

## The Spirituality of St. Francis: Holy Mother Church

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### Introduction

If we wish to understand the Gospel way of life which St. Francis lived and by which he expressed his faith, we must examine it in the context of the Church. "Holy Mother Church" was Francis's inspiration and sole objective, his beginning and his end. He was born into the Church, and it was under her guidance that he lived and died as he did. The Church was the mould which shaped him into the man whom we know today as St. Francis of Assisi and whom the whole Church acknowledges as our model in the following of Christ. Francis and his way of life can be understood only in relation to the Church, so much so that, if we wish to trace his spiritual journey, we must first try to find out what the Church meant to him and how he lived his life as a member of the Church.

### 1. The Problem

When we begin to examine Francis's relations with the Church of his day, we are immediately confronted with an obstacle which, while it is not insurmountable, does make it difficult to form an objective opinion. This obstacle is the problem of the various ways in which Francis's attitude towards the Church is interpreted in the light of the Franciscan sources, which, in turn, present their own problems.

Broadly speaking, there are two main positions. First, there are those authors who regard Francis as a "victim," a view expressed by Paul Sabatier in his well-known life of the Saint, in which he stressed Francis's "rebellious" attitude towards the institutional Church and his gradual "taming" by the Roman Curia to the point of forcing him to live within the narrow confines of the traditional religious life as dictated in the Church reform which Innocent III and, after him, Honorius III had undertaken.

According to Sabatier, Francis had tried to submit to this process even though it was completely different from what he really wanted to do. He strove to convince himself that what the authority of the Church decreed was

God's will for him and his Fraternity. Hence his obedience to the Church, which we find expressed mainly in his Admonitions and which overrode the convictions he had formed on the basis of his own experience. The tension which this self-abnegation cause in him continued to mount until, just before his death, it burst forth in the outpouring we now know as his Testament.

Sabatier interpreted Francis's words in the Testament: "And after the Lord gave me brothers, no one showed me what I should do..." to depict the Saint as a broad-minded man who was quite capable of following the Gospel in a way that was different from the traditional one, as a believer who preferred to obey the law of the spirit rather than the laws of the Church, as a "prophet" who denounced the laxity of the institutional Church but who had to submit to the tyrannical "priestcraft" of the clerics. According to Sabatier, Francis was a victim of the Church's absolute power, personified in Popes Innocent III and Honorius III.

In more recent times, other authors, especially Kajetan Esser OFM., have taken the view that Francis was simply "obedient," that is, completely submissive to the Church almost to the point of giving blind obedience to the hierarchy. These writers do not accept that there was ever any conflict between Francis's plans and those of the Curia because, they say, whenever a problem arose in the Fraternity, Francis went of his own accord to Rome to find the answer. And they base their position on the Franciscan sources, all of which attest clearly to Francis's special reverence for the hierarchical Church and which, therefore, utterly preclude the possibility of any confrontation between Francis and the Church.

In short, on the one hand the sources testify to Francis's devotion to the Church, while on the other they do not mention any conflict between him and the hierarchy. But this is the old problem of taking the sources as the sole authority and interpreting Francis from them *alone* and without taking any account of the historical context in which the events related occurred. While it is true that the sources describe only Francis's positive relationship with the Church, it is also true that the Roman officials entrusted with the organization of religious life in the Church did not and could not understand the Gospel form of life which Francis proposed to the Curia for approval. But this does not mean that we should accuse these officials of ill-will or a desire to crush Francis and his project so as to re-shape them into something that could be more easily assimilated into the existing structure of the Church. However, if something shameful like this did actually happen, it was at the behest of the intellectuals and the Provincials of the Fraternity itself rather than by command of the Curia. Be that as it may, our purpose here is not to apportion

blame but to enquire dispassionately into the real relationship between Francis and the Church.

## 2. *Francis's Charism and the Institutional Church*

The problem of the two different interpretations described above seems to be due to a one-dimensional, reductionist image of Francis. When we examine the matter more closely from the standpoint of the Church, we see that these two assessments of the Saint set up an irreducible opposition between two facets of his character which were really not antagonistic to each other—his reverent obedience to the Church as an institution, and his protest against the apathetic observance of the Gospel in the Church of his day.

As we might expect, Francis's attitude of obedience to, yet protest against, the contemporary Church caused great tension within him. Yet he was able to keep his balance, and we can get some idea of how he did this if we remember that he was an ordinary layman who had been unexpectedly converted to a life of penance. As such, he saw the Church as a whole, as a kind of family in which there were indeed contradictions but in which he had to stay in order to overcome those contradictions.

The Church had been like a mother to him, nourishing and sheltering him all his life. He was continually aware of God's personal love for him, a love he wished to share with others. Almost without knowing it, he had received from the Church the faith, the sacraments and Christian practices, elements which now formed that familiar climate outside of which it would be impossible for him to understand himself and everything around him. That is to say, he lived and moved and breathed in the atmosphere of the Church, which awoke in him a deep longing to follow the Christ of the Gospel on His way to the Father.

The Church in Assisi had been fundamental in helping the citizens to come to a realization of their cultural and religious identity as a community. It was the Church that had fostered the development of interpersonal relationships between the citizens until they were able to think of themselves as a unitary group, as "we." The *Legends of the Holy Martyrs*, especially that of St. Rufino, describe the gathering of the first Christians around their bishops. Devotion to St. Rufino and his cathedral was the nucleus around which the new town grew to become a commune, a city-state.

Rufino, the holy bishop of Assisi, became the symbol that united the town in its fight against its feudal oppressors, so that the saintly protector of the commune was pictured as being brave and valiant in war, and it was this combination of holiness and valor in battle that inspired the citizens of Assisi to wage war with Perugia, the German Emperor, the lords of the castles and

even their own bishop, when, in true feudal fashion, these tried to rob them of St. Rufino as the symbol of their town and their new commune.

In 1140, John of Gubbio began the construction of the new cathedral on the site of the old one. The architecture and the carvings on the facade of the new building reflected the fiery, combative spirit of the citizens of Assisi. The new cathedral was the nerve-center of the city, the place where the people's army was mobilized, where the courts sat and the parliament was convened, as well as the museum in which the trophies of military victories were on display.

It was as a family of faith united under its bishops that Assisi had begun and had grown both as a city and as a commune. This historical background gave Francis a vision of the Church such that, no matter how problematic and painful the institutional element in it might turn out to be at times, he was not deterred from putting into practice his decision to follow Christ in poverty and humility. From this we can deduce that, for Francis, the Church, even as a structured institution, was something which formed part of his origins and which he could not regard as a purely external society that had nothing to do with him. Instead, he saw the Church as a loving family into which he had been born and which had cared for and sustained him and in which he hoped to realize his Gospel plans.

Naturally, Francis knew that there was really more to the Church than this, that there was much in her that was beyond his own personal knowledge and experience. He was aware that her history stretched far back beyond his ken and that, without his being fully conscious of it, he had been formed by her moral and doctrinal teachings, her religious and even her political power, that is to say, by the weighty, clerical structure in which it was often difficult to discern the glory and sanctifying presence of the Lord.

The Church of Innocent III had reached her highest level of power and, as a consequence, her lowest ebb of fidelity to the Gospel. She was a Church that aped the Empire and the great feudal lords. More than half the land in Europe belonged to clerical benefices; and the monasteries, instead of aligning themselves with the poor, had joined in the race for influence and wealth.

Given the temper of the times, it is not surprising to find that, as Jacques de Vitry said, the Church was more intent on attending to worldly affairs than on preaching the Gospel to the new "middle" social class which was just then emerging. This failure of the clerics to spread the Good News led to the appearance of Gospel movements, most of which were led by lay people who, sincerely but ingenuously, tried to make up for what the clergy seemed unable or unwilling to do.

