possibility of sharing in the divine life. Instead, it will be enough for us here to examine Chapter 23 of the *Rule of 1221*.

This whole chapter is a prayer of thanksgiving for our salvation and especially for the merciful love with which God redeemed us. Our redemption was wrought by the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. The whole Trinity participated, each Person in His own fashion, in God's drawing near to us to save us. Therefore, our prayers of gratitude must be addressed to the Triune God. Because Francis was conscious of his inability to offer adequate praise to God, he had recourse to our Lady and the saints so that, from their privileged place in heaven, they would render Him due praise.

Francis began his prayer by thanking God for having given Himself to us through the Son and in the Spirit in such a wonderful way in creation and especially for having made us with His own hands in His image and likeness (v. 1). This gesture of love is motive enough for our thanks and praise, but an even greater reason is His having re-created us through His Son's becoming man in Mary's womb, so taking on our poor, sinful condition (v. 3), to the point of dying on the cross. But God's goodness to us did not end there. The Father seated Christ at His right hand to show us what He wishes to do for us; and this is a further reason why we should praise and thank Him (v. 4).

Francis was aware that only a man who was also God could fully understand all these proofs of God's generosity and could accept them with adequate gratitude. That is why he asked our Lord Jesus Christ, God's own beloved Son, along with the Holy Spirit, to give the Father thanks for everything and in a fitting manner (v. 5). Then he called upon the Blessed Virgin and all the saints to join in this filial praise of Christ to His Father so that they, too, could thank Him for all that He and the Son and the

Holy Spirit have done for us (v. 6).

When the prayer of thanksgiving is genuine, it does not stop at mere words but also touches the heart with enduring, efficacious love. It is not enough for us to say "Lord, Lord!" It is only by living according to the Gospel and so giving thankful praise for God's goodness to us (v. 7)—it is only by this that we truly show that God alone is the object of our love (v. 8) and of our desires (v. 9). Nothing, then, must hinder us from loving and praising God, Trinity and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (v. 10), because thankful praise is the only fitting response to God's coming down so close to us.

b) Private prayer

It is in Francis's private prayers that we can glimpse the secrets of his heart. There he could give free rein to his creativity in his relationship with God. Such spontaneous prayers show us what made him a man of God who lived only for God.

As we would expect, his private prayer was shaped by his cultural formation. The popular piety of his time influenced the image he formed of God and that in turn shaped the way he responded to it. The various cultural strands that went into forming medieval piety made the peoples' prayer different from the theologians' idea of what prayer should be. We know little or nothing about the real prayer of the ordinary medieval lay Because they were illiterate, they could not set down their experiences in writing, so that all we have to go on is what the clerics wrote about the peoples' pious practices, usually to condemn or forbid them.

When we look for the popular sources of Francis's prayer, we shall scarcely find them in his writings, which belong to an advanced stage in his life and which can at times be somewhat official and hence stilted in tone. His biographies are where the popular, spontaneous sources of his prayer can be most clearly seen. His zeal in communicating and sharing his Gospel life with everyone, especially with the ordinary people, led him to express his own profound spiritual experiences in the types of prayer which those people used.

Francis wrote a considerable number and variety of prayers, all inspired by the liturgy but differing in form. He wrote prayers properly-so-called (Office of the Passion; Letter to the Entire Order 50-52; Rule of RegNB 23), praises to God (Exhortation to the Praise of God; Praises of God), hymns and poems (Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Salutation of the Virtues; Canticle of Brother Sun).

Because we lack sufficient knowledge of the devotional literature available to Francis, we can neither assert nor deny the originality of some of his prayers, such as the one which he is reputed to have said before the crucifix at San Damiano, or the Prayer Inspired by the Our Father. Nevertheless, we can deduce that they were not completely original but, rather, common prayers of the day which he adapted to his own special devotion and rephrased to his liking.

This whole array of prayers shows that his prayer-life did not lack variety of form, although he says nothing in his writings about this feature of his devotions. Again, it is his biographers who enlarge on this aspect of his life in order to show him as a saint whose prayer was deep and wideranging. While we may not wish to accept the biographers' idealized portrait as the reality, we must recognize the important part which private prayer played in Francis's spirituality, filling long periods of his life and being his principal occupation and preoccupation.

Francis's different forms of prayer combined to create his own particular method of meeting God. Yet the way he developed this method was quite normal, beginning with a preference for expressing himself in vivid language and with prayerful actions, then passing on to a more meditative style, and finally basing his prayer on the official liturgy and quiet reflection upon it.

