

## On "Bearing" Some notes from the point of view of the philosophy of man and of culture<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In the past decade people everywhere have rapidly become conscious of the inevitability of a world-wide cooperation in economic, political and cultural fields. This consciousness also took shape in the appeal of the "World Council of Churches" for support to the so-called "Counciliar Process for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation." In the background of this growing process the question arises, more than ever before, how, at the same time, the much-needed dialogue between philosophies of life and religions can take shape. And, in connection with this, the old questions about the nature and the scope of the concept of "tolerance" gain importance. The following reflections are meant as a small contribution towards the provoking of opinions in this matter, by reflecting on the human attitude of "bearing," which—in my opinion—is essential for real tolerance.

A single look into the dictionary may, indeed, remind us of the fact that *tolerare* and *tolerantia* are derived from the verb *tollere*—which, etymologically, is related to the Germanic *dulden*, and, among other things, means: to lift, to take up, to abduce, to remove. In a related conceptual context we find in the German language words like: *ertragen*, *vertragen*, *ertraglich*, *Verträglichkeit*, which are all elaborations of the verb *tragen*, "to bear." It seems to me that this word "to bear" frequently denotes a fundamental human attitude.

While giving some reflections on this subject, I do not wish to give a comprehensive historical expose, by way of a *Begriffsgeschichte*. I shall only make an attempt at distinguishing some salient positions that have been taken up in the history of western culture with regard to "bearing" as a fundamental attitude. I hope this may help to sharpen our view of certain aspects of

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology*. Essays in Honor of Vincent Brümmer. Edited by G. van den Brink, L. van den Brom and M. Sarot. (Kmapen, The Netherlands, Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992) pp 267-282.

contemporary problems in the culture of the west, especially with regard to the practice of "tolerance."

Indeed, I realize that the theme of "bearing" will evoke in many a certain aversion. It often seems to refer to an ethos of passivity, or even to a "dolorism," that is rightly suspect. In other words: the word "bearing" itself is also a "burdened" word. One may remember what, under this denominator, has often been put on the shoulders of women in particular. It may be true that "making a virtue of necessity" is one of the tasks required by human existence. But should we make that particular virtue (of "bearing") our necessity? We recognize Nietzsche's image of the "patient spirit ... like a camel running into the desert, running into its desert."<sup>2</sup>

All the same, the author of the *drei Verwandlungen* does certainly not sing the praises of a bourgeois land of Cockaigne, in which one could live without heaviness, without challenge and risks. It is significant that the image of the "child," which follows the images of the camel and the lion, has its point in "a holy affirmation" (*ein heiliges Ja-sagen*). So the central question is how a human being deals with the exacting, inevitable and difficult things. Can a burden or load be changed into an acceptable or even pleasant task by the way of conceiving (*auffassen*) i.e. by interpreting or "placing" it, so that we can truthfully answer: "it was a pleasure," "you are welcome," *gerne geschehen*? The answer of the little girl carrying her sick brother: "It isn't heavy; it's my little brother," stands in violent contrast with the torture of the degrading carrying of stones, which the prisoners were forced to do on the death-stairs in the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Natzweiler.

How can the exacting and burdening become bearable and endurable? What bearing-power is at our service? (*Patientia*, mostly translated by "patience," *Geduld*, should rather be conceived as "the power to bear, or to wait.") In other words: how can strong patience be mustered, perhaps even "cheerful patience"—on the analogy of Nietzsche's *fröhliche Wissenschaft*? I will not make a secret of it that here I am reminded of the Jewish joy of the yoke of the Law and of Jesus' word on the yoke that is easy and the burden that is light (Mt 11:30). I realize, however, that the connection of patience with power has been reflected on in ancient philosophy in *optima forma* by Plato and Aristotle and, with special acuteness and in a special key, by the Stoa.

My notes cover four fields:

<sup>2</sup>In German: *tragsame Geist ... dem Kamele gleich, das beladen in die Wüste eilt, also eilt er in seine Wüste*. Also sprach Zarathustra 1: *Von den drei Verwandlungen*.

- I. The concept of *hypomone*/or *patientia* in ancient philosophy.
- II. By way of counter-point: the concept of *sustinere* in Francis of Assisi, as representing a particular Christian tradition.
- III. A broad characterization of modern culture, as marked by the stepping up of tempo and production.
- IV. Some questions on our contemporary modern/post-modern situation.