Before the accession of Innocent III to the papal throne, the bishops and the Roman Curia could not or did not want to guide and supervise the



contemporary upsurge of Gospel renewal. As a result, the new groups ended up by confronting the official Church and defending a Gospel way of life that did not need a Church which did not seem in the least concerned about reviving the Gospel form of life which the groups were demanding.

Francis, too, was caught up in this enthusiasm for Gospel poverty, but his attitude differed radically from that of other leaders of movements, the majority of whom preferred to resist Rome's prescriptions and disobeyed them in order to give what they saw as greater obedience to God. Yet perhaps because Francis's nearness to Rome gave him a clearer image of the Church as a family, he preferred to "confront" her from within by adopting a type of Gospel life which, unlike her, possessed neither power nor wealth, and which, therefore, stood as a living protest against the anti-Gospel forces that were then shaping the Church.

### I. Francis and the Hierarchy

From his standpoint as a typical medieval layman, Francis saw the Church primarily as a structured institution. For him, the Church was the whole hierarchical edifice whose ministers, the clergy of various ranks, provided the means of salvation. We should not be surprised, then, to find in his writings such a "vertical" vision of the Church as the source of salvation, because it was the clergy alone who made it possible for the faithful to partake in the mystery of Christ by means of the sacraments and the word of God.

#### 1. *The Roman Curia*

The Church in Rome was a model of the institutional structure as a whole. And Francis's relations with Rome grew closer as his Fraternity was being incorporated into the general framework of the reform of the religious life which the Pope was then implementing. His attitude to the Curia was dictated by his need to negotiate with it in his capacity as the founder and head of the new Franciscan group. And, naturally, approval of his way of life made for more realistic communications between him, as a loyal son of the Church, and the Pope and Cardinals who ruled the Church.

Still, we must not exaggerate Francis's power to sway the Curia. Disappointing as it may be for us to accept, Francis did not have enough influence in the institutional Church to affect her decisions. The ecclesiastical powers, the Pope and the Cardinals of the Curia, had their own plans for incorporating into the Church any new movement that appeared in the Christian world.

Until the time of Innocent III, the religious life had faithfully followed the pattern laid down in canonical tradition. There was, therefore, a juridical model, whose salient feature was stability in the monastic sense, to which all the new religious Orders had to conform, so that any new movement which

was not prepared to follow tradition had no place in the religious life of the Church.

Innocent III tried to find an acceptable solution to the problem posed by some of the new groups. On the one hand, he put into practice his policy of refusing to approve any new Order that would not accept one or other of the traditional Rules, a principle laid down in Canon 13 of the Fourth Lateran Council:

Lest an excessive diversity of religious Rules and foundations should lead to serious confusion in God's Church, we absolutely forbid the foundation of new religious Orders in the future; and whoever wishes to join a religious Order must choose one of those already approved. Similarly, those who wish to found a religious house in the future must adopt the Rule and institution of one of those already approved. We also forbid anyone to presume to be a monk of more than one monastery, nor may any abbot preside over several monasteries.

On the other hand, Innocent proved his sensitivity towards the new Gospel movements by making a clear distinction between the heretical and the orthodox ones and by accepting the orthodox movements into the Church by approving each one's "Propositum" or form of life. Yet papal approval of these groups, which were mostly lay organizations, did not make them religious Orders, and this allowed them greater freedom when they came to put their own particular charism into practice.

The presentation and oral approval of the Franciscan way of life in 1210 were part of this general acceptance of Gospel movements by Innocent III. In 1201, he had approved the Humiliati; in 1208, the Poor Catholics of Durandus of Huesca; in 1210, the Poor Lombards of Bernard Prim; and in 1212, the Penitents, who were connected with the Poor Lombards.

Honorius III, who was less committed to the Church's juridical structures than was Innocent, broadened the latter's policy in two respects. He modified the Fourth Lateran Council's total ban on the approval of new Orders with their own special Rules, and he extended the concept of religious life beyond the traditional canonical definition.

The Curia, of which Honorius III was a member before being elected Pope, did not subscribe completely to Innocent III's personal policy for reform of the religious life. In fact, the Fourth Lateran Council, which enshrined Innocent's thinking on the subject, had scarcely closed when the new Pope, Honorius III, changed its prescriptions in practice and approved new Orders, such as the Carmelites, with their own Rules.

This adaptation of religious life to the conditions in contemporary society was undertaken with a view to solving the problems which the Church was then facing. Inevitably, this process of adaptation broadened the traditional

concept of religious life, making that life more open and more active in the apostolate. This change of emphasis, however, did not affect the monastic form of life. The foundation of the canons regular, the military and hospitaller Orders and similar groups was evidence of the intent to solve the pastoral and preaching difficulties which were besetting the Church towards the end of the twelfth century. Even the Cistercians, who were identified with the return to the purest traditional monasticism, did not hesitate to answer the Pope's call to undertake the crusade against the Albigensians.

However, although the Cistercians were led in this mission by none other than St. Bernard himself, they failed, and their failure was one of the reasons why Innocent III had come to favour the approval of the emerging Gospel groups, including the Dominicans, as a solution to the problem of heresy. The only conditions laid down for a group to be approved were unwavering fidelity to the Church at Rome and a system of internal laws administered by an authority who was responsible for over-all control of the group. This was the policy of the Curia when Francis applied for approval for his way of life, with the consequence that his relations with the Papacy were not strained, despite the tensions which almost inevitably arose later, when he began putting his plans into practice.

#### *a) Francis and the Pope*

In the mind of the ordinary medieval lay person, the figure of the Pope was surrounded with an aura of reverent awe and a cloud of mystery. So, when Francis, as the founder and leader of a new religious group, had to approach the Pontiff, he must have done so with great trepidation. Francis's biographers make much of this attitude of mind: they describe his meetings with the Pope in terms of the quasi-miraculous and imbue them with much of the importance which the Order only later acquired in the Church. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Roman Curia was not nearly as large and as complex as it came to be in later times. Yet even then it was a structured organization, presided over by the Pope, who could be approached only by passing through a bureaucratic filtering system in which the Cardinals played an important part.

There is plenty of proof that Francis succeeded in making his way up through this system to meet Innocent III in person. In his Testament, he tells us that, when he had the way of life which "the Most High Himself revealed to (him)... written down simply and in a few words..., the Lord Pope confirmed it for (him)" (Test 15). Later, his biographers amplified this sparse account into an elaborate scenario that intentionally went far beyond what really happened (1Cel 32f; 2Cel 16f; LM III 8-10; L3S 46-49).

The result of this audience with the Pope was the oral approval of the Franciscan way of life, an event which was significant in itself but which was even more important because it meant that the Fraternity was thereby accepted as an Order with its own place in the apostolate of the Church and a Rule which it could present for full legal acceptance. This initial proof of the Pope's trust was sufficient to allow Francis to go forward, secure in the knowledge that his way of life was what God wanted and not just his own personal illusion. We have no proof that he had any other contacts with Innocent III. The Pope died in 1216 while on a visit to Perugia, and it is possible that this visit brought together for the last time these two men who, although they were so different from each other in so many ways, yet did their best to serve the Church by agreeing on the establishment of a new Fraternity in which it would be possible to "live according to the form of the Holy Gospel." Francis had no dealings with the new Pope, Honorius III, until some years later. With the division of the Fraternity into Provinces at the Chapter of 1217, the brothers had to undertake new missions, some of which were unsuccessful and from which they had to withdraw. At the Chapter of 1219, at which Cardinal Hugolino was present, the brothers told of their disastrous experiences in these failed missions. When the Chapter ended, the Cardinal presented Francis to the Pope, Honorius III, who gave him the bull *Cum dilecti filii*, addressed to the bishops of the whole world, vouching for the Fraternity's loyalty to the Church and requesting that they be received with kindness (L3S 62).

