

The Man Francis as Seen in His Letters

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1. A Look at the Literary and Historical Arrangement of the Letters

A. Francis's Schooling

Francis of Assisi dictated a number of letters and wrote some himself. This fact is more remarkable than might appear at first sight. Most of his contemporaries were illiterate. But the son of a prosperous cloth merchant had a chance to learn to read and write Latin at the parish school of San Giorgio in Assisi. The textbook was the Psalter, which Francis memorized almost word for word. Thanks to this elementary training he was able to read Latin and even write it to some extent,¹ though without the help of a secretary he could not write without mistakes. The letter and blessing he sent to Brother Leo, and the letter to a minister, are full of solecisms and read more like the Old Italian dialect spoken by the people than Latin. Interestingly, mistakes in Latin grammar and syntax serve to authenticate Francis's writings. For Kajetan Esser they are an important criterion for establishing the original wording of his writings.²

Although Francis's schooling enabled him to rise above the educational level of his fellow citizens, his lack of proficiency in Latin led him to dictate much of his correspondence. The extent of his literary output is amazing. The saint says of himself: “*I am ignorant and unlettered.*”³

¹See Octavian Schmucki, “Ignorans sum et idiota: Das Ausmass der schulischen Bildung des hl. Franziskus von Assisi,” in *Studia historico-ecclesiastica: Festgabe für L.G. Spätling, O.F.M.*, Bibliotheca Pontificii Athenaei Antoniani, vol. 19 (Rome, 1977), pp. 283–310. See also G. Lauriola, “Intorno alla cultura di Francesco d'Assisi,” in *Studi Francescani* 78 (1981): 307–27. See also Anton Rotzetter, “Franz von Assisi: Lebensgeschichte — Lebensprogramm — Grunderfahrung,” in Anton Rotzetter, Willibrord C. van Dijk and Thaddée Matura, eds., *Franz von Assisi: Ein Anfang und was davon bleibt*, 2 (Zurich, 1982), no. 10.

²*Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi: Neue textkritische Edition*, Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, vol. 13 (Grottaferrata, Rome, 1976), pp. 57–60, hereafter cited as *Opuscula*.

³*EpOrd* 39. See Kajetan Esser, *Opuscula*, p. 262; *Die Schriften des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, introduction, translation and commentary by Hardick and Grau, p. 7; revised ed.

He felt that he belonged to the lowest ranks of society. He associated with the poor and the lepers and had strong reservations about learning and scholarship.⁴ Nevertheless, he made extensive use of the written word. Letters were an important, and at times the only means he had for communicating with the friars about their apostolate. His letters became more frequent and took on greater urgency when illness put a halt to his itinerant preaching. It might be worthwhile inquiring whether Francis was influenced by papal documents or other circular letters. To judge from his *Letter to the Clergy*, and the *Letter to the Entire Order*, it would appear that he was indeed influenced by them. The content of these letters betrays the influence of the papal encyclical on the Eucharist: *Sane cum olim*.⁵ We might ask another question: How common was communication by letter in the time of Francis? What people wrote them, and for what reasons? Did they have a stereotyped structure, with a formal introduction and conclusion? How did they indicate the sender and addresses?

B. Possible Influences

At present we do not possess a comparative literary and historical study of twelfth- and thirteenth-century correspondence.⁶ Consequently it is hard to tell to what extent Francis's letters differed from those of his contemporaries. Such an investigation would have to cover a wide range and is beyond the scope of this paper. The place of Francis's letters in the thirteenth-century literature poses many questions. We have to make the following assumptions:

1) Francis was familiar with the epistles of the New Testament.⁷ The writings of the apostles to the churches must have inspired him, consciously or subconsciously, to take up his pen to communicate with the far-flung community, and eventually to reach out to all people. The

(Werl, 1982), (vol. 1: *Franziskan. Quellenschriften*), p. 93, hereafter cited as *Schriften*.

⁴ *Test* 1-3, 19; *RegNB* IX 2; *EpAnt* 2; *Adm* VII.

⁵ See Bertrand Cornet, O.F.M., "De reverentia corporis Domini: Exhortation et lettre de saint François," in *Etudes franciscaines*, n.s. 6 (1955), p. 169. See also Kajetan Esser, *Studien zu den Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, eds. E. Kurten and I. de Villapadierna, *Subsidia Scientifica Franciscalia*, vol. 4 (Rome, 1973), pp. 309-10, hereafter cited as *Studien*.

⁶ See Octavian Schmucki, O.F.M.Cap., "La 'Lettera a tutto l'Ordine' di San Francesco," in *L'Italia Francescana* 55 (1980): 245-85, esp. pp. 245-46.

⁷ See Optatus van Asseldonk, O.F.M.Cap., "Le Lettere di S. Pietro negli Scritti di S. Francesco," in *Collectanea Franciscana* 48 (1978): 67-76. See also idem, "Insegnamenti biblici 'privilegiati' negli Scritti di S. Francesco," in *Lettura biblico-teologica delle Fonti Francescane* (Rome, 1978), pp. 83-116 [English translation: "Favored' Biblical Teachings in the Writings of St. Francis of Assisi," in *Greyfriars Review* 3, no. 3 (Dec. 1989): 287-314 — Ed.]. Concerning the First Letter of St. John, see idem, p. 107. To date we have no good study of his use of the Pauline epistles. See I. Schlaury, "Saint François et la Bible: Essai bibliographique," in *CF* 40 (1970): 365-437.

sentences and concluding blessings of so many of his letters are reminiscent of the apostolic epistles. Like them, his letters contain doxologies, prayers and liturgical formulas.⁸ In its elaborate listing of addresses and in its conclusion, Francis's *Letter to the Entire Order* also resembles many of the letters of St. Ignatius, bishop and martyr, which for their part are literary gems.⁹

2) Francis must also have been acquainted with the circular letters of the popes. They were so numerous that curial copyists were kept busy publishing them. Even the papacy felt the effects of a phenomenon dating from the early eleventh century, a change from the cumbersome papyrus rolls to small sheets of parchment commonly used for private correspondence. Naturally there was an increase in letter writing especially from the time of the reform Pope Leo IX.¹⁰ Papal writings fell into a variety of categories according to content. Some decrees were issued for the entire church, though they did not take on the form of the modern encyclical.¹¹ The document *Sane cum olim* resembles Francis's letters only in content. Its style is quite different. It does not have a greeting or blessing. And instead of the long, involved periods of the papal documents, Francis pens a series of brief exhortations. His letters shun the dour, menacing tone found in the first part of *Sane cum olim*.¹² And yet we can be sure that no other papal document had such a powerful influence on Francis's own letters on the Eucharist.

3) In addition to their circular letters, popes and bishops also wrote to particular groups and individuals. Gregory the Great (d. 604) left posterity 854 letters, which were still read in the Middle Ages.¹³ The extent of official church correspondence is further evidenced by the collection of 288 letters written by Ivo, bishop of Chartres (d. 1115). On the other hand, only three letters of Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141) have come down to us.¹⁴ As for bishops' pastorals, Francis's letter-writing

⁸ E.g. *2EpFid* 1, 61-62, 86. *EpOrd* 1, 4, 8, 38, 49-52.

⁹ See the seven Letters of Ignatius, in J.A. Fischer, ed., *Die Apostolischen Väter* (Munich, 1956), pp. 142-225. See also E. Fascher, "Briefliteratur," in *RGG*, vol. 1 (Tübingen, 1957), 1412-15.

¹⁰ See K. Langosch, "Überlieferungsgeschichte der mittelalterlichen Literatur," in *Geschichte der Textüberlieferung der antiken und mittelalterlichen Literatur*, vol. 2 (Zurich, 1964), pp. 9-185, esp. p. 129. For some comparative studies see P.F. Kehr, s. 1 1989; F. Kempf, *Die Register Innozenz' III* (Rome, 1945); "Innocentius III, Regestae sive epistolae," in *PL* 214-16. See the excellent article by O. Hageneder and A. Haidacher, *Die Register Innozenz' III* (Graz and Cologne, 1964).

¹¹ See G. Damizia, in *Enciclopedia Cattol.*, s.v. "Lettere Pontificie."

¹² Kajetan Esser has a comparison of the texts in *Studien*, pp. 310-12 [cited in n. 5 above].

¹³ "Gregorius Magnus, Epistolae," in *PL* 75, 509d-516c; 77, 441a-1328c.

¹⁴ "Epistolae," in *PL* 176, 1011a-1018a (very different from Francis's letters!). For Ivo of Chartres, see K. Langosch, *Geschichte*, p. 130 [cited in n. 10 above].

style seems to have been influenced by Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240). Among all the non-Franciscan sources for the early history of the friars he is without doubt the most important. Wendelborn writes: "As a French cleric he preached against the Albigenses in Belgium.... On his way to take possession of his episcopal see in Acre (Palestine), he spent several months traveling through Italy in 1216, where he came to know both the Humiliati and the Franciscans."¹⁵ He speaks of the friars in two of his letters. One was addressed to his friends in Lüttich at the beginning of October in 1216, as he prepared to embark for Palestine. The other was sent on November 12, 1221, the day after the sultan's troops captured Damietta.¹⁶ It is quite possible that Jacques de Vitry met Francis in Perugia during his travels in the summer of 1216.¹⁷ As a contemporary and apologist of Franciscan ideals he could have served as inspiration and model for the letters written by the Poverello.

4) Though of unequal importance, the letters of abbots and monks must also be considered. Some 160 letters of Peter Damian (d. 1072)¹⁸ have survived. He had copies made of his letters and preserved them in his monastery of Fonte Avellana. The collection has unfortunately disappeared, but a demand for Peter's writings continued after his death.¹⁹ Some of Francis's prayers, such as the *Antiphon of the Blessed Virgin Mary* in the *Office of the Passion*, and in the All Saints litany found in chapter twenty-three of the *Earlier Rule*, seem to bear the influence of the texts of Fonte Avellana.²⁰ But such a connection would be hard to prove.

