

The Spirituality of St. Francis: Minority

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When Francis discovered that Christ's poverty was the key to living the Gospel life to the full, he set out to be completely poor, poor to the very marrow of his bones. He knew that because he had been created, he owed his whole existence to his Creator. He had come from God's hands and, whether he liked it or not, his whole life depended upon God's providence. But he also knew that this was a loving providence that would accompany him on every step of his journey through life and would be waiting for him in heaven, where, at last, he would be able to give unending praise and love to the Giver of all gifts.

By acknowledging that he had been created, Francis recognized also that he was essentially poor. Not only that, but Christ, the only Son of God, had made Himself poor by taking on our human nature. And He had done so to act as a guide whom we could follow along the path of the Gospel to His destination and ours—the Father who loves us.

But Christ's poverty was not confined to doing without things in order to remain open to the Father's love and to be ready to do His will; He went so far as to take on the condition of a servant in order to free us from our servitude. Therefore, Francis also wanted to base his poverty on the fact that everything he was and had was a pure gift of God's love and that his weakness and need were his only titles to any rights.

The words "minor" and "minority" have special meanings in the Franciscan context. The title "Friars Minor" is, of course, derived from the Latin for "Lesser Brothers" (*Fratres Minores*), while "minority" means the state of being such a Lesser Brother. However, even within the Franciscan family itself, "minority" is not something that is always highly valued. It can be little more

than a mere word and may not, as it should do, impregnate the lives and attitudes of those of us who say we are followers of Francis. An indication of this is the scarcity of writing on the subject.

Still, within the wide range of values that are part of Francis's charism, "minority" or the state of being "lesser," is a determining factor because it colors all the rest: it is *minority* that makes those other values Franciscan. If we had to pick out the one thing that truly identifies the Franciscan movement, we should have to choose that one word, "minority."

Although "minority" is so important, it is difficult to define and perhaps even more difficult to perceive because it has no clear-cut outline. It is blurred at the edges and merges into poverty of spirit, humility, simplicity, service to others, etc. Yet we must try to pin it down because we need to know it and absorb it if we are to regain the original Franciscan spirit, that spirit which will make the Gospel as alive and fresh for us today as it was for Francis.

In his account of the brothers' life at the Portiuncula, Celano described Francis perfectly in a few words: "(He was) small in stature, humble in mind, a *minor* by profession" (2Cel 18). Francis regarded himself as a "minor" and put himself at the service of everyone. He did this, not because he had low self-esteem, but because he saw that the attitude portrayed in the Beatitudes was fundamental to following Christ. Our Lord had plainly declared that the Beatitudes were the key to understanding the Kingdom: not only that, but He had lived according to them and had accepted the consequences.

The first friars adopted minority as the identifying characteristic of the group. Initially, they called themselves "Penitents from Assisi," then "Poor minors" and, finally, "Minor, or Lesser, Brothers," a process of clarification which took some time to evolve. The most reliable source we have on this subject is Jacques de Vitry's letter of 1216, in which he described to his friends how consoled he was at "seeing a great number of men and women who renounced all their possessions and left the world for love of Christ," and he went on to say that they were called "Lesser Brothers and Lesser Sisters" (*Omnibus*, p.1608).

Celano's account of how Francis came to give the Order its name apparently places that event at the very beginning of the Order (1Cel 38). But this need not have been the case. The biographer tells us that Francis listened to the words of the Rule of 1221 concerning the way the friars were to carry out their duties in the houses where they were serving. Then he exclaimed: "I wish that this fraternity should be called the Order of Friars Minor." But this fragment of the Rule of 1221 could not have belonged to the early years of the Fraternity because it presupposes a rather prolonged period of time during

which something undesirable had happened which Francis did not wish the brothers to forget or repeat.

We do know, however, that the name, Minors, which Francis took as the official title of the Order, was meant to describe the attitude which the brothers were to adopt in following Christ on the way of the Gospel. Unquestionably, then, the Franciscan state of "minority" has its roots deep in the Gospel. Yet this did not prevent Francis and his fraternity from being drawn towards, and made sensitive to, particular ways of living their Gospel life. After all, the Gospel can inspire different courses of action according to the different socio-religious standpoints from which it is viewed.

I. A Society of Greater and Lesser Classes

In Francis's day, the ordinary people of Assisi and the surrounding countryside, and of medieval society in general, were joyfully awakening from their torpor and servility. At all costs, they wanted to assert themselves and be respected because they felt that their identity and even their very survival were at stake. They had come to understand that the hierarchical system of social classes which they had inherited from the past was the cause of the intolerable conditions in which they were then living.