I. The concept of *hypomone/patientia* in classical philosophy

(1) The concept of *hypomone* or *patientia* played an important part in ancient Stoic thinking, and it has made its influence felt far into modern times through the far-reaching working of the Stoa.<sup>3</sup> To a considerable extent the Stoic conception of bearing one's lot reaches back to the pertinent ideas of Plato and Aristotle. I shall first give a sketchy outline of these. For the sake of brevity I shall take the two positions together, with the omission of differing details. Festugière, on whom I base myself, emphasizes that the meaning of *hypomone* in the various philosophers and in a comparative examination of the New Testament, emerges most clearly if one discerns the connections of this virtue with the other virtues.<sup>4</sup>

(2) In Plato and Aristotle *Hypomone* appears in close connection with the virtue of *andreia*, i.e. "manly" courage, which stands for the *karteria* of the soul: power of endurance, stamina, self-control. The virtue of *hypomone* proves itself in standing firm against a stronger adversary, without, however, failing into recklessness. Naturally, it has its place within the total design of the ethically good life, namely: bringing or keeping one's existence in a "beautiful" order, guided by reason (*phronesis*). On the strength of this virtue of *hypomone* one tends to resist inner or outer "opposition." Thus *hypomone* is the counterpart of *soophrosune*, which virtue regulates the dealings with "beneficent" things. The prevailing perspective is the unperturbed restfulness of the "wise man," who does everything or bears everything with perseverance *heneka tou kalou*, i.e. with a view to the beautiful ordering of life. So here the virtue of patience is in the service of a wisdom that is self-sufficient, and does not expect a remuneration from elsewhere. The "hope," raised by the sharp realization of human misery, is lacking in this view on man as a rational microcosm.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. M. Spanneut, *Permanence du Stoicisme. De Zenon à Maïtraux* (Gembloux 1973); M. L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, (Leiden, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. A.J. Festugière, "Hypomone dans la tradition grecque," in: idem, *Etudes de Philosophie Grecque*, Paris 1971, p. 273-282.

(3) During the periods in which the burdens of existence are felt more poignantly, the importance of *hypomone* is enhanced. If one does not want to withdraw from disturbances and grief with Epicures, one must give a central place to patience with the Stoa. With them, just as with Plato and Aristotle, full emphasis is put on the virtue of *andreia*. Taken in the right measure, this “manly” attitude musters the power (*karteria*) to resist any perturbation. In the Stoics, however, the accentuation of the wise man as the strong man, who is a tower of strength, is sharper than in their predecessors. “As a man,” he remains unimpaired by misery, he is self-sufficient and does not expect help from others. “Nobody is wise, unless he is strong; so weakness will not befall a wise person” (*Nemo sapiens, nisi fortis; non cadet ergo in sapientem aegritudo.*)<sup>5</sup>

Thus Cicero sums up their position. One gets the impression that the emphasis on a manly and severe attitude in life grew stronger as Stoic philosophy developed. There is still the rejection of every kind of hope. However, the emotional tone of dejection seems to be increasingly manifest—certainly in late antiquity in Marcus Aurelius. Anyhow, the firm acceptance of the inevitable is certainly impressive. The famous adage, still quoted by Kant: “fate leads the willing, the unwilling is drawn” (*ducunt volentem rata, nolentem trahunt*), is strikingly illustrated by the image of the draught-dog, put to the cart, wounding itself if it resists in vain the speed of the cart running down a slope. Such a weight of manliness and heroism is asking for a contradicting ironic voice. Festugière raises it, for instance by reminding us of the testimonies of Christian woman martyrs, who, though weak and insignificant, bore their deathly lot joyfully, putting their trust in God’s strength, who would supplement their weakness.

However, before listening more closely to the specific sounds from the Christian tradition, I want to underline the notion of measure and self-restraint, Socratic too, which is contained in ancient philosophy. *Sustine et abstine*, this proud Stoic word, going through the ages, gives food for thought, especially to us, who, in and after the “modern times” get to learn afresh the popular wisdom that “you cannot make bricks without straw.”<sup>6</sup> The limits to the growth of production of goods and to the “make-ability” (*Machbarkeit*) of things, make themselves increasingly and painfully felt. What is make-able soon appears to be more and more “*facilis*” i.e. easily and quickly to be ordered and supplied. He, however, who will open his eyes for what has, in the

<sup>5</sup>Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* IV 49, 75.