While Francis was on a missionary journey in Syria, a crisis arose in the Fraternity which brought about another meeting between the Saint and the Pope. When Francis heard that two Vicars had met in Chapter with some of the "senior" brothers to reorganize some features of the Fraternity, he returned from Syria and went to the Curia to resolve the problem and to request the Pope to put Hugolino officially in charge of the Fraternity as Cardinal Protector (1Cel 100; 2Cel 25; L3S 65).

Those, then, were the circumstances which led to Francis's contacts with the two Popes whom he had to consult on various matters concerning the Fraternity. While the differences in outlook and in areas of responsibility between him and the two Pontiffs must have made negotiations concerning the Fraternity very difficult, it does not seem that those negotiations were conducted in a strained atmosphere, as Sabatier and his followers would have us believe. In Jordan of Giano's *Chronicle*, (n.14), we read of Francis's sensitive familiarity with Pope Honorius on the occasion of his visit to Rome to seek solutions to the crisis in the Fraternity. Jordan tells us that the Saint was so unwilling to intrude on the Lord Pope that he slept in the porch of the papal



palace so as to be sure to catch the Pontiff whenever he might emerge. When at last Honorius did come out, Francis bowed to him and said: "Holy Father, may God give you peace!" to which the Pope replied: "May God bless you, my son!"

b) *The Cardinal Protector*

It was only by going through the normal bureaucratic formalities of the Curia that Francis was able to appear before the Pope in 1210 to have his way of life approved. Guido, Bishop of Assisi, had presented him to Cardinal John of St. Paul, who had worked closely with Innocent III in his fight against the heretics and in his plan to bring the lay religious movements into the service of the Church. As Cardinal Penitentiary, John had the legal power necessary to help Francis to incorporate his group into the universal Church.

John of St. Paul was skilled in the art of papal politics and advised Francis to join one of the traditional Orders. But the Saint could not follow his patron's advice because he was convinced that the Lord had showed him that he should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel. When the Cardinal saw Francis's firmness of purpose, he promised to present his request to Pope Innocent (1 Cel 33; L3S 47ff).

But John of St. Paul died before the Fourth Lateran Council was convened in 1215. An important group of cardinals and bishops wanted to forbid the foundation of new religious Orders, and, as we saw, they in fact succeeded in doing so (cf. Can. 13 of the Council). Francis then had to look for new support in his struggle to have his way of life incorporated legally into the Church; and he found that support in the same group of cardinals who had helped him in 1210. We do not know if Hugolino had been one of that group since the sources do not mention his collaboration with Francis until his meeting with the Saint in Florence in 1217.

Hugolino of Ostia had received his diplomatic training while working in the Curia and carrying out important international tasks for Innocent III, who had employed him as a trusted emissary in delicate diplomatic missions. He kept this position of trust under Innocent's successor, Honorius III, with whom he worked in putting into effect the papal policy of reforming religious life and other important matters.

Francis's biographers differ in their assessment of Hugolino. In his *First Life* of Francis, Celano describes Hugolino's dealings with the Saint as friendly and helpful, a view which, however, is not echoed in the later sources. Almost all the sources describe their meeting in Florence, when Hugolino forbade Francis to continue his journey to France. But only the Legend of the Three Companions and Anonymous of Perugia record Hugolino's mediation with

the Pope to obtain approval of the Rule and his appointment as Cardinal Protector. The other sources simply describe Hugolino as a benevolent admirer of Francis, but one who played no part in the development of the Fraternity.

These divergent assessments of the Cardinal cause students of Franciscanism to ask who was the first to suggest Hugolino's appointment as Protector of the infant Order. Did Francis ask for Hugolino because he would be able to help the Fraternity to organize itself within the Church and in fidelity to the Gospel way of life? Or, instead, did the very Curia itself impose the Cardinal as Protector as a condition for the Fraternity's being accepted into the institutional Church?

The sources show indecision here, too. Giano (*Chron.* 14) and Celano (2Cel 25) say that Francis himself asked the Pope for a Cardinal who could substitute for him when necessary, whom he could consult when the need arose and who would listen to him and help him solve his own problems and those of the Fraternity. But, according to the Legend of the Three Companions, it was Hugolino himself who offered to advise, help and protect the brothers (L3S 61). Yet despite these differences, the two versions can be reconciled. Francis's first personal contact with Hugolino could have developed gradually from mutual esteem into a permanent official appointment (cf. Legend of the Three Companions).

Still, in my opinion, this is not the real problem but rather was it Hugolino, who, as the Curia's representative, directed the development of the Fraternity, channelling it towards and placing it within the programme which Rome had for organizing the new religious movements? Or was it, instead, the Ministers and intellectuals of the Order who, with the approval of the Curia, forced the development of the Fraternity in the direction of the more organized forms of the religious life?

The office of Cardinal Protector already had a precedent, albeit an informal one, in the case of the Poor Catholics; their Protector's function was to defend them before the regional hierarchies and to oversee their orthodoxy. In the case of the Fraternity, however, the Cardinal was not only its protector who defended it against prelates but was also, in the strict sense, "the governor ... and corrector of (the) fraternity" (RegB XII 3).

Apparently, Hugolino had no specific plan for the transformation of the Fraternity. Instead, the various initiatives came from the "senior" brothers in the Order, to whom Hugolino lent his support because their ideas followed the same lines as his own and did not seem to be antagonistic to those of Francis. The only matters in which Hugolino collaborated systematically were the consolidation of the structure of the Order and the juridical organization

of obedience—elements, however, which were not original to the Protector but were part of the Curia's own policy, which was why Francis had already adopted them in principle.

But Hugolino, besides being a friend of Francis and an admirer of the Fraternity, was also a Cardinal of the Curia and, as such, conscious of his responsibility to ensure the smooth functioning of the "machinery" of the Church. We should not be surprised, then, to find him trying to help Francis and the brothers in arranging details so that their movement would not go astray but would be able to fit into the structure of religious life in the Church. Francis must have understood and accepted the need for this guidance even though it did require a re-interpretation of his original plans.

While Francis and Hugolino had to deal with each other on a bureaucratic level, they were also good friends, and their friendship allowed them to enrich each other without either having to sacrifice his deepest convictions, although each did have to give in on many details of personal preference (LM VII 7; 2Cel 148). Francis saw Hugolino both as a friend and as someone who could assist him in the sometimes painful task of incorporating into the Church the way of Gospel life which the Lord had inspired him to follow. And Hugolino admired in Francis the saint who yearned to put into practice in his own life and in that of his Fraternity the Gospel which the Curia was so diligently striving to protect with its canonical legislation. Both Francis and Hugolino were endeavoring to foster the Gospel life in the Church, but each had to modify his ideas so that the Fraternity could continue to live that life within the structure of the Church.

## 2. The Bishops

The bishops were another important section of the hierarchy with whom Francis had to deal. His attitude towards them was the one common among the ordinary people of the time, for whom the bishops' authority was unquestionable. In addition, there was the canonical legal system which gave the bishops almost absolute power in ruling their dioceses (L3S 19).

In spite of the differences in temperament between Francis and Guido, the Bishop of Assisi, their relations with each other seem to have been smooth and without conflict of any kind. Even more than that, the biographers state that, in difficult moments, when Francis had to decide his future, the bishop was at his side, helping him to clarify his thoughts and attain his purpose. More or less explicitly, the *Legend of the Three Companions* (L3S 20), as well as Thomas of Celano (1Cel 15), tend to emphasize the spiritual aid which Guido gave Francis. Still, the bishop's forceful character and his acute consciousness of his own dignity make us wonder how deep was his understanding of Francis's

Gospel project, so that his help in Francis's spiritual growth may not have been fully what the Saint needed.

This difficult friendship continued all during Francis's life, with Guido visiting him often at the Portiuncula (1Cel 100), having him as a guest in his palace, caring for him when he was sick (1Cel 108) and, finally, weeping as bitterly at his death as if at his own father's (2Cel 220).