The terms *maior* and *minor* were traditional and widely used. A brief glance at any history of Italian law will show that the free men of a city were divided into *maiores*, that is, people of "greater" importance; *mediani*, those of "middling" importance; and *minores*, people of "lesser" importance. These divisions were in place at the end of the tenth century; and, perhaps for the sake of convenience, the term, *mediani*, tended to disappear, leaving only one distinction, between the *maiores* and the *minores*. The actual composition of these classes differed from time to time and from place to place. Thus, in Alba, according to a document dated 1259, a *maior* citizen was one who had property valued at 300 pounds, a *medianus* citizen had between 100 and 300 pounds, and a *minor* citizen had less than 100 pounds worth of property. A short time later in the rural community of Anghiari, the title *maiores* was given to knights and their children, to judges and to those who owned horses for use in time of war. Those who worked in the fields for wages of any sort were called *minores*, and the rest were known as *mediani*. We could say that the titles *maiores* and *minores* were practical organizational terms that were applied to all divisions of society, social, political and religious. Closer to Assisi, a document from 1178 spoke about "all the Spoletan people and city, the *maiores* and *minores* of the city of Spoleto," and, seven years later, Frederick I received into his protection "all the Spoletan citizens, both *maiores* and *minores*." In many cases, these two terms designated the quality of the composition of certain

communities. Thus, some knights were *maiores*, while others were *minores*, and there were consuls who were in either class. In Assisi itself, it seems that, in the twelfth century, the canons of St. Rufino were called *maiores*, while those of St. Mary were deemed to be *minores*. Again, in the agreements reached in Assisi to settle the problems caused by the *hominium*, that is, the service to be rendered to the feudal lords, the two parties in the dispute were the *maiores* and the *minores*.

1. Assisi Between the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

Although Italy was part of the German Empire, the Emperors did not show much interest in enforcing their authority there. When they did visit Rome, it was either to have themselves crowned or to arrange some matter with the Pope. Because of this lack of imperial vigilance, the feudal lords first, and later the communes, began to accumulate power at the expense of the Emperors. When Frederick I Barbarossa became aware of this laxity, he tried to remedy it by putting German nobleman in place to watch over the cities. In Assisi, he crushed the citizens' rebellion of 1174 by sending in Christian of Maguncia's troops; and he then installed his relative, Conrad of Urslingen, in the "Rocca," or castle, to ensure the maintenance of order and the loyalty of the citizens.

The growing resentment of the citizens of Assisi at this occupation of their city burst into violence in 1198. The occasion for the outbreak was Conrad's leaving the city to hand over the territory of Spoleto to the papal legates of Innocent III. The citizens laid siege to the "Rocca" and demolished it; and all the fortresses and castles which the feudal lords held in the city fell one by one. The lords fled to Perugia, which only served to heighten the age-old tension between Assisi and Perugia. That tension came to a head at the battle of Collestrada in 1202 in which Francis took part and was made prisoner. Gradually, the lords returned to Assisi, and in 1203, they signed a peace-treaty with the representatives of the town in order to fortify it against threats from outside. However, this pact apparently achieved little because, in 1210, another one had to be drawn up between the *maiores* and the *minores*. As we have already seen, these terms were often used to denote a division in society, not only along social and religious lines, but along political ones as well.

The two words *maiores* and *minores* actually described the socio-political composition of the two factions engaged in struggling for power. *Maiores* and *minores* indicated a juridical and personal relationship in which one group became lords over, and dominated, the other. General terms such as these could be used to designate the two hostile groups because, in fact, they aptly described the real situation, namely, that the *maiores* had more power than the *minores*. Yet this did not mean that the *maiores* represented the lords, and the *minores* the servants. Instead, these were two social groups, each powerful in

its own way, and each trying to organize the city according to opposing political ideas. So we must not imagine that it was simply a matter of the common people rising up against the oppression of the lords. The only thing the people of the commune were trying to do was to enforce the *Carta franchitatis* ("Charter of Enfranchisement") of 1210 and so put an end to the feudal services which some citizens still had to render to their lords, a situation which offended the peoples' sense of civic liberty and prevented some of them from serving the commune freely.

Even so, the freedom in question affected only very few because the majority of the population were either the "country" people or the wretched poor of the city; and neither group were really citizens and therefore would not have access to this freedom even if it were granted. To get some idea of who this large marginalized group were, we must have recourse to other sources, such as Franciscan ones, because the "people (who are considered to be) of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars" (RegNB 9:2), did not appear in the official documents simply because they did not form part of the *minores* who were looking for more power in Assisi.

This fact makes it difficult to prove that there was a close link between the origin of the name "Friars Minor" and the *minores* of Assisi, who were an active political force, whereas the larger part of the city population, not to mention that of the country, were too wretched and underprivileged to be *minores*. Therefore, Franciscan "minority" had a cultural connotation which places it in a much wider context than the socio-political situation in Assisi or than even the Gospel ideal of "littleness." And while these two aspects of minority do explain part of the significance of the term, they do not exhaust its cultural, symbolic content, which extends much further.

II. Francis, a "little one and ... servant"

Understanding the word "minor" in the sense of being "lesser" than others, prepared Francis to grasp the true Gospel meaning of minority. The attitude of minority, which is at once so fundamental and so complex, is the kernel of the Gospel. That is why Christ took this attitude during His mission of preaching the Good News and why He made it essential for those who devote themselves to spreading the Kingdom.

1. "Unless you ... become like children" (Mt 18:3)

From this quotation from St. Matthew's Gospel, we see that minority or "littleness" is a quality without which it is impossible to enter the Kingdom. If we are to be able to listen to and understand the Good News, we must first

become little, like the child whom Christ gave as an example (Mt 18:2f). But not all the "little ones" are equal; there are varying degrees of littleness.

a) First, there are the little ones, the minors, those who are nothing and have nothing, like the child whom St. Matthew mentions. In general, these are the poor, those men and women who are in great material need, those who have been marginalized and who no longer take part in any sort of normal social life.

