

The Spirituality of St. Francis: The Gospel Life

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When we are trying to examine and evaluate Francis's spiritual experience, we usually concentrate on particular subjects such as his poverty, joy, closeness to nature, etc. This procedure would be suitable enough if Francis's faith had been superficial and uncommitted, but it does not enable us to see what it really meant to him to meet the God who came so close to him and so enthralled him that he set out to follow the Son of God along the path of the Gospel.

This is so because what marks out sincere believers is that, sooner or later, God comes to meet them and asks them to make a commitment to Him in faith. However, their awareness of the importance of such a step or the fear of committing themselves can cause them to keep on postponing their acceptance of His offer. But the moment always arrives, as it did for Jonah, when they realize that running away leads only to another dead end, and they feel they have nowhere else to go. Then they surrender to Him who is stronger than they and without whom their lives would lose all meaning.

That, or something like it, is what happened to Francis. His dream at Spoleto so changed his values and so broadened his horizons that it took him several years to realize the full implications of what had happened to him and to reorganize his life so that it was a coherent and sensible answer to the God who had transformed him with His presence. This answer of his was, it is true, relatively original, yet, to some extent at least, it was conditioned by the socio-religious atmosphere of the time and by his own upbringing and education.

I Searching for the Gospel

Christianity in the twelfth century was marked at all levels by a general movement in search of the Gospel. Art, pilgrimages, the Crusades and even theology itself were, at one and the same time, both the cause and the effect of this wide spiritual movement, which extended over the whole period of Church history. For the first time, Christians everywhere felt that the Gospel

message, which promised freedom from fear and anxiety, was going to spread throughout the world.

1. The Humanity of God

It would seem that, in the early Middle Ages, there was a general urge to humanize God. Then art became spiritualized and was used in cathedrals and churches to depict the Son of man, God incarnate, whereas the Christ whom the faithful had so far venerated had been the majestic, sublime God of theology, the God of the fourth-century Fathers and the Roman mosaics, He who is consubstantial with the Father, who possesses all knowledge and who will one day come to judge the living and the dead.

The Carolingian revival had depicted Christ in imperial grandeur, so that theirs was a majestic Christ. The miniatures in the "Books of Hours" and the frescoes in the churches portrayed this apocalyptic Lord and stressed His power and dominion. The Gospels were read from this standpoint, and the everyday happenings described there were interpreted as being simple opportunities for God to show His power and magnificence. The pain and suffering which were part of Christ's earthly life were either glossed over or regarded as signs of His glory, with the result that His divinity was emphasized to the detriment of His humanity.

This apocalyptic Christ, especially as He is shown appearing at the Last Judgment, gradually gave way to a more human Christ, the Christ of the Last Judgment as described in the Gospels. The art-work in the cathedrals was a perfect reflection of this slow evolution; and those who built these great new churches simply expressed in stone Christianity's new-found religious sensitivity, its new image of God, the living Christ of the Gospels, the earthly Christ. This change was not an abrupt one but retained a continuity with the past. Romanesque symbolism was still used but now it was directed towards depicting Christ in a different way. He was still the central figure, but those grouped around him had begun to change with the new vision. The ancient musicians gave way to the Apostles, who had accompanied Christ during His earthly life. Depicted also, but not so centrally, were those who had gone before Him and foretold His coming, such as the kings of Judah and the prophets, as well as the various images that prefigured the God-man.

Representations of Christ's humanity were not confined to the miniatures or the frescoes, sculptures or stained-glass windows in the churches. The "mystery plays" soon appeared, with their favorite themes of the Nativity, Passion and Resurrection of Christ. These dramatizations of the Lord's life were performed in the churches and were based mainly on the Gospels, although popular piety added many details from apocryphal writings and even

from the people's own imagination. Francis's reenactment of the Nativity at Greccio was in this tradition of liturgical drama or "mystery plays."

The Christ whom we see in twelfth-century art shows the change in perspective brought about by the new spirituality. People had begun to sense that if they wanted to get closer to understanding the mystery of God-made-man, they had to rediscover His humanity. They were coming to see that Christ's human traits were essential to affirm His divinity; hence the representations of the crucified Christ became more human to make clear that the pain and suffering of the cross were the instruments of God's redeeming love for us.

Pilgrimages to the Holy Land were another factor in shaping the new Gospel spirituality. Once the barbarian invasions had ended, the ensuing period of peace encouraged the pilgrims to set forth. When the Crusaders had regained possession of Christ's tomb, there was a continuous flow of pilgrims to Jerusalem, so that popular piety was nourished by the Gospel fervor aroused by actual contact with the holy places in which Christ had lived, suffered and died. Being able to set foot on the very roads of Galilee, Samaria and Judea, where Christ Himself had walked, brought home forcibly to the pilgrims the humanity of Christ and contributed greatly towards creating an atmosphere in which the Gospels permeated a vast popular movement. Those who traveled to Jerusalem undertook their pilgrimage as an "imitation of Christ," a conviction which they expressed by having themselves rebaptized in the River Jordan before they visited all the places which the Savior had sanctified with His presence.

The Crusades enabled the pilgrims to have direct access to the places mentioned in the Gospels and allowed them to become acquainted with Eastern religious art, which stressed the human portrayal of divinity. Furthermore, the Crusaders stole from the Eastern churches innumerable paintings and relics, especially of the Passion, which were shared all over the West, and which, as a consequence, contributed towards humanizing still more the devotions of the faithful.

The beginnings of scholasticism, led by St. Anselm (†1109), also echoed this new spirituality by asking: "Why did God become man?" a question which served as the title of one of Anselm's principal works. The reasons which he gives for the Incarnation are really just lengthy meditations, yet they do show how sensitive the new rational theology was towards the problems that affected spirituality in the Church.

Other authors, such as John of Fecamp (†1076), traced the steps taken by the Redeemer in carrying out the work of salvation, not as a purely theological

investigation, but as an invitation to take part in them by reflecting prayerfully on them.

But there is no doubt that it was St. Bernard (†1153) who was the most influential in the process of humanizing Christology. Following in the patristic tradition, he used his sermons and biblical commentaries to expound the mysteries of Christ as they are related in Gospels; and he wrote in a tender, poetic style calculated to charm the reader. He did so because he knew that our human hearts are more easily moved to love Christ's humanity than His divinity since like is more readily drawn to like. Without Christ's humanity, our love of God would be "up in the air," as it were, with nothing to attach itself to. Accordingly, the Incarnation of the Word was God's loving way of helping our weakness. Christ's humanity is the light that assists us to discover His divinity. And this is not mere devout speculation. Like the bird in its hidden nest, like the swallow under the eaves, we must live in the Lord's wounds, close to His heart, in order to meditate on the mysteries of His humanity, especially His Incarnation, birth, death and Resurrection.

Theologians such as these contributed towards humanizing the image of God by finding in the Christ of the Gospels the Son who makes the Father's love present to us. In this way, Christ was shown to the faithful as the "sacrament," the outward sign, of the Father. So, believing in Him, adoring Him and following Him came to be seen as the best way to respond to God's call to salvation.

The medieval Christians needed to see in order to believe. What they first saw with their bodily eyes, they finally came to see with the eyes of the spirit. In his first Admonition, Francis expressed what the people felt and what the Gospel and the Church both teach when he said that no one has ever seen God and that the only way to the Father is through Christ. Christ, therefore, is both the Way as well as the Wayfarer in whose footsteps we must follow if we are to meet God.

We learn of this role of Christ as mediator from the Gospels, in which the narrative crystallizes His personality and activity, and where we are shown what God means for us and the way to reach Him, a spiritual journey that is animated by the Holy Spirit.

2. The Gospel as a Rule of Life

Proposing the Gospel as a rule of life for the faithful was, of course, not original. The Church had always presented the Gospel as the foundation of Christian life, the standard which Christians had to use to assess the validity of their faith. Rather, originality lay in the method of approaching the Gospel, that is, in the viewpoint from which the Gospel was read, since the reader's

response to the Gospel depends to a great extent on his or her social and religious situation.