<sup>6</sup>In Dutch: “You cannot break iron with your hands.”

meantime, come forward, as *dif-ficilis*, cannot easily persevere in the attitude of *maîtres et possesseurs*, which Descartes pictured so expectantly. So one wonders, if, in our times, new opportunities are being offered to the Stoic attitude in life. Perhaps it is not accidental that Heidegger's observations on the *Sein zum Tode* should remind some readers of the Stoic manliness.

But even if one prefers the light-footed third "transformation" (*Verwandlung*) of Nietzsche, or the little girl "hope" of Charles Péguy (tripping timidly between her big sisters "faith" and "charity"), the implementation of the modern leitmotiv of "making and breaking" does certainly not release us from considering the way in which we face the inevitable.<sup>7</sup> And is "fertility" not often too easily identified with economic "productivity" there where change and renewal are possible?

## II. The concept of *sustinere* in the spirituality of Francis of Assisi

If we wish to take up Francis of Assisi into the company of academics, we should know that a person is being admitted who deliberately ranged himself on the side of "the fools for the sake of Christ," and who liked to announce himself as *ignorans et idiota*. I dare say there was a lot of irony in it, which he not only employed by way of knowing one's ignorance, but also by having the status of a have-not and by way of the might of not being mighty. It is astonishing that this man, who has left no philosophical or scholastic-theological text, should also, in this respect, resemble Socrates; in both cases the name lives on in an important philosophical and theological school.

I want to discuss here the significance which, according to Francis, "bearing" can have in human existence. First we demonstrate that this theme is one of the central ideas of his philosophy of life. Thus, in his famous last song ("The Canticle of Brother Sun") he calls those people blessed "who give pardon for Your love and *bear* infirmity and tribulation. Blessed are those who *endure* in peace...." The old-Italian word from the popular language *sostengo* that he uses here and elsewhere, is identical to the Latin verb *sustinere*, which has a conspicuous place in his writings.<sup>8</sup>

In Francis the meaning of the word also has a clearly biblical connotation. For instance Psalm 130, where *sustinere* in the first place means "to wait" and "to hope;" and in I Corinthians 13:7, where it says that charity "beareth" all. (*Hypomonei* is here translated by *sustinet* in the Vulgate).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Péguy, *Le porche du mystère de la deuxième Vertu* (Paris 1929).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Theo Zweerman, "Reddere und Sustinere. Sokratische Gedanken zur Freiheitsauffassung des hl. Franziskus von Assisi," *Franziskanische Studien* 63 (1981): 70-98.

This man, who practiced and taught life-wisdom, has not left any theoretical treatises expounding his motivations and orientations in life. Apart from the Rules and a handful of letters, a collection of saws (the so-called Admonitions), some prayers and his Testament, there is a story on True and Perfect Joy, which, in fact, deals with “patience.”<sup>9</sup> Here, careful mention is made of a number of evident human successes—only to ascertain “that true joy does not consist in any of these things.” Then some well-chosen frustrations are being enumerated by way of crescendo. When the climax has been reached, the laconic conclusion is: “I tell you this: if I had patience (*patientia*) and did not become upset, there would be true joy in this and true virtue and the salvation of the soul.”

The theme of “bearing” is pregnantly introduced in his eighteenth Admonition. This runs as follows:

Blessed is the person who bears with [*sustinet*] his neighbor in his weakness [*fragilitas*] to the degree that he would wish to be sustained by him if he were in a similar situation. Blessed is the servant who attributes [*reddet*] every good to the Lord God, for he who holds back something for himself, hides within himself the money of his Lord God, and that which he thought he had, shall be taken away from him.

This short text is not an arbitrary admonition. It provides the concise summary of two attitudes that I consider as belonging to the kernel of Francis’s spirituality, expressed in the words *sustinere* and *reddere*.

I shall record here what is essential to mark out Francis’s position with regard to “bearing.”