Those lowest on the social scale, those who are lost, who have been crushed by life, the lepers, the hungry, those who have no power, no influence, are really the first on the scale of the Beatitudes. Because Christ emptied Himself to become man, these people are really the privileged ones; they are the true minors, the real "little ones" and therefore are able to enter the Kingdom. Francis knew that he did not belong to this class of "minors" and that he had to model himself on them if he was to become a "minor" himself. So, he urged the brothers to experience the joy of living with those who were on the fringes of society (RegNB 9:2).

b) Secondly, there are those who "become like children," those who humble and abase themselves, who leave aside their "greatness" and willingly become servants. This was the path of "minority" which Francis wished to follow. Those who are minors by nature are prevented by their very littleness from choosing this way, whereas the Franciscan option is for those who could have become "greater" than the minors by nature, but who choose instead to walk the way of littleness and minority in answer to Christ's call and as a witness to the mystery of the Kingdom.

c) Thirdly, there are those who welcome the children and the little ones (cf. Mt 18:5), those who make minority a sign of acceptance and service. In this, they are simply following in the footsteps of Christ, who made Himself little among us and called to Himself those who were really little, those who were in need. Francis and his brothers chose this optional state of minority and thus placed the Fraternity among the servants of Christ, who Himself served others, especially the little ones.

2. *Christ the Servant*

The theological basis for minority and service to God is Christ the Servant, the Son of God, who emptied Himself to become man, whom St. Paul depicts in the great hymn in his Epistle to the Philippians (Phil 2:6-11) and whom St. John depicts in his account of Christ's washing His Apostles' feet (Jn 13:1-17). St. Luke relates the dispute among the Apostles about "which was to be regarded as the greatest." Christ's answer was unequivocal: the one who serves is always the lesser, the minor, and, He added, "I am among you as one who serves" (Lk 22:24-27).

Christ the Servant, who had become little in order to give Himself to us, was the fulfilment of the age-old promise of a Messiah who was the Servant of Jahweh, completely devoted to freeing the oppressed and bringing light to the blind, bearing trials even to the point of offering Himself willingly as a sacrifice for all (Is 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-15; 53:1-12). This image of the Messiah brings home to us forcibly the full significance of Christ's washing His Apostles' feet, an incident which is a parable showing us Christ's fundamental characteristic, His minority placed at the service of all humanity: that was the aim of His whole life and of His death and resurrection. He was meek and humble of heart (Mt 11:29), brought the good news of salvation to the poor (Lk 4:18f) and placed Himself at their service (Lk 22:27) to the very end (Jn 13:1). For that reason, He was treated like a criminal (Lk 22:37) and sentenced to die on the cross (Mk 14:24). But the Father raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in heaven (Lk 18:31ff). Hence, Christ, the Servant of God, who was crucified and who rose again, is the only source of our salvation (Acts 4:10ff).

3. *"We are unworthy servants" (Lk 17:10)*

The image of the Messiah-Servant convinced Francis that this was the best way to follow His Master. He was so persuaded of this, that, all through his writings, he represented himself as "little brother Francis, your servant" (Test 41), "your little and despicable servant in the Lord God" (EpRect 1), "a worthless and weak man" (EpOrd 3), "the least of the servants of God" (2EpFid 1), "obliged to serve all and to administer to them the fragrant words of my Lord" (2EpFid 2).

Francis's use of the word "servant" as an identifying mark shows how closely he wished to imitate Christ's life of humility and humiliation. It did not imply, however, an unhealthy lack of self-esteem on his part, which, far from being a spiritual asset, would have been a sign of psychological disorder. If our conviction that we are "minors" is to be real, and therefore healthy, we must hold it solely in relation to Christ, who, although He was God, made Himself little for our sakes. In the Fraternity, none of us is a "minor," that is, lesser than any other brother. Such a situation would mean that there are class distinctions within the Fraternity, and that some brothers are greater, more important, than others. This would be in total opposition to the very nature and identity of a Fraternity, a brotherhood.

a) *"You are all brothers"*

The Fraternity, as such, is a group of equals which does not admit of any gradation in dignity among its members. Loving service of others within the Fraternity is reciprocal and so does not reduce anyone to the level of a servant,

a "minor," a person of lesser importance. That is why, even though Francis regarded himself as a minor and servant and encouraged others, especially the friars, to adopt the same attitude, he never used the term "servant" to refer to the relationships between members of the Fraternity but preferred the word "brother." He did so because it is the Fraternity as such, rather than the individual friars, which assumes the responsibility of service to society and the Church. Mutual service within the Fraternity is that of one brother to another, a relationship which also implies true minority (RegNB 5:14f).

The word "servant" in medieval Assisi had strong socio-political overtones and to have used it to describe the brotherly relationships within the Fraternity would have been to reproduce the very type of society which the Fraternity was trying to change. For the brothers were striving to provide a new kind of community life, of Gospel life, one in which everyone served and was served on a basis of equality.

b) "Ministers and servants"

There was a clear danger that this Gospel balance would be upset in the necessary arrangements for order in daily life. Only too often it happens that, when we have been given a position or entrusted with some responsibility, we tend to feel self-important and to take advantage of the situation to lord it over those who are answerable to us. Accordingly, Francis used the word "servant" in this context only when he spoke about "the ministers and servants" to whom he had confided the care of the brothers (RegNB 4:6). Both the friars and the ministers were to take care to remain responsive to the will of God (2EpFid 42). And so, his use of the term "ministers and servants" was not merely symbolic but was meant to be operative even in the most trying circumstances. The brothers were to be able to speak and deal with the ministers as masters dealt with their servants (RegNB 10:5f).