In the twelfth century, society was looking back to the origins of its culture. The Church, too, was seeking the strength to renew itself by returning to the marrow of the Gospel and the primitive Church.

a) Monastic Gospel Life

St. Benedict had affirmed the Gospel nature of his Rule what he wrote in the Prologue: "Let us walk in His paths by the guidance of the Gospel." But it was Rupert of Deutz (†1129), the best exponent of ancient Benedictine spirituality, who defended the traditional monastic asceticism and claimed that the conservative monasticism of the "black monks" followed the lifestyle of the Apostles more closely than did the reforms of the innovators, the "white monks" or Cistercians. In his book, "On the Truly Apostolic Life," he held that the roots of the monastic life were to be found in the community at Jerusalem because the Apostles' practice of living in a community of shared love, prayer and possessions implied the existence of the first monastery, from which all the others derived. No Rule could be more fitting for the Apostles than the four Gospels themselves. The Gospels contain the most sublime doctrine, and so they are the most sublime Rule. The Fathers who later organized monastic life by means of their own particular Rules did nothing more than adapt the Rule of the Gospels to the needs of their times. We can conclude, then, that the monastic life is "truly apostolic" because it was founded by the Apostles, who were true monks; and because that life was the life of the Apostles, it was also the life of the Gospel.

But we must note that the Gospel life which Rupert was defending was that of the community at Jerusalem, a life of great fervor living in a community in which love, prayer and possessions were shared and which the monks, who, however, were rooted in a completely different tradition, that is on feudalism, took as their model.

At a time when society was beginning to awaken from a long period of lethargy and to look for different modes of life, the Cistercian reform appeared and offered a new way of understanding the monastic form of Gospel life. In spite of the Cistercians' insistence on seeking solitude as a means of being faithful to their original Rule, they did not regard this aspect of their life as the only approach to the Gospel. For them, the part of the Gospel was the poverty and humility which St. Benedict had proposed to them in the Prologue to his Rule.

No doubt we are here very far from the ideal of extreme poverty envisioned later by the radical movements among the laity. But a new outlook on the Gospel was dawning, one on which the most sensitive groups in the Church

were in agreement—the following of Christ as He appears in the Gospels, poor and humble, and bringing the Good News to all humanity.

The debate between the Cistercian, St. Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, and the conservative Peter the Venerable (†1156), Abbot of Cluny, clearly demonstrated how different were their conceptions of the monastic Gospel life. Peter defended the “discretion” and “moderation” suggested by mildness of the traditional monastic program, while Bernard stress the radical elements in following Christ in poverty and humility. Actually, each was trying to justify a social viewpoint that could have compromised the monastic Gospel life.

The Cluniac monasteries were then at the zenith of their religious and social power. Because their wealth in lands and money made a poverty-oriented approach to the Gospel impossible for them, they tried to justify their position by saying that it was only prudent to gather in and conserve what they could. In this way, they were convinced that they were really practicing poverty when they exercised their rights over parish churches and demanded the payment of tithes and first fruits, because thereby they were simply ensuring the independence of each abbey. By way of return, the abbeys helped their lay subjects with prayer and penance and the singing of the Divine Office, and give them alms and other material assistance whenever required. Furthermore, they said:

The monastic lands give employment to the peasants, artisans and other workers, who prefer to remain under the benevolent protection of the monks rather than suffer under the tyranny of the feudal lords. Many villages which had formerly been nests of thieves had become houses of prayer under monastic guidance and, similarly, castles had become oratories. As regards the manual labor prescribed by the Rule, we must remember that one can exert oneself, not only by working in the fields, but also by praying, reading or singing the psalms; and, when all is said and done, it's better to pray than to fell trees.

In contrast, the Cistercians had based their reform on an austere poverty that required them to work to support themselves. They settled far from centers of population and were careful to keep their buildings plain and to occupy only as much arable land as they could till with their own hands. Their income, therefore, came almost exclusively from the sale of their excess production since their isolated location and their simple liturgy meant that they had little contact with the faithful and received few offerings. However, despite their initial desire to live the Rule of St. Benedict in the spirit of the Gospel, they were soon guilty of the same failings that they had criticized in Cluny. Their lands grew so extensive that they had to have *conversi*, or lay brothers, to work them. Their buildings and churches grew more commodious and lavish, which attracted the faithful and, with them, their offerings.

The solitude in which they had at first hidden themselves began to break down as the monks' visits to the outside world grew ever more frequent. The great prestige which their monasteries had acquired at the end of the twelfth century coincided with their loss of Gospel impact on the new spirituality.

Besides the Cistercians, other new foundations rejuvenated the old monasticism. The Carthusians, for example, were in the eremitical tradition, which also felt the need to go back to the origins of the Church in search of their identity as followers of the Gospel. The first Carthusian Ordinances, which were drawn up at the end of the eleventh century, are usually attributed to St. Bruno and his disciple, Landuin. Their Ordinances say that the monastic Rules are, as it were, commentaries on the "Rule" of the Gospel. Hence, the Rule of the Carthusians was nothing other than the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ with the Catholic interpretation of the Doctors of the Church.

The Carthusian Gospel life was distinguished by solitude as the setting for prayer and the strictest poverty. This preference for the solitary life was based on:

the example of God Himself and the Lord Jesus, who, although He had no need of it, took it upon Himself as a preparation for His ministry, being tested by temptations and fasts. The Scripture says of Him that, leaving his disciples behind, he went up the mountain to pray in solitude, as He also did in Gethsemane on the night before His Passion. With these examples, Christ is trying to prove to us how beneficial solitude is for prayer, because, when He wished to pray, He did not want any companions, not even the Apostles.

As for poverty, Guigo, whom we have just quoted, wrote in the "Customs" that:

with the purpose of eliminating every occasion of greed, with the help of God and as far as is possible, both for ourselves and for posterity, we ordain by this document that all those who dwell in this place shall possess nothing outside the boundaries of their desert, neither fields, nor vineyards, nor gardens, nor churches, nor cemeteries, nor offerings, nor titles, nor anything that can belong to them.

The Carthusians' Gospel life in solitude and poverty was completed by their silent preaching. Guigo justified their principal apostolate of copying manuscripts by saying simply: "We... preach the Word of God by the work of our hands since we cannot do so with our mouths."

The Abbey of Grandmont, which was founded by the disciples of St. Stephen of Muret shortly after his death in 1124, also based its form of life on the Gospel Rule. The monks of Grandmont drew up their Rule when their customs had become firmly established, and in the Prologue they wrote:

It is true that a variety of spiritual itineraries have been provided by some of the Fathers, so that we speak about the Rule of St. Basil or St. Augustine or St. Benedict. Yet none of these Rules is the origin of the religious life but merely preserve and propagate it. They are not the root but only the leaves. On the contrary, as regards faith and salvation, there is only one Rule, the first and principal Rule of Rules, from which all the others flow as streams from the one fountain-head—the holy Gospel which the Savior gave the Apostles and which they spread faithfully through the whole world....

The counsels which the Lord gave in the Gospels are free and voluntary; but once the vows are made, these counsels become laws and obligations. Therefore, joined like branches to the vine which is Christ, strive to observe the precepts of His Gospel in so far as His grace allows you, so that, if you are asked what profession of Rule or Order you belong to, you will not be ashamed to identify yourself as followers of the first and principal Rule of the Christian religion, that is, of the Gospel, which is the fountain-head and beginning of all the Rules.

The hermits of Grandmont, who were called "Christ's poor men," chose self-renunciation as their way of living the Gospel life. Their Rule pointed out that one of the brothers' main objectives had to be:

to renounce churches, with all that pertains to them, as well as worldly honors, fields, cattle, tithes and any kind of fixed income, markets, fairs, visits from relatives, law cases whether on their own behalf or on behalf of others, seeking alms, making provision even for a single day, and all those other things which we have renounced for love of God. On the contrary, we must persevere until the end in the hermitage as men who are dead and cast off by the world.