(1) *Sustinere* (to bear) and *reddere* (to render or to bring home) also occur together in other places in Francis’s writings. Apparently, according to him, these attitudes belong together.

(2) For a better understanding of these two concepts it is important to know the opposites which Francis had in view. For *sustinere* this is *se exaltare* (to extol oneself above others). For *reddere* this is *sibi appropriare* (to appropriate). Francis also specifically has in mind the good impulses of one’s own will. He is afraid that man should act as an owner. If one acts in this way, one plagiarizes with regard to God as the giver of all good.

(3) *Sustinere* also has the meaning of bearing one’s punishment—in addition to those mentioned above; and the bearing of undeserved suffering, in imita-

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. Cajetan Esser, *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis* (Grottaferrata 1978); *Francis & Clare, The Complete Works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. & Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M. (New York, 1982).

tion of Christ. Where other people are concerned, it has a connotation of "upholding," "esteeming highly," "giving honor."

(4) "Bearing" (and "patience") ought not to be understood within the antithesis of passivity and activity. The connotation of "power" also remains valid in "bearing." Standing on biblical ground, Francis seems to think in terms of bearing-power and power to endure. This power is given by God, who is preeminently the Bearing One.

It is significant, however, that Francis, with the words *sustinere* and *reddere*, thinks according to the co-ordinates of, respectively, above-and-under and inside-and-outside. So "conversion" means a change of attitude: upside down and inside out. Socially this meant for Francis the turn downward of a career, and the turning towards an eccentric position in Assisi town-life, which involved solidarity with the underdogs and with the outcasts who lived in the outskirts of the town.

(5) A desire to be original is alien to Francis and those of his way of thinking. They only wanted to take up in their own way what had touched them in the life and the person of Christ. The text they apparently had often in mind was St. Paul's word about Christ's giving all up (*exinanitio*) and humbling himself (*humiliatio*) (Phil. 2:5ff.). These attitudes reach back to the Poverty and Humility that, according to St. Francis, God is Himself. There *reddere* and *sustinere* have their ultimate verification and example.

(6) "Bearing" certainly does not mean an excusing acceptance of injustice. However, the way in which the good struggle for justice and the resistance against evil takes shape is of primary importance. Francis tries to avoid a negative reaction pattern. Paying back for inflicted sorrow in a spirit of revenge and resentment causes self-poisoning and an increase of the evil that should be opposed. To be sure, it is characteristic that Francis, as we saw, expressly draws attention to bearing with "the other," and exactly insofar as he or she is *fragilitas*: "earthenware," vulnerable and hard to bear with.

(7) In connection with the Old Testament Francis sometimes uses "to bear" in the sense of "to hope" and "to expect."<sup>10</sup> It is probably not going too far to take the act of "hoping" in the meaning of the German expression: *in guter Hoffnung sein* ("to be expecting"), in which there is a connotation of "being pregnant." Indeed, it seems to be a good thing to connect the virtue of "bearing" in Francis with the texts in which he speaks about himself and his

<sup>10</sup>Cf. G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, s.v. *bypomenein*. Cf. W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, (London 1982).

brothers in terms of "motherhood." Naturally, this should not be understood biologically, but as those "maternal" things that a male person can do: the caring, attentive, loving and nourishing activities through which other people come to life and stay alive. The equality of genuine "brotherhood" or "sisterhood"—according to Francis's paradoxical insight—is only possible in the implementation of the a-symmetrical attitude of motherhood with regard to others. It can hardly be denied that there are similarities here with Levinas's position with regard to a-symmetry in ethical relations and with his interpretation of God's mercy as femininity.<sup>11</sup> Rather than a direct dependence, a sharing of experiences comes into play here, which found their reflection in the bible and were "eye-openers" to St. Francis and Levinas in conceiving what life and living together means.

### III. Modern culture, marked by the stepping up of tempo and production

The theme of toleration refers predominantly to modern times. Is it, therefore, relevant to go into the pre-modern positions, such as those of Greek wisdom and of a medieval Christian tradition? In my opinion the answer should be affirmative. If the wish forces itself upon us to get a better insight into the nature and the scope of modern culture, taking detours can be particularly enlightening: detours in space, by taking cognizance of life-patterns and thinking-patterns in other cultures; and detours in history, by noticing previous periods in our own culture.