--- Lay peoples' prayer

Francis's religious and cultural background directed his prayer along popular lines so that it consisted mostly of religious gestures and words spoken aloud, at least until after his conversion and during the first years of the Fraternity. We have no information about his method of praying before his conversion, and so we must assume that he used the same words and types of prayer as the ordinary believers of the time, taking part in the

usual ceremonies in the parish church and using the common formulas in his private prayer.

His first major religious undertaking during his conversion was his journey to Rome to visit the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles (L3S 10; 2Cel 8; LM 1:6). At that time, as we have seen, every Christian dreamed of visiting three tombs: Christ's tomb in Jerusalem, St. Peter's in Rome and St. James's in Compostela, a popular tradition which expressed in a simple but demanding way the pilgrim's commitment to follow Christ in the Church founded on the Apostles. Keeping this tradition, Francis visited Rome, and possibly the other two shrines, in order to nourish his faith on the sights and sounds of a pilgrimage, undertaken as a parable of his following in Christ's footsteps and a pledge of his allegiance to the Church of the Apostles.

Visiting churches was another popular devotion which Francis practiced, particularly in the early days of his conversion. His visits to San Damiano played a decisive role in his conversion. We have one of the prayers which he used to say before the crucifix there (OrCruc; L3S 13; 2Cel 10). Shortly before his death, he recalled this "faith in churches," which he regarded as a gift from God and which urged him to pray, saying simply:

We adore You, Lord Jesus Christ, in all Your churches throughout the world, and we bless You, for through Your holy cross You have redeemed the world (Test 4f).

But the most original and most eloquent gesture of his conversion occurred when, in the presence of the bishop and the townspeople, he took off all his clothes and returned them to his father as a sign that he was giving himself completely to his Father in heaven (L3S 20; 1Cel 14f; 2Cel 12). Perhaps his action here may not seem very prayerful to us today, yet, for the people of the time, and especially for Francis himself, it was quite natural and acceptable to express oneself to God by using dramatic actions; that is, they believed that such actions were prayers. As it was, Francis made the theological meaning of the event quite clear when he gave the reason for his action: "From now on, I will say 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' and not Father Peter Bernardone. "In fact, he was acting upon the Gospel theme, so beloved of the medieval radical poverty movements, of following naked the naked Christ.

The lay element in Francis's prayer can also be clearly seen in his singing God's praises, especially in French, at key moments of his life. No sooner had he left the family home than he fulfilled what was possibly a subconscious youthful ambition to be a minstrel, by running through the woods, singing praises to God in French (1Cel 16).

While he was repairing the Church at San Damiano, he used to go through the city streets and squares, singing God's praises and begging for stones to use in his building work (L3S 21). When he had been joined by four companions, he went with Brother Giles to the Marches of Ancona, singing praises to God loudly in French (L3S 33). Celano himself was a witness to this:

At times, as we saw with our own eyes, he would pick up a stick from the ground and putting it over his left arm, would draw across it, as across a violin, a little bow bent by means of a string; and going through the motions of playing, he would sing in French about his Lord (2Cel 127).

Occasionally, Francis's personal prayers bordered on the unorthodox, and this is not surprising in the historical context. Nowadays, people in general are not very concerned about prayer, but in the Middle Ages they took their prayer seriously, although they did not worry greatly about its orthodoxy. Yet their prayer was usually a genuine meeting with God even though they did not always act or express themselves in ways that were strictly in the Christian tradition. For instance, they sometimes had recourse to the so-called sortes apostolorum, biblicae aut evangelicae ("the Apostles', biblical or Gospel casting of lots"), which consisted in opening the book of the Gospels three times at random to find out what the will of God was. Francis used this method to discover which vocation God wished him and his companion, Bernard, to follow (L3S 28f; 2Cel 15; LM 3; 3). If this is what actually happened, it is more than a coincidence that Francis and Bernard should have turned up precisely the three texts which all the radical poverty movements at the time used to justify their way of life. Such practices of popular piety were accessible to the ordinary people and helped them place themselves in the presence of God even though they used untheological means like "the Apostles' casting of lots" (cf. Acts 1:26).

--- Hermit's Prayer

Francis's biographers love to relate how, immediately after his conversion, he spent long hours in meditative prayer; but the reality probably was that he increased his prayer-time only gradually. The religious atmosphere of the day, in which hermits were not regarded as at all unusual, favored this type of prayer, especially for a recent convert like Francis. Moreover, he needed tranquillity and quiet in which to cope with the sudden way God had changed his life and to see what the future might hold for him.