The hermit, St. Norbert of Xanten (†1134), founder of the Premonstratensians, had to answer accusations leveled at him for his work as a popular preacher. He defended himself by saying that he drew his inspiration for his way of life directly from the Gospel and that, therefore, no one could reproach him for it.

Abelard and Heloise also held that monastic life should be a Gospel way, centered on keeping the vows. In their correspondence with each other, they expressed different ideas about the Gospel nature of the new Rule for the Monastery of the Paraclete, of which Heloise was Abbess. In one of her letters to Abelard, she wrote that she wanted to observe the Gospel to the full,

in a way that does not claim to be more than Christian since the Fathers decided to impose on us no Rule other than the Gospel with no kind of added burden by way of multiplicity of vows.

In reply, Abelard described his desire to establish the religious life on the Gospel. He did this in an ascetical treatise in which he based the monastic life for women on three principal virtues: continence, poverty and silence, which correspond to the Lord's precepts to gird our loins (Lk 12:35), to renounce all possessions (Lk 14:33) and to avoid careless words (Mt 12:36):

Poverty includes forsaking our own will in such a way that, having abandoned it completely, we follow naked the naked Christ, as the Apostles did. For love of God, not only must we give up all earthly goods and attachments, but subordinate our wills to His, submitting our wills to the will of our spiritual superior and entrusting ourselves to him who takes the place of Christ for us, as if he were Christ and for the sake of Christ.

b) Clerical Gospel Life

The reform of the secular clergy which began in the eleventh century was not the result of the priests' own desire to lead lives more in accord with the Gospel. Instead, it arose mainly from the decision of Pope Gregory VII to solve once and for all the problem of intervention of the lay lords in the nomination of clergy with its logical consequences of simony and concubinage.

The Pope meant to use these same lay lords as well as the upper ranks of the clergy to implement the reform. However, in those regions where the feudal system was firmly implanted, the lords and higher clergy persistently refused to promote the reform because it conflicted with their personal interests. There was less resistance in the more democratic areas, so that the spiritual improvement in the lives of the clergy was possible in those places. And once the authority of the Church in nominating the clergy had been at least partly restored, the reform was aimed at ensuring that the clergy first observed celibacy before going on to require them to practice poverty in their lives.

The secular clergy never had a clear spiritual role model since spiritual perfection was generally considered to be the concern of the monks alone. The proposed reform of the clergy, in order to solve the problems of clerical concubinage and wealth, was effected by forming the priests of each church into "canonries," in which they led a community life and shared property in common.

St. Augustine had held up the example of the first community in Jerusalem as a model of monastic life for the secular clergy. St. Romuald (†1027) revived this ideal and strove to promote community life among the secular priests. Through his efforts to eliminate the evils of simony, many canons and priests who had been living worldly lives as if they were so many laymen, were persuaded to obey a superior and live in community. His disciple and biographer, St. Peter Damian (†1072), held that the Rule of the canons was derived from the Apostles' form of life since, to a certain extent, the new communities imitated the tender infancy of the primitive Church.

When the conditions favoring simony and concubinage had been reduced or removed entirely, then having the clergy live in community had the effect of requiring them to practice other priestly virtues, such as poverty, penance,

gratitude for their vocation and generosity towards others in their ministry, etc. Poverty and preaching were perhaps the salient characteristics of the Gospel life as lived by the Canons Regular. St. Peter Damian associated poverty with preaching because, he argued, since it is the priest's duty to preach and since every preacher should be poor, then every priest worthy of the name should also be poor. The Rule of the Canons Regular was modeled on the type of life led by the Apostles, in which no one regarded anything as his own, and everything was held in common by all. How could priests award themselves the prerogative of personal property when Christ did not allow His Apostles to have it?

Because of the way the canons grouped themselves together into communities which were very similar to the monastic ones, some people wanted to deny them the right to engage in the various activities of the apostolate. But the Canons Regular succeeded in spreading through almost all of Christendom, supplying a very varied ministry. Yet, despite the fact that the canons were able to raise the spiritual level of the clergy, we must remember that they were a privileged élite, and that they experienced great difficulty in communicating the spirituality of the reform to the rest of the secular clergy who did not live in community and who were in the vast majority. And the Canons Regular received their new members, not from the ranks of the existing clergy, but from vocations among the laity.

c) *The Lay Gospel Life*

Contact with the monks and Canons Regular, who had chosen a Gospel life after the example of the Apostles, as well as the activity of the wandering preachers who lived a Gospel life in poverty and homelessness, had the effect of leading many lay people to make a greater commitment to their Faith.

The chronicler, Bernold of Constance (†1100), described the most marked characteristics of this ascetical phenomenon of the eleventh century, which took shape in different types of lay associations. At that period, the common life flourished in many regions, not only among the clergy and monks, but also among lay people who, with deep piety, had committed themselves and their possessions to their own form of community living. Although in their manner of dress they did not resemble monks or clerics, these lay people were not considered any less deserving of respect. Out of devotion, they renounced the world, lived a common life and submitted themselves and their possessions to the religious communities of clerics and monks, to whom they were content to render obedience and service. And it was not only men, but women, too, who made up this countless multitude who dedicated themselves to a similar form of life. Even in the villages, many girls renounced marriage and the world and chose some priest as their spiritual director. Married couples also were in-

spired to live like the religious, whom they obeyed with great docility. This latter form of life flourished especially in Germany, where whole villages undertook such a commitment and strove unceasingly to live holy lives.

Gerhoh of Reichersberg described the different categories of "converts" or "penitents" who joined these movements of lay spirituality:

In the first place, there are those who associate themselves with the regular communities of monks or canons, who accept both penitents and innocents. Then there are those who, while remaining in their own homes, imitate at least the followers of the Apostles if not their close companions, and if not the Apostles themselves, then at least their disciples. By remaining at home, they follow a safer path than if they left to become bad "converts," because if, through helping the poor, they achieve absolute poverty, it means that they are on the path of true apostolic life, and especially if, while earning their living by their own labor, they care for the sick and for those who are unable to work. Finally, there are the married couples who, while remaining married, decide to abstain from all sexual relations for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. They, too, can aspire to follow Christ in their own way of life.

The practice of community life made each one share in apostolic perfection. Those who could not leave everything and follow naked the naked Christ, accepted the rule which the disciples of the Apostles had drawn up so that they could live at least a modified form of Gospel life, namely, the life of those who, while they did not aspire to imitate the Apostles, still led stricter lives than the married people and put themselves and their possessions at the service of the "saints," that is, of the religious, the clergy, the poor, the sick, pilgrims, etc.

In short, it was a question of opening up to everyone the possibility of living the Gospel life,

because neither married couples, nor the rich, nor judges, nor knights, nor soldiers should lack norms if they really want to learn the teachings of Christ, for every class as well as every profession will find in the Catholic Faith and in the teaching of the Apostles a rule suited to their way of life. Therefore, let the soldier and the villager—indeed, let every Christian learn the Faith handed down by the Apostles, that is, let them learn the rule of life which the Apostles gave for their profession and state of life.

Jacques de Vitry (†1240) also championed this bringing of Gospel perfection within the reach of all classes of society:

Those who renounce the world and enter religion are not the only religious; so also are all the Christian faithful who serve the Lord in obedience to the rule of the Gospel, and who, therefore, live under the one, supreme Abbot.

The groups of "Beguines" who were formed, in Belgium especially, and whom de Vitry encouraged and protected, were examples of lay communities

pledged to a true following of Christ in the Gospel way. The same could be said of the brotherhoods of penitents who, while still living at home, led lives of commitment to the Gospel and who, by their poverty and prayer, showed that they had taken seriously the demands of their Faith.