The two positions mentioned above were concerned with the way of dealing with the limits of the reach of one's own power. Whether one speaks of taking up one's destiny, or of the loving acceptance of the cross of Christ: in both cases there is the implication of one's own finiteness and, at the same time, an attempt at reaching peace in a situation in which one is not able any more "to manage" with the available power and means. All the same, clear differences emerge on the question how this peace may be attained. There is the perseverance in the attitude of the powerful man, who, unmoved and earnestly, defies the disaster that comes rolling on. And there is the attitude of a person who, no less powerful but powerful in a different way, tries to hold up others in their fragility, as he himself would wish to be sustained, if he were in a similar situation.

In modern times (*Neuzeit*) there is a continuous increase in the power that people can bring to bear on data and processes previously outside their

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. E. Levinas, *Du Sacré au Saint* (Paris 1977), 158.



control. Connected with a new way of "acquiring knowledge," which broke through in the seventeenth century, there is also the rise of a new conception of the "subjectivity" of man. This plays a conspicuous role in the mastering of a great deal of what previously had to be accepted as destiny. It includes the planning of "history," sometimes conceived as progress.<sup>12</sup> This is associated with a "masculine" way of acting. Initially, in the Renaissance and the Reformation, there were strenuous attempts to remove the sediment of all kinds of traditions, in order to be able to realize a new, beautiful and free humanity—either by returning to the ancient Greek form of life, or by believing in the evangelical *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*.<sup>13</sup> Soon, however, the dominant attitude in life became more and more that of the explorer, conqueror, colonizer. Acting like a man seemed to come to be a demonstration that attack is the best method of defense. Defense against what? Against what is experienced as a possible threat to one's own limited existence. Spinoza would say: that which prevents me from living *secure et sano corpore*—and which exceeds my power as an ethically ordering and as a visioning being.<sup>14</sup> This attitude in life leads to a strong emphasis on "making," i.e. taking one's own fate in hand as much as possible (or manipulating others).<sup>15</sup> This involves: a tendency to reduce life to "production," and to reduce the earth to raw material for the unremitting forcing up of the production process. Thus two syndromes become increasingly manifest in the western way of life: the "forcing-up syndrome" and the "insurance" or "security syndrome."

In combination these syndromes have received a pregnant realization and symbol in the "space-shield" of President Reagan and his successor. That which announced itself as a mainly economic activity, namely the stepping up of production, appears to be more and more a phenomenon that manifests itself in numerous reaches of life. All kinds of actions in life are being speeded up, increased, inflated (including the frequency in "social kissing"). In social life this stepping up or forcing up (*Hinaufführung*) is being coupled with a performance (*Aufführung*) i.e. ostentation, the wish to prove oneself in the sight of others. The much needed acknowledgment and affirmation of an

<sup>12</sup>Cf. C.F. von Weizsacker, *Die Einheit der Natur* (München 1971), 440.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. G. Sohngen, *Die Einheit in der Theologie*, (München 1952), 291.

<sup>14</sup>*Tractatus Theologico—Politicus* III (ed. Gebhardt), p.46.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. O. Duintjer, C. Verhoeven et al., *Maken en breken. Over productie en spiritualiteit*, (Kampen 1988). (A critique of the controlling attitude expressing itself in the idea of *Machbarkeit* or "makeability" should evidently be accompanied by a careful analysis of various other meanings of the verb "to make" in ordinary language.)

unstable identity seem to have to be extorted by a "demonstrative" way of existence, exceedingly intensified by the flourishing of modern means of publicity. This forcing up and ostentation stimulate each other and are mutually corroborative.

More than once, and since long ago, questions have been asked concerning this comprehensive spectacle by the great critics of western culture. But what, until recently, was perceived by clear-sighted individuals only, is now being realized by a growing number of people, where the limits of economic growth, of "make-ability," of planning and directing—and, who knows, of a masculine and manly way of living—are concerned.