¹⁵ *Franziskus von Assisi: Eine historische Darstellung*, vol. 2 (Vienna, Cologne and Graz, 1982), p. 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101. The letters have been edited by R.B.C. Huygens in *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry (1160/1170-1240)* (Leiden, 1960), pp. 71-78. For the bishop's change of opinion concerning the Friars Minor see K. Elm, "Die Entwicklung des Franziskanerordens zwischen dem ersten und letzten Zeugnis des Jakob von Vitry," in "Francesco d'Assisi e Francescanesimo dal 1216 al 1226," *Atti del IV Convegno Internazionale* (Assisi, 1977), pp. 193-233.

¹⁷ See Kajetan Esser, *Anfänge und ursprüngliche Zielsetzungen des Ordens der Minderbrüder* (Leiden, 1966), p. 10, n. 2.

¹⁸ "Petrus Damiani, Epistolarum libri," in *PL* 133, 205a-498b. See J. Leclercq, *Saint Pierre Damien eremite et homme d'église*, (Rome, 1960); idem, in *Diz. Istit. Perf.*, s.v. "Pier Damiano."

¹⁹ See Langosch, *Geschichte*, p. 130 [cited in n. 10 above]. See also K. Reindel, in *LThK*, s.v. Petrus Damiani.

²⁰ The Antiphon has the same wording as the one found in the *Officium Parvum*, which was used in the hermitage of Fonte Avellana near Gubbio and probably dates back to Peter Damian. See *PL* 151, 972c. See also Octavian Schmucki, "De seraphici Patris Francisci habitudine erga beatissimam Virginem Marian," in *Regina Immaculata*, Bibliotheca Seraphico-Capuccina, vol. 15 (Rome, 1955), pp. 15-47, esp. p. 31. The *Earlier Rule* XXIII 6 mentions Elias and Henoch, as does the text of Fonte Avellana. See Leonhard Lehmann, O.F.M.Cap., "Gratias agimus tibi": Structure and Content of

5) The growth of correspondence was not limited to ecclesiastical circles. The civil authorities also wrote letters. The investiture conflict gave birth to the polemic pamphlet turned out in great numbers by supporters of both emperor and pope. Each party used literary skill as a tool to win public opinion for their side. The eleventh century also witnessed a new type of imperial letter employed as a propaganda weapon. Henry IV (d. 1106) made maximum use of it. Langosch says of Henry's letters: "Six are manifestos, that is, letters addressed to the general public, and six are personal letters. Their literary success was greater than their political influence. Propaganda letters started a trend and soon found a prominent place in the political arsenal."²¹

From personal letter to manifesto — this was the gamut spanned by Francis's letters. Though differing greatly in goal and scope from other letters of the time, they occupy a significant niche in medieval epistolary literature. He is not original. Any number of factors influenced both the content and style of his writing.²²

Recent research in the broad area of Francis's letters has detracted nothing from their freshness. In them he shows himself a powerful force for the promotion of brotherhood and a master of the spiritual life. His message went far beyond the confines of his order.

2. Letters to Individuals and Circular Letters

Ten of Francis's letters have come down to us in their entirety. They fall into two categories according to content and addressee: letters to individuals and circular letters.²³ To the first group belong the letter appointing St. Anthony as lector, the very personal letter to Brother

Chapter 23 of the 'Regula non bullata,' in *Laurentianum* 23 (1982): 312-75, esp. p. 357. For the influence of Peter Damian and the Camaldolese, see also A. Jansen, "Traduction, sens et structure de la 27^e admonition v. 4-6," in *Franziskanische Studien* 64 (1982): 111-27, esp. p. 112, n. 4.

²¹ See Langosch, *Geschichte*, p. 127, cited in n. 10 above.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 131. See H.M. Schaller, in *Lexicon des Mittelalters*, s.v. "Ars dictaminis, Ars dictandi." Esser says: "Most of the writings have come down to us in the form of dictation." Likewise Raoul Manselli, in *San Francesco d'Assisi* (Rome, 1980), p. 304. He supports Esser's view that very few of the *opuscula* were written by St. Francis. In most cases he used the services of a secretary. N. Scivoletto does not share this opinion. See his "Problemi di lingua e di stile degli scritti latini di S. Francesco," in *Francesco d'Assisi*, pp. 106-12 [cited in n. 16 above]. See also G. Lauriola, "La formazione culturale di Francesco d'Assisi," in *LitFran* 56 (1981): 363-84, esp. pp. 372-74.

²³ Unfortunately the latest edition of the writings does not follow this division. Stanislo da Campagnola, in *Fonte Francescane* (Assisi, 1977), pp. 74-81, favors the following division: "Circular letters, letters to the friars, private letters." This is not accurate, because some of the circular letters are addressed to the friars, and the *Letter to a Minister* can also be classified as a private letter. Damien Vorreux, O.F.M., in *Les écrits de saint François et de sainte Claire* (Paris, 1981), pp. 69-98, offers no division. On the other hand, Lázaro Iriarte, O.F.M.Cap., in *Escritos de san Francisco y santa Clara de Asís* (Valencia, 1981), pp. 112-14, lists the two private letters after the circular letters.

Leo, and the one to a minister. The second group (the larger) includes: a) Two versions, of unequal length, of his *Letter to the Faithful*; b) his *Letter to the Clergy*, which appears in two slightly different versions; c) the two letters to the superiors of the order; d) the letter to the civil authorities; e) The letter to all the friars. The last mentioned is the longest of all and is outstanding for its impeccable, graceful and at times poetic Latin style. These qualities, and the fact that it was written after Francis had received the stigmata, suggest that it was put in its final form by a secretary.²⁴ The wounds in Francis's hands, his illness and weakness would have made it extremely difficult for him to write such a long letter.²⁵ It is the last of his letters to have come down to us in its entirety.

Four others are known to us only in fragments or in references found in the biographical sources: a letter for the citizens of Bologna, "written in faulty Latin";²⁶ a letter sent to the brothers in France; a letter to St. Clare about fasting; and the letter written to Lady Jacoba, written in the last days of his life.²⁷ Kajetan Esser relegates this letter to the rather ambiguous category of *dictata*, as do Hardick and Grau.²⁸

In addition to these complete or fragmentary letters, we know that there were a number which the recipients did not think worthwhile preserving. St. Clare, for example, says that St. Francis wrote to her frequently, but none of these letters have survived.²⁹ Neither has his letter to Cardinal Hugolino. Its loss is all the more tragic since it would have shed a good deal of light on the relationship between Francis and the cardinal protector of his order.³⁰ But the authentic letters that have come down to us are sufficient to reveal the widespread influence exercised by the man of Assisi. He wrote to people within and outside

²⁴ See Schmucki, "La Lettera," pp. 246-48 [cited in n. 6 above].

²⁵ See *EpOrd* 3, 39. For a study of Francis's illnesses, see especially Octavian Schmucki, O.F.M.Cap., "Le malattie di Francesco durante gli ultimi anni della sua vita," in *Francesco d'Assisi*, pp. 315-62 [cited in n. 16 above].

²⁶ *LBol*.

²⁷ *LFran; LJac*.

²⁸ Esser, in *Opuscula*, pp. 451-61, and Hardick and Grau, *Schriften*, p. 222 [cited in n. 3 above], expand the heading to "Dictata, Sketches, Contents." For a critique of the term *dictata* see Anastasio Matanic, O.F.M., "De nova editione critica Opusculorum S.P.N. Francisci," in *AFH* 70 (1977): 147-52. See Leonhard Lehmann, O.F.M.Cap., "Zur Neuausgabe der Schriften des hl. Franziskus," in *Lau* 22 (1981): 302-18, esp. p. 307.

²⁹ *TestCl* 34: "He gave us many writings." See Engelbert Grau, O.F.M., *Leben und Schriften der hl. Klara von Assisi*, vol. 4 (Werl, 1976), p. 111.

³⁰ See Esser, *Opuscula*, pp. 14-17. For a discussion of this problem see also K.V. Selge, "Franz von Assisi und die römische Kurie," *ZThK* 67 (1970): 129-61. Idem, "Franz von Assisi und Hugolino von Ostia," in *Convegno del Centro di studi sulla spiritualità medievale IX* (Todi, 1971), pp. 159-222. See also Wendelborn, *Franziskus von Assisi*, pp. 269-82 [cited in n. 15 above].

his order, and even addressed himself to non-Christians, as can be deduced from the dedication of the so-called *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*.³¹ The letters tell us much about the personality of the man who wrote them, as well as about those to whom they were addressed. What kind of man composed them? How does he address his readers? What does he expect of them? Let us try to find some answers to these questions in the ten complete letters that have come down to us.

3. Francis's Personality as Revealed in His Correspondence

Francis's image of himself as revealed in his letters can be summed up under eight headings. Taken together, they provide a picture of his personality that may not reveal all its facets but goes beyond the usual one-sided clichés.³²

A. Modesty: "Your little servant"

Francis invariably refers to himself as "brother" or "little servant." His letters usually open wishing his readers "Greetings and peace." Thus he writes to all the superiors of the order: "To all the custodians of the Friars Minor to whom this letter is sent, Brother Francis, your servant and little one in the Lord God, sends a greeting...." In his second letter to the same group: "... Brother Francis, the least of the servants of God, sends greetings and holy peace in the Lord."³³ Toward the end of his life he decided to send a long letter to the entire order. It begins with the words: "To all the reverend and much beloved brothers, ... Brother Francis, a worthless and weak man, your very little servant, [sends] his greetings in Him Who redeemed [us] and washed us in His most precious blood." Toward the close of this letter he imposes an obligation on its recipients. His humble description of himself is followed by the enjoinder: "I Brother Francis, a useless man and unworthy creature of the Lord God, say, through the Lord Jesus Christ, to Brother H., the minister of our entire order, and to all the ministers general who will come after him, and to the other custodians and guardians of the brothers, who are or who will be, that they should

³¹ See n. 39 below.

³² Like 'the jolly friar', the 'Poverello', the 'peacemaker', the 'nature lover', 'God's jester', the 'prophet and brother of our time'.