Francis treated all the other bishops with the same deference he showed the Bishop of Assisi, and whenever he arrived at a city, he went straight to see the bishop of the place because he regarded each one as the natural ruler of his diocese (1Cel 75). That is why, when sending the brothers throughout the Church's territory, he was always careful to do what the bishops wanted. But this did not sit well with the Ministers of the Fraternity. It did, however, please the Curia, especially when the Fraternity had become an effective instrument of the apostolate (AnPer 45). In his *Chronicle* (nn.3-4), Jordan of Giano gives a humorous yet dramatic account of the harsh treatment endured by the brothers on their first missionary journeys through Europe in 1219. Their appearance and their way of life caused them to be suspected of heresy, not only by the people at large but, more ominously, by the bishops, too.

This attitude of suspicion was understandable because Rome had been urging all the bishops to be ever watchful lest the seeds of heresy should be sown among their people. This was one reason for the bishops' mistrust of the brothers on the one hand, and on the other hand for the brothers' anxiety to seek the Curia's endorsement so that they could go about their ministry unhindered. The brothers got their desired endorsement in the various papal bulls which Honorius III gave them through Hugolino, assuring all the bishops that the Fraternity was loyal to the Church and that it had been approved by the Curia and requesting them not to impede the brothers' apostolate in any way (*Cum dilecti filii*, June 11, 1219; *Pro dilectis filiis*, May 29, 1220).

Francis, however, did not favour this approach but preferred to win over the bishops by the example of the way he and his brothers followed Christ in humility even though such a course of action might lead to their being misunderstood or even persecuted and banished. His prohibition to seek privileges from the Curia (Test 25) shows that he retained this attitude towards the bishops up to the very end of his life even though it might curtail his efforts to spread the Gospel (2Cel 147).

### 3. Priests

Francis's relations with the clergy grew in depth as his conversion progressed. From the respect for priests which was natural to him, as it was to every medieval lay person, he went on to seek clerical protection and then



gradually came to a fuller appreciation of priests as those who make possible Christ's sacramental presence among us.

His unconditional reverence for priests was motivated also by his desire for orthodoxy in contrast to the popular religious movements which were marked by an aggressive anticlericalism. The leaders of these movements reacted against the prevailing acceptance of priests as the one, indispensable source of pastoral and sacramental power: they denigrated and belittled the priesthood, especially in the case of those wretched clerics who were leading lives unworthy of the dignity of their office.

Francis strove to counteract this dangerous trend among the heretics of going from despising individual priests to denying the power of the priesthood in general. Thus he wrote in his *Second Letter to the Faithful* that:

We must ... venerate and show respect for the clergy, not so much for them personally, if they are sinners, but by reason of their office and their administration of the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which the clergy pronounce, proclaim and minister (2EpFid 33).

This power and function exempt them from any contemptuous judgement,

... for even though they may be sinners, nonetheless no one is to judge them since the Lord alone reserves judgement on them to Himself. For inasmuch as their ministry is greater in that it concerns the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ ..., so those who sin against them commit a greater sin than (if they sinned) against all other people in the world (Adm 26).

Within the Fraternity itself, Francis reduced the use and prestige of authority to a minimum, but he did not extend this attitude to the hierarchy of the Church, which, for him, was always sacred and therefore untouchable. The resolute stance of Francis and his brothers in this matter must surely have influenced the Curia's special solicitude to preserve the Fraternity from the danger of the anticlericalism which was so characteristic of the radical poverty movements.

Above all else, Francis remained firm in his respect for the clergy. His reverence for "their order and their office and government" (RegNB XIX 3) was so great that he would not preach against their will, no matter how sinful and ignorant they might be. His reason was that he saw "the Son of God in them and they (were) his masters" because they received and administered to others the Most High Son of God in the bread and wine and word" (Test 7-13).

The biographers provided abundant proof of this attitude of Francis partly because they wanted to vindicate the clericalization of the Fraternity and partly because it showed how the first brothers, as wandering laymen, had to prove their loyalty to the Church through their reverence for priests.

In his sermons, Francis strove to inspire the people with his own esteem for the clergy so that they could express their faith in the Church at Rome by following his example. But, most of all, it was the brothers whom he wished to imbue with his own deep conviction (AnPer 37; L3S 57). In terms that we today may find quaintly fulsome, the sources constantly refer to the first brothers' unquestioning trust in and obedience to the clergy (L3S 59; 1Cel 46).

## II. Francis and the Mystery of the Church

Francis's familiarity with the hierarchical structure of the Church did not prevent him from seeing beyond its rigid and sometimes repellent outward appearance to the warm, inner heart that animated and motivated it—the saving presence of God. That Church, through its hierarchy, had taught him and accompanied him in his discovery that the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was at the beginning of everything, lovingly shaping the whole of creation, especially humanity, made in God's image and likeness (RegNB XXIII 1).

The Triune God took pity on our weakness, the result of our sin of betrayal, and joined us in our poverty by becoming man in the Son, born of the Virgin Mary, and opening to us the way to freedom by His life and death (RegNB XXIII 2f).

The family of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not only there at our beginning and with us along the way but also awaits us at the end, relieving our fatigue and fulfilling our destiny as humans (RegNB XXIII 4). Francis perceived this saving action of the Trinity as the mystery enshrined in the Church, whose praises we can only stammer and whose earthly structure is a sacrament of liberation for all those who are called to form in her the people of God.

### 1. *Temple of the Trinity*

While it is true that Francis, not being a theologian, did not think out a formal theology of the Church, he did draw an analogy between Mary and the Church which helps us to see how he regarded the saving mystery of the Trinity in relation to our Lady and the Church.

In the Antiphon of the Holy Virgin which he wrote in his Office of the Passion, he praises Mary for her closeness to the Trinity, calling her the daughter of the heavenly Father, the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ and the spouse of the Holy Spirit. In Mary is made visible God's invisible goodness to us; in her we can touch the intangible mercy which God offers us as a gift. But this mystery does not end with Mary. In his Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Francis draws the analogy between Mary and the Church. In calling her

"the virgin made church," he is clearly referring to her being at God's disposal so that the Son of God could take flesh in her womb; and he also brings out her dignity as an anticipatory image of the Church. That is to say, the Church is called to be what Mary already is, the dwelling place of the Trinity, where God's grace is made present to humanity.

Most likely, Francis had the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38) in mind when he wrote the Salutation because, in it, he describes Mary as becoming the temple of the Holy Spirit when she received the Son of the Father into her womb. This positive act of acceptance by Mary allowed Francis to picture her as a church, a tabernacle containing the Lord. After all, he *was* a medieval layman, accustomed to thinking in vivid images about church doctrine, especially the doctrine of the Incarnation. Mary, then, had been chosen by the Father and consecrated by the presence of the Son through the Holy Spirit, images which recall the liturgical consecration of a church. In Mary, the fullness of grace and all goodness are seen to dwell, as the Real Presence is found in the tabernacles of our churches.

Mary's consent to having the Son take flesh in her womb transformed her into the palace, the tabernacle, the dwelling place and the "robe" of God—four metaphors that describe Mary's welcoming within her the visible presence of the invisible mystery of God. As a humble earthen vessel, she consented to being filled with the grace of the Almighty; she offered herself to be God's home and abode among us.

The words which Francis sang about Mary, he also applied analogically to the Church, since the Church was also chosen by the Father and consecrated by the presence of the Son through the Spirit. In the Church, too, are found the fullness of grace and all goodness. Similarly, the Church is the palace, the tabernacle, the home and the "robe" of God because it bears within it the Lord and His Gospel. That is why the dignity of the Church rests, not so much in its hierarchical structure, as in its being the place where humanity meets the Triune God, despite any failure on the part of the clergy to live up to their Gospel commitments.