It is certain that Francis did not become, officially at least, one of the hermits of Umbria. Yet the Three Companions note that, when he retired

to the Church of San Damiano, he made himself a habit similar to that of the hermits (L3S 21) and wore it until he heard the priest explaining the Gospel passage describing Christ sending out His disciples (L3S 25). Especially in the Middle Ages, clothes were a kind of language, a way of showing one's religious convictions or social values or function in society. That was why the biographers thought it important to depict Francis clad as a hermit. They wanted to demonstrate the spiritual nature of his new life-style and to show that, when he had progressed to a life of Gospel poverty, he had changed his garb accordingly. His new manner of living did, however, contain some of the features of the less solitary form of hermit life, and, while he did not entirely cease to have dealings with other people, he did have time to devote himself freely to quiet meditation.

No doubt, in its first years, the new Fraternity led the life of wandering hermits, in which they alternated between ministering in the cities and towns and retiring to the forests for contemplation. Jacques de Vitry somewhat formally described the first brothers' life-style:

During the day, they go into the towns and villages to convert whomsoever they can, thus devoting themselves to the active life: and at night, returning to deserted or solitary places, they give themselves up to contemplation (Letter 1, Oct.1216).

The fact that hermitages were the first fixed abodes which the Fraternity acquired shows the importance they attached to this modified eremitical manner of life and indicates the type of prayer they practiced. But contemplative prayer was not exclusive to the hermit-brothers. Francis himself used to seek solitude to pray and used to spend long periods of time in absolute isolation so as to be able to give himself to meditative prayer. This became such a common practice among the brothers that Francis had to draw up a rule for the hermitages to which "those who … pray" could take turns to retire (RegNB 17:5).

The Rule for Hermitages was the culmination of an eremitical tradition in the Fraternity which was marked by the predominance of meditation over liturgical prayer. Especially in the beginning, Francis clearly exhibited this instinct for withdrawing to the forest to pray, to spend long stretches of time in contemplative retreat and, when he stayed in any friary, to isolate himself so as not to be disturbed at prayer.

When we analyze the Rule for Hermitages, we find that there was already a blending of liturgical and meditative prayer in the Fraternity. The brothers in the hermitages had to recite all the hours of the Office, but there was no reference to the celebration of Mass, another indication of their eremitical tendency. In the other, more monastic hermitages, the mode of life was less extreme. There the brothers alternated between

prayer, manual labor and the apostolate, always keeping in mind, however, that prayer was the very foundation of their life. The biographers describe this facet of Francis's life by giving us a profusion of details about the many occasions on which he devoted himself to contemplation (1Cel 71, 91; 2Cel 95, 168f; LM 9:4).

--- Para-liturgical prayer

Francis's devotional life bore the clear imprint of the liturgy. During the celebrations in his parish church and while he was learning to read from the Book of Psalms, he had absorbed the spirit of the liturgy, and this determined the way he expressed himself to God. Most of the prayers that have come down to us from him are derived from the liturgy; and the vocabulary he used in his compositions is purely liturgical, which shows that his private prayer was nourished on the public prayer of the Church, that is, the liturgy.

His Office of the Passion is a perfect example of his para-liturgical devotion. Leaving for discussion elsewhere the problem of whether he alone composed it, or whether he had the help of a biblical expert or consulted a concordance of the Bible, we do know that he used this Office every day as a devotional supplement to the Divine Office, as St. Clare did

later (LegCl 30).

In the monastic tradition, the monks felt the spiritual need to prolong the Divine Office by adding more and more psalms. But Francis did not follow their example. His devotion did not lead him to alter the Office itself, but he did supplement it with prayers inspired by the liturgy or, what is more significant, by a devotional Office, the Office of the Passion, in which he could give free expression to the thoughts and dispositions inspired by our Redemption and by his feeling that he had been visited by God, who had done and was still doing such great things for him.

Since practically all the prayers composed by Francis that have come down to us were inspired by the liturgy, we must conclude that it was the liturgy also that nourished his private devotions and meditation. He had had no theological training which would have allowed him to consult spiritual writers to obtain inspiration with which to keep his personal prayer fresh and vibrant. So he had to look to the liturgy to provide the elements needed for thoughtful prayer and the satisfaction of his own devotion. A proof of this is the so-called "Breviary of St. Francis." It had been written by a chaplain of the Roman Curia, and Francis had acquired a copy after the approval of the Rule in 1223 so that he could say the Office "according to the rite of the holy Roman Church, except the Psalter" (RegB 3:1). A little later he added a lectionary of the Gospels because, as the Legend of Perugia relates, he used to have the Gospel of the day read to him before dinner when he could not attend Mass (LP 50).

However, Francis's para-liturgical prayer reached its highest level with the full blossoming of his spiritual life:

(Realizing) that the time of his death was at hand, he called to him two of his brothers ... and commanded them to sing in a loud voice with joy of spirit the Praises of the Lord—the Canticle of Brother Sun—over his approaching death, or rather, over the life that was so near. He himself, in as far as he was able, broke forth in that psalm of David: 'I cried to the Lord with my voice'.... Finally, he ordered the book of the Gospels to be brought and commanded that the Gospel according to St. John be read from the place where it begins: 'Six days before the Passover, Jesus, knowing that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father....' (1Cel 109f).