However, the questions that should be asked from the inside, regarding this system of syndromes, are more important than this awareness from the outside.<sup>16</sup> Why should western man so often feel obliged to prove his potency and to extort acknowledgment? What fundamental data of human existence are in this way continuously suppressed and spirited away? Long before Ernest Becket and others called into awareness "The Denial of Death," Rilke had written (remarkably in November 1915) that, since God and death seemed to have been withdrawn

(as one not of this moment, but of a future time, of somewhere else, of something different) the smaller cycle of the merely momentary ran faster and faster, the so-called progress became an event in a world, turned in upon itself, which forgot that it had previously and finally been overcome by death and by God, whatever its toiling and moiling.<sup>17</sup>

If "culture" is (also) the expression of the pride that is taken in dealing creatively and worthily with one's own mortality and that of others, a question is forced upon us: is the western world not marked and battered at present by a gross discarding of the cultural? To such a degree has this occurred, that culture has come to be no more than a fine trimming, at the side of the one central happening that devours everything: increase of property on the side of the owners and increase of might on the side of the mighty.

<sup>16</sup>This view from the inside is stressed by K. van der Wal, "Geen maken aan. Reflecties op de technologische samenleving vanuit de ethiek," ("Cannot be made" or "Cannot be repaired") in: Duinjtjer, *Maken en breken*, p. 139-161.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, (New York 1973); Rainer M. Rilke, *Über Dichtung und Kunst* (Frankfurt 1974), 68: "(als ein nicht Hiesiges, sondern Späteres, Anderwärtiges und Anderes) beschleunigte sich der kleinere Kreislauf des nur Hiesigen immer mehr, der sogenannte Fortschritt wurde zur Ereignis einer in sich befangenen Welt, die vergass, dass sie, wie sie sich auch anstellte, durch den Tod und durch Gott von vorneherein und endgültig ubertroffen war."

"Dealing with one's own mortality and that of others," "bearing" with one's own limitations (shortcomings and guilt) and those of others: this may sound heavy and oppressing. But must it be that way? The concern of a vital culture is laying bare and putting into practice the best things lying within human beings in imagination and thinking power, acknowledging the dignity of man and stressing his vulnerability. But cannot this only come to light in and through the illusionless recognition and acceptance of all that is implied in our mortality? Only then a fertility of life can come to light, which is not simply that of an increased production capacity.

Of course, the forcing-up-syndrome as well as the security-syndrome are, in a sense, one great acknowledgment of mortality, i.e. of the vulnerability (the nakedness) and the instability (the precariousness) of human existence. Now, however, there is the urgent question, if *this* way of acknowledging (by way of suppression) has not clearly proved to lead to the disintegration of (world) society, in which "liberty" and "equality" are unequally distributed, and in which "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" are non-committal, hollow phrases. There is also the question, if pre-modern and non-western wisdom could at present serve as an *aide-mémoire* and an eye-opener in the discussion between "moderns" and "post-moderns," particularly where the bearing of one's fate and that of the fragile others is concerned.

I shall dwell for a moment on this question in my final section. I shall confine myself to some notes based on the view of life of Francis—without denying that some aspects of the ancient (Stoic) wisdom may also be valid again.

#### IV. Some questions concerning our contemporary cultural situation

(1) The negligence of God and death that Rilke noticed in 1915, had already been sounded in words of the same tenor in a letter that Francis wrote to the "Rulers of the Peoples" in the twenties of the thirteenth century. The way in which this little man wished to die is even more striking: naked and lying on the floor. In this way he welcomed "Sister Death," while his brothers were singing the "Canticle of Brother Sun." Francis could not know how, by dying in this way, he showed a counterpart of the idea of a space-shield, which at the end of the twentieth century was to be considered as the absolute culminating point of a perfect security of life.

There is no denying that there were aspects of a performance, in the sense of *Aufführung* and play-acting, in this staging of Francis's death. Through "playing" he had tried to put into practice his outlook upon life. Or, considered from a different view-point, by playing that which he saw as the kernel of Christian life, he made his interpretation of human existence metaphorical,

i.e. into an active metaphor of his inspiration. "Bearing" a responsibility (*tragen*) constituted one reality with "transferring" (*übertragen*).

If, in this connection, we are allowed to speak of "making," Francis and his brothers "made" a mini-society by practicing what they saw as *their* role or vocation, and this in a *concertare* with other roles, forces, conceptions. This they did by resuming (*mimesis, imitatio*) a way of life or pattern of life that had touched them most deeply in Christ as their example. (We know that, in the century before Francis, a remarkable light was shed on "Jesus as Mother" by Cistercians.)<sup>18</sup> In other words: in this way Francis and his followers marked *their* position in the inevitable *conflit des Interprétations* within the rapidly developing burgher society, in which the unbridled desire of property, of might and career-making soon made itself felt.