But it was the radical poverty movements, both orthodox and heretical, which were most fervently committed to living the Gospel life to the full. The Provost of the Premonstratensian at Steinfeld (Cologne) sent St. Bernard a report on the behavior of a group of Cathari, about whom he wrote:

They say that they alone form the Church because only they follow in the footsteps of Christ and are the true followers of the apostolic life, not seeking the things of this world and owning neither houses, nor fields, nor money, after the example of Christ, who had no possessions and who allowed none to the Apostles. "Yet you," they say to us, "You pile up house upon house, field upon field, and you seek the things of this world. But we, Christ's poor, homeless, fleeing from city to city, suffer persecution with the Apostles and martyrs, like sheep in the midst of wolves; yet we lead a holy and very poor life, with fasts and abstinence, persevering day and night in prayer and hardship, and asking others only for the necessities of life."

The origin of the Waldensians is also connected with the Gospel life. When Peter Waldes (or Valdes) was converted, he asked a master of theology which was the best and surest way to attain salvation and was told: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor" (Mt 19:21). In 1179, Peter and his companions went to Rome to have the Pope approve his "Proposal," which would allow him to live absolutely and literally according to the teaching of the Gospel. In his profession of faith in 1180, he described what he wished to do:

Since, according to James the Apostle, faith without works is dead (Jas 2:17), we renounce the world, giving all we have to the poor, as the Lord counsels; and we have decided to be poor to the point of not being worried about the morrow and not accepting gold or silver or anything similar from anyone, except our daily food and clothing. We propose to observe the evangelical counsels as if they were commandments.

Actually, this was not just pious talk, because the English ecclesiastical court official, Walter Map, had already described the Waldensians as having no fixed abode, traveling around in pairs, barefoot, clothed in woolen garments, with no personal property and having everything in common like the Apostles, naked, following the naked Christ. Their Gospel life, inspired by that of the Apostles, took the form of radical poverty and itinerant preaching. The basis of their poverty was the imitation of Christ and the Apostles, and so Durandus of Huesca said: "Our faith and works are justified by the Gospels. If you ask

why we are poor, we shall say that it is because we have read that our Savior and His Apostles were poor.”

Their zeal to share with others their discovery of the Gospel led them to engage in itinerant preaching, and this proved to be the greatest obstacle to their being approved by the Church. In their eagerness to make converts, they established themselves in Milan, where the first thing they did was to open a “school” or meeting place where they could preach and where the public could learn the Scriptures. These Waldensians of Lombardy practiced a less itinerant form of Gospel life and one which was more like that of the Humiliati.

These Humiliati took the primitive community at Jerusalem as their model. They pledged themselves to live simple, upright lives and came together for prayer and Gospel study. Only the leaders visited the various communities and, during these visits, they worked at the woolen trade like the others but only in a minor capacity. One part of the movement ended up confronting the Church on the matter of preaching, but the majority of them accepted the decision of the Roman Curia to have them divide up into three Orders: one of canons, composed of clerics; a second, a monastic one, composed of men and women religious; and a third, made up of lay people, who remained in their homes.

The “Proposal” for the lay Order, approved by Innocent III in 1201, defined their spiritual objective as being to preserve, with the Lord’s help, humility of heart and meekness of manners, as the Lord said: “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). Their Gospel commitment took the form of refusing to take oaths, making restitution for unlawful gains or for usury exacted, paying tithes to the clergy, giving alms to the poor, preserving marital chastity, fasting on the appointed days, dressing simply in keeping with their state of life, praying for the living and the dead, and meeting every Sunday to hear the word of God and the exhortation of one of the better educated brothers, who would encourage them to correct their ways and to perform acts of mercy, but who would not deal with questions of faith or the sacraments.

This concludes our brief survey of the influence which the Gospel movement had on Christian spirituality before the time of St. Francis. In it, we have seen that, at all levels of the Church, people were striving to come closer to the poor, humble Christ of the Gospels. In the main, their approach took either of two forms: the wandering life of the itinerant preacher or the more settled life modeled on the primitive community in Jerusalem. Both had the word of God as their rule of life, first, to guide their own journey in faith, and then to offer to others in their various methods of preaching.

Poverty and preaching, then, were the formative elements of the Gospel way of life which inspired Francis's own conversion, which guided his spiritual journey, and which made that journey the most influential one in this movement in the Church.

II Francis's Gospel Life

If we want to form some idea of what the Gospel meant to Francis, we must realize how important the Bible was for medieval society. It was regarded as containing all knowledge, scientific as well as theological, and it was the basic text for all instruction, in the universities as well as in the primary schools, where it was used to teach reading and writing. In it was hidden the whole of reality and all the answers to every possible question. That is why an aura of mystery surrounded it, for it was nothing less than the knowledge and will of God in book form, arousing a sense of religious and secular reverence, especially among lay people, to most of whom it was inaccessible for several reasons.

Francis was one of those lay people, and a twofold barrier stood between him and the Scriptures—the book itself and the language in which it was written. Although the medieval Church never officially forbade the reading of the Scriptures, there were restrictions on the use of the Bible, arising especially from the obstinate, sectarian attitude of some of the radical poverty groups, such as the Waldensians and the Albigensians. However, while Scripture reading was not forbidden, the reality was that few lay people read the Bible, especially because of the prohibitively high cost of books and also because most lay folk were unable to read. Reading and studying the text of the Bible was the clergy's business, and not even all clerics had read the whole text, mainly because the manuscripts were so very expensive.

The other obstacle between Francis and the Bible was the language. He had learned how to read and write Latin, but he never really mastered the language, as we can see from the autograph manuscripts that have come down to us and from the testimony of Thomas of Eccleston in his chronicle, in which he speaks about a letter of Francis's being "written in bad Latin." Actually fluency in Latin would have been of little use to a young cloth merchant like Francis, since he would normally conduct his business in the vernacular.

1. *Francis and the Gospels*

To the medieval mind, only a priest could surmount the double obstacle of the book and the language because, as the minister of the Word and the

sacraments, his sole mission was to help the people understand the Gospel message.

Two incidents narrated by the Saint's biographers are evidence of this attitude. In the first (1Cel 22; L3S 25), when Francis had heard the Gospel passage on the sending out of the Apostles read in church, he asked the priest to explain it so that he could understand it better. And in the second (Fior 2; cf. 2Cel 15; LM 3:3; L3S 28), when he was looking for a Gospel program for his infant fraternity, he again had recourse to a priest for help.

There is no doubt that the biographers are using Francis as an example when they record incidents which show him respecting the priest's role as mediator and interpreter. But, even apart from this, the attitude he adopted all through his life towards theologians and the "written word" leads us to believe that, in his approach to the Scriptures, there was always an undercurrent of the medieval layman's awe of the Bible.

While it is difficult to find the sources of Francis's knowledge of Scripture, we must remember that, in the Middle Ages, Europe was deeply and completely Christian, with the result that all its resources were used to bring its Christian values before the people, resources which undoubtedly brought the Scriptures close to Francis.

One of these resources was teaching. We have already said that the Bible was the text used in all schools: so the psalter, as well as a few liturgical prayers such as the Creed and the Our Father, etc., was the basis of primary education. Francis's writings show that he knew the psalter well—after all, he had learned to read and write from it—and also that he knew many of the psalms by heart, for such memorization was a teaching method then widely used.

Art in its many forms, painting, sculpture, stained glass, etc., was another source of biblical knowledge. In a society like that of the Middle Ages, where the general level of education was low, art was one of the principal vehicles of instruction and religious formation, so much so that art was regarded as "the poor man's book." By means of the various art-works to be found in all the churches and cathedrals, the ordinary, illiterate people gained a knowledge of bible history and the truths of the Faith.

We must also include the "liturgical drama" in the religious plastic arts. These "mystery" plays were written in the vernacular, were based on liturgical and apocryphal texts and helped to stimulate popular piety as well as to deepen the people's knowledge of the most important events in Scripture.