³³ *1EpCust 1; 2EpCust 1*. [Editor's note: For our translation of the writings of Francis, we have used *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M., eds. and trans., Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press (New York, Ramsey and Toronto, 1982). Used by permission of Paulist Press. Translator's note: The Latin *custos* is commonly retained in English. See, for example, *St. Francis of Assisi Omnibus of Sources*. "Custodian" is used in this article by direction of the editor.]

have this writing with them, put it into practice and carefully preserve it."³⁴

With these words Francis makes it crystal clear that he is the founder of the order and is responsible for its future. Despite his role as spiritual leader, however, he never flaunted his position in the order but looked on himself as "a useless man and an unworthy creature of God." He was "the poor little servant" of his confreres. He realized in his own life the ideal that was to be the very marrow of the *Rule*: "All the brothers in this regard should not hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves. For, as the Lord says in the Gospel: 'The rulers of the people have power over them' (Matt. 20: 25). It shall not be like this among the brothers. And whoever among them wishes to become the greater should be their minister and servant. And whoever is the greater among them should become like the lesser" (see Luke 22: 26).³⁵ "And no one should be called prior, but all generally should be called Friars Minor. And the one should wash the feet of the others" (see John 13: 14).³⁶ "And do not call anyone on earth your father. For one is your Father, the One in heaven. And do not let yourselves be called teachers, for your teacher is the One in heaven" (see Matt. 23: 8-10).³⁷

Francis considers himself the servant, not only of his brethren but of all people. He certainly had little in common with the magistrates and officials of the city-states; yet he encounters them as "Brother Francis, your little and despicable servant." To them, too, he extends "wishes of health and peace in the Lord God."³⁸

The letter that was meant for the widest readership, the so-called *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, opens with the sign of the cross, followed by the words: "To all Christian religious: clergy and laity, men and women, and to all who live in the whole world, Brother Francis, their servant and subject, offers homage and reverence, true peace from heaven and sincere love in the Lord." He concludes by calling himself again: "Brother Francis, your little servant."³⁹

As all these quotations show, Francis's letters employ a somewhat stylized expression of modesty. It occurs in nearly all the correspond-

³⁴ *EpOrd* 2-3, 47.

³⁵ *RegNB* V 9-12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, VI 3-4. For the title "lesser brothers" see *1Cel* 38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, XXII 34-35.

³⁸ *EpRect* 1.

³⁹ *2EpFid* 1, 87. Hardick and Grau translate *religiosi* as "all Christians leading a devout life." In my dissertation, *Der universale Grundzug im Beten und Wirken des Franziskus von Assisi: Eine Analyse seiner Gebete und Briefe*, manuscript (Rome, 1982), pp. 624-29, I take up the question of the opening sentence of this letter, which according to the oldest manuscripts is "*opusculum ... commonitorium et exhortatorium*." See Esser, *Opuscula*, p. 188.

ence in which sender and recipient are identified. In fact, the expression "your little servant" can be taken as a hallmark for authenticating his letters. We might note, however, that some such expressions of modesty characterized much of medieval letter writing.⁴⁰ But they occur so frequently and consistently in Francis's correspondence that we cannot dismiss them as flowery gestures or literary stereotypes. He reinforces them with the other terms mentioned above: *ignorans et idiota*, which are more an expression of the saint's humility than an assessment of his educational level.⁴¹ His expressions of modesty are consistent with his whole life-style and with the ideal expressed in the *Rule*: always and everywhere to be lesser brothers.

Francis's self-image as portrayed in his letters is identical with that which he and his companions presented to the people: "All of us lesser brothers, useless servants, humbly ask and beg all those who wish to serve the Lord within the holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and all ... clerics ... all lay people, men and women, ... the small and the great, all peoples, ... all nations and all peoples everywhere on earth and who will be ... that all of us may persevere in the true faith and in penance."⁴² In this selection from a penance-sermon to all levels in the church and in the world, to all people and nations, the saint's humility is no less evident than his enthusiasm and missionary zeal. He and his friars appear as petitioners. They call themselves lesser brothers and base their title on the Gospel (see Luke 17: 10). The pleading tone of the letter, as well as the verbs used throughout it, bespeak an attitude of minority: "They are in the hortative (subjunctive) mood, which is less forceful than the imperative, since it involves the speakers themselves."⁴³

His public appearance is reflected in his letters. They are an extension of his self-revelation as found in his preaching. "Friar Minor" is not just a name; it is a program. It conjures up a special way of speaking, writing and behavior for Francis himself and the friars.⁴⁴ "To be subject to every human creature for the love of God" (1 Peter 2: 13) is such an integral part of Francis's program that he looked upon himself as the servant of all, the members of his order and all men.⁴⁵ In his *Salutation*

⁴⁰ See E.R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, vol. 2 (Bern, 1954), pp. 93-95.

⁴¹ *EpOrd* 3. See Schmucki, "Ignorans sum et idiota," pp. 302-6 [cited in n. 1 above].

⁴² *RegNB* XXIII 7, and XI 3.

⁴³ Anton Rotzetter, "Gott in der Verkündigung des Franz von Assisi," in *Lau* 23 (1982): 40-76, esp. p. 56. See Lehmann, "Gratias agimus tibi," pp. 330, 338 [cited in n. 20 above].

⁴⁴ See e.g. *2EpFid* 1. See also *Test* 19 with *RegNB* VII 2 and XI 1-9.

⁴⁵ *RegNB* XVI 6; *2EpFid* 47. See van Asseldonk, "Insegnamenti," p. 113 [cited in n. 7 above]; Rotzetter, *Franz von Assisi: Ein Anfang*, no. 39 [cited in n. 1 above].

to the *Virtues* he identifies holy obedience with a certain attitude whereby a man puts himself at the disposal of all rational beings, becoming utterly submissive to them, and "not to man only but even to all beasts and wild animals, so that they may do whatever they want with him, inasmuch as it has been given to them from above by the Lord."⁴⁶

Francis even expresses this self-image through gesture. As "little servant" he longs to "kiss the feet" of his readers.⁴⁷ This wish is most impressive when he asks to do it "in the love which is God." It betrays a deeply felt purpose. Apparently he associates the love of God with Jesus' action in washing His disciples' feet (John 13). Washing the feet is a dramatic manifestation of God's love; it must also be part of the brothers' community life. The idea of washing the feet is so essential for Francis that he could hold it up as an example for his friars to imitate: "And one should wash the feet of the others."⁴⁸ We can better understand why kissing the foot became an expression of humility for Francis if we recall how the act was practiced at the papal court as well as in monasteries and abbeys. The pope's foot was kissed at the papal High Mass and on many other occasions. Sometimes bishops and cardinals were honored in the same way. At Cluny the abbot was greeted with a kiss on the hand, but in other abbeys kissing the foot was more customary.⁴⁹ Francis reversed this practice. He wished to kiss the feet of *others*.

B. A Great Self-awareness and Consciousness of Mission

Modesty, the service of others, submission to all — this is what his letters tell us about Francis. But there is more meaning to them, and to overlook it would be to end up with a very distorted picture. Anyone who reads his letters cannot help but sense the great weight he attaches to his words. The range of his addresses is highly significant. He does not limit his correspondence to his friars, who already shared his views. His circle is much wider. He addresses Christians everywhere, as well as magistrates, consuls, judges and statesmen of the entire world, that is, all those responsible for the conduct of public affairs. At first blush, such a grandiose project might seem inconsistent with the image of a simple, humble Poverello. An explanation is in order. His aim is to reach out to all persons of authority and speak to them with the same frankness that he would use in conversing with his closest

⁴⁶ *SalVirt* 14–18.

⁴⁷ *2EpFid* 87; *EpOrd* 12; *RegNB* XXIV 3.

⁴⁸ *RegNB* VI 4. For Francis's ideas on John 13, see van Asseldonk, "Insegnamenti," p. 100 [cited in n. 7 above].

⁴⁹ See E. Lengeling, in *LThK*, s.v. "Kuss." See also L. Spätling, "Der hl. Franziskus von Assisi und das kluniazensische Mönchtum," in *FSien* 58 (1976): 112–21, esp. p. 119.

companions in the order. He admonishes the rulers and even warns them: "And if you do not do this, know that you must render an account before the Lord your God, Jesus Christ."⁵⁰ Francis considers his message of such supreme importance that eternal salvation or eternal damnation depend on its observance.

He hopes that his letters will reach the widest possible readership. They must be carefully preserved, copied, sent on to others, read publicly and even memorized. He who does these things will be blessed by the Lord. At the conclusion of his *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful* Francis sums up the gravity of his words as follows: "And to all men and women who will receive them kindly [and] understand their meaning and pass them on to others by their example: If they have persevered in them to the end (Matt. 24: 13), may the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit bless them. Amen."⁵¹

In his first letter to the superiors of the order Francis even adds his own personal blessing and declares that those who preach and disseminate its contents are practicing genuine obedience: "And all my brothers [who are] custodians to whom this writing shall come and [who] have made copies to keep for themselves and to give to the brothers who have the office of preaching or the care of the brothers; and who have preached everything which is contained in this writing to the very end, should know that they have the blessing of the Lord God as well as my own. And let these matters be for them [an expression] of true and holy obedience."⁵²

Such a conclusion bespeaks a deep-seated self-awareness and consciousness of mission. Francis is addressing all future generations as well as his own contemporaries. His injunction to the superiors "to preach everything which is contained in this writing to the very end" could mean, of course, to the end of their lives. But his purpose does not seem to be confined to the life span of individuals but to extend to the end of time. The *Letter to the Entire Order* hints at this interpretation. In it Francis urgently begs "the custodians and guardians of the brothers, who are and who will be, that they ... guard carefully those things which are written in it and to have them observed diligently ... now and always, as long as the world continues to be."⁵³ The holy founder is obviously certain that his order will last to the end of time. He could not have expressed more emphatically his authority and right to speak to the friars of all time, and through them to all who will inhabit the

⁵⁰ *EpRect* 8. See *1EpFid* II 22; *EpCler* 14.

⁵¹ *2EpFid* 88.

⁵² *1EpCust* 9-10.

⁵³ *EpOrd* 47-48.

earth. As Rotzetter says: "Anyone who proclaims the importance of his message in such terms, and thereby affirms his conviction that his order will last till the end of time, shows a deep awareness of his mission."⁵⁴

Ordinarily Francis showed little interest in the minutiae of organization, but he did draw up a definite plan of action for distributing his letters. He entrusts the superiors with the task of publicizing them. This is clear when he addresses these words to them in a letter that is basically a follow up to his *Letter to the Clergy* and his *Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*. Francis writes as follows: "I ask you in the sight of the Lord our God, as much as I can, to give the letters which treat of the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord to the bishops and other members of the clergy... Make many copies of the other letter containing an invitation to proclaim the praises of God among the people and in the piazzas, which I am sending to you to give to mayors, consuls, and rulers. And propagate them with great diligence among those to whom they should be given."⁵⁵

The superiors of the order are to share and multiply his message. They are his ambassadors for the clergy and civic leaders. They are to carry out Francis's wishes in their own lives, and then communicate them to certain designated persons.