So Francis, who had lived his life following in Christ's footsteps, wished to end it in the same way by reproducing in para-liturgical form the last days of his Lord. In his prayer, he had always tried to imitate and identify with Christ's prayer of total obedience to the Father. It was this life-long desire to follow Christ on His way to the Father that helped Francis to meet God in the liturgy. Even further, he lived the liturgy because he saw it as the Church's own method of speaking and listening to God. So his private prayer, impregnated as it was with the liturgy, bore the Church's mark of objectivity and authenticity.

c) Liturgical prayer

Francis's prayer, and indeed his whole life, was shaped by the liturgy and, more precisely, by the Divine Office. By the standards of the time, he was an educated layman, since he had learned to read and write from the textbook of the Psalms. So, when he was converted, he instinctively felt that he had to adopt the Divine Office for his Fraternity when it had been approved by the Church. We must remember, however, that we cannot judge the first friars' methods of praying the Office by our modern standards, since they lacked the organization and the various means that we have at our disposal, such as ease of communication and readily-obtained books. It took time to integrate the Office fully into the prayer-structure of the Fraternity so that it became a normal, stable element of that structure.

Francis tells us in his Testament that, in the beginning, the brothers who were clerics said "the Office as other clerics did; the lay brothers said the Our Father" (Test 18). This could give the impression that the Fraternity had begun to say the Office in the same fashion as the well-established religious Orders. But this was not the case.

The progressive introduction of the Divine Office as the official prayer of the Fraterntiy clearly proceeded in step with the evolution of the Franciscan movement into a religious Order. The biographers' description of the early Fraternity's attitude to the Office differs from that which Francis gives in his Testament. When the brothers returned from Rome, they asked Francis to teach them how to pray because "they did not know as yet the ecclesiastical office" (1Cel 45). Glossing over the first brothers' lack of education, St. Bonaventure said that they

devot(ed) themselves to mental rather than vocal prayer because they did not yet have liturgical books from which to chant the canonical hours (LM 4:3).

If they really did not have books, it was not primarily because they were unable to obtain them, but rather because their way of life was more lay than clerical, and organizing themselves as an Order was not part of that life. That is why their liturgical or official prayer was the Our Father and the antiphon: "We adore you, O Lord Christ," which Francis had taught them (L3S 37). This shows that the early Fraternity had not started to say the Office in community; but, when possible, they used to assist at it in the nearest church (L3S 38).

--- "The clerics shall say the Divine Office."

About 1215, the entrance of priests and other educated men changed the situation in the Fraternity, and the recitation of the Divine Office was made mandatory.

The two Rules, especially that of 1223, stressed the obligatory nature of this type of prayer, and this, combined with the development of the ministerial apostolate and the need to study theology, determined that the community prayer should be in the liturgical form rather than the meditative one favored by the hermit-brothers. These two different approaches to prayer were never fully reconciled, but were, instead, blended harmoniously together to form the ideal brother, a man who had been "touched" by God and whose response was to do his best to keep himself open to God's presence. Organizing the liturgy in the Fraternity focused Francis's attention more than ever on the Church's official prayer and, at the same time, provided more food for his own private prayer, as we can see from his Office of the Passion and his custom of having the day's Gospel read to him when he could not assist at Mass.

The Rule of 1221 reflected this process by commanding the cleric brothers to say the Office, while the other brothers who could read were to join them in reciting the Psalter; but those who did not know how to read were to say the Our Father (RegNB 3:4-10). Despite this ruling, books

were so scarce that the Fraternity at the Portiuncula had only one copy of the New Testament from which to read the lessons at Matins. And to reinforce this point, the compiler of the *Legend of Perugia* added that, at that time, "the brothers had no breviaries and only a few psalters" (LP 56).

When the Rule of 1223 was approved, the regulation on the Office remained more or less unchanged, except for the addition of the proviso that the Office should be said "according to the rite of the holy Roman Church" (RegB 3:1-4), that is, following the liturgical rite of the papal chapel. But, as we have seen, the "Breviary of St. Francis," written by a chaplain of the Roman Curia, presumably "according to the rite of the holy Roman Church," came into Francis's hands only at the time his Rule was approved. So the Fraternity as a whole could not possibly have obeyed the new Rule's regulation about the Office. In fact, as Jordan of Giano tells us, at the General Chapter of 1230, the Order's supply of breviaries and antiphonaries were distributed among the various Provinces so that they could be copied and spread among the friars of each Province (Chronicle 57).