We must remember, too, that, when Francis used the word "master," he had in mind the all-powerful feudal lords. The reason he demanded this attitude on the part of the ministers was that the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve (RegNB 4:6) and gave us a practical example by washing His Apostles' feet (RegNB 6:3f). Therefore, anyone who wanted to be the greatest among the brothers had to become their servant (RegNB 5:11).

Although these theological reasons are persuasive, we are still naturally predisposed to misuse our offices and positions of responsibility and turn them to our own advantage. It was precisely to prevent this abuse that Francis gave the title "ministers and servants" to those entrusted with serving the friars in positions of authority.

c) The servants of God

The terminology which Francis employed to describe the relationships between the brothers stressed the equality between them all, friars and ministers alike. But he had a deeper reason for his action—to emphasize the sovereignty of God.

In half of his Admonitions, Francis used language which medieval ascetical theology usually applied to monks. But he turned it to his own purpose to say that the true servant of God was the brother who had understood that it is God alone who gives us existence, accompanies us on our way and waits for us at the end of life. Consequently, in strict terms, our individual activity is not essential to God's general plan of salvation. We are useless servants, not because we do our allotted tasks badly, but because, of ourselves and apart from God, we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5). Nor will His plan fail even though we do not co-operate with Him.

The servant should not even be concerned with the results of his work for the Kingdom but should leave it to God to make that work effective and have it stand as a witness. That is to say, the servant's role is to acknowledge God as the sole author of salvation. His duty is to contribute to doing God's will in this world with his prayer and his work: and he should do so without claiming any rights and in an attitude of simple humility. The servant is one who has chosen to dedicate himself totally to the service of God, making his life a parable of God's love for people.

4. A Fraternity without pretensions

As the model for his own Gospel life and that of his Fraternity, Francis took the image of Christ, the Suffering Servant, who accepted the cross out of love for us. Although the Fraternity had been born and lived in a society driven by ambition and the quest for power, the friars simply sought to walk the same lowly but ultimately glorious path of humility which Christ had travelled. They chose this road because it was the only way to escape the vicious circle in which so many people were caught and which prevented them from opening their hearts to God.

The early Fraternity provided a Gospel choice which contrasted sharply with the social values prevailing at the time. The young Fraternity's refusal to imitate the rest of society was not due to a juvenile urge to contradict for the sake of contradiction. Rather, the brothers were inspired by the basic values of the Kingdom. They saw that spreading the Gospel was the only way to give meaning to life and to provide a lasting foundation for human relationships. Therefore, they undertook to live the Gospel life and to offer it to others, not

in any proselytizing manner but simply so that those others could fill their own lives with meaning.

Because the friars were attempting to follow a new way of living the Gospel, people thought they were strange yet felt a certain admiration for them. Medieval society was essentially based on Christian values, so it was not surprising that people should esteem men who had chosen to follow as closely as possible in the footsteps of Christ. However, at the same time, the brothers' mode of life was a reproof to others. In fact, by taking the Gospel so seriously, the Franciscan Fraternity caused a crisis in a society which proclaimed that it was Christian but which had trimmed its faith to accommodate a system of values which Christ had denounced.

5. *"We were simple and subject to all"*

There is no doubt that the Church played an indispensable role in preserving and fostering culture during the Middle Ages. First the monasteries and later the cathedrals became sanctuaries in which knowledge and learning were maintained and protected against the ravages of the pagan invaders from the north. Yet while those who saved and made use of this knowledge did render a great service to humanity, they also had at their disposal a source of immense power. With it, they were able to evolve a dominant ideology and play a vital part in forming and controlling the organization of society. No wonder, then, that their prestige was high.

The Church treasury of culture and knowledge was put to good use in preparing candidates for ecclesiastical office. But, perhaps more significantly, all the key posts in medieval society were held by people who owed their education and cultural formation to the Church. Knowledge and culture, when conserved and stored, could be used as instruments to exert pressure and wield power. And so, Francis and his followers chose not to use "book-knowledge" as a means of spreading the Gospel but selected, instead, the culture of the common people to communicate their personal convictions and experience.

a) *"Simplicity"*

By describing himself and his brothers as being "simple (that is, uneducated) and subject to all" (Test 19), Francis was indirectly challenging the values of medieval society. Actually, not all the brothers lacked education since some were clerics and others cultured laymen. But their resolve to follow Christ in humility had led them to renounce their learning and not to use it in their work or in their apostolate because it carried with it an aura of prestige and power.

From the Rule of 1221, where it speaks about working and preaching, we gather that these two areas of the brothers' life had presented some difficulties, due to the lust for power and domination which is present in all of us and which, at the first opportunity, will become active and will even disguise itself as service to others and as zeal for the spread of the Kingdom. That is why Francis laid it down that:

None of the brothers should be administrators or managers in whatever place they are staying among others to serve or to work, nor should they be supervisors in the houses in which they serve; nor should they accept any office which might generate scandal or be harmful to their souls (cf. Mk 8:36); instead, they should be the lesser ones and subject to all who are in the same house (RegNB 7:1f).