Thus the attitude of "bearing" in Francis cannot be considered detached from his "conception" of life—this word taken in the sense of *Auffassung*: "taking upon his shoulders" his unique responsibility for others; bearing debt; bearing inevitable death and its signs; receiving the mandate to make life, received as a gift, bear fruit in passing it on. Ipso facto this conception also meant "resistance" against the forcing-up and security-syndromes, which had already announced themselves in those times. In other words: this conception at the same time implied a special way of resisting, namely by doing his utmost to realize what he saw as *good* human relations (and not, therefore, by criticizing others). "Resistance and surrender" (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, Bonhoeffer) became one reality in this attempt at showing respect by, if necessary, bearing the heavy load. This never meant wearing the heavy boots (*cothurni*) of actors in a classical tragedy, but being light-footed, i.e. as a *ioculator Dei*, a tumbler, *pazzo*, "Fool for Christ's sake," as if it were a matter of *comédie humaine*. In this respect too, he had some characteristics in common with cynics.

In her own way, spiritedly though peacefully, Clare, a kindred spirit, exhorted Agnes of Prague: "What you hold, may you always hold. What you do, may you always do and never abandon. But with swift pace, light step, and unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir up no dust, go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness...."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Cf Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley 1982).

<sup>19</sup>Francis & Clare, *Complete Works*, 196.

(2) Are the playfulness and light-footedness, which we noticed in the view of life of Francis and Clare, no more than a passing, volatile idyll, which cannot contribute anything towards the solution of the serious socio-philosophic problems anno 1990 etc.? Not mentioning the enormous differences between their society and ours, I shall try to trace a possible relevance for us in their motivation and orientation.

In whatever period one lives, sooner or later one is inevitably confronted with the certainty (I have already referred to it) that our existence is thoroughly precarious (unstable) and naked (vulnerable). In the first place this awareness forces itself upon us in the fear of the chaotic, i.e. of the threat to our identity through decay and downfall and by being exposed to the icy cold freakishness of the elements. These threats have throughout history been opposed by a defense Francis summed up in the words *sibi appropriare* and *se exaltare*: the persistent endeavor to obtain a durable identity.

How can it be understood that Francis and his followers tried to take up a radically different attitude with regard to the same threats, namely changing the urge to appropriate into an attitude of "giving back" and the desire to extol oneself into the attitude of esteeming, i.e. "holding up," the others? Was it for them a kind of "flight to the front"? What moved them toward this evident addition to the risks of existence?

In Francis, I think, everything hinges on his religious conviction of the primary importance of the "social" aspect of human being. He knew that that is where personal integrity and identity are really at stake. Negatively, this implies the conviction that acquiring property, meant to be a protection and security, soon causes fencing and shutting off, and therefore a fatal isolation with regard to others. This results in a constriction of the blood-circulation that unites and keeps alive the members of a community. The heart of the matter, however, is Francis's positive interpretation of the precariousness of our existence. The insecure vulnerability is the reverse (or the "negative") of the possibility of susceptible sensitiveness and sensitive susceptibility for others.<sup>20</sup>

In other words: vulnerability is also an openness, which enables us to recognize and acknowledge others in their sensitive vulnerability, to empathize with others, or to give them hospitality. Vulnerability is a possibility to do them justice in their fragile humanity—which is one of the meanings of the

<sup>20</sup>Cf. E. Levinas, *De plaatsvervanging (La substitution)*, ingeleid, vertaald en geannoteerd door Th. de Boer, (Baarn 1977), 74f.

word *reddere* in Francis. Likewise the dizzying experience of the instability of our existence implies the possibility to experience the unstable balance of the other as an invitation to assist him and sustain him in his frailty. In short, what matters is the conviction that this very "beautiful venture" of a life in mutually accepted vulnerability is the source of mutual solidarity.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the susceptibility, mentioned just now, is not pure passivity, but rather implies the act of receiving;<sup>22</sup> also that for Francis this act pre-supposes the faith in, and the hope of, God's help; and that this act of receiving and sustaining the other is evidently of a different order from that of "making" and "producing" arbitrarily. This other order is that of being able to wait, of letting grow what withdraws itself from the grasp of making man.