--- "Say the Office with devotion"

Surprising as it may seem, Francis said nothing about the spirit in which the brothers were to recite the Office. This omission is explained, however, when we realize that the organization of the liturgy of the Office within the Fraternity bears the mark, not of Francis himself, but of some skilled canonist. However, the biographers have left us a description of Francis's earnestness in reciting the Office and the great care he took to say it with dignity (L3S 52; 2Cel 96). Because the Fraternity had adopted the Office as their public, official prayer, Francis wished to see that it was said with devotion and due solemnity, as his Letter to the Entire Order shows.

This letter also provides the motivation for saying the Office in praise of God. Francis begs the clerics:

to say the Office with devotion before God, not concentrating on the melody of the voice but on the harmony of the mind, so that the voice may blend with the mind, and the mind be in harmony with God. (Let them do this) in such a way that they may please God with purity of heart and not charm the ears of the people with sweetness of voice (EpOrd 41f).

The context of this section of Francis's letter is to be found in the Rule of St. Benedict, which, in chapter 20, entitled "On Reverence in Prayer," points out that, when we wish to make our requests to powerful people, we do so only with humility and respect: "How much more, then, are complete humility and pure devotion necessary in supplication of the

Lord who is God of the universe!" This is the attitude which Francis recommended for the recitation of the Office: it should be said with "devotion before God." Here the word "devotion" means more than a simple sentiment or a feeling of religious fervor. It is, instead, a radical disposition which makes us abandon ourselves completely to God and surrender ourselves unconditionally to Him whom we know is Absolute and Sufficient in Himself.

Francis held that saying the Office devoutly in the presence of God was an imperative duty for the Friar Minor. As we have seen, in his Letter to the Entire Order, he earnestly requested that the friars should avoid anything which might detract from their devotion, such as worrying about their singing. Before all else, they were to attend to the harmony of the soul, so that their voices would be in harmony with their souls and their souls with God. These warnings were not misplaced because, very soon, the friars had begun singing the Office to their own music and competing with other religious groups (Giano: Chronicle 26; Eccleston: The Friars and How They Came to England: trans. by Fr. Cuthbert O.S.FC., Sands & Co., London, 1903).

In the Rule for Hermitages, the rhythm of life was regulated by the Divine Office, although no reference was made to the Mass. Such detailed organization of the contemplative element of the Fraternity must have taken place during the last years of Francis's life, perhaps with the intention of attracting the numerous hermits then living in central Italy. This Rule is also an indication that the eremitical vocation of the early friars did not disappear with the acquisition of the first hermitages, such as Greccio, the Carceri, etc., since these, too, retained the traditional eremitical form.

--- The Mass in the Fraternity

The Fraternity's liturgical prayer was conducted by brothers who were not clerics and who led a semi-eremitical life. So it was centered more on the Divine Office than on other liturgical functions, such as the Mass. But this changed, and, accordingly as the Fraternity began to be organized as an Order, provision was made for the celebration of Mass. This provision seems to be taken for granted in the Rules, although they say nothing directly about it. The daily celebration of Mass is mentioned only in the Letter to the Entire Order and then not as the central celebration in the Fraternity but to preserve the Mass from being exploited for money (EpOrd 30-33).

Nowadays, we are properly sensitive about the Mass since it is the main liturgical celebration which makes us a Fraternity. Hence, we find it strange that Francis should have made no allusion to the Mass although he

used to prostrate himself before Christ present in the Eucharist. But he was a child of his times, and he did much to emphasize the "humbling" aspect of the Mass and Eucharist, which led him to adore rather than to thank Christ present there.

Silence on the celebration of the Mass in the Fraternity is explained, first, by the fact that the Mass was included in the Divine Office, and, second, by the wandering, eremitical character of the first Franciscan group. The other great religious Rules do not contain norms for the Eucharistic celebration, perhaps because the Mass was regarded as being so obviously important that there was no need to draw up regulations about it. So it is not strange that the Franciscan Rules should not make provision for it either. And we can only assume, but not prove, that the eremitical nature of the first Fraternity also had some influence in the matter. Evidently, the hermits were more inclined towards contemplation than towards liturgical celebrations. They may have said the Office and, if they were priests, celebrated Mass now and then. But when there were no outsiders present, they would not have held those liturgical functions which presupposed the assistance of a congregation. However, we do not know if the early Fraternity was radical in this matter or if, instead, they adopted a milder stance and had more regular liturgical celebrations, but of a simple, austere kind.

Francis's biographers more than compensate for his silence on the Mass. For example, Celano testifies that:

Not to hear at least one Mass each day, if he could be there, he considered no small contempt. He frequently received Holy Communion, and he did so with such devotion that he made others also devout (2 Cel 201).