In the new communes, the class of the *minores* were so noted for their education and uprightness that they were readily entrusted with posts of responsibility. But such positions conferred a certain prestige and could be a temptation to misuse one's powers, circumstances which were incompatible with the brothers' chosen life-style and would be a danger to their souls.

Those who used their learning to engage in preaching were threatened with another, more subtle kind of danger—the danger that they would utilize their theology to their own selfish advantage while ostensibly spreading the Gospel. Therefore, Francis advised:

All (of us) brothers must beware of all pride and vainglory. And let us keep ourselves from the wisdom of this world and the prudence of the flesh (Rom 8:6). For the spirit of the flesh desires and is most eager to have words, but (cares) little to carry them out And these are the ones of whom the Lord says: 'Truly I say to you: they have received their reward' (Mt 6:2). But the Spirit of the Lord wishes the flesh to be mortified and despised, worthless and rejected. And it strives for humility and patience, and the pure and simple and true peace of the spiritual person. And above all things it always longs for the divine fear and the divine wisdom and the divine love of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (RegNB 17:9-16).

Francis, then, believed that knowledge was an ambiguous possession that had to be used in such a way that it harmonized with the Fraternity's choice to be "lesser brothers." His Admonition 7 is a keenly observed description of the two effects, spiritual life or spiritual death, that knowledge could have on the friars, especially on those who were preachers:

Those religious are killed by the letter who do not wish to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but only wish to know (what) the words (are) and (how to) interpret them to others. And those are given life by the spirit of Sacred Scripture who do not refer to themselves any text which they know or seek to know, but, by word and example, return everything to the most high Lord God to Whom every good belongs (Adm 7:2-4).

b) *“Let us refer everything to ... God”*

The attitude of Franciscan minority applies even to Gospel poverty, that is, to having only what is needed to live with the indispensable minimum of human dignity. The numerous radical poverty movements which preceded and paralleled Francis's spiritual journey did not always avoid “appropriating” their own poverty and using it as a weapon against the abuses, mostly the *real* abuses, of a rich and powerful Church.

Francis recalls in his Testament that those who joined the early Fraternity

gave to the poor everything which they were capable of possessing, and they were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and short trousers. And we had no desire for anything more (Test 16f).

By embracing this poverty, they were able to live happily without superfluous comforts, and did not

look down or pass judgment on those people whom they (saw) wearing soft and colorful clothing and enjoying the choicest food and drink; instead, each (was to) criticize and despise himself (RegB 2:17).

Poverty, then, views things in their proper perspective, seeing that they are to be valued only to the extent that they help people to grow and fulfil themselves before God. And material things can fail in this purpose in two respects: first, when they are so abundant that they constitute wealth; or second, when there is so little of them that degrading poverty results.

Accordingly, Francis did not pride himself on his poverty but used things moderately. He encouraged others who had more than he had, to live unpretentiously and to show Christian charity by helping their less fortunate neighbors. For Francis, being a poor minor meant devoting himself to following the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, putting material things in their proper place and being content with having enough to live on (RegB 9:1).

c) *With no power or dominion over others*

We often try to make our instinct to dominate others appear as a willingness to help them. If we are to control this instinct, we must first acknowledge that it exists. Our choice of the Gospel life requires us and shows us how to serve the Kingdom by following the example of Christ's humility. That is why Francis insisted that none of the brothers should

hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves. For, as the Lord says in the Gospel: ‘The rulers of the peoples have power over them, and their leaders rule over them’ (Mt 20:25); it shall not be like this among the brothers (cf. Mt 20:26a). And whoever among them ‘wishes to become the greater should be their minister’ (cf. Mt 20:26b) and servant. And ‘whoever is the greater (among them) should become like the lesser’ (cf. Lk 22:26).

and yet the Fraternity had to have someone in authority to co-ordinate the brothers' work and to encourage them in their efforts. Consequently, Francis, ever faithful to the Gospel, proposed a new kind of authority whose only power was the ability to serve. The brothers renounced their own will in order to be able to do the will of God. This placed the whole Fraternity, ministers and subjects alike, in a situation of minority in which obedience was no longer a personal subjection that could lend itself to an abuse of power. Rather, their obedience consisted in a readiness to undertake whatever their Gospel plan of life demanded; and whenever the intervention of authority was necessary, it was always to be kept in check by the use of discernment.

In Francis's eyes, obedience did not concern the subject alone. If obedience was to be an expression of minority, neither the superior's nor the subject's will was to be suppressed in following in Christ's footsteps. The ministers were forbidden to abuse their authority by ordering something that was not part of the Fraternity's Gospel plan; and the subjects were not to insist on having their own way when they did not approve of the minister's reasonable directions (RegNB 5:2-6).

6. *"They shall appropriate to themselves nothing."*

The early Fraternity's challenging attitude of minority in leading the Gospel life extended even as far as ridding themselves, not only of material things, but also of those other more subtle possessions to which we cling in an effort to assert our individuality.

We often forget to

refer all good to ... God, and acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him for everything from whom all good things come ..., for every good is His, He who alone is good (RegNB 17:17f); (and) that nothing belongs to us except (our) vices and sins (RegNB 17:7).