Francis has drawn up a well-ordered campaign. His goal is first of all the worthy celebration of Mass and reverence for the Eucharist. The zeal with which he prosecuted this goal and his system of chain letters warrants the term "a Eucharistic crusade." His campaign would be a peaceful alternative to the armed crusades against the Muslims.⁵⁶ As Lortz says: "If we consider the persons to whom Francis wrote, how he wrote, how ardently he wished his words to be shared and observed,

⁵⁴ Anton Rotzetter, *Die Funktion der franziskanischen Bewegung in der Kirche: Eine pastoraltheologische Interpretation der grundlegenden franziskanischen Texte* (Schwyz, 1977), p. 108.

⁵⁵ *2EpCust* 4, 6-7.

⁵⁶ Hilarin Felder, O.F.M.Cap., *The Ideals of Saint Francis*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925): "Francis desired that his sons be the bearers of a worldwide Eucharistic mission. At that time this was something unheard of. At a time when the churches were to a great extent in a deplorable condition, when the Sacrament was treated with shameful indifference and neglect on the part of the clergy and laity, the Seraphic Knight sounded a clarion call to his Brothers of the Round Table to undertake a Eucharistic crusade." Since Felder's time, the theme of Francis's crusade has never been muted. See Cornet, "De reverentia corporis Domini," in *EF* 8 (1957): 45 [cited in n. 5 above]. See also Esser, *Studien*, p. 310 [cited in n. 5 above]; Schmucki, "La Lettera," p. 247 [cited in n. 6 above]. Rotzetter, in *Die Funktion*, p. 172 [cited in n. 54 above], speaks of the "Eucharistic basis" of the Franciscan movement. See idem, "Kreuzzugskritik und Ablehnung der Feudalordnung in der Gefolgschaft des Franziskus von Assisi," in *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 35 (1972): 121-37. See also L. Thier, "Der Friede erwächst aus der Armut," in *Wiss. Weish.* 39 (1976): 108-22, esp. p. 121.

and how he even attached to them a blessing or curse, we can be sure that the so-called 'little poor man' of Assisi held strong convictions about his extraordinary mission and was filled with an immense self-assurance.⁵⁷

Francis's prayers, especially the one in the twenty-third chapter of the *Earlier Rule*, also bears witness to his worldwide commitment.⁵⁸ Humility and self-awareness complement one another in Francis, like the convex and concave surfaces of a lens. As Lang says: "For all his humility he does not suffer from an inferiority complex. For him, simplicity is an essential condition for all the great and necessary works that God accomplished in his life."⁵⁹

C. Directed to Each Individual

Francis's awareness of his mission is manifest also in the fact that he almost always addresses his letters to the totality of a group, or simply to all people. The constant recurrence of words like 'all', and 'wherever' (*omnes, universi, ubicumque*) shows this. He writes to *all* Christians, religious, clerics, lay people, men and women, all who inhabit the entire world.⁶⁰ In one of his letters he exhorts all clerics: "All of us who are clerics should be aware..."⁶¹ Both his letters to the superiors open in a similar way: "To all the custodians of the Friars Minor..."⁶² The most outspoken of all his letters begins: "To all mayors and consuls, magistrates and rulers throughout the world, and to everyone who may receive these letters: Brother Francis, your little and despicable servant in the Lord God, sends [his] wishes of health and peace to all of you."⁶³ From these greetings, and from the obvious missionary character of all his correspondence, we can perceive the global outreach that distinguishes the prayers and activities of the saint.⁶⁴ His prayers show

⁵⁷ J. Lortz, foreword to Kajetan Esser's *Das Testament des hl. Franziskus von Assisi: Eine Untersuchung über seine Echtheit und seine Bedeutung* (Munster, 1949), vol. 8. See idem, *Der unvergleichliche Heilige* (Werl, 1976), p. 61; Rotzetter, *Die Funktion* pp. 96-108 [cited in n. 54 above].

⁵⁸ See n. 42 above. See also Lehmann, "Gratias agimus tibi" [cited in n. 20 above]: "The Call to Mission Activity" (p. 344); "Petition to All Men and Women in the Church and in Society" (pp. 358-63). See also idem, *Die universale Dimension im Beten des Franziskus von Assisi* (Werl, 1984).

⁵⁹ J. Lang, "Erschaut und begriffen: Die sakramentale Genialität des hl. Franziskus von Assisi," in *Wiss. Weish.* 40 (1977): 1-10, esp. p. 3.

⁶⁰ See n. 39 above.

⁶¹ *EpCler* 1.

⁶² *1EpCust* 1; *2EpCust* 1.

⁶³ *EpRect* 1.

⁶⁴ See n. 39 above. See also Octavian Schmucki, O.F.M.Cap., *Gotteslob und Meditation nach Beispiel und Anweisung des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, (Lucerne, 1980), p. 35 [English translation: "Divine Praise and Meditation according to the Teaching and Example of St. Francis of Assisi," in *Greyfriars Review* 4, no. 1 (1990): 23-73 — Ed.].

it in his appeal to heaven and earth — the entire cosmos — and to all men to unite in the praise of God.

His efforts to reach out to the whole world is combined with concern for the individual. The broad horizon of prayer and apostolic labor never lets him lose sight of each person or of particular groups. This is shown in the special rule he composed for friars living in hermitages.⁶⁵ It is also evident in his letters to Anthony, Leo, Clare, and an unnamed minister, as well as in his often detailed list of addressees. This is most pronounced in his *Letter to the Entire Order*, where he apparently contradicts his early concept of obedience by listing the brothers according to the hierarchical position they held in the order:⁶⁶ “To all the reverend and much beloved brothers; to Brother A., the minister general of the Order of Friars Minor, its lord, and to the other ministers general who will come after him; to all ministers, custodians, and priests of this same brotherhood [who are] humble in Christ; and to all the simple and obedient brothers, from first to last: Brother Francis ... [sends] his greetings...”⁶⁷

Just how earnestly Francis desired to speak to each and every individual is shown most clearly in the rationale he gives for his long *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*: “Since I am the servant of all, I am obliged to serve all.... Since I cannot visit each one of you in person because of the infirmity and weakness of my body, I have proposed to set before you in this present letter...”⁶⁸ The twofold “all” (*omnes*) is complemented by “each one of you” (*singulos*) and reinforced by “personally” (*personaliter*). Despite his illness, the writer feels a responsibility for all and regrets that he cannot visit them in person. We might sum it all up by saying: Francis combined universalism with personalism.

D. The Herald of Spirit and Life

Why did Francis feel this sense of responsibility for all people? Why did he attach such importance to his letters? How could he ask that they be taken as norms for everyday living and assume that the worldwide mission of the order would last to the end of time? How can

⁶⁵ *RegEr*. See Esser, “Die ‘Regula pro eremitoriis data’ des hl. Franziskus,” in *Studien*, pp. 137–79 [cited in n. 5 above].

⁶⁶ Rotzetter, in *Franz von Assisi: Ein Anfang*, p. 78 [cited in n. 1 above] writes: “The Friars Minor are, therefore, a community without a hierarchical structure.” But there is no evidence for this statement in Francis’s *Letter to the Entire Order*, or in his *Testament*, or in *Admonitions III–IV*, where he also speaks about the office of superior. Esser, in *Anfänge*, p. 63 [cited in n. 17 above], comes to the following conclusion, after a study of the early sources: “Francis was the superior of the community who were bound to him in strict obedience.” See my article in *CF* 53 (1983): 132–35.

⁶⁷ *EpOrd* 2–3.

⁶⁸ *2EpFid* 2–3.

he make a blessing, and even salvation, depend on the observance of his letters? Does all this not betray an overweening egoism, arrogant presumption, or a bid for power under the guise of humility?

We must admit that the mission awareness of Francis has given occasion, and still does, to exaggerate his role, positively or negatively. On the one hand, there have been devout but unenlightened attempts to search out every imaginable resemblance between Francis and Christ.⁶⁹ Others tend to view him as power mad, and to see behind his repetitive *omnes* a gigantic bid for dominion.⁷⁰ Anyone who carefully examines Francis's self-witness will avoid the danger of both extremes. His awareness of mission is inextricably bound up with his commitment to service. He has been sent to serve all. This is clear from his declaration of purpose at the opening of his circular letter to all Christians.

The key to understanding the importance he attached to his letters is his mystical concept of the word of God. What this means is shown in the two *Versions of the Letter to the Faithful*. The first concludes with the words: "We beg all those whom these letters reach to accept with kindness and a divine love the fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ for the love of God."⁷¹ Francis equates his words with those "of our Lord Jesus Christ." He takes it for granted that he is expressing the mind of Christ. In fact, his letter consists in great measure of quotations from the Gospel. Despite that, enough of Francis's own words are interspersed with them to give the letter a distinctively personal tone. The smooth alternation of Francis's words and those of Christ is remarkable. We find the same occurring in the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*. After expressing a wish to visit all his addressees in person, he adds: "Since I am the servant of all, I am obliged to serve all and to administer to them the fragrant words of my Lord. Therefore ... I have proposed to set before you in this present letter and message the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Word of the Father, and the words of the Holy Spirit, which are spirit and life" (John 6: 64).⁷²

⁶⁹ Bonaventure had already referred to Francis as "*alter Christus*," but with moderation. Bartholomew of Pisa, in his monumental work *De conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Jesu* (1385-90), digs out every possible resemblance of Christ and Francis. Protestant critics justifiably attacked the work. See Stanislao da Campagnola, *L'angelo del sesto sigillo e l'Alter Christus: Genesi e sviluppo di due temi francescani nei secoli XIII-XIV*, Studi e ricerche, 1 (Rome, 1971), pp. 64-67. See also idem, *Le origini francescane come problema storiografico* (Perugia, 1979), pp. 64-67. The Spanish Observant friar Pedro de Alva y Astorga carries the idea to extremes when he enumerates no fewer than 3,726 resemblances (*conformitates*) between Christ and Francis. See van Asseldonk, in *Lettura biblico-teologica*, p. 81 [cited in n. 7 above].