When Francis was describing his ideal Minister General of the Order, he said:

For the first thing in the morning, he must begin with the holy sacrifice of the Mass and commend himself and his flock to the divine protection in a prolonged devotion (2 Cel 185).

Of course, this could happen only when the Fraternity had fixed dwelling-places, a circumstance which the Letter to the Entire Order takes for granted and which was not possible until 1222, when Pope Honorius III gave the Order the privilege of celebrating the Mass and the liturgical offices in their "churches, when they acquire them," but only behind closed doors. In the bull, Quia populares of 1224, the Pope "conced(ed) them the privilege that, in their houses and oratories, they (might) celebrate the sacrifice of the Mass and the other divine offices with portable altars. Until

then, all the brothers, just like the ordinary faithful, had to be content with going to the nearest church to hear, and if they were priests, possibly to celebrate Mass. (L3S 338).

--- The Sacrament of Penance

The sacrament of penance was another liturgical act of the praying Fraternity. During the Middle Ages, confession became so private a function that it no longer seemed to be a part of the communal activity of the Church but rather a personal devotion of the individual. Echoing the Fourth Lateran Council, Francis invited the friars to confess all their sins to a priest. However, because of the necessarily private nature of this sacrament, it was hard to see it as an action of the church community in which God comes close to us as our Father, forgiving us and encouraging us to begin again, while we gratefully accept this new evidence of His mercy, and praise Him for it.

Because of his formation in the faith, Francis stressed the less positive side of this sacrament, that is, our sinfulness and our continual need to have recourse to God's mercy to receive His pardon through the priest. But when we view penance as part of our redemption by Christ, it becomes an act of thanksgiving because we see that we have been set free and redeemed by His cross, blood and death (RegNB 23:3). This redemption stretches over all of time and will reach its culmination when the Son Himself returns in the glory of His majesty

to say to all those who have known (Him) and have adored (Him) and have served (Him) in penance: 'Come, you blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom, which has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world' (RegNB 23:4).

Penance, then, viewed from the ecclesiastical and communal aspect of salvation, is also a celebration in which God gives Himself graciously to us and in which

all of us wretches and sinners (who) are not worthy to pronounce Your name..., humbly ask that our Lord Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, in whom You were well pleased, together with the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, give You thanks as it pleases You and Him for everything.... (RegNB 23:5).

The liturgical prayer of the Church must have been very important to Francis for we know how acutely aware he was that he had not kept the Rule because he had failed to say the Office as prescribed by that Rule. He was also conscious that he had treated harshly those who did not say the Office as the Rule commanded.

Francis was not psychologically prone to scrupulosity, yet when his failing eyesight prevented him from reading the Office, he still felt that he had been derelict in his duty "either out of negligence or on account of (his) illness or because (he was) ignorant and unlearned" (EpOrd 39). Perhaps he felt that he had to be a living example for the other friars and so regarded as a fault something that was a physical impossibility. However, he blamed others, too, for not having done the impossible; very probably, this is what he had against those brothers who had been unable to say the Office because they had lacked books. He said that he did not "consider them to be Catholics nor (his) brothers and ... (did) not wish to see them or speak with them until they (had) done penance" (EpOrd 44). This was a surprising attitude for him to take. But it does show how faithful he was in following the law as laid down by the Church in Rome. And, if the friars concerned really had been guilty of negligence in saying the Office, it also demonstrates his conviction that praising God was a fundamental duty of the whole Fraternity.

4. The Life of Prayer

Prayer is of such paramount importance in the spiritual life that we cannot regard it in isolation. It is not just one act among so many others that promote the Christian life. This is so because, when we pray, we are placing ourselves completely in the presence of God, consenting to His saving action on us and giving ourselves entirely to Him. Therefore, Francis did not avoid God's benevolent gaze inviting him to do penance (Test 1), that is, to follow Christ in the Gospel task of spreading the Kingdom of God on earth. From the moment in Spoleto when he felt the presence of God so devastatingly, he could not do anything else with his life except spend it in answering, adoring, praising and serving his Lord.

As we have seen, Celano said that Francis did not merely pray but became a prayer himself (cf. 2Cel 95), that is, he made his whole life an uninterrupted prayer in which he unfolded all that he was, all that he had and all that he did before God's healing gaze. This desire to walk always in the divine presence made Francis an untiring seeker after God, a pilgrim of the Absolute, who scrutinized his life and everything that happened to him in order to find God's will and satisfy the infinite longings of his heart.