What does all this mean for the way in which Francis concretely deals with persons of a different persuasion? On this subject the following brief remarks.

(3) Of particular importance is the question of how Francis speaks about the way of dealing with non-believers, especially with persons of a different persuasion. From his own experience he knew of the excessive fanaticism in religions—with the extreme consequences of the "holy war" of the crusaders and the Muslims. The story of his journey to the Sultan, during which he crossed the front-line between the two armies, got about in Europe when he was still alive, as an unheard-of fact.<sup>23</sup> The story that he later talked with the Sultan in an atmosphere of mutual respect does seem to be reliable. On the other hand, indifference, in the sense of relativism, was alien to Francis. He sought a middle ground between the extremes of fanaticism and indifference. For example in his Rule, he touches the subject of "those who are going among the Saracens and other non-believers."<sup>24</sup> There he expressly warns his brothers not to hold disputes, in case they find themselves among non-believers. Instead, the brothers should behave as inferiors and servants.

In this serving attitude they are actually hosts. They offer an opportunity for others to be who they are. In this way the other need not belie himself, and need not feel to be in danger. Yet, Francis does not ask his brothers to belie themselves. They should simply say that they are Christians. In that way they, themselves, ask for hospitality, namely to be accepted in their being different. This request for

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (London 1979).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Th. van Velthoven, "Ontvangen als intersubjectieve act" ("Receiving as an intersubjective act"), in: idem, *De intersubjectiviteit van het zijn* ("The intersubjectivity of being") (Kampen 1988), 65-81.

<sup>23</sup> François de Beer, *François que disait-on de toi* (Paris 1977), 25ff.

<sup>24</sup> Francis and Clare, *Complete Works* 121 f.

hospitality should remain naked and unprotected. It must not be accompanied by theological arguments, leading to disputation. The brothers should simply say that they are Christians. This defenselessness is in itself the request for hospitality. It creates that open, but vulnerable space in which every mystery and every transcendence may dawn, because here all might and violence have disappeared.... In this open attitude a dialogue is hopefully possible, in which no one loses and everybody gains.<sup>25</sup>

Finally I should like to note:

(1) Whereas the usual situation is that people receive their social identity from property, and whereas often there is the urge to regard one's truth, in competition with others, as property, through which acknowledgment can be extorted "as if truth were a coin," Francis seems to have extended his apprehension with regard to appropriation, to truth.<sup>26</sup> Thus he anticipated later thinkers in that which Levinas considered as one of the most important intuitions of Kierkegaard, namely his exposition of a *vérité persécutée* which takes the place of a *vérité triomphante*.<sup>27</sup> It may be surmised that in this contrast a conception of the "holy" is being proffered that does not make itself known in power and superiority, but rather in humility and defenselessness.

(2) It is beyond dispute that this position of Francis is a venture. But recognition of the fear of loss of identity (which, indeed, is also often at the root of the usual fanaticism and indifference) may make us aware of the relevance of a reflection on "bearing" and "sustaining"—in short, of the hope of fruitfulness, in a dialogue of which the result is uncertain.

(3) The paradoxical insight, familiar to Francis, that insight alone is not sufficient, and that real wisdom is only attained through a life-practice, takes shape, among other things, in his putting into effect a "practical hypothesis." This was that brotherhood and sisterhood, as ideals of "equality," only reach their realization through the a-symmetric, motherly, attitude of *sustinere*. Thus, in deeds of "taking up" and "bringing home" the other, dawns the ethical *Sitz im Leben* of what seemed only to be a theoretical act of interpreting (*auffassen*).

<sup>25</sup>A. Jansen, "Thuis op de hele wereld. De spanning tussen broederschap en identiteit" ("At home in the whole world"), *Franciscaans Leven* 73 (1990) 172-181.

<sup>26</sup>Hegel quoting Lossing: "als ob die Wahrheit Munze ware," *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (ed. Hoffmeister) (Hamburg 1952) 33 (Vorrede).

<sup>27</sup>E. Levinas, *Nomspropres* (Toulouse 1976), 114f.