⁷⁰ See Karlmann Beyschlag, *Die Bergpredigt und Franz von Assisi* (Gütersloh, 1955), p. 191.

⁷¹ *1EpFid* II 19.

In both passages he uses the uncommon phrase "fragrant words." They are not just poetical. They are based on 2 Corinthians 2: 14-16, and Ephesians 5: 2. They are an expression of faith. The words of Scripture are not dead; they are alive. They shed an aroma. Fragrance is a sign of life, yes, of God Himself.⁷³ Francis's words are life-giving, efficacious at all times and meant to be grasped and felt in our minds. That is why he shows such great reverence for God's written and spoken word and name⁷⁴ and why he wants all to listen and observe them: "Listen, sons of the Lord and my brothers. 'Pay attention to my words' (Acts 2: 14). 'Incline the ear' (Isaiah 55: 3) of your heart and obey the voice of the Son of God."⁷⁵ In his letters and sermons Francis sees himself as the spokesman for the message revealed so long ago, still vivifying but so seldom observed. The faith that made him speak of "fragrant words" is further expressed in his statement that they are the source of spirit and life. The fact that Francis sees all three Persons present and operative in the Word is typical of the Trinitarian spirituality found elsewhere in his writings.⁷⁶ Christ, Who is the Word of the Father, abides with us in His revealed word. He is not a transitory word, uttered for a moment in time. It is ever present. It is to be listened to and read. It transmits spirit and life (John 6: 63-64) because it is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Francis shares the belief of the early Christian communities that "every word of Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3: 16; 2 Pet. 1: 20-21). His faith in the inspiration of the Bible is not limited to its actual writing, which ended centuries ago. For him inspiration is ongoing in and through the sacred text.⁷⁷ As Wendelborn says: "For him, the word of God was not just a historical narrative or the basis of a system of dogma, but the revelation of God's will in the concrete circumstances of life. Francis was sure that God's word was directing and guiding him. He listened to the words of the Gospel as if Christ

⁷² *2EpFid* 2-3.

⁷³ As Hardick and Grau rightly note. See *Schriften*, p. 57, n. 13 [cited in n. 3 above].

⁷⁴ E.g. *EpCler* 1, 12; *Test* 12. *ICel* 82. See Rotzetter, *Franz von Assisi: Ein Anfang*, nos. 112-13 [cited in n. 1 above]. See also Octavian Schmucki, O.F.M.Cap., "Die Stellung Christi im Beten des hl. Franziskus," in *Wiss. Weish.* 25 (1962): 128-45, 188-212, esp. pp. 202-9.

⁷⁵ *EpOrd* 5-6. See Hardick and Grau, *Schriften*, p. 89 and n. 121 [cited in n. 3 above].

⁷⁶ *LaudHor* 4, 9; *SalBVM* 1-2, 6; *EpOrd* 1, 38, 50-52. See Schmucki, "Die Stellung Christi," pp. 132-34; J. Wackerl, "Die trinitarische Prägung des Weltverständnisses des hl. Franziskus," in *FSien* 64 (1982): 245-60.

⁷⁷ Francis must have had the same concept of Scripture as that described by K.H. Schelkle, in *Ethos, Theologie des NT*, vol. 3 (Düsseldorf, 1970), p. 23, when he writes: "The doctrine of inspiration does not mean only that the writing is of the Spirit. Inspiration implies that the writing is always operative through the power of the Spirit."

Himself was speaking directly to him. His self-awareness and consciousness of mission meant an awareness of God Himself. He always believed that he was led by God, and he was resolved to act as God's instrument.⁷⁸ He was so convinced of the mystical presence of Christ in the spoken and written word and its healing and sanctifying power that he was driven to share it with others, so that they too may participate in spirit and life. He saw himself as a link in the long line of those who spread the word of God in the course of history. He looked upon his words as truly the word of the Lord, even when not expressed in the exact phraseology of the Scriptures.

In the last analysis it was always God Who was speaking through his words, and the divine word is not circumscribed by particular phrases, or by space and time, precisely because it is spirit and life.⁷⁹ This Johannine expression is the key for an understanding of Francis's "word of God" theology. A definite theological orientation underlies all his thoughts and actions.⁸⁰ The evangelist's words also help us understand why, toward the end of his letter, he adheres more closely to the words of Christ and quotes them directly: "I, Brother Francis, your little servant, ask and implore you in the love which is God, and with the desire to kiss your feet, to receive these words and others of our Lord Jesus Christ with humility and love, and observe [them] and put [them] into practice."⁸¹ Francis gave the word of God top priority, not through mere repetition, but through personal acceptance and in a vital exchange with his hearers and readers. Here lies the great importance he attached to his letters and the reason why he identifies his own words with those of Christ. His continual recourse to the Savior's words also shows that it is not really Francis who is speaking, but the Lord Himself. When he equates his words with those of Christ, he is not setting himself up as another messiah. Rather he looks beyond his own words to Christ, the Word of the Father. He is first and foremost the servant of the Lord, and as such the servant of all men. Consequently his consciousness of mission is thoroughly spiritual, like that of the

⁷⁸ See Wendelborn, *Franziskus von Assisi*, p. 137 [cited in n. 15 above].

⁷⁹ See the frequent references in the Gospel of John, e.g. John 6: 64. See van Asseldonk, "Insegnamenti biblici privilegiati," pp. 97-99 [cited in n. 7 above]; idem, "Lo spirito del Signore e la sua santa operazione negli scritti di Francesco," in *Lau* 23 (1982): 133-95 [English translation in *Greyfriars Review* 1 (1987): 93-104 — Ed.].

⁸⁰ See Alexander Gerken, O.F.M., "Die theologische Intuition des hl. Franziskus von Assisi," in *Wiss. Weish.* 45 (1982): 2-25, esp. pp. 3-6. More succinctly in Rotzetter, *Die Funktion*, p. 31 [cited in n. 54 above]. Francis, in the *Earlier Rule*, in his reference to prayer also outlines a word-of-God theology. See Willi Egger, O.F.M.Cap., "Verbum in corde — cor ad Deum: Analyse und Interpretation von RegNB XXII," in *Lau* 23 (1982): 286-311.

⁸¹ *2EpFid* 87.

ancient prophets. That is why he so often says: "In the Lord I also beg all... I admonish and urge in the Lord... I beg them..."⁸² "I ask and implore you in the love which is God..."⁸³

E. The Voice of Prophecy and Exhortation

Francis admonishes the people in the style of the Hebrew prophets. He demands attention to his words: "Listen ... Remember ... Look ... Pause and reflect ... Know ... Know well ... Observe."⁸⁴ He harks back to the words of the prophets when he utters words of condemnation, for example: "Those who do not wish to taste how sweet the Lord is (Ps. 33: 9) and love the darkness rather than the light (John 3: 19), not wishing to fulfill the commands of God, are cursed. Of them the prophet says: "They are cursed who stray from your commands" (Ps. 118: 21). He speaks in a different tone when he describes the blessedness of those who follow after God: "Oh, how happy and blessed are those who love God and do as the Lord Himself says in the Gospel." But then he returns to the menacing words of the prophet: "For as the Lord says through the prophet: 'Cursed is the man who confides in man'" (Jer. 17: 5).⁸⁵ He returns to these judgmental words in his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, where he pronounces a "woe" on some, and a "blessing" on others.⁸⁶

The hortatory passages of the *Earlier Rule* already present these simple alternatives, so fundamental for all Franciscan preaching.⁸⁷ We can discern the basic structure, though not yet full developed, in the so-called *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful*. Lacking any mention of sender or recipient, it reads more like a sermon than a letter. It is divided into two balanced headings: 1) Of Those Who Do Penance, and 2) Of Those Who Do Not Do Penance. The first part is an *exultet* ("rejoicing") over those men and women who lead a penitential life. The second is an *exhortatio* ("exhortation") directed to those who "do not lead a life of penance."⁸⁸ For these he has some stern words: "Those who practice vice and sin and follow [the ways of] wicked concupiscence" are

⁸² *EpOrd* 14, 30, 48.

⁸³ *2EpFid* 87. See *1EpFid* II 19; *RegNB* XVII 5; XXII 26. See Antonio Blasucci, "In caritate quae Deus est: Dio-Amore negli scritti di S. Francesco d'Assisi," in *Lau* 23 (1982): 404-13.

⁸⁴ *EpOrd* 5, 21, 17, 23, 28; *EpRect* 2, 8; *2EpCust* 2; *EpOrd* 6. See Isaiah 1: 2, 10; 3: 1; 7: 13; 25: 9; Jer. 2: 4, 8; 19: 9; 13: 15; 21: 8.

⁸⁵ *2EpFid* 16-18, 76.

⁸⁶ *CantSol* 11, 13.

⁸⁷ *RegNB* XXI. See Rotzetter, Rotzetter, "Gott in der Verkündigung," pp. 50-61 [cited in n. 43 above].

⁸⁸ *1EpFid* I. The title "*exultatio et exhortatio de poenitentia*" is based on n. 39 above. See pp. 542-44 of my dissertation.

called captives of the devil "whose children they are and whose works they perform.... They are blind, since they do not see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ."⁸⁹

After this stirring sermon he offers an example that is more fully and dramatically developed in the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*.⁹⁰ The depiction of different classes of persons, the dialogue of a dying man with his family and with the priest, and the negative attitude of the sick man who refuses to restore ill-gotten goods, were calculated to make a deep impression on the hearers. They must do penance before it is too late.

Francis's aim is to bring about conversion to a genuine Christian life. This is the purpose of all his circular letters. To achieve it he employs every manner of persuasive tactics reminiscent of the old prophets. He uses every kind of rhetorical device, from stirring appeals to open threats, from blessings to woes.