Preaching was one of the arts, too, and it was an important element in Francis's biblical education. Besides the traditional preaching of the bishops and the parish priests, there was that of the monastic preachers, especially the Cistercians, and also that of the itinerant preachers, both cleric and lay, whose

Gospel message, delivered in plain language, was reinforced by their own example of a simple, poor life-style. Although we have no evidence that Francis had any contact with these movements of itinerant preachers, it is still quite probable that he had, since the road from mainland Europe to Rome passed near Assisi.

Even a cursory examination of Francis's writings will show that the main source of his biblical knowledge was the liturgy, whose influence we can clearly see in his use of antiphons, prayers and phrases from the Ordinary and Canon of the Mass as well as from the commentaries of the Fathers in the lessons of the Divine Office. So it is quite likely that it was from the liturgy and not from reading the Bible itself that Francis gleaned the quotations from Scripture which are scattered throughout his writings.

2. *How did Francis read the Gospels?*

Francis's own idea of the Bible differed markedly from that of his biographers, who were perfectly well acquainted with the contemporary scientific methods of biblical scholarship, as we can see from the symbolic exposition of Scripture which they use in handling the various texts. In contrast, Francis, who was no theologian, read the Bible in a straightforward, uncomplicated way. And his biographers knew this so well that they attribute to him only those texts from the "open" books of the Bible, that is, those books which the laity were allowed to read, such as the historical ones, etc.

The religious formation which Francis had received as a medieval layman fitted him only for the simplest, plainest reading of the Gospel. Still, this must not cause us to confuse his "Gospel literalism" with the fundamentalism of the newer American sects. For Francis, the "letter" of Scripture was not absolute and fundamental (Adm 7). He always interpreted Scripture, not on the surface, but in depth, and he was guided by his religious formation, which, though limited, was sound. This literalism of his must have colored his thinking when he was formulating his plan of life and basing it on a radical following of the Lord's counsels. His literal, but still liberal, interpretation of Scripture allowed him to make completely new experiments when he placed himself in the same socio-religious situation as the Apostles, namely, living as a poor itinerant. Undoubtedly, this helped him to grasp the full meaning of those Gospel texts which the "itinerant prophets" of the primitive church had received from Christ and according to which they lived and preached to others. One's reading of the Gospel is always partisan and never neutral; and so, approaching it from circumstances similar to those in which Christ and His Apostles lived, must have helped Francis to understand it better.

Because he read and understood the Gospel "simply and plainly," he had no sophisticated scholarly devices which could serve as a justification and pretext

for evading its full meaning. His insistence that no glosses were to be made on the Gospel, and his directions on how it was to be understood (Test 38) explain his decision to approach it simply, because, after all, only those who put the Gospel into practice can really understand it. At least, that is what Francis believed when he gave a poor woman, the mother of a friar, the first and only copy of the Gospel the Fraternity of the Portiuncula possessed. His reasons for doing so were clear: the Lord is better pleased when we practice what the Gospel contains than when we only read it (2Cel 91; LP 93). In other words, Francis started putting the Gospel into practice without waiting to have its every implication fully clear in his mind. He dared to try the experiment of living it, and from that he discovered a new way to understand it.

Despite his practical, down-to-earth understanding of the Gospel, Francis did not read it with gross, superficial literalism. We could give many examples in which, under the appearance of a pedestrian literalism, Francis gives a re-reading or interpretation of the text, accommodating it to the existing circumstance. The theme of literal interpretation of the Gospel appears only later, when the Fraternity were already settled in friaries. But Francis's understanding of the Gospel was "spiritual," from within, like that of St. John the Evangelist, an understanding which, according to Egger, was marked by his respectful attitude before God's word, his openness to spiritual conversion, his putting the Word into practice and his conviction that the meaning of Scripture was to be reached by acting on it.

3. How did Francis use the Gospel texts?

When we are studying the scriptural quotations in Francis's writing, we must exercise some caution. In the first place, we must do so because we cannot project into his time the division of Scripture into chapters and verses which we have today. Because of the influence of the liturgy, Francis's religious language is steeped in the thought of the Gospels. As a result, when he wrote, thoughts from the Gospel came to him spontaneously and without strict reference to precise quotations. That is, when he wrote about Gospel themes, he expressed his ideas without quoting the evangelists, except in a general way. He first expounded some radical, basic principle and then supported it with ideas from the Gospel itself.

In addition, we do not know exactly how skillful Francis was in finding texts appropriate to the Gospel ideas which he wished to express. We do know that his best authenticated writings, such as those in his own hand and the Testament, have scarcely any quotations, while those for which he needed collaborators, such as the two Rules, are full of biblical texts. The most striking example of this is the first Rule, in which by far more space is given to quotations than to his personal ideas. Happily, in this instance, we have a

witness to help us clear up the problem. In his *Chronicle* (n. 15), Jordan of Giano tells us that Francis knew that Caesar of Speyer was well-versed in Sacred Scripture, so he confided to him the task of finding appropriate Gospel texts to "adorn" the Rule which he himself had already drawn up in simple words. And that is what Caesar did.

From Francis's action in this case, we can deduce that the more quotations we find in his writings, the more help he had from his collaborators. And that can cause us to wonder just how much real knowledge Francis had of the Scriptures, especially when he was using them in his works.

In my opinion, we should not take the extreme position of thinking that the whole array of quotations that appear in his writings were supplied entirely by others. Francis was perfectly capable of knowing the principal ideas of the Gospels and of suggesting them to scholars who could then look up the appropriate texts and quote them accurately. Moreover, the fact that he did not personally supply the whole range of quotations in his writings does not mean that he was ignorant of them. For example, when the first Rule had been "adorned" by Caesar of Speyer, Francis must have read and revised it several times, so that he would have become so familiar with the texts that he would have made them his own.

Keeping all this in mind, we see that the Old Testament books most used in Francis's writings were Genesis, Tobit, the Psalms, Isaiah and Daniel; and from the New Testament, the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John and, to a lesser extent Mark; the Epistles of Paul, especially Romans, Corinthians and Thessalonians, also those of St. James, St. Peter, and St. John; and finally, Revelation (the Apocalypse). To explain the preference of some texts over others, we would probably have to know which books of the Bible were most used in the liturgy of the time, especially in the places in which Francis lived.

4. How did Francis live the Gospel?

Francis was a practical man. He had not chosen the Gospel just to know it intellectually but rather to practice it in his daily life. However, while we are finding out what kind of Gospel life Francis lived, we shall also have to ask ourselves how did he view that life and what was his approach when putting it into practice.

The Synoptic Gospels contain certain "logia" or sayings of Christ, according to which the community at Jerusalem lived and which they handed down. These texts propose an itinerant, radical following of Christ and are the essence of the Gospel. They offer to anyone who has chosen to follow Christ the possibility of returning to his own personal roots and, from there, rebuilding a whole new life on the pattern which Christ offers.

All these radical "sayings" which appear in the Synoptics, except the one concerning eunuchs (Mt 19:12) and the other, about scandal (Mk 9:43-48), appear also in Francis's writings, especially in his two Rules. This shows the influence that Francis could exert on his collaborators when it came to searching out and applying Gospel texts to his writings, even though he did not do that research himself.

Almost all the radical texts appear in the first Rule, which stresses how hard we must strive to enter by the narrow gate (11:13—*Note*: Unless otherwise indicated, all references in this section are to the first Rule, usually abbreviated as RegNB), leaving father and mother and even ourselves (1:4), denying ourselves and taking up our cross in order to follow Christ (1:3), losing our life in order to find it (16:11) because it is of no profit if we gain the whole world while losing our own life (7:1). Therefore, we must be converted (21:3), leaving the dead to bury their dead (22:18), forgetting all our cares in order to serve the Kingdom better (8:2).