The symbolism of the Church inhabited by the Trinity which Francis applied to Mary was no mere metaphor unconnected with the saving mystery of God. The Church is truly the temple of the Trinity because it is made up of believers in whom the Trinity dwells. Thus, in his Second Letter to the Faithful, Francis promises them that, if they live according to their Gospel faith, the Spirit of the Lord will come to rest on them and

will make His home and dwelling among them. They will be children of the heavenly Father, whose work they do. And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined

to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are brothers when we do the will of His Father Who is in heaven. (We are) mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to Him through (His) holy manner of working, which should shine before others as an example (2EpFid 48-53).

The Church's loving acceptance of the indwelling of the Three Divine Persons is what makes it the true temple of the Trinity, the place where it is possible to live out the saving mystery of God. This is so because there, made present and tangible in a sacramental form, we can find the immense love which binds together the family of the Trinity and flows out to humanity. In describing this experience, Francis can express himself only in words of praise, acknowledging how glorious it is to have a Father, a Spouse and a Brother, the Triune God, who has already done, is doing and will continue to do so much for us (2EpFid 54-56).

## 2. *The People of God*

Because the saving presence of the Trinity is a sharing of love, it does not lead to a divisive individualism but rather to a loving community. Francis saw the Church as such a community, a vision which had been set before him all his life in sermons and in the religious art of cathedrals and churches, a vision of the Church as a vast multitude in heaven and on earth, united in praising the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (RegNB XXIII 6f).

At the head of the "Church Triumphant" stands the Virgin Mary, after whom come in due order of rank "Blessed Michael, Gabriel and Raphael and all the blessed choirs of seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, principalities, powers, virtues, angels, archangels ...." Then there are, as if portrayed on the broad facade of a cathedral, the figures of the Old and New Testaments, represented by "blessed John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, Peter, Paul, and the blessed patriarchs, prophets, the Innocents, apostles, evangelists, disciples," followed by the three groups into which the early Church divided the saints, the "martyrs, confessors, virgins"; and, finally, there are the Old Testament prophets, "the blessed Elijah and Henoch and all the saints who were, who will be and who are" (RegNB XXIII 6).

This countless throng of men and women had walked the path of faith, and now, in heaven, they live in that light and love which, while they were pilgrims here below, had drawn them on, and which, despite many perplexities and reverses, they had striven to reach. This heavenly multitude, this invisible Church in glory, is the figure and model of the visible, pilgrim Church on earth.

This pilgrim Church is made up of all those who wish to serve the Lord in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, that immense congregation of



priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, lectors, porters and all the clerics, all religious men and all religious women, all lay brothers and youths, the poor and the needy, kings and princes, workers and farmers, servants and masters, all virgins and continent and married women, all lay people, men and women, all children, adolescents, the young and the old, the healthy and the sick, all the small and the great, all peoples, races, tribes, and tongues, all nations and all peoples everywhere on earth.... (RegNB XXIII 7).

For Francis, that, too, was the Church, that immense assembly which includes all and excludes none, whose wide embrace has room for everyone and in which all can find grace and merciful forgiveness. This, Francis's universal vision of the People of God, combined with his mystical vision described above, allows us to put in their proper place the different levels at which he perceived the Church.

### III. The Church, Haven of Salvation

Convinced as Francis was that the Church was a haven of salvation, he was even more convinced that "Outside the Church, there is no salvation." For him, the Church was the only haven of salvation. While he was well aware of the sins which members of the Church committed, and while he regarded himself as the worst sinner of all, he was even more keenly conscious of God's sanctifying presence in the Church. He accepted the ancient Fathers' paradoxical description of the Church as "the chaste harlot" and unhesitatingly chose to remain her faithful son because he needed to experience the Lord's grace-giving presence and forgiveness. Therefore, only in the Church was he able to live his faith profoundly by following Christ on the way of the Gospel because the True Word is heard only in the Church and only she offers the possibility of meeting God who frees us mortals from sin.

#### 1. *Jesus, Present in the Church*

During his spiritual journey, Francis was acutely aware of God's presence, something which is perhaps normal in every mystic, but in his case that presence seems to have been visible, palpable, physical. From the time of his experience at Spoleto, when the Lord's visit began his process of conversion and enlightenment, his whole spiritual journey was to be a continuous search for the Absolute. He would try to perceive the invisible presence of God in visible forms that would assuage his hunger for salvation. His Testament is an example of this desire to visualize the mystery of the Lord's presence in the Church. From first looking for that presence in dilapidated little churches, he went on to concentrate on the sacramental presence of God which the priests made possible by the words of consecration.

He himself confessed that, at the beginning of his conversion,

... the Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would simply pray and speak in this way: '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).

The hermit-like life he led at the beginning of his conversion and the silence of his writings, including the two Rules, on contemporary Eucharistic practices, could lead us to the mistaken conclusion that the presence of God which he cultivated was not exactly the sacramental presence. Such a position, however, is untenable because the sources in general bear witness to the Saint's devotion to and even obsession with the sacramental presence of Christ.

He declared: "Let us all firmly realize that no one can be saved except through the holy words and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ ...." (2EpFid 34). This sacramental presence of Christ in the Church is a continuation in time of the salvation offered by the Trinity through the Incarnation of the Son of the Father by the operation of the Holy Spirit. In his first Admonition, where he speaks at length of the Body of Christ, he describes God's humble drawing near to us and promising to be with us always:

See, daily He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin; daily He comes to us in a humble form; daily He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest. And as He appeared to the holy apostles in true flesh, so now He reveals Himself to us in the sacred bread. And as they saw only His flesh by means of their bodily sight, yet believed Him to be God as they contemplated Him with the eyes of faith, so, as we see bread and wine with (our) bodily eyes, we, too, are to see and firmly believe them to be His most holy Body and Blood living and true. And in this way the Lord is always with His faithful, as He Himself says: 'Behold I am with you even to the end of the world' (Adm 1:16-22).

Because Christ's sacramental presence is a continuation of His Incarnation and is fundamental to the Church, Francis regarded the priests who make that presence possible as the noblest part of the Church structure, to such an extent that, in his eyes, the Church was primarily the hierarchy. Although he knew perfectly well that the dignity of the priesthood was attached to the office and not to the person of the priest, he did not hesitate to demand from priests a holiness that was in accord with that dignity of office, and he even compared them with Mary, because,

If the blessed Virgin is so honored, as it is right, since she carried Him in (her) most holy womb; if the blessed Baptist trembled and did not dare to touch the holy head of God; if the tomb in which He lay for some time is so venerated, how holy, just and worthy must be the person who touches (Him) with his hands, receives (Him) in his heart and mouth, and offers (Him) to others to be received. (This is) He Who is now about to die, but Who is eternally victorious and glorified, upon Whom the angels desire to gaze. Look at your dignity, you

brothers (who are) priests, and be holy since He is holy. And as the Lord God has honored you above all other persons because of this ministry, so you should love, reverence, and honor Him above all others (EpOrd 21-24)

While desiring that priests, who consecrate the Eucharist, should be holy, Francis revered them because of their ordination alone, regarded them as welcoming arms of the Church and would have recourse to them even if they were to persecute him. He wished to fear, love and honor them, no matter how sinful or ignorant they might be, because he considered that they were his masters since he saw the Son of God in them. The reason he gives for his attitude is that they, and they alone, make present in this world the Body and Blood of the Most High Son of God (Test 6-10). As a fervent member of the clerical-centred Church of the Middle Ages, Francis saw the sacrament of Holy Orders as the key to the Lord's saving presence, not simply because he saw the Son of God in the clergy, but because their sacramental power made them indispensable if the Christ who had been born, had lived, died and had risen from the dead in Galilee was to continue being present in the Church, bringing grace to humanity.