That is why Francis's prayer was never an escape or a means of distraction from the real problems he had to face during his life. He had to go through dark, difficult moments in order to discover that, in the end, a light always appeared which confirmed his hope. But he also felt the joy and happiness of knowing with certainty that God lives in His children and in the events of their lives. This ability to see God in His creation is not

something natural, something that comes without effort. The sensitivity to find the divine presence is a gift which the Spirit offers us if we are willing to open our lives to Him and to help His "holy operation" to do its work in us.

This active, habitual receptivity to God is what we usually call prayer; but prayer is also the way we express, at various times and in a variety of ways, our continual need to adore, thank and praise God for His presence in our lives. Francis spent long periods of time in prayer and prayed in many different ways: but while his prayer was rooted in his everyday life, there was another dimension to it which reached beyond time and space and so cannot be measured.

Our meeting with God does, of course, have to take place in time and space; but if our moments of prayer do not sharpen our sensitivity enough to allow us to perceive the presence of God in and through history, then our prayer becomes a closed circle that serves merely to feed our illusions and that tries to satisfy our desires.

Francis's conversion came about as the result of his meeting with God in prayer. But the God whom Francis met was not a dispassionately transcendent being who cared nothing about what happened to humanity. Rather, the God who came to meet Francis was a God who had become man, who had entered human history by taking on the poverty of our mortal limitations and who had met and overcome the challenge of time by remaining with us, silent but beneficent, in the Eucharist. In response to our Lord's humbling Himself in this way, Francis resolved to imitate His utter poverty and to strive to follow in His footsteps on earth. For Francis, imitating Christ's life and poverty consisted in keeping Him in his heart so as to be able to "love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to Him" (RegNB 23:10). That is to say, for Francis, praying simply meant living the Gospel life to the full.

If we did not have Francis's biographies to guide us, we might think that his intense prayer and his close relationship with God demanded that he lead a life of retirement, far removed from the many problems that beset the seething society of his day. But it was not like that with Francis. The range of his apostolate was surprisingly wide; and he was in close contact with the most diverse social groups, bringing them the good news of the Gospel and showing them how to live up to it. And he had adopted the itinerant mode of life because he was eager to tell everyone that they could find the meaning of life only in Christ, the Son of God, who had become one of us in all things except sin.

Despite the hints which his biographers give us, Francis's prayer was not a "sacred time," dedicated exclusively to God, a time when he would

fill his heart with divine things which he would then go out and share with others through the apostolate. Actually, he lived his whole life in God's presence so that it was a continuous prayer, which took different forms, sometimes consisting of reflection and contemplation, at other times of intense activity, preaching and moving among the people.

In this way, his prayer and his life, that is, his contemplation and his action, were reciprocal, the one ensuring the authenticity of the other. His prayer ranged over the whole of creation, with all its suffering and its ability to be used in praise of God (Cant). At the same time, his preaching was an invitation to everyone to see the real meaning of life and to praise our Creator for having loved us so unselfishly and at such great cost (II EpFid 19-62). For Francis, praising God and being active in the apostolate were one and the same thing, so that he entreated his friars:

> Give praise to Him since He is good (Ps 135:1) and exalt Him by your deeds (Tob 13:6), for He has sent you into the entire world for this reason (cf. Tob 13:4): that in word and deed you may give witness to His voice and bring everyone to know that there is no one who is allpowerful except Him (Tob 13:4) (EpOrd 8.9).

Francis was a man of the Middle Ages, and, for him, the world was not a mindless, impersonal machine which operated relentlessly and according to fixed, immutable laws. On the contrary, the world was alive, animated by a Presence that creates, sustains and leads everything to its fulfillment (RegNB 23:1-4); and this was the reason for his complete trust in God's providence. He did not view history as a succession of unconnected events but as the providential working-out of a plan that had been conceived in love. That is why he recalled in his Testament that it was God who made him change his life and do penance (v. 1); who accompanied him when he went among the lepers to have mercy on them (v. 2); who gave him such faith in churches as the meeting place between God and humanity that he was able to compose a simple prayer before the crucifix (v. 4). Similarly, it was the Lord who gave him such great faith in priests, because of their ministry, that he was able to overlook their defects and limitations and to "fear, love and honor them" as his "masters" (vv. 6-10), as he also did with theologians (v. 13). Finally, it was the Lord Himself who gave him the brothers with whom he formed his Fraternity and whom he inspired to live "according to the form of the Holy Gospel" (v. 14).

Because the world is not a product of chance but comes from the loving generosity of God, who continues to sustain it, we should acknowledge His presence here with us and abandon ourselves into His hands, making our lives a continuous act of thanksgiving to Him who has

called us to share in His love.

Conclusion

From our brief review of Francis's attitude towards prayer, we can see that God was the center of his life and that to Him he referred his every thought and act. He put himself unreservedly at His Lord's disposal, confidently and gratefully surrendering himself so that he was able to serve all humanity with no thought of self.