Those who follow Christ must be peacemakers (Adm 15; RegNB 14:2), not slaves to legalism (9:13-16), and joyful when they are fasting (3:2). They will confess Christ before the world (16:8), even though they are persecuted for it (16:16). Rather than defend themselves or resist (14:4), they should be like lambs among wolves (16:1-2), striving not to react violently (22:21-23), but loving their enemies (Adm 14:4), always forgiving them (21:6, 22-28) and not fearing those who kill the body (16:17-18).

Those who wish to follow Christ must fulfill the law from within (11:4) and realize that evil does not come from outside but from the heart (22:7-8). In the presence of God and of men, they must consider themselves slaves who do what they ought and who are really useless (11:3; 23:7). And if they have any post of responsibility which gives them power, far from accepting the title of father or master (22:3-35), they should conduct themselves as the servants and the least of all (5:10-11), after the example of Christ the Lord, who came to serve. Those who wish to join the community of Christ must leave all they own in favor of the poor (1:2) and set out through the world, free of all hindrance (14:1). Once they have put their hands to the plow, they should not look back (2:10) but should go ahead, safe in the knowledge that the Lord will keep His promises (1:5). And, above all else, they should love the Lord God (2EpFid 18), knowing that, if they persevere to the end, they will find salvation (16:21).

Among the non-synoptic texts in the first Rule which ask for the same radical detachment are those of St. John concerning the Holy Spirit, who must be adored in spirit and in truth (22:30-31), and the command of love (22:2), as well as that of washing each others' feet (6:4).

The theme of following in the footsteps of Christ comes from the epistles of St. Peter and from St. Paul's pastoral epistles (22:2), in complete submission to every creature (16:6) and without useless disputes or quarrelsome words (11:1), but with kindness and gentleness (11:7-9).

This mosaic of texts gives us a clear picture of the true follower of Christ, and from it we can gauge the fidelity with which Francis captured the essence of the Gospel, shaping it in the socio-religious mold of the itinerant life which he had adopted when he was drawing his plan of action.

5. *What does following Christ mean?*

When we are beginning to build up our life of faith, we must have a clear vision of the Kingdom, with God as the Father who loves us and wants us to be with Him forever there. This living experience of God prevents us from sheltering in the safe harbor of the past and directs us towards the open sea of the future. When we have felt this presence of God, we can no longer remain shut up on our own haven of peace, because that very Presence draws us towards the future to seek His face and to meet Him openly. When we come to see that God is our loving Father and fully realize His goodness to us, we are strongly drawn to return His love, an attraction which can take many forms, as can be seen from the great number of ways in which we can be good Christians.

Certainly, Christ understood that this response to the saving love of the Father had to take the form of a life of itinerant preaching to announce the good news of the Kingdom. After His Resurrection, He became the only Way to reach God. But even during His earthly life, He was the "sacrament" or visible sign of the Father, so that following Him was the equivalent to answering the saving call of God. Accordingly, He called others to follow Him, a call which involved living with Him, taking part in preaching the Kingdom and sharing His later sufferings.

When Christ calls us, it is not merely to follow an ideology, to accept a system of theoretical truths or to take on a more or less demanding rule of life. Nor is it just a call to take part in a community project such as building up the Kingdom, no matter how important that may seem. While all that is included in following Christ, it is not the heart of the matter. It is *Christ Himself* we must follow, and Him alone.

Yet this experience of relationship and intimacy with the Lord does not end in oneself. Christ called His Apostles "to be with him, and to be sent out to preach" (Mk 3:13-15). Therefore, following Him means more than living close to Him: it also implies being sent out to work so that others may open their hearts to God and find salvation.

Taking part in Christ's life and work leads inevitably to sharing his fate. Throughout the Gospels, there is the perception that Christ was to suffer a violent death, the death on the cross. But there is also the constant conviction that the disciple is not greater than the master. Therefore, anyone who wishes to follow Christ must accept a fate similar to His and walk the same road, carrying the cross (Mt 10:38).

This is the picture of the historical Christ which the Gospel paints and which the Jerusalem community lived out and handed down in the Church. And it is the one which Francis perceived and upon which he modeled his own Gospel life and that of his Fraternity.

The way of life which appears in the two Rules and which Francis put into practice as "the form of the holy Gospel" viewed from a radical poverty perspective, cannot be reduced simply to following Christ in poverty. St. John the Evangelist's theme of God adored "in spirit and in truth," the synoptic themes of mission and the Beatitudes, as well as the theme of the suffering servant of Isaiah are also fundamental to any understanding of Francis's spirituality.

a) Adoring the Lord God

Our culture is certainly an anthropocentric one, in which we humans are the measure of all things. When we speak about "experiencing God," we are immediately placing the emphasis on our own, subjective perception. This is now a common attitude and one which has even been turned into a science, "the phenomenology of religion."

In contrast, for the people of the Middle Ages, the fact that God existed, objectively and outside themselves, was self-evident. So Francis did not even pause to consider God's existence, as we would deem necessary nowadays. Instead, he derived his God-centered view from the world around him and from his contemporaries' way of thinking and speaking about God as the One to whom we humans should naturally and spontaneously refer everything.

This uncritical attitude towards the existence of God may seem simplistic to us who are so inclined to be skeptical. However, Francis's belief in God's existence was not the result of a mere intellectual exercise but came from his firm conviction, based on experience. The overwhelming presence of God which shook his life to its very foundations was more than sufficient reason for him to be able to speak about God without first having to prove that He existed. Our problem today is that we try to speak about God without ever having experienced His presence. The result is that we do not go beyond analyzing the possibility of meeting Him. In contrast, Francis began with the fact that God had already made Himself present to him, so that, when he spoke about God, he was really only describing his own spiritual experience.

In the first Rule, especially in chapters 22 and 23, it is clear that, for Francis, the need to seek and meet God was the heart of the Gospel life which he wanted to live and which he proposed to his brothers, so that, animated by the Spirit, they could follow in the footsteps of Christ and thus be able to reach the Father. The soul's response to the Trinity is the nucleus of the Gospel and, therefore, of the form of life with which Francis wished to help himself and other to be faithful to the demands of the Gospel.

Since we have left everything voluntarily, it is only logical, according to Francis, that we should carefully follow the will of God and do whatever pleases Him (RegNB 22:9). But this will not happen spontaneously because, deep within us, there is a mysterious power of evil which tries to gain possession of our hearts by making us forget what God means to us (RegNB 22:19-21). Accordingly, we must be alert to remove every obstacle and dismiss every worry so that we can serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with unfettered hearts and allow the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to take possession of those hearts (RegNB 22: 26f).

Only hearts that are inhabited by the Trinity are able to thank the Father for having created, through His Son and with the Holy Spirit, all things spiritual and material and especially us, who are made in His image and likeness (RegNB 23:1).

Our thanks are due also for the generosity which the Father showed when His beloved Son, Jesus, was born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit and redeemed us by His cross, blood and death (RegNB 23:3). Raised from the tomb by the power of God and seated at the right hand of the Father, this same Lord Jesus will come in His glory at the end of time to judge how we have loved Him and, if we are judged fit, to enable us to go on loving Him to our full capacity (RegNB 23:4).

But our weakness as sinners prevents us from praising Him as we should. Hence, "we humbly ask that our Lord Jesus Christ..., together with the Holy Spirit..., give you thanks as it pleases you and Him for everything" (RegNB 23:5). In this way, our hearts will be ready to open out to God's merciful love.

Let us all love the Lord God with all our heart, all our soul, with all our mind and all our strength, and with fortitude, and with total understanding, with all our powers, with every effort, every affection, every emotion, every desire and every wish.... Therefore, let us desire nothing else, let us wish for nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight, except our Creator and Redeemer and Savior.... Let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us or come between us. Let all of us, wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of day, every day and continually, believe truly and humbly and keep in our heart, and love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the most high and supreme eternal God, Trinity and Unity, the Father and the

Son and the Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Savior of all who believe in Him and hope in Him and love Him (RegNB 23:8-10).