There is no doubt that the heretical doctrines, especially those of the Cathari and the Waldensians, concerning the sacraments of Holy Orders and the Eucharist, caused the Church to react by stressing the presence of Christ in these sacraments. In his turn, Francis spoke at length about Holy Orders and the Eucharist, but he scarcely mentioned the sacrament of Penance. This, however, does not mean that he did not acknowledge the "virtual" presence of the Lord in those other sacraments to which he had no particular reason to refer. In every age, the Church emphasizes the importance of those aspects of the faith which are currently under gravest threat; and at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the attack on the Eucharist was certainly of greatest concern to the Church. Hence, it is not strange that Francis should have hastened to the defence of the Eucharist, a cause which the Church herself, led by Innocent III, had undertaken as a crusade.

The glorious presence of the Lord in the Church does not consist solely in the sacraments. The "holy names and written words" which reveal that presence also show clearly His welcoming love. Francis always connects the Lord's holy names and written words with His Body and Blood. The Word-made-flesh continues to be present in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, by virtue of the sanctifying words of the liturgy. Words and actions together confer the healing gift of grace which allows us to break out of our own closed existence so that we can live in the freedom of the children of God.

We must venerate the Eucharist because "in this world we have and see nothing corporally of the Most High except (His) Body and Blood and the

(names and written) words through which we have been made and have been redeemed from death to life" (EpCler 11-3; 1EpCust 2). The "names" and "words" to which Francis refers several times have a special meaning for him. The "(written) words of the Lord" mean the liturgical texts in general, that is, the lectionary, containing the Scripture readings, and the books used in liturgical functions (EpOrd 34).

If we investigate a little further, we shall see that, for Francis, the term "words" has an even greater variety of meanings. In the first place are "the holy words" which the clergy "pronounce, proclaim and minister" (2EpFid 34; Test 13). Apparently, here he is referring to the Scripture contained in the lectionary, which serves as a source for preaching, while other "words" are those used in the consecration of the Mass. He uses "consecrated," "made holy" and "sanctified" to indicate consecration or "transubstantiation," a term created by the new theology of that time, with which he was not very familiar (EpCler 2; EpOrd 37; Adm 1:9). Then there is a third group of "words" through which creation and redemption are brought about (EpCler 3; 2EpFid 34).

These various shades of meaning which Francis gives the term "words" are reminiscent of the language of Augustinian sacramental theology, quite different from that of the scholastics, which was characterized by its precision of thought and terminology. And while he made a distinction between "the holy names" and "the words of the Lord," he was really referring to different aspects of the same reality, the presence of God, which is indicated by both phrases. During the Middle Ages, there was a general belief that names, even names of human origin, were based on the nature of things; that is, it was thought that the name expressed, not so much the outward form, as the inner essence of the subject named. Hence the medieval respect for names and the conviction that they transmitted grace when it was a question of sacred names.

Despite the *ex opere operato* power of the sacraments (that is, the power of the completed rite), there is no question here of any magical effects, because the sacraments require the participation of the recipient. Even more, mere intellectual consent, faith alone, is not enough; it must be a living faith because receiving the sacraments while not living up to the basic Gospel principles produces spiritual death, not life. We need faith to accept that the Lord is present among us; but a faith that does not lead us to receive Him and to live as He did is cause for condemnation.

Francis explains all this clearly when he says:

All those who saw the Lord Jesus according to (His) humanity and did not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Godhead that He is the true Son of God were condemned. And now in the same way, all those who see the sacrament (of



the Body of Christ), which is sanctified by the words of the Lord upon the altar at the hands of the priest in the form of bread and wine, and who do not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Godhead that it is truly the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, are condemned. (This) is attested by the Most High Himself Who says: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life' (Adm 1:1-11).

The Lord "wills that all of us should be saved through Him and that we receive Him with our pure heart and chaste body," and so, "we must ... confess all our sins to a priest" because if we do not eat His Body and drink His Blood worthily, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God (2EpFid 14:22f).

Francis's earnest wish to ensure reverence for the presence of Christ in the Church led him to beg all clerics and religious to treat with love and respect the Eucharist, the species under which we can see and touch Christ Incarnate and glorious. Therefore, he admonished clerics:

Let all who administer such holy mysteries—especially those who administer them carelessly—consider the sad state of the chalices, the corporals, and the altar-linens upon which the Body and Blood of the Lord are sacrificed. And (the Body and Blood of the Lord) is left by many in dirty places, carried about in a miserable manner, and administered to others without discretion. Even His sacred written words are sometimes left to be trampled underfoot; for the person who does not have the spirit does not perceive the things of God (EpCler 4-7).

He made the same plea to religious:

We who have been called more particularly for the divine functions should in consequence not only listen to and do what God says, but we should also guard the (sacred) vessels and other (liturgical) appointments so that we may impress upon ourselves the loftiness of our Creator and our subjection to Him. Therefore, I admonish all my brothers and encourage (them) in Christ that wherever they come upon the written words of God, they venerate them so far as they are able. And if they are not well kept or if they lie about carelessly in some place, let them, inasmuch as it concerns them, collect them and preserve them, thus honoring the Lord in the words which He spoke. For many things are made holy by the words of God and, in the power of the words of Christ, the Sacrament of the altar is celebrated (EpOrd 34-37).

Francis's zeal in promoting devotion to the Real Presence and the proper attitude towards everything connected with the Blessed Sacrament is evident in the simple but deeply significant account which his biographers give of his early life. At the beginning of the Fraternity when he was in the Portiuncula with the other brothers,

He sometimes travelled through the hamlets and visited the churches in the vicinity of Assisi, proclaiming and preaching repentance to men. He brought along a broom to clean the churches. He suffered a great deal, in fact, when he entered a church and saw it dirty. And so when he finished preaching to the

people, he gathered together all the priests who were there and took them aside so that the laity could not hear. He then spoke to them of the salvation of souls and especially reminded them of the solicitude they were to exercise in keeping churches, altars and everything that is used in the celebration of the divine mysteries clean (LP 18).

Christ is present in the Church in more ways than in the Blessed Sacrament. Besides the Mass, in which the Lord comes to meet us in a special way, He is present in another manner, one which emphasizes the reality of His Incarnation even after He has been glorified by the Father. Christ is present in His creatures, especially in people, in the poor.

Celano gives us a vivid description of the way Francis could rise from creatures to meet their Creator:

In beautiful things, he saw Beauty itself; all things were to him good. 'He who made us is the best,' they cried out to him. Through His footprints impressed upon things, he followed the Beloved everywhere; he made for himself from all things a ladder by which to come even to His throne (2Cel 165).

But Francis saw Christ's glorious presence most clearly in people, because, even when they were sinners, they were still made in the image and likeness of God (RegNB XXIII 1) and still reflected that image. In this way, Christ is present in the sick and the poor, that same Christ who chose to be poor and took upon Himself our infirmities so that He might heal us and make us rich (1Cel 76; 2Cel 85).

For Francis, the whole universe was both the sign and the result of God's presence. Just as Christ is the sacrament of God, so the Church is the sacrament of Christ since she makes Him present in a glorious, saving way with her sacraments and the life of grace. Francis knew the need for "seeing" in order to believe and for believing in order to receive and for receiving in order to be able to follow in Christ's footsteps to the Father. Hence his steely determination to remain always in the Church, the only place where we can see and receive the food we need if we are to live as Christians, the Body and Blood of the Most High Son of God.

## 2. *Finding God in the Church*

Since Christ is present in the Church, it is there we must seek Him who gives meaning to our lives. This was the line of reasoning which Francis followed in pursuing his ideal.

Christ is the way that leads to the Father; but the Father is a spirit whom no one can see. Therefore, the only way to find Him is to look for, to see, what our eyes can perceive of Him, His Body and Blood, and to believe what the Spirit inspires in our hearts (Adm 1:1-12). This need to "see" was a paradox in Francis's last years, when illness had deprived him of sight. Or was it precisely

because he was blind that he had recourse to visualizing the Blessed Sacrament as a way to show us that his "seeing" was an act of faith in the glorified and glorifying presence of Christ in the Eucharist, an act which is much deeper than the vision which his eyes, even when healthy, could ever have given him?