In the God-fearing society of the Middle Ages, Francis's search for self-fulfillment in following Christ was not seen as anything unusual. Unfortunately, the same is not true today. In our culture, God is no longer the key to reality or the goal of our interior life. Worse still, our world blames belief in God for having kept people in a state of submission and infantilism, preventing them from exploiting their full human potentialities. Consequently, we are told that God must die, and so, modern western society has tried to kill Him.

Our post-modern, increasingly secularist society challenges us to be self-determining and self-fulfilling. We are urged to think and act for ourselves because we need no outside reference point to help us to achieve self-knowledge and self-realization. In short, we are the measure of all things.

When we are confronted with this secularist philosophy, which is usually linked with agnosticism, we may be tempted to calm our fears by idealizing the past, but, in the end, we shall be forced to face the reality of the present. Even though we may find modern society difficult to cope with, it is what it is, and taking refuge in the past is no solution. We must confront the reality of modern life. We must see it as a challenge to renew our faith and to state that faith in new ways which will be meaningful for the society that we are trying to transform.

Prayer will make no sense to a secularist, agnostic society if we are not able to show that we are committed to prayer and live by it. Our Fraternity of brothers who have come together to follow the Gospel, must be, and must be seen to be, based on prayer. No one will take us seriously as people of prayer if we do not show by our own lives that prayer can be truly fulfilling when it is an expression of a deep faith. And this leads us to ask ourselves if the kind of prayer we practice shows that we are really committed to our basic tenet, that God is the center, the beginning and the end of all human life.

Everything that we do should be inspired by the conviction that God is all, the Absolute, for us. We must strive to cleanse our hearts so that we can see God; and everything else, important though it may seem, must take second place to Him. This is especially true of our work and our study, two activities which can so easily become idols; we must subject these also

to the supremacy of God (RegB 5:11-3; EpAnt 1). Otherwise, we have not understood what it means to be a Friar Minor.

If prayer is to help us to grow and follow the path of faith, it must be personal. No matter how much the Fraternity encourages and sustains the prayer of each one of its members, it can never be a substitute for the individual's personal responsibility to put himself in the presence of the living God, for whom we live. Our dignity as persons is based on the special love that God has for each one of us, a love to which we should respond with praise and the desire to be made ever more in His image and likeness, because it is by imitating God that we learn to be truly human.

Still, prayer is not the sole prerogative of the individual. The Fraternity prays as a community, expressing its love for God and its gratitude for His goodness in bringing the brothers together (Test 14, 15) and making them His ambassadors to spread the good news of the marvels He has done for all people. In addition, a Fraternity that has been founded to follow Christ must always be conscious that He was a contemplative, unconditionally committed to doing His Father's will in building up His Kingdom on earth. If we think of community prayer simply as something we must get through so as to comply with Church law, the day will surely come when at least those who take the trouble to observe us will see that what we are doing is not prayer but play-acting, not contemplation but indolent silence.

Although prayer is a basic element of our identity, we should not try to use it as a cure-all for the problems of the Fraternity. When individual members of the group, or the group as a whole, are not functioning properly, then increasing the amount of time spent in prayer is not necessarily the only solution. Quite possibly, what we need then is the

services of a psychologist or some similar form of therapy.

On the other hand, the current popularity of oriental prayer-techniques is threatening the very nature of our prayer by emptying it of its theological content. Christian prayer can have no objective but the one which Christ taught us, namely, His Father and ours. Therefore, confusing the means with the end by engaging in an unfocused, impersonal prayer, would be to turn our backs on the traditional, God-centered prayer which the Church has always taught. This and none other was the prayer to which Francis devoted himself as the only possible response to God's call to conversion and a new way of life.

Francis's prayer, as the reflection of his life, was the prayer of a man who knew that he was poor and who, therefore, did not depend on his own merits but on God's goodness. With this attitude, he was able to acknowledge gratefully and without envy the gifts which God had given

others so that they could use them in the common cause of building up the Kingdom and fostering the brotherhood of all peoples. By recognizing these gifts and thanking God for them, we can exercise poverty even in our prayer. In this way, too, we can increase our sensitivity and see real gifts where others see only threats and disasters.

Prayer, then, must extend its range and its place in the Christian life. The spirit of renewal advocated by the Second Vatican Council should send us back to our origins to recover our identity in a new form. But we cannot renew our Franciscan charism if we do not experience the freshness and the depth of a confident prayer. Armed with such a prayer, we shall not shrink from the secularist challenge of our modern world, because we shall have experienced in our own lives what meeting God truly means and the wonders it can work in us and in the world around us.