From this it follows that a brother is truly a minor only

if the flesh does not pride itself when the Lord performs some good through him—since the flesh is always opposed to every good; rather, he considers himself the more worthless in his own eyes and esteems himself less than all others (Adm 12:1-3).

It is vitally important to accept humbly that all good comes from God and not from ourselves. We should not pride ourselves on the good which the Lord says or does through us any more than on the good He says and does through others (Adm 17:1). Francis warns us that

Whoever envies his brother the good which the Lord says or does in him ... envies the Most High Who says and does every good (Adm 8:3).

A brother understands minority only when he

esteems himself no better when he is praised and exalted by people than when he is considered worthless, simple and despicable; for what a man is before God, that he is and nothing more (Adm 19:1f).

Our greatness does not consist in our saying that we are great but in knowing that God is our refuge and support. Therefore, we refer everything back to the Creator because if we keep anything for ourselves, we are building on a foundation of sand which, sooner or later, will collapse under us and leave us at the mercy of the elements (Adm 18:2).

This attitude of humble minority may seem so abstract and generalized as to be unreal. Nevertheless, the first friars did have the insight and inspiration to live as true minors. But gradually this spirit became so diluted by the practicalities of daily life in the Fraternity that it finally disappeared.

Minority ceased to be the characteristic mark of the Franciscan life and was reduced, at best, to the virtue of humility, with the result that the friars acted just like the other non-monastic religious. For example, posts of responsibility in the Fraternity were originally regarded as being opportunities to serve the friars; but now they were seen as personal attainments to be used to dominate others and exercise power over them. This trend must have developed swiftly because, in one of his Admonitions, Francis pointed out that our Lord came to serve and not to be served. Then he declared that the true minister is one who glories in his office only as much as he would if they had given him the task of washing his brothers' feet. And if he is more disturbed about losing his office as superior than he would be about not being allowed to wash the brothers' feet, it means that he is coveting his post to the detriment of his vocation as a minor (Adm 4:1-4). So Francis was fearful for those brothers who had been placed in a high position by others and who did not wish to step down. Such friars had not succeeded in understanding that true minority, true service, has no ambition for exalted office and prefers always to be at the feet of the others (Adm 19:3f).

Another form of appropriation was that of clinging to the office of preacher as if it were a right. Francis was incisive on this point, too:

No minister or preacher should appropriate to himself the ministry of the brothers or the office of preaching, but he should set it aside without any protest whenever he is told (Adm 17:4).

He then went on to give Gospel reasons for his warning. Humility is the basic attitude of anyone who accepts the Kingdom joyfully because he or she knows that salvation comes from God alone and not from us. Accordingly, it would be absurd for us to be puffed up with pride and self-importance,

bragging about what we do or say. Such an attitude would be a sham because bitter experience has shown us the evil we are capable of and the good that we fail to do.

7. *Servants of all*

While minority is an attitude of mind inspired by our acceptance of our essential poverty, it does not consist simply in saying that we are nothing and have nothing of our own. Rather, it must be based on the reality of our humble relationships with God, with our brothers and with everyone else. This is so because values, or as we used to call them, virtues, are acquired and strengthened by exercising them. Therefore, although we are intellectually convinced of the importance of minority, that conviction is futile if it does not penetrate into the depths of our being where conviction becomes decision and belief becomes practice.

a) *Servants of God*

When we were speaking about the servants of God (cf. 3, c), we described the attribute of knowing that we are minors and therefore need God. The concept of "the servant of God" elaborated in the Middle Ages to express the monk's giving of himself to the service of God implies total self-abandonment to the divine will. Francis used this idea very sparingly (RegNB 7:12; RegB 5:4), except in his Admonitions, which have a monastic tone, possibly as the result of later editing by someone other than the Saint himself. But the biographers use "the servant of God" concept frequently: the official ones, Celano and St. Bonaventure, as well as the anonymous ones, often refer to Francis in that way. They employ the term in the traditional meaning but also extend it beyond its usual application to the consecrated religious life. The Three Companions describe how, during the family dispute, Francis's father summoned him before the consuls. But Francis refused to appear, maintaining that, since "by divine grace he had obtained freedom, he was the servant only of God and, therefore, no longer owed obedience to the civil authorities." And the authorities gave the same reason for not summoning him: "As Francis had entered the service of almighty God, he was no longer their subject" (L3S 19).

Still, even this canonical and legal aspect of the term "servant of God" does not exhaust the full significance which it had for Francis. Serving the Lord God in penance (RegNB 22; 26; 23:4) sums up the whole Gospel plan which Francis had for himself and his brothers. Even more, serving God in penance presupposed having ceased "bodily (to) serve the world" (2EpFid 65) and also summarized the life of Clare and her sisters when they had "made (themselves) daughters and servants of the most high King, the heavenly Father" (FormViv 1). They were following the example of Mary, "the daughter and servant of the

most high and supreme King and Father of heaven" (OffPass Ant 2; SalBVM 5), who placed herself unconditionally at the service of the Kingdom announced by her Son.