From his own experience, he knew that seeing does not necessarily lead spontaneously to believing; it did not do so in the case of our Lord's contemporaries, who saw Him only as a man. But seeing can serve to lead us into the presence of God and to meet our Lord. In this sense, seeing was a source of belief for Francis because we humans have bodies as well as souls, and we use both to experience and to express our faith. Thus, gazing at the Blessed Sacrament is an act of adoration since the visible species make present and tangible the invisible Lord who visits us and comes near to us in His Body in order to make Himself accessible to our human condition. Therefore, if sight or sense perception does not bring us to adoration in faith, it really is useless; even worse, our failure to see Christ in the Eucharist may be evidence of our failure to live a Christian life and may, therefore, stand in condemnation against us.

For Francis, then, the Church was the place where we can meet the Triune God, the place where love is offered and received. Our sins and shortcomings as members of the Church are never an insurmountable obstacle to our having this access to the God who saves and frees us.

Still, our Lord's complete surrender of Himself to us demands a similar total commitment on our part to the best of our ability, as well as a repentance that is sincere enough to allow Him to come into our hearts. We can achieve this commitment and repentance only within the Church; we must "persevere in the true faith and in penance, for otherwise no one will be saved" (RegNB XXIII 11).

Francis believed that to live the faith was basically to

love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the most high and supreme eternal God, Trinity and Unity, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Saviour of all who believe in Him, and hope in Him, and love Him (RegNB XXIII 11).

Our only adequate response to God's generosity in giving Himself to us as our goal and fulfillment is to forget self and live for Him alone.

Living a life of penance in the wide sense in which Francis understood it, was to accept our Lord's invitation to enter His kingdom and to resolve to follow the thorny path of conversion which must be trodden by those who aspire to be "renewed," as the Gospel demands. Therefore, to do penance is to leave behind the old life of sin in order to live the new life inspired by the Spirit; that is, it is to seek the Kingdom of God and His justice and free

ourselves from all the cares and worries that keep us from God (RegNB XXII 9-30).

In spite of any failure on the Church's part to live up to the Gospel values upon which she was founded, Francis firmly held that she is the only reference point for judging our progress as Christians along the path of conversion. Where else but in the Church can we find such a loving welcome and such caring companionship in our search for fidelity to the Gospel? Perhaps the Church may at times have been remiss in faithfully following in the footsteps of Christ, but, to her own shame and as a call to conversion, the voice of the Gospel has always resounded and will continue to resound in her, that voice by which Christ summons us to make radical changes in our lives and to realize that we can reach the Kingdom and make ourselves "new."

Living in the Church means answering Christ's urgent call to conversion and to belief in the Good News that the Kingdom is at hand (Mk 1:15). This is what Francis tried to put into practice in his way of life, for he was convinced that the Church was the only place in which he could fully realize his dream of following closely in the footsteps of his Master.

### 3. *The Standard of Truth*

The Church has always regarded herself as the guarantor of "the deposit of faith" which the Apostles confided to her care. In that sense, she has believed that she is the guardian of a system of beliefs which cannot be rejected because they are directly connected with the Gospel.

The medieval Church built up and accumulated a large body of ideals, theology and canon law based on these "truths of the faith," which she put forward as the expression of the one truth to which every other idea had to be referred. In this way, she became the interpreter and administrator of the divine and human law, and she used this prerogative as a justification of her sovereign power. As a result, the whole of Christendom became a sort of theocratic society in which the Pope, as God's representative, laid down principles deduced from the faith and expanded from his own thoughts, principles which all rulers had to follow in governing their subjects.

The Church certainly has the duty to guarantee the proper understanding of the mystery of salvation so that people can live it as God wants and not become mired down in a morass of pure subjectivity. Yet the official Church has always tended to confuse her own personal, and therefore limited, interpretation of the Christian system of fundamental values—to confuse that interpretation with the objective reality of those values. Such an interpretation then becomes the official one, the sole authentic expression or formulation of the faith of the Church.



Actually, theological tradition has always assigned to these "truths" a theological mark or rating, indicating the degree of assent which the faithful must give to them. But normally the faithful take no account of theological niceties and lump all the teachings of the Church together as something to be believed and obeyed. This was the background against which Francis's faith developed, the faith of the people, in which his proximity to Rome favoured easy assent to the Church's teachings, with no soul-searching on problems because he had no problems with the faith. Assisi and the surrounding district were not threatened by heresy in any serious way, so that doubts about the faith of the Church were unlikely to come to the fore there.

Yet not all Christians were as settled in the faith as Francis and his fellow-citizens. Some Gospel groups had come to the point of disagreeing with certain "truths" which were fundamental for the Church in Rome but not for them. This difference in understanding and confessing their faith, but especially their putting that faith into practice, led to their being expelled from the ecclesiastical community as heretics. When Innocent III was trying to bring them back into the Church, he laid it down, as an indispensable condition for their being approved by the Curia, that they should make a profession of faith. Durandus of Huesca, who had been a Waldensian, came to Rome in 1210 to get approval for his movement, but he first had to make such a profession of faith to the Pope himself. His profession went like this:

I, Durandus of Huesca, (with my hands) in your consecrated hands, O Supreme Pontiff, Lord Innocent, invoke God as witness that I believe simply and truly everything that is here written, and I shall never believe the contrary but shall resist with all my strength anyone who does believe the contrary. To You, as the successor of St. Peter the Apostle, to the archbishops, bishops and other prelates in whose dioceses or parishes I may find myself, I shall render obedience and respect.

I believe with all my heart that the sinfulness of the (officiating) bishop or priest does not compromise the baptism of a child or the consecration of the Eucharist or the other ministries that are celebrated for the faithful, since the sacrament is conferred, not through the merits of the minister, but by the word of the Creator and the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I believe and firmly confess that, no matter how holy or prudent a chaste religious may be, he cannot and should not consecrate the Eucharist or celebrate the sacrifice of the altar if he is not a priest duly ordained by a bishop in a visible, public way. Hence, I firmly believe and confess that everyone who, without being ordained, dares to celebrate the Eucharistic mystery is a heretic and must be separated from the entire Holy Roman Church.

I believe that, while preaching is very necessary and praiseworthy, it must be exercised under the authority and with the consent of the Supreme Pontiff or with the permission of the prelates. I know that wherever there are confessed heretics who blaspheme against God and the faith of the Holy Roman Church, I must confront them with godly arguments and warnings, not fearing death when

opposing them, as enemies of Christ and the Church, with the word of God.

I believe that tithes, first fruits and offerings must be paid to the clergy by command of the Lord (Bull *Eius exemplo* of Innocent III; PL 215:1510-1511).

This excerpt from Durandus's confession of faith can serve as an indication of the Church's attitude towards those groups that had begun as heresies. Francis's group, on the contrary, had begun in orthodoxy and had never faltered, so that there was no need to demand a profession of faith from them. Yet precautions still had to be taken to eliminate any danger of infection by heresy and to ensure that both the candidates and the professed brothers in the Fraternity were sound in their faith.

In this situation, we can understand the precautions taken by the Curia and also by Francis at the Curia's insistence, because heresy could have easily infiltrated the rapidly expanding Fraternity. It was, therefore, quite logical that candidates for the Fraternity should be examined on the Catholic faith and the sacraments of the Church. They could be admitted only after they had shown that they believed all that the Church taught and wished to confess it faithfully and observe it steadfastly (RegNB II 2f).

Francis's preoccupation with orthodoxy did not apply to the candidates alone. Throughout his writings, and no doubt at the urging of the Curia, he showed a special interest in maintaining the orthodoxy of the friars themselves (RegNB XII 3f) and in promoting a Catholic attitude which was not to be merely theoretical but which should be put into practice in daily life and in the apostolate (RegNB XIX 1), as Francis himself demonstrated when addressing the faithful (2EpFid 32f).