The marrow of the Gospel is Christ's confiding, prayerful attitude towards His Father. Francis grasped this and translated it into an unceasing search for the Triune God, so that he could praise and thank Him for the whole mystery of salvation with which He has made Himself present to us.

b) The Gospel of Mission

The beginning of the "revelation" which the Lord gave Francis that he should live according to "the form of the holy Gospel" is described by the biographers as Francis's discovering the Gospel text in which Christ sent His disciples out to preach (1Cel 22; LM 3:1; L3S 25). The texts from Luke and Matthew are used in chapter 14 of the first Rule to paint a picture of the friar being sent out into the world, a picture which contains all the elements required for a mission: travel, poverty, peacefulness, approachability, etc.

Although the friar's guidelines of conduct are concentrated in chapter 14 of the first Rule, the true identity of the Franciscan movement is outlined in both Rules and in the biographies, where it is seen as a confident opening of one's heart to God while traveling the roads of the world, preaching penance so that everyone can hear the good news of Christ. The sending out of the Apostles so shaped the actions of Francis and his first brothers that, when he was trying to condense the Gospel form of life into one Rule, this mission text became the key to his whole program. No doubt, he included it in the Proposal (or *propositum vitae*) which he presented to Innocent III in 1210, but it certainly appears in the first Rule as the mark of the Franciscan preacher of the Gospel.

When the brothers go about through the world, they should carry nothing for the journey, neither a knapsack, nor a purse, nor bread, nor money, nor a staff. And in whatever house they enter, let them first say: Peace to this house. And, remaining in that house, they may eat and drink whatever their hosts have offered. They should not offer resistance to evil, but if someone should strike them on one cheek, let them offer him the other as well. And if someone should take away their clothes, they should not deny him also their tunic. They should give to all who ask; and if anyone takes what is theirs, they should not demand that it be returned (RegNB 14: 1-6).

This missionary apostolate shaped the whole organization of the Fraternity. The liturgy, poverty, common life, etc., were all aimed at facilitating the itinerant mission to preach the merciful goodness of God, who calls us to do penance and to be converted so that, in the end, we shall be able to welcome the new reality which the Kingdom will bring us.

However, when the Fraternity had become integrated into the pastoral life of the Church and had begun to settle down in friaries, this mission text proved to be incompatible with the new form the Order was assuming, so that

it practically disappeared from the second Rule. Yet, for Francis, it continued to be fundamental because it marked the start of his Gospel vocation, and it was the mold which he had used to shape the beginning of his Fraternity. In his Testament, he was to try to recall those missionary beginnings with an appeal to the brothers not to forget their roots. But the Order was already seeing itself reflected in other texts which would justify the new structures that had been adopted.

c) The Beatitudes

While the mission texts undoubtedly shaped the Franciscan movement, there was also another formative element that went to mold their philosophy and mode of action: and that was the spirit of the Beatitudes. The Admonitions are a detailed, perceptive example of this spirit, which is incomprehensible to anyone who does not live by it. The Beatitudes are daunting because they are Christ's picture of what we shall become when we shall have followed the way of life we have chosen. So, if we take the Beatitudes as our standard, they will test the quality of our faith.

In the Admonitions, especially in those which begin with the word "blessed" and which some writers have called the "Franciscan Beatitudes," we find the true image of the follower of Christ. Those who can put these beatitudes into practice are already on the new road which Christ described as being pleasing to God; and so they are already blessed because they are living the life which can be found only in a Utopia.

In this sense, those are blessed who try to preserve a clean heart so that they can see earthly things in their true perspective and seek God above all else in order to adore and contemplate Him (Adm 16:1-2). The Gospel is where the Lord's words and works are shown so that we can practice them and draw others to discover them in joy (Adm 20:1-2). Reading the Gospel with clear eyes, we discover that poverty must go beyond not owning things until it dwells in the depths of our being (Adm 14:1-4). If we see that we are indeed poor, we must attribute it completely to the Lord (Adm 18:2) and not retain any part of ourselves for ourselves (Adm 11:4). Only in this way shall we be able to see God working through us and not appropriate His work as our own, thanking Him equally for what He does through others (Adm 17:1). When we know that we are really poor, we shall accept the correction of our faults without trying to justify them with feeble excuses (Adm 22:1-3) because we are not afraid of losing face with others. Instead, we try to serve everyone humbly, either because we are subjects (Adm 23:1), or because we have been given responsible positions (Adm 19:1-4).

Trying to follow Christ to the end means sharing in the persecution, suffering and cross that He had to endure; and if we are able to remain in

peace when difficult times arrive, then we are on the road of the Kingdom (Adm 15:1-2; 13:1-2). However, we never travel this road alone but always in fraternity, because acknowledging the brotherhood of man involves supporting one another (Adm 18:1), loving and respecting each other when apart as well as when together (Adm 25), and caring for a "brother as much when he is sick... as... when he is well" (Adm 24). Discreetly revealing the Lord's work in our own spiritual journey can help others to travel the way of the Gospel. But if we merely use the favors the Lord has granted us in order to brag about our "holiness" and to put ourselves above others, we do not really know what following Christ means (Adm 21:1-3; 28:1-3).

The ability to live the Beatitudes is a gift offered us through the Church. Living the Gospel is possible only within the Church because we must depend on human intermediaries, including the hierarchy, to show us how to follow Christ. We must accept these intermediaries without being scandalized by their defects, looking beyond their frail humanity to discover the God who is inviting us to a transformation of the way we live and think, so that we can put on the new man and so come to the Kingdom (Adm 26:1-4). But the spirit of the Beatitudes which marked the early Fraternity is not confined to the Admonitions. All through the rest of Francis's writings, especially the two Rules, we can see the positive though painful steps we are encouraged to take in order to live the Gospel to the full.

Discovering that poverty makes us heirs and kings of the Kingdom (RegB 6:4-6) presupposes that we are continually seeking to do God's will (RegNB 22:9) in order to love and adore Him with pure hearts (2EpFid 19). So the brothers can go about the world without despising or judging those who dress and dine sumptuously (RegB 2:17), walking humbly as befits those who preach peace (RegB 3:12-13). Trying to live according to the spirit of the Beatitudes involves facing up to evil; yet we must love our enemies and do good to those who hate us, as did the Lord Himself (RegNB 22:1; 2EpFid 38). We can be worthy to follow Him only if we adopt this new way of life, the Christian way.

Because Francis was able to commit himself so fully to this way of life, his personality inspires in us a mixture of fascination and fear, because what it is really doing is urging us to walk along the difficult, incomprehensible, yet fulfilling path of the Beatitudes.

d) Jesus the Servant

Those of us who dare to follow Christ along the path of the Beatitudes cannot do so unscathed. Satan will not forgive us for trying to break out of his power any more than he forgave Christ (RegNB 22:19). Those who follow the way of the Gospel must accept the fact of the cross as one more consequence of the life they have chosen. The mysterious suffering servant of Isaiah (Is 42:

1ff) foreshadowed the Son of God. The words which the Father addressed to Christ when He was baptized by John, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11), shaped Christ's vocation as the "suffering servant," having Him make common cause with sinners and those who are despised, with all the evil-doers of the world, to suffer for them and in their stead (Is 53:12). But when the Father raised Jesus from the dead, He showed us that, although evil is the cause of suffering and death, it is not final and definitive, since it has been overcome by His loving will to make us His glory.

In Francis's Gospel journey, as in that of every believer who decides to follow Christ to the end, there was the painful encounter with the cross. Called by the Lord to follow in His footsteps, Francis did not lose courage when he found those footsteps stained with blood. His task of founding his Fraternity to live the Gospel life caused him moments of darkness when the opposition he was meeting was the only sign he had that God's plan for the group was being carried out. In the last years of his life, when he was ill and almost broken, weary in body and soul, his identification with the suffering servant allowed him to feel in his own flesh what the cross meant for the Christian. The imprinting of the Stigmata was a seal on his firm will to follow the Christ of the Gospel to the end, to the cross.