The biographers, especially Celano, interpret the early Fraternity's "serving the Lord in penance" in a community sense. It no longer meant practicing minority by placing themselves before God to serve Him but also by avoiding idleness and by being continually occupied with "holy things." As Celano relates it, when Francis was doubtful if he was truly a servant of God, he heard the voice of God saying: "Know that you are then truly my servant when you think, speak and do holy things" (2Cel 159). Yet, now and then, we catch glimpses of minority in all its freshness, as when the Legend (or Compilation) of Perugia depicts Francis as feeling that he is very small in respect of God, "His little servant" (LP 67); or when, in a moment of weakness due to his infirmities, he experienced God's mercy towards "His poor, unworthy servant" (LP 83).

From what we have said, it is clear that the servant is one who does the will of God without claiming any reward for himself. Docile to God's decisions, he accepts them confidently because he knows that they come from love and are for his good. Being a minor before God, then, does not mean taking a servile attitude because of fear and cowardice. Serving God is working to spread His Kingdom on earth and being humble co-workers in His liberating action.

b) Servants of the brothers

Service of the Kingdom is no airy abstraction that dilutes the Gospel meaning of service until it becomes little more than mere gestures and sentiments. The Kingdom consists in bringing God's saving love to people; consequently, spreading that Kingdom must also mean showing that same love to each other. But love must be effective and manifest itself in action, in service to those who are closest to us, that is, to the brothers of the Fraternity.

When we spoke about the minority aspect of obedience, we mentioned the nature of the relationship which should be maintained between the brothers, that there should be no question of some dominating the rest or asserting themselves by humiliating others (RegNB 5:9-12). The true Friar Minor shows his minority in Gospel values by helping his brothers to be faithful to their chosen life, knowing that such a service is mutual, that the other brothers are called to serve him by helping him to follow his own vocation (RegNB 5:13-15).

However, this help must do more than provide spiritual aid since maturity in Gospel values affects more than the soul, for the person as a whole must be freed to serve in freeing others. By the very nature of their office, the ministers

are already “serving” the friars; and the other brothers, too, must build up fraternity in loving service of each other.

The care of the sick (RegNB 10:1), helping those who are experiencing a crisis (EpMin 2) or have fallen into sin (EpMin 15), and working or begging to obtain food and clothing for the brothers (RegB 5:3), are all forms of practicing the minority of service that should shape and characterize the relationships within the Gospel Fraternity.

c) Serving everyone for God

The readiness to serve which marks the vocation of the Friar Minor is not confined to the Fraternity itself but reaches out to all the children of God and even to the whole of creation. When we believe that human history is “the history of salvation” because God is present in it and accompanies it, then we accept and, where possible, shape events so that the Kingdom of God may be effective and spread into peoples’ daily lives.

Yet this transformation can be brought about only if we are ready to change our instinct to dominate into a will to serve. For minority simply means offering our services to all humanity since “we must never desire to be over others; rather, we must be servants and subject ‘to every human creature for God’s sake’ (1Pet 2:13).” The duty of the servant of God is to serve everyone. We must show by our actions that we know what we are in the sight of God and where our duty lies. Only then shall we be true minors. Generally speaking, there are two ways in which we can put our minority into practice—by work and by the apostolate.

Work

The early Fraternity adopted work as a form of service to others, the one service they could offer out of their poverty. The only thing that was asked of the brothers in their work was that they should be faithful to their vocation, that is, that their efforts should reflect the Gospel life they had chosen, a life of minority, open to God’s will and at His service and that of their fellow human beings.

As a consequence, they were forbidden to accept posts of responsibility which would give them power over their co-workers. As “lesser brothers,” they had to present a clear image that would remove any possible doubts or ambiguities about their commitment to the Gospel life (RegNB 7:1). Francis knew from experience that we are by nature inclined to seek power over others. One of the best ways to avoid this danger is to remove the possibility of temptation by taking only the lowliest posts as a proof of our will to follow the Lord in poverty and humility.

The desire to be efficient in order to give "better service" can be simply an excuse for finding another way to exercise power. Discovering how a Friar Minor can be truly efficient demands Gospel standards, which are very different from those which society at large employs. The Franciscan idea of work, then, does not mean helping people from a position of power or privilege but rather serving them humbly and respectfully and trying to restore their human dignity when it is threatened or undermined.

The apostolate

The second facet of the Fraternity's service of minority is the apostolate or spreading the Gospel, which, in the Middle Ages, consisted almost exclusively of preaching. The principal and practically the only activity of the first brothers was proclaiming the Good News.

While this preaching remained unofficial and was done only as the opportunity arose, there were no difficulties about its being an exercise in minority. But when the Fraternity began to aspire to become part of the official, permanent apostolate, the office of preaching became a problem for Francis. This came about because the Fraternity's characteristic minority was threatened by the increased risk that the preachers would "appropriate to themselves" their ministry and would come to regard it as their right. Then, too, there was the danger that the preachers might go further and insist on exercising their ministry independently of the bishops and parish clergy.

The threat to the Fraternity's minority must have been a real one, judging by the number of times Francis insisted that the preachers should not pride themselves on their ministry or try to claim it as their own (RegNB 17:4-18). When preaching became a regular part of the Fraternity's work, the friars had to have theological training in order to be approved by the Minister General and be appointed by him to preach (RegB 9:2). Being thus trained, chosen and appointed could have tempted the preachers to consider themselves a cut above the other friars and to seek for ways to take advantage of their office. For that reason, Francis was fully justified in warning the appointed friars to be true to their way of life as minors and not to use their office of preacher to bolster their self-esteem but to exercise it as a service of minority to the people of God.