From all this we see that, for Francis, being a Catholic meant believing what the Church believed, but with a faith which was conditioned by the heretical groups' opposition and of which the profession of faith quoted above is an example. In Francis's writings, when he is dealing with the question of orthodoxy, he shows an almost exclusive fixation on sacramental theology (RegNB II 2) and, more specifically, on the ministerial priesthood (RegNB XIX 3; XX 1-4). Nevertheless, the Catholic faith which Francis lived and preached did certainly include the faith of the Church and went even further, to the point of embracing *everything* she commanded and proposed.

After all, this is how he had always thought, and his later acquaintance with Church policy did not allow him much room for dissent because he had to live out his faith within the parameters which the institutional Church had marked out for his type of Gospel group. His lack of precision in distinguishing between the basic faith, desirable religious ideals and ecclesiastical disciplinary norms did not prevent him, however, from putting into practice within the

Church those things which he deemed fundamental and necessary to his Gospel plan.

#### *4. The Standard of Conduct*

Besides teaching "the truths of faith" which derive from the Gospel, the Church takes the precaution of stressing also the practical consequences which flow from those truths. If we are to be "new," as the Risen Lord wishes us to be, we must act and live in accord with the Gospel. Hence, all through the ages, the Church has laid down norms of conduct which show her desire to follow Christ; and the traditional "precepts of the Church" are a good example of these norms.

Rules such as these, however, were not always drawn up with the sole aim of making the Gospel practicable but were sometimes meant to serve less evangelical purposes. Discerning the Gospel elements in the canonical and moral prescriptions of the Church has always been difficult for the ordinary Catholic. In Francis's time, there were those who exercised their discernment in this area to the point of confronting Rome; but most of the faithful accepted that it was normal for the Church to lay down, not only norms for conduct that were in harmony with the Gospel, but also disciplinary regulations which made possible the type of ecclesiastical organization which Roman policy had decided was necessary for governing the Church.

Francis surely must have been one of these faithful subjects since he was apparently able to follow in every detail the directions of the Holy Roman Church without any traumatic effects. Perhaps the grave obstacles which he had to overcome while organizing his Fraternity had accentuated his natural attitude of absolute fidelity to everything that came from the Church in Rome. But, as I see it, many Franciscan enthusiasts go too far in trying to canonize without hesitation his unquestioning fidelity to the Church hierarchy and in excluding other, more critical, forms of fidelity, like that of some of the radical poverty movements, which were despised and rejected as unruly because they raised questions.

In a powerful Church like that of Francis's time, it was very difficult to separate the Gospel elements from those which resulted from that power. Just as the official Church had its own ideas about "orthodoxy," it also laid down special rules for "orthopraxis" for all the faithful which made any kind of pluralism impossible. The differences between the radical poverty movements and the Curia soon began to pose problems in everyday life. Each side read the Gospel from its own point of view, so that their ethical conclusions were necessarily different. Asking oneself which of the two sides was right led nowhere. What it came down to was that the side which had the most power

used it to its own advantage and left the other side marginalized from the official Church.

The Curia in Innocent III's reign was the high point in the centralization of ecclesiastical power. The Church's policy of organization required an active bureaucracy as well as a general tightening up on morality, and that entailed a proliferation of rules of every kind to facilitate government with authority. The Church's desire to make herself the arbiter of social and political as well as of religious conduct, presupposed that she had some means of enforcing her laws. And she had: she linked her laws with the truths of faith and eternal salvation; the threat of an interdict or excommunication by the Pope was enough to make the other party surrender or at least revise its proposals.

It would be unrealistic to doubt the good intentions of the Pope and his Curia in embarking on this course of action. In the prevailing atmosphere, it was their duty and responsibility to take measures which we find difficult to judge fairly from the viewpoint of our world and times, so far removed from theirs. Whether or not their heavy-handed attempt to promote Christian life and conduct was in harmony with the Gospel, it certainly did not present the image of a serving Church which refused to impose her discipline by force but preferred to follow Christ's example by being the victim and not the instrument of incomprehension and impersonal bureaucratic "efficiency."

That is how Francis saw matters, and, consequently, his natural loyalty to the norms of the Church in Rome must occasionally have been burdensome to him. His reading of the Gospel, which he regarded as having been revealed to him by the Lord, did not always coincide with Rome's rulings. His point of view and his resultant attitude were at times different from those of Rome: yet the thought never crossed his mind that his personal vision should prevail over that of the Curia.

The sacramental nature of the Church led him to see in her the Christ who was calling him to follow in His footsteps on the way of the Gospel. Therefore, he did not hesitate to obey, in his own life and in that of his Fraternity, the norms laid down by the Church because he saw them as the Lord's will even when they did not fit in with his own plans. Still, the fact that he was walking the dark way of fidelity and obedience allowed him to feel assured that his life and work were protected and watched over by a mother's love, the love of Holy Mother Church. Above and beyond this subjective feeling was the objective fact that the same Church, who held the Lord and His Gospel in her bosom, was also able to lead him and his brothers towards the eternal, absolute Reality.

That is why he constantly strove in his writings to defer to the authority of the Church as his standard and guide in following the Gospel. So it was that,



in liturgical matters, he reminded the clergy that they should observe strictly the prescriptions of Holy Mother Church in the way they treated the Body of Christ (EpCler 13; 1EpCust 4). In the same fashion, he admonished the friars to celebrate the Divine Office and the Eucharist according to the form and rite of the Church (RegB III 1; EpOrd 30). We can see how important to him was such submission to the norms of the Church when we read in his Testament the severity with which he treated those brothers who did not say the Office according to the Rule. He even went so far as to organize a kind of search and seizure process to bring them before the Cardinal Protector, who was to decide what to do with them (Test 30).

The ceremony of admitting brothers to the community had to be carried out according to "the form and prescription of the holy Church" (RegNB II 12); and the brothers who were already professed were to strive to be faithful to the end according to the same norms (RegNB II 10; RegB II 12). Finally, the friars were to exercise their ministry of preaching according to "the form and regulations" of the Roman Curia (RegNB 17:1), thus showing their loyalty to the Church and distancing themselves from those Gospel groups that were suspected of heresy.

### **Conclusion**

The maturing of Francis's loyalty to the Church was a long process which neither turned him into a victim of ecclesiastical tyranny nor made him ingenuously blind to reality. Starting with the simple, spontaneous faith in the Church which he had absorbed in the socio-religious atmosphere of Assisi, he went on to know and feel the joys and pains of meeting the challenges to that simple faith arising from the ecclesiastical system of his day.

By becoming "a man of the Church," he was able to see the weaknesses of that Church as a structure, made up as it was of men who, like himself, had human frailties. But his dealings with and responsibilities in the Church opened his eyes to an institution that was much wider and deeper than he could otherwise have suspected. His decision to live according to the Gospel led him to perceive the sacramental nature of the Church although he had, of course, always known that it was she who celebrated and administered the sacraments. But in his dealings with Rome, he had discovered the mystery that the Church herself was a sacrament. The sinful weakness of her structures was transcended by the redeeming grace of the Triune God. In her, Christ is incarnate, always eager to welcome and pardon. Her cumbersome "machinery" makes present the only thing we can see of the Son of God, His Body and Blood; and she alone announces to us the Word through which the Spirit gives us life.

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That was why Francis, despite his sometimes harsh experience of the institutional Church, never hesitated about living his Gospel way of life under her close guidance. In her, he had received the faith; in her, he had been given the grace of conversion; in her, it had been made plain to him that he should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel; to her he had recourse for assurance that his plan was not a mere personal caprice. Accordingly, it was logical also that he should turn to her for counsel as he followed in the footsteps of Christ. His submission to the Church which had recognized his charism was neither blind nor cringing, for he was well able to distinguish between the salvation to be found in her and the apathy which she sometimes showed in revealing that salvation and offering it to humanity.