F. Radical in His Response to the Demands of the Gospel

The words of Jesus had a decisive impact on Francis's life-style. He comes back to them time and time again in his *Rules*. The radical demands of the Gospel are incorporated into both *Rules*, especially in the earlier one, which is the basic document for expressing the ideals of the order.⁹¹ We find them again in his letters, written by a man who makes great demands on himself and on others. For the most part they are written in the first person plural ("we") and therefore include the writer. In his *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* we find a whole litany of such demands:

We must hate our bodies with [their] vices and sins, because the Lord says in the Gospel: All evils, vices, and sins proceed from the heart (Matt. 15: 18-19). We must love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. We must observe the commands and counsels of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must also deny ourselves.... The one to whom obedience has been entrusted and who is esteemed as greater should be as the lesser and the servant of the other brothers.... We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh; rather, we must be simple, humble, and pure.... We must never desire to be over others; rather we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake (see 1 Pet. 2: 13).⁹²

He frequently reinforces the Gospel passages with words of his own. For example, to the Lord's command: "Anyone who would be the

⁸⁹ See *ibid.* II 3, 6-7.

⁹⁰ *1EpFid* II 15-18; *2EpFid* 72-85.

⁹¹ Thaddée Matura offers a collection of the "radical texts." See *Die Lebensordnung nach dem Evangelium: Franziskus von Assisi damals und heute*, Bücher franziskan. Geistigkeit, 20 (Werl, 1979), pp. 54-56. See *idem*, *Le radicalisme évangélique* (Paris, 1978), *Lectio divina*, 97.

⁹² *2EpFid* 37-40, 42, 45, 47.

greater must become the least" (Luke 22: 26) he adds the words: "and the servant of the other brothers." The Gospel passage "to be subject to every human creature" is amplified by "and servant."

Francis's ideals shine out most clearly in his *Letter to a Minister*. This superior, responsible for a community of friars, found his office very difficult. It would appear that there were serious conflicts between him and his confreres. As he himself confessed, he felt that his religious life was suffering as a result. He asked permission to retire to a hermitage. Francis answered him:

To Brother N., minister: May the Lord bless you (see Num. 6: 24).

I speak to you, as I can, concerning the state of your soul. You should accept as a grace all those things which deter you from loving the Lord God and whoever has become an impediment to you, whether [they are] brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you. And you should desire that things be this way and not otherwise. And let this be [an expression] of true obedience to the Lord God and to me, for I know full well that this is true obedience. And love those who do these things to you. And do not expect anything different from them, unless it is something which the Lord shall have given to you. And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians. And let this be more [valuable] to you than a hermitage.

And by this I wish to know if you love the Lord God and me, His servant and yours — if you have acted in this manner: that is, there should not be any brother in the world who has sinned, however much he may have possibly sinned, who, after he has looked into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not to seek mercy, you should ask him if he wants mercy. And if he should sin thereafter a thousand times before your very eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him back to the Lord. Always be merciful to [brothers] such as these. And announce this to the guardians, as you can, that on your part you are resolved to act in this way.⁹³

Erich Auerbach, an authority in European literature, calls this letter a masterpiece of realism. Francis understands the minister, who longs for a quiet life of contemplation instead of the hassles of his office. But the saint will not allow him to take refuge in meditation. He urges him to humble himself under the burden of his daily tasks and to accept blows patiently, and even to love the one who strikes out against him. He is not recommending any stoic apathy but a cheerful and grateful acceptance of adversity. He employs many demonstrative pronouns, and hastily-written sentences that almost all begin with "and." Says Auerbach:

The unpolished directness of his expressions resembles the spoken word and stresses a very radical idea — not to run away from evil or even resist it; not to abandon the world but to immerse oneself in its torment and gladly suffer hardship. The minister should not wish that things be

⁹³ *EpMin* 1-12.

otherwise.... Here Francis stretches his moral theology to the breaking point, when he writes: *Et in hoc dilige eos et non velis quod sint meliores Christiani* ("And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians"). After all, should not our own trials lead us to hope that another person might become a better Christian? According to Francis, it is only by submitting to evil that the power of love and obedience is shown.⁹⁴

The radical renunciation of one's own will has a reverse side, an unshakeable trust that every contradiction is a grace. The minister will be able to confront every adversity. He will and not be crushed under the weight of office or disheartened by the hostility of his brothers. A total dedication of self, combined with unconditional love, is worth more than a self-chosen life in a hermitage, more than peaceful contemplation far removed from the bustle of the world. His other letters, too, are filled with uncompromising Gospel demands. But the *Letter to a Minister* suffices to reveal Francis's basic position. Wherever his advice is asked, or when he is conversing with his companions, we can discern the full extent of his Gospel orientation. His letters teach us that we should see God's grace in everything, show mercy without reservation, and desire naught else but what God wills for us.

G. Heartfelt, Frank, Courteous and Discreet

1) Advice — Not a Command

Anyone who imposes heavy demands on himself or others runs the risk of becoming inhuman and fanatical. Francis's writings prove that he escaped this trap. In his *Letter to a Minister* he conveys a rather unwelcome message to the demoralized superior: If you run away, you are evading God's will. You can love God in any situation, even when you feel yourself abused. You will not achieve salvation in some cozy hideaway, be it ever so holy. Francis probes deeply into the recesses of the human heart and unmask the motives that seem so right and sensible, even devout. Hardick says: "The manner in which Francis lays all this before the friar is not in the form of a peremptory command. His aim is to lead him to make the correct decision for himself. The saint is merely assisting him to reach it."⁹⁵

We find the same approach when he writes to Brother Leo. Here he strives to bring his companion to recognize the divine will with a blend of charm, tenderness, or whatever name you might give that special touch in which he clothes his words. Francis compares himself to a mother when he writes: "Brother Leo, [wish] your Brother Francis health and peace! I place all the words which we spoke on the road in

⁹⁴ *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, vol. 7 (Bern, 1982), p. 161. Quotations given.

⁹⁵ "Brief an einen, der es leid war," in *Bruder Franz* 35 (1982): 163-64.

this phrase, briefly and [as] advice. And afterwards, if it is necessary for you to come to me for counsel, I say this to you: In whatever way it seems best to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprints and His poverty, do this with the blessing of God and my obedience. And if you believe it necessary for the well-being of your soul, or to find comfort, and you wish to come to me, Leo, come!.”⁹⁶

We possess the original of this letter in which Francis wishes for his confidant the most important grace of all — to abide in the all-embracing goodness of God and to experience peace and healing. He makes reference to a conversation they had while walking together, during which they must have discussed a number of important questions relative to their life. Perhaps Francis was worried that he had talked too much and confused his brother. Consequently he gets back to basics, not by issuing any mandate but by way of counsel. (The word occurs three times.) This enables Leo to discern, in the presence of God, the way best to follow. Francis was well aware of the great influence he exercised among his companions. Nevertheless, he had no desire to attach anyone to his person, but rather to guide each one to responsible obedience to the will of God. Again to quote Hardick: “This did not mean that he gave each friar *carte blanche* to do whatever he pleased. He simply reminded each of his own personal responsibility to God for the way he lived. Francis has such respect for the person of his brother that he is patient when one of them ignores the advice given him by the saint. Even if Leo should choose to follow his own way, Francis would look upon it as obedience if it was really according to God’s will.”⁹⁷ Rotzetter and Hug comment: “Adequate leeway and liberty must always be afforded for improvement. In warm and touching words Francis encourages his friars to follow this course.”⁹⁸ He carefully eschewed inflexible and absolute declarations. He spoke carefully and with reserve as shown by his employment of the conditional mode. He has a heart-to-heart talk with Leo. He addresses him by name at the beginning and end of his letter. He makes frequent use of the pronouns: You, your, to you (eight times in the Latin text). Beginning with somewhat involved and incomplete sentences, the letter concludes with the simple, almost childlike invitation: “And if you wish to come to me, Leo, come!” After a hopeless struggle to find the right phrase, Francis admits the inadequacy of the written word and invites Leo to a face-to-face conversation. The letter, and the preceding talk, were not meant to finalize anything. Everything is still open, especially Francis himself.

⁹⁶ *EpLeo* 1–4.

⁹⁷ *Führen — den eigenen Weg zeigen*, p. 132.

⁹⁸ *Franz von Assisi: Die Demut Gottes*, Reihe Klassiker der Meditation (Zurich, Einsiedeln and Cologne, 1977), p. 45.

Even his wish not to be disturbed while in a hermitage or during prayer was subject to exceptions, especially when a brother was in need of support.

2) Like a Mother

Francis's openness was based on his belief that God is operative in every individual. This conviction made it possible for him to allow his friend and brother to choose his own way. His manner of speech is truly motherly. Elsewhere he describes the affectionate relationship of the friars among themselves as "maternal".⁹⁹ Now he writes: "I speak to you, my son, as a mother." His gentleness does not prevent him, however, from reminding Brother Leo of his duty of obedience. The delicate balance that must be maintained between obligation and freedom is well expressed in the term "mother." Like a mother, Francis had to have a care for the friars and guide them. Taken jointly with other writings by and about Francis, this brief, grammatically awkward letter shows how the Poverello could combine tenderness and strength. *Animus* and *anima* seem to have achieved a happy partnership in his affectivity. The letter reveals how he was able to bring together paternity and maternity, obedience and flexibility, obligation and liberty.

The saint's *Letter to St. Anthony*, too, like that to Brother Leo, is not rigid or hobbling but marked by maternal concern and guidance: "Brother Francis [sends his] wishes of health to Brother Anthony, my bishop. It pleases me that you teach sacred theology to the brothers, as long as — in the words of the *Rule* — you 'do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion' with study of this kind."¹⁰⁰

This little note, consisting only of the addressee and a single sentence, brings to light two basic attitudes of Francis, which evidence his respect for the integrity of the individual and of the community as a whole — acceptance of the gifts of each person, and sensitivity to the needs of the church. To understand his attitude we must take a closer look at the way Francis thought of studies in general and ask what role a teacher of theology played in the church at that time.

⁹⁹ *RegNB* IX 11; *RegB* VI 8. See Auspicius van Corstanje, O.F.M., "Dit zeg ik je als moeder," in *Franciscus van Assisi* 14 (1977): 166–82; D. Gagnan, "Le symbole de la femme chez s. François d'Assise," in *Lau* 18 (1977): 256–91; Rotzetter, *Franz von Assisi: Ein Anfang*, no. 50, 2 [cited in n. 1 above]; idem, "Die Gegenwart Gottes in der Welt und die Herrschaft der Kleriker: Ein ideologiekritischer Beitrag zum kirchlichen Amtsverständnis aus franziskanischer Sicht," in *F'Sien* 63 (1981): 188–202.