The other risk the preachers ran was that of seeking to be independent of the local ecclesiastical authorities, even though they did so only in order to be directly responsible to the Pope. We know Francis's thoughts on this particular endeavor from what he said in his Testament. There he declared that, even if he possessed as much wisdom as Solomon, he would not preach even in the parishes of unworthy priests without their permission (Test 7).

Francis's attitude in this matter is all the more surprising when we remember that, at this time, the Order had already made a place for itself in the official apostolate of the Church. Moreover, the preachers had obtained privileges from the Roman Curia which allowed them to exercise their apostolate more freely and to build their own churches (Test 25). The ability to obtain papal exemptions did give the Order a special luster, but it also posed a threat to the Fraternity's life of minority.

The biographers provide ample evidence of Francis's willingness, his eagerness even, to submit his preaching to the local Church authorities, the bishops and parish priests, although doing so curtailed his freedom. One example will be enough to allow us to understand his idea of what salvation in the Church really means. God takes the initiative in the salvation of souls, and our function is to serve Him and His people without any pretensions. Celano has Francis give a whole series of recommendations so that the friars would be able to exercise their ministry in humble minority:

We have been sent to help the clergy towards the salvation of souls ..., and (this) can be better obtained by peace with clerics than by disagreements with them Therefore, be subject to prelates, so that, in so far as you can help it, no jealousy will spring up. If you will be sons of peace, you will win the clergy and the people for the Lord, and the Lord judges this more acceptable than to win the people but scandalize the clergy. Hide their lapses, supply for their many defects; and when you have done this, be even more humble (2Cel 146).

8. Peacemakers

Serving the Kingdom and preaching the word of God cannot be accomplished by violent methods, since using such means would be a complete contradiction of the Gospel message. When Christ sent out His disciples to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, He reminded them that they were servants and were to carry out their task meekly and humbly. Besides travelling with only the barest necessities, they were to conduct themselves as men who possessed no other power or strength than that of the word of God.

Confronting unarmed the violence of others, they were to preach a peace which did not consist merely in the laying down of weapons but in the recognition of the Fatherhood of God as the basis for the brotherhood of man. Our First Parents' estrangement from God resulted in fratricidal hate; so peace will be restored only by our being reconciled first with Him who is the source of all peace.

Francis and his brothers learned from the Beatitudes that preaching the Gospel effectively demanded humility because God's humility in coming among us as a man was the very kernel of that Gospel. Preaching the Gospel

in humility also meant helping others to fulfill themselves by forming human relationships of peace and harmony.

Francis was born and grew up in the violent society of the Middle Ages. His actual taking part in a war had the effect of making him an apostle of peace after his conversion. His usual greeting: "Peace to this house" was a heartfelt wish that the peace of the Kingdom should become a reality in the world (RegNB 14:2; RegB 3:13; Test 23), so that he not only preached peace but did everything he could to spread it among people.

The biographers describe his work for peace in a society full of tensions, a society in which, before being a peacemaker, he had to show that he had peace in his own heart (L3S 58). In the form of an allegory, Celano tells how Francis cast out the devils of discord from the town of Arezzo (2Cel 108). Similarly, in Perugia the Saint warned the knights that, if they persisted in their plan to attack their neighbors, their own town would lapse into civil war (2Cel 37). But the most striking example of his work as a peacemaker was his reconciling Bishop Guido with the mayor of Assisi, for both of whom he composed the verse of his *Canticle of Brother Sun* concerning pardon (LP 44).

In trying to bring peace to a violent world, Francis was taking on an almost impossible task. Even when the conditions of justice necessary for a dignified life in society are present, even then relying on dialogue alone to bring peace means that peoples' initial distrust must first be allayed. Francis's encounter with the Sultan, Melek-el-Kamel, in the unfavorable context of the Crusades, shows how peace can blossom when we overcome our prejudices and speak directly as one individual to another. Although humanly speaking, this endeavor of Francis's was a failure, no one can deny that his attempt to make peace from a position of weakness and Gospel minority is a bench-mark for those of us who are trying to follow Christ, guided by Francis's experiences.

Conclusion

The attitude of minority which Francis proposes to us was the result of his keen perception of what the Gospel teaches. For him, living the Gospel life meant being ready to follow closely in the footsteps of Christ, who showed us God's "weakness" by coming on earth as a man and by dying on the cross to save us and to lead us to the Father. And Francis adopted this close following of Christ the Servant as the basic value for his Gospel Fraternity.

When we realize what is involved in following Christ as Francis did, we are frightened by its demands and we try to water it down, even reducing it to mere words. We need courage, audacity, to live as true minors and so restore to the Fraternity one of its principal identifying marks, the mark of minority. Present-day society, ambitious, competitive, hedonistic, will not forgive us any

more than contemporary society forgave Christ—or, for that matter, Francis—if we make our lives a parable of everything it rejects. That would mean that we have taken ourselves out of the modern world's sphere of influence, in which the basic principle is "Every man for himself," and in which respectful service of others is seen as a sign of weakness and stupidity.

If we wish to renew the Fraternity's Gospel challenge to the world, we must at all costs recover a true attitude of minority. Words alone are no longer sufficient. We have to back up our words with deeds so that our identity as "lesser brothers" is made abundantly clear to everyone.