Nevertheless, he was persuaded that the cross was not the end, the final act. In Christ, we are all called to pass to a new life in which we shall already have the feeling of being near God. Therefore, for Francis, suffering and the cross were not dehumanizing factors, capable of destroying him. At the very darkest moment of his life, he was able to express in song, in his *Canticum of Brother Sun*, what he was feeling in his heart. At peace and in harmony with God and creation, he accepted the pain which he had suffered because he dared to follow Jesus, with confidence in His promises.

As we have seen, four themes predominate in Francis's spiritual way—adoration, mission, the Beatitudes and the cross. These themes are so intermingled in his life that they form the Gospel texture with which he is identified and by which he is recognized as a man of the Gospel.

6. Following the Teachings and the Footsteps of Christ

Francis's spiritual journey was marked by his unceasing endeavor to shape his whole life on the pattern of the Gospel which Christ has given us. Reading the mission texts in the Gospel convinced him that the way of life which he had been considering for some time was the one God intended for him. At last, he had found what he was looking for, what he and the companions God had given him needed (1Cel 22). At the end of his life, he was to remember these first steps as a grace from the Lord who had inspired him to live according to "the form of the holy Gospel" (Test 114).

It was in this romantic, but difficult, Gospel text that the Fraternity began and grew until Francis and his handful of followers presented his Rule of life, written in a few words, for approval by the Pope (Test 15), a Rule which Francis had composed mainly from Gospel texts, as Celano tells us (1Cel 32). We have no way of knowing precisely what this Rule contained, but it is likely that the mission texts were in it, as well as itinerant poverty with its consequent disruption of any kind of settled life, heroic reliance on God's providence, freedom to eat whatever was available, and joyful preaching of penance and peace; and all of this directed by the determination "to follow naked the naked Christ" even to the cross.

From what the biographers tell us, it seems that the early Fraternity really lived according to his program—an itinerant, missionary life that tried to keep to its difficult path by means of a living faith in God, constant prayer and willingness to accept each other, faults and all. The gradual addition of clerics and other educated aspirants influenced the Fraternity's ingenuous, but nonetheless profound Gospel life. The eremitical spirit which had helped to shape the first Fraternity slowly gave way to a more settled and organized way of life, based on the model of religious life which the Roman Curia had suggested and which omitted the radical elements that had hitherto marked the Franciscan movement.

Francis's return from the Middle East in 1220 coincided with the critical moment at which the traditional elements of religious life began to make their influence felt. Gradually, the Fraternity began to turn into a structured group in which Gospel values they had adopted in the beginning were being reassessed, a process in which their approach to these values lost that freshness which had made the Franciscan movement a constant call to the whole Church to live the radical Gospel life.

The "new wine," the vibrant spirit that had sustained the early Fraternity's radical Gospel life, was diluted, tamed, and put into "old wineskins" in which it lost its freshness and exciting appeal and became just another form of spirituality that would fit into the socio-religious framework of the times.

As Francis tells us in his Testament, this meant that he had to defend the Gospel values which the Lord had revealed to him as the foundations of this Fraternity; and this he did by writing them down as clearly as possible in his two Rules. Within the juridical constraints of this type of writing, he tried to outline in vigorous strokes what he believed was fundamental to his purpose. And even this he was able to do only in so far as the other forces in the Fraternity allowed, now that the friars were being accepted in the Church as a group of true believers who were striving to follow Christ in a consistent mode of life.

Although he fought tooth and nail to defend the type of Gospel life in which, as he attested himself, he had been given the power to follow faithfully in Christ's footsteps, the tide of events was against him. True, the Fraternity still retained the nucleus of the Gospel which Francis had promised the Lord to observe; but it was being put into practice in the traditional ways in which the reform of the religious life at that time was moving.

The life which the Fraternity had lived in the beginning had afforded Francis the joy of practicing the type of Gospel living that he wanted. But now, the Lord gradually deepened his inner life still further until, by traveling the same road that Christ had trod, he arrived at the Gospel maturity of trusting in God alone in the darkness of the night that surrounded him. Towards the end of his life, there were times when his fatigue seemed to have been almost unbearably aggravated. Yet his final years show us that, in last analysis, following Christ does not mean that it is we who have chosen the way we want to go but that it is the Spirit who leads us along paths traced out by the Father, paths which may turn out to be strange and incomprehensible to us. Allowing ourselves to be led by the provident hand of God, as Francis did, is the greatest proof that we have understood what He demands of us in the Gospel.

7. Conclusion

Living the Gospel seriously has always been unsettling and dangerous. If Francis had followed the traditional patterns of piety in the Church of his time, nothing out of the ordinary would have happened. But he dared to take the path which his meeting with God had opened up for him, and so both society and the Church came to regard him with suspicion until they were able to accept him.

The way of Gospel life which Francis took was subversive even though he did not intend it to be; and it was subversive because it clashed with the new values which the society of his day was evolving. People's first reaction to him was to say that he was crazy and to push him aside, because they could not tolerate anyone who thought and lived like a truly free man. They looked upon such an attitude as dangerous, and it made them feel uneasy. As the years went by, they succeeded in bringing themselves to accept him by considering him a saint, a kind of patron for those who lived in the cities and towns. In later years, this outlook continued in the sense that the mendicants, and especially the Franciscans, came to be seen as the Orders for this new urban society composed in large part of merchants and traders, who formed the new "middle" class, in the "middle" between the nobles and the peasants. Something similar happened in the Church. Perhaps due to recent experiences, it was only with some reluctance that Rome had accepted the feasibility of Francis's proposal to demonstrate that the Gospel, which the clerics preached but did

not practice, could indeed be lived in daily life. However, before the authorities could approve of the Gospel way of life which Francis was presenting as a coherent program in the Church, they had to be sure of his orthodoxy and his integration into the reform of the religious life which the Roman Curia was conducting.

Even the Fraternity itself was not able to assimilate fully Francis's Gospel teaching. Besides accepting the trend towards more traditional positions and structures, the biographers interpreted Francis's ideal from the position in which the contemporary spirituality had placed the Order. Francis had conceived and lived his form of life as a dynamic following of Christ modeled on the example of the first community at Jerusalem. But now his aim was being seen as "Gospel perfection," a monastic expression which implied "imitation," a static form of the Gospel life which reflected the monastic and not the Franciscan point of view.

The picture we have just painted could give the impression that Francis's plan to put Christ's Gospel into actual practice was frustrated. But his plan did not fail completely. It is a general law that radical movements begin, develop and then fade away very quickly. And this is what happened to "the form of the holy Gospel" lived in the manner of the lay radical poverty movements, which is what Francis understood to be the Lord's will for him and his Fraternity. However, although this precise form of life did not prosper, the evolution of the Franciscan movement towards a type of Order acceptable to society and the Church of that day did retain Francis's fundamental values but put them into practice in less simple, less spontaneous forms, which, unfortunately, diminished the pristine freshness of Francis's vision.

At any rate, the Gospel life as lived by Francis continues to be a challenge to us to re-shape our lives. Our holy Father still invites us to follow the path of Christ to the Kingdom. If we do follow the footsteps of Christ—and of Francis—we shall become, as individuals and as an Order, what we have always dreamed of being and even more, what God, in His love, has planned for us.

Francis walked the road of the Gospel, guided by the sure hand of the Church. From the Church, he received "the holy words... of our Lord" (2EpFid 34f), which were spirit and life to him (Test 13); and it was to the Church that he turned to get approval for "the form of the holy Gospel... written down simply and in a few words" (Test 14f). His determination to live his form of life within the Church marked him as a true believer. It showed that he did not want to go his own way, no matter how secure that way might have seemed, but that he yearned to follow the path of Christ which the Gospel marks out for us.