¹⁰⁰ *EpAnt* 1–2. Its authenticity has been questioned by some scholars. See Kajetan Esser, "Der Brief des hl. Franziskus an den hl. Antonius von Padua," pp. 43–58, in *Studien* [cited in n. 5 above]. See also idem, *Opuscula*, pp. 147–54. Because of its stylistic resemblance to the *Letter to Brother Leo*, Raoul Manselli, in *San Francesco*, pp. 336–39, believes that any further discussion about its authenticity is superfluous.

3) Open to the Gifts of the Individual

If Francis did not have a downright hostile attitude toward studies,¹⁰¹ it is safe to say that he was wary of learning and scholarship, especially for members of his order. As Berg says: "Francis, the townsman, understood the advantages of learning, especially in law and medicine, for social advancement, the settlement of property rights and prestige in the community.... He felt the same way about theology in the life of the church. Since he was aware of the importance of culture for society, he harbored no serious objections to learning as such. His problem was the inherent danger of pride and egoism for the scholar."¹⁰² He saw the simplicity, poverty and minority of his order menaced by a friar's ambition to be a cut above the rest.¹⁰³ A craving for that learning which implied a position of dominance over others, whether in the church or in civil society, raised misgivings in his mind. Consequently he wrote in his final *Rule*: "Those who are illiterate should not be eager to learn."¹⁰⁴

In the light of the above, the writer of the *Letter to St. Anthony* would appear to be inconsistent. Francis actually grants Anthony, a theologian, permission to teach his friars.¹⁰⁵ Of course he attaches one significant condition. He quotes the *Rule* of the order and unequivocally subordinates studies to the "Spirit of prayer and devotion." The reference to the *Rule* indicates its priority over every kind of occupation and its binding force on every friar, whether he be "bishop" or lay brother. For all his magnanimity it would appear that Anthony was the only friar whom Francis commissioned to teach.¹⁰⁶ He considered him a model religious. He was confident that Anthony, despite his elevation to the office of lector, would preserve the Franciscan way of life, since he represented a felicitous combination of simplicity and learning. We cannot, therefore, conclude that this one-time appointment meant an

¹⁰¹ See Paul Sabatier, *Vie de s. François* (Paris, 1894), who rejects the letter as a forgery.

¹⁰² *Armut und Wissenschaft: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Studienwesens der Bettelorden im 13. Jhd.* (Düsseldorf, 1977), pp. 44-45. The author thoughtfully assesses Francis's attitude toward learning. See also Gratien of Paris, O.F.M.Cap., *Histoire de la fondation et de l'évolution de l'Ordre des Frères Mineurs au XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1928), pp. 81-96.

¹⁰³ See *Adm VII*. See also Lothar Hardick, O.F.M., *Die Ermahnungen des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, Bücher franziskan. Geistigkeit, 22 (Werl, 1981), pp. 66-72.

¹⁰⁴ *RegB X 7*.

¹⁰⁵ The office of preaching required the permission of the provincial or minister general. All the more so the office of lector. See *RegNB XVII*; *RegB IX*.

¹⁰⁶ In fact, just three years previously he condemned John of Sciacca for establishing a house of studies at Bologna. See *Actus b. Francisci et sociorum eius*, no. 61, ed. Paul Sabatier (Paris, 1902), p. 183. For the historicity of this event see Berg, *Armut und Wissenschaft*, p. 51, with references [cited in n. 102 above].

overall approbation of learning, even less so a go-ahead signal for studies in the order.

On the other hand, Francis must have known that the nomination of Brother Anthony as teacher would necessarily entail certain consequences. Henceforth there would be friars, students of Anthony,¹⁰⁷ who would in the very near future agitate for the introduction of organized studies in the order. Unless we are to imagine that Francis was totally blind to the situation, we must conclude that despite all his warnings against identifying scholarship and wisdom,¹⁰⁸ he himself, by his appointment of Anthony, did in fact open the door for the establishment of chairs of theology and the organization of a program of studies in the order.¹⁰⁹

4) Attentive to the Needs of the Church

Francis recognized and respected Anthony's talents and enabled him to place them at the service of his confreres. Thereby he transcended his own personal bias in favor of the interests of the individual friars and of the order as a whole. His choice of the title "bishop" hints at an even wider circle. When Francis called Anthony "bishop" (which Celano records with some surprise),¹¹⁰ he was not displaying mere courtesy or flattery. Nor was he indulging in a pleasantry or a special sign of friendship for Anthony.¹¹¹ The title was addressed not so much to the person as to the office. Francis honored all priests and teachers of the word of God, regardless of their personal qualities. He was resolved to reverence them, because they "minister spirit and life to us."¹¹² The title "bishop" is an indication of the respect he has for the office that Anthony will assume. At the same time he reminds him of the obligations he will incur toward the church.

¹⁰⁷ Hilarin Felder's account of Anthony's career as lector must be essentially abridged. See his *Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Studien im Franziskanerorden* (Freiburg, 1904), pp. 135-49. See also Berg, *Armut und Wissenschaft*, pp. 54-55 [cited in n. 102 above]. See also Sophronius Clasen, O.F.M., "Antonius, Diener des Evangeliums," in *Wiss. Weish.* 23 (1960): 53-67, 108-30, esp. p. 113.

¹⁰⁸ Francis did not greet learning, but 'holy simplicity' as sister of 'Queen Wisdom'. See *SalVirt* 1. For its spiritual significance see Kajetan Esser, O.F.M. "Studium und Wissenschaft im Geiste des hl. Franziskus," commentary on *EpAnt*, in *Wiss. Weish.* 39 (1976): 26-41, esp. pp. 37-39.

¹⁰⁹ For the further development of studies, see Hilarin Felder, O.F.M.Cap., *Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Studien*, pp. 97-123; 149-59 [cited in n. 107 above]. See also Berg, *Armut und Wissenschaft*, pp. 76-85 [cited in n. 102 above]; idem, "Das Studium im Spiegel der franziskanischen Historiographie des 13. und beginnenden 14. Jahrhunderts," in *Wiss. Weish.* 42 (1979): 11-33, 106-56.

¹¹⁰ See *2Cel* 163.

¹¹¹ According to Manselli, in *San Francesco*, p. 339, Francis was "affectionately serious or playful."

¹¹² *Test* 6-13. See Esser, *Studien*, pp. 53-54 [cited in n. 5 above].

Kajetan Esser makes reference to the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which required bishops to preach in their dioceses, or else provide for the training of skilled clerics to preach to the people in their stead.¹¹³ Francis was familiar with the reform movement initiated by the council, as we can see from his Eucharistic letters and *Earlier Rule*.¹¹⁴ We can assume that the decree of the council exercised some influence on his attitude toward studies and teaching. As superior of the order, Francis was trying to implement its decrees within his own community and entrusted Anthony — a “skilled man,” in the words of the council — with the office of teaching, thereby providing for other capable priests and preachers.

D. Berg, too, discerns the influence of canonical legislation in Francis's use of the words “my bishop.” Francis honored bishops, who at that time were the official *pastores et doctores* (“shepherds and teachers”), and expected Anthony's duties to be understood in terms of the episcopal office of teaching.¹¹⁵ The refutation of heresy was also a motive for approving theological studies and to a large extent determined their content and scope.¹¹⁶ Francis was attentive to the needs of his time, and he permitted teaching and learning for the benefit of the entire church and the future of his order. He appointed his “bishop” Anthony to a post that was not unlike the one filled by real bishops.

5) Discretion

Discretion pervades Francis's letters to Leo and Anthony. The same holds true for those he addressed to wider audiences. Let us take a look at his admonition to the clergy. True, he had some unpleasant things to tell them. He complains of their lack of awareness and their want of care and respect for the Holy Eucharist. As a deacon (and therefore a cleric) he includes himself in his fervent appeal: “All of us who are clerics should be aware of the great sin and ignorance which some people have toward the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

When describing abuses, he does not indulge in vague generalizations. He speaks of those who leave the Body of Christ in unbecoming places, who carry it through the streets in a careless manner, who

¹¹³ See *Opuscula*, p. 154, where the council's decree can be found.

¹¹⁴ See Bertrand Cornet, O.F.M., “De reverentia corporis Domini,” in *EF* 6 (1955): 65–91; David Flood, O.F.M., *Die Regula non bullata der Minderbrüder* (Werl, 1967), pp. 125–33; Rotzetter, *Die Funktion*, p. 160 [cited in n. 54 above].

¹¹⁵ *Armut und Wissenschaft*, p. 53 [cited in n. 102 above]. See also R. Zerfasst, *Der Streit um die Laienpredigt: Eine pastoralgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Verständnis des Predigtamtes und zu seiner Entwicklung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg, 1974), p. 117.

¹¹⁶ See Esser, *Anfänge und ursprüngliche Zielsetzungen*, pp. 204–6 [cited in n. 17 above]. See also Clasen, “Antonius,” pp. 112–13 [cited in n. 107 above].

receive it unworthily or distribute it indiscriminately.¹¹⁷ He uses an indirect approach to get them to change their ways. Francis never reproved the clergy publicly in his sermons. After preaching to the people, he would meet separately with them, perhaps in the sacristy, where they would not be overheard by the laity. There he would speak to them about the salvation of their souls and urge them to take good care of churches, altars and all that had to do with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.¹¹⁸ Even when he felt he had to address some serious problem, he employed a prudent reserve. He knew how to deal circumspectly with others, as is evident from his letter to the superiors of the order: "I beg you, with all that is in me and more, that, when it is appropriate and you judge it profitable, you humbly beg the clergy to revere above everything else the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹¹⁹ The superiors are not to get involved with the affairs of the diocesan clergy. They are to approach them humbly, as petitioners, and bring up the subject of respect for the Eucharist at an appropriate time and with the necessary distinctions.

Francis is only asking what he himself practices. In his message to the Poor Clares he promises: "I, brother Francis, the little one, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of His most holy mother and to persevere in this until the end."¹²⁰ Here we find the language of chivalry and good manners combined with modesty, sincerity, and Christian charity.

He adopts the same style when he writes to his brethren and urges them to better their lives. Before going on to make his recommendations to the friars, he complains that the *Rule* is not being observed and the Divine Office is not recited. Here again he employs polite language: "Sons of the Lord and my brothers."¹²¹ He rarely issues orders. He prefers to entreat: "I ask and implore you ... with the desire to kiss your feet."¹²²

Chivalrous speech and good manners are combined with modesty, good will, and Christian charity.

¹¹⁷ *EpCler* 1-5.

¹¹⁸ *Compilatio Assisiensis*, no. 60. See Marino Bigaroni, O.F.M., ed., "*Compilatio Assisiensis*" dagli *Scritti di fr. Leone e Compagni su S. Francesco d'Assisi* (Portiuncula, 1975), p. 154.

¹¹⁹ *1EpCust* 2.

¹²⁰ *UltVol* 1-2.

¹²¹ *EpOrd* 5: "Audite, domini filii et fratres mei..." Esser, in *Opuscula*, p. 259, in conformity with *UltVol* 2, prefers the translation "Lord sons" to "Sons of the Lord." See Esser, *Schriften*, p. 89, with n. 14 [cited in n. 3 above].

¹²² *2EpFid* 87. See n. 83 above.

H. Proceeding from Prayer and Leading Back to Prayer

One more point must be stressed. In Francis's letters we encounter a man of prayer. We don't look for precise prayer formularies in them; they seldom occur in his letters. But three of them open with an invocation of the name of the Lord, or with the sign of the cross. Three conclude with an "Amen." Besides a blessing and "Amen," the *Letter to the Entire Order* contains a longer, deeply moving prayer modeled on the liturgy in its concise form and content. Its wording is similar to some other prayers of the Poverello, especially the *Prayer before the Crucifix* at San Damiano, the preface-like hymn in the *Earlier Rule*, and the *Canticle of Brother Sun*.¹²³ As Hardick and Grau say: "We can rightly call [the *Letter to the Entire Order*] the quintessential prayer of the Friar Minor, of a man standing poor before his God."¹²⁴ In fact, it is a summary of the three classical "ways" of the spiritual life: the purgative way (prayer and faith), the illuminative way (meditation and hope), and the unitive way (contemplation and love).¹²⁵ Obviously Francis was thoroughly animated by the spirit of prayer when he wrote or dictated the *Letter to the Entire Order*.¹²⁶ Prayer and a call to prayer recur throughout it, as they do in the *Rules*. The prayer-texts usually appear at the opening or close of his letters. Francis had a predilection for Trinitarian devotion. But he is not bound to any strict formulary, as we can see from the spontaneous and often ecstatic outbursts of prayer that occur throughout his letters. Thus in his *Letter to the Entire Order* we find, in addition to the prayer at its close, a *Confiteor* and a cry of jubilation over God's humility:

O admirable heights and sublime lowliness!
 O sublime humility!
 O humble sublimity!
 That the Lord of the universe,
 God and the Son of God,
 so humbles Himself
 that for our salvation
 He hides Himself under the little form of bread!¹²⁷

¹²³ See the prayer in *EpOrd* 50–52.

¹²⁴ See Hardick and Grau, *Schriften*, p. 89 [cited in n. 3 above].

¹²⁵ "... so that interiorly purified, interiorly enlightened and aflame with the fire of the Holy Spirit, we may follow the footsteps of your beloved Son..." (Esser, *Opuscula*, p. 263).

¹²⁶ These manuscripts, which have transmitted the prayer apart from the letters, have indicated clearly the close relationship between them. Thus they list *EpOrd* 50–52 among the prayers of the saint. See Esser, *Opuscula*, pp. 238–39: "In accord with the majority of the manuscripts, both must be taken together, especially since the prayer sums up the basic idea of the letter so very well." See also Schmucki, "La Lettera," pp. 283–85 [cited in n. 6 above].

¹²⁷ *EpOrd* 27.

The threefold "O" punctuating an otherwise staid letter shows how easily Francis could be carried away by his feelings, especially when he contemplates the humility of almighty God.

A similar outburst can be found in both versions of the *Letter to the Faithful*. In the first, the very thought of the happiness of the Christian to be a member of the family of God inspires the joyful confession: "Oh, how glorious it is, how holy and great, to have a Father in heaven! Oh, how holy, consoling, beautiful and wondrous it is to have such a Spouse! Oh, how holy and how loving, pleasing, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all things to have such a Brother and such a Son: our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave up His life for His sheep and Who prayed to the Father saying: 'O Holy Father, protect those in Your name whom You have given to me in the world'" (John 17).¹²⁸

Francis quotes the High Priestly Prayer of the Last Supper, in which Jesus expresses His joy over the profound, familial unity of the triune God. He prays as Jesus prayed, and like Him, for his followers.

In verse three of the second (the longer) version of the letter, Francis proposes "to set before you ... the words of our Lord Jesus Christ..." He then meditates on the Incarnation, the Last Supper, and the Passion of Jesus, especially on His obedient subjection to the Father. Of special importance is the prayer of the Savior in the Garden of Gethsemani: "Father, let Your will be done; not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26: 42, 39).¹²⁹ He understands and emphasizes the divine will to redeem all mankind. His meditation on all that God has done for us and still does leads him to bewail our meager love for Him. From a consideration of God's love, and his sorrow that so few respond to it, Francis writes a long litany of pleas ("let us"), among them an entreaty to love and prayer. The key word "adore" occurs seven times in three sentences. After concluding his pleas, he describes the consequences of their observance. He who fulfills all this will be the son of the heavenly Father, the spouse, brother and mother of Jesus Christ. Again he breaks out into a threefold cry of joy, and he quotes the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. Immersed as he is in his union with God, Francis intones a doxology that reaches out to the whole universe, to all those who worship the Lord:

Let every creature
in heaven, on earth
in the sea and in the depths,

¹²⁸ *1EpFid* I 11-14. The poetic style of his cry of jubilation can be seen here as in other passages in the arrangement of the text. See Rotzetter and Hug, *Franz von Assisi: Die Demut Gottes*, p. 156 [cited in n. 98 above]. See also Thaddée Matura, "Mi pater sancte: Dieu comme père dans les écrits de François," in *Lau* 23 (1982): 102-32.

¹²⁹ *2EpFid* 3-10. Sometimes the verses are incorporated in the text.

give praise,
 glory, honor, and blessing
 to Him
 Who suffered so much for us,
 Who has given so many good things,
 and [Who] will [continue to] do so for the future
 For He is our power and strength,
 He Who alone is good
 [Who] is most high,
 [Who is] all-powerful, admirable, [and] glorious;
 [Who] alone is holy, praiseworthy, and blessed
 throughout the endless ages. Amen.

By way of contrast with the blessings bestowed on those who do penance, there follows a stirring appeal directed to those who do not live in penance. He then narrates the story about the sick man who died impenitent and without making restitution, and as a result went to hell. But then the letter concludes with the sign of the cross, and, prayer-like, with an Amen.

4. Recapitulation

At the outset we made some observations on Francis's education and suggested some models that may have influenced his apostolate of the written word. While he looked upon himself as an uneducated man, he surprises us with the number of his letters and their profound spiritual and theological content. They fall into two groups: personal letters and circular writings. Only one has come down to us in its original form. Others are copies. Still others survive in summations or are referred to in the sources. A number have been completely lost.

After a brief look at the material content of the letters, we thought it worthwhile to study the personality of the writer revealed in them. They are replete with contrasts, and careful study is needed to discover their essential unity. Like his letters, Francis the person can be understood only in paradoxical terms. He was at once humble and self-assured, a useless servant with ambitious plans for organizing a worldwide campaign. He looks on himself as an unworthy creature of God and yet proclaims himself the bearer of a divine message. As the area of his wandering apostolate shrinks, the circle of his audience expands. Although he has become sick and weak, he unleashes an incredible amount of energy in his efforts to open the way of salvation to all his fellow men. He is determined to reach all, and still address himself to the individual. Nevertheless, his sense of urgency is tempered by discretion. He respects the role of divine grace in guiding each person. Unshaken in his adherence to principle, his mind is open to new developments. Totally committed to the word of God, he is attentive to the needs of the church and the order. Radical, inflexible and even utopian in his demands, he has the heart of a mother for the well-being

of his companions. He does not issue orders in his letters. He counsels, pleads, implores.

This paradoxical behavior makes it difficult to delineate a clear picture of the man of Assisi. There is always the danger of highlighting one facet of his personality while ignoring the other. If we were to limit our attention to his letters to the worldwide community, with their apocalyptic pronouncements, we might find it hard to escape an impression of exaggerated self-importance. If we concentrate on the habitual modesty of the saint, we come up with a picture of a little poor man suffering from a rather mean self-image. We must find a third dimension to see that the contradictions found in his letters and personality are only apparent. If we take the first dimension as humility and the second as self-awareness, the third is God. It is important to grasp this third dimension whenever Francis makes Christ's words his own. He himself withdraws behind the task committed to him by God. Since he gives himself totally to his mission and identifies himself with it, he expresses himself with assurance, authority and confidence.

The concept that mediates between Francis's self-description as a little servant and his role as messenger to the entire world is that of mission. Francis is convinced that he is called to serve others and communicate to them "the fragrant words of the Lord." Face-to-face with the grandeur of his task, he feels very small indeed. But in realizing it, he achieves greatness. His admonitions are always associated with God in Whose name he pleads, blesses and warns. It is through Francis's meditation on the divine word and his complete openness to the commands of the Lord¹³⁰ that he arrives at the conviction that all human happiness consists in sharing the life of the holy Trinity, or as he himself expresses it: to taste the sweetness of being the son of the Father, and the spouse, brother and mother of Jesus Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit. This mystical grasp of Christian life is ultimately the deepest source from which his warnings and words of comfort, his condemnations and blessings flow. In his letters he shows himself a single personality that seeks God in all things, is enraptured in Him and converses with Him from the fullness of his heart.

¹³⁰ His determination to know God's will and to carry it out is already expressed in his *Prayer before the Crucifix* of San Damiano: "Give me, Lord ... sense and knowledge, so that I may carry out Your holy and true command."