# The Church in the Writings of St. Francis of Assisi

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In his Life of St. Francis of Assisi, <sup>1</sup> Sabatier would have us believe that the approval of the Franciscan Rule by Innocent III was the beginning of the erosion of the freedom and purity of Francis's new "way." The overlay of structure and the exercise of control on the part of the Church resulted in the inevitable loss of the initial inspiration of gospel living which was Francis's dream. This perspective of ecclesial, or more particularly Papal, influence is found in nearly all the early biographies of the saint. It was adopted by others—lesser historians and lesser talents. Therefore, when we ponder the relationship of Francis and the Church, all sorts of images or clichés press in upon the imagination inspiring a concept of the relationship of Francis with the Church which is contemporary.

Sabatier would also have us believe that because the concept of evangelical living was an idea unique to Francis and his dream was one that was so radical, so difficult, and so pure it could only distress and threaten the heavily structured ecclesiastical institution. In his works and in his actions Francis insists on his perfect loyalty and devotion to the Church. However,

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Sabatier, Paul, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*. trans. Louise Seymour Houghton (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912) 101-102.

in spite of himself, Francis presages already the explosion of free investigation and exploration and the reform of the 16th Century.

The institutional Church of the 13th century did not lack intelligent and spiritual men, such as Innocent III and Cardinal Hugolino. Rather than oppose the movement raised up by Francis (as it had earlier opposed the Waldensians and the Humiliati), the Church chose to protect it, according to some, in order to use it for its own ends after having modified it radically and stripped it of its uniqueness and of its controversial essence.

Early authors believed that Francis was aware of this, that his heart and flesh were crushed by it. However, in spite of scattered attempts to protest, he bowed in obedience and accepted this mutilation of his intentions, with a sense of death in his soul.<sup>2</sup> The reason for such an incomprehensible attitude is not explained. But it is a fact, reaffirmed on several occasions by Francis himself, that with a touching devotion he proclaimed his faith and his submission to the Church and to its ministers. Francis's devotion to the clergy within the Church reveals his image of the Church as a hierarchical and clerical pyramid. But is this concept really supported by the facts, does it render justice to the historical documents and consequently to Francis himself?

A more dispassionate approach, undertaken by some historians, modifies it considerably, as the works of K. Selge and of R. Manselli testify. For Manselli, in particular, Cardinal Hugolino did not at all play the role which was habitually attributed to him, that of intentionally creating a substantial transformation of the original dream of Francis.

In this article, my proposal is not to take up again the examination of the historical question on the basis of contemporary documents such as diplomatic sources, chronicles, nor the diverse early lives of Francis. I limit

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>A characteristic text of the French historian Jacques LeGoff: "Francis accepted this deformed Rule with death in his soul." "Francis of Assisi," 2000 Years of Christianity, Vol III, Paris 1975, p. 204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>K. Selge, "Franz von Assisi und die römische Kurie", Zeitschrift fur Theologie und Kirche 67 (1970) 129-161; R. Manselli, St. Francis of Assisi, trans. Paul Duggan. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988) pp. 193-285.

myself to a much more restrained objective: to examine, solely from the authentic writings of Francis, the image which he had of the Church.

This image appears, in fact, a great deal less clerical than it at first seems: it is a people-Church, a mystery-Church, a place-for-salvation-Church, the norm for faith and conduct. The communion of Francis with this Church, his "submission"—to use his own words—is explained, then, by his clinging to a profound faith, but not out of tactical necessity nor out of a blind obedience.

The study which follows is divided into four parts: 1. an examination of the vocabulary used by Francis; 2. a summary presentation of the major texts in which he speaks of the Church; 3. Church: its mystery, its structures; 4. functions of the Church.

# I. The Vocabulary of Francis<sup>4</sup>

In order to speak of the great assembly of humans who constitute the Church, and of which he and his fraternity were a part, Francis utilizes two types of words: some are a general designation of this body, others describe the different categories which compose it.

1. The first group is made up of three words: Church, Catholic, Christian. The most frequent is that of Church: 22 occurrences, 13 of which allude to the society bearing this name, 8 refer to the material edifice, and one usage is symbolic (SalBMV 5). The Church as a community is qualified 10 times by the attribute holy; two times it is called Mother; 5 times Roman; one time Catholic and Apostolic; only once is the word used without an adjective. Certainly, compared to the frequencies of other terms (Lord: 410 times; Brother: 306; Christ: 83; body: 85; soul: 77; etc.), the term Church is employed rather modestly, about as often as the expression poor one: 27, and more frequently than that of little poor one: 16. Although we have here forms which were current in the time of Francis, the use of the expression Mother, the frequency of the words holy and Roman, are not just the result of chance: they attest to faith, respect and a certain tenderness with regard to the Roman Church.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>†</sup>For the study of vocabulary, I relied on J. F. Godet - G. Mailleux, Opuscula sancti Francisci, Scripta Sanctae Clarae. Concordances, Index, Listes de frequence, Tables comparatives (Corpus des Sources Franciscaines, V) Louvain 1976.

The term *Catholic*, under diverse forms, appears 13 times in the writings of Francis. It qualifies sometimes the *Church* (one time) and at others *faith* or *life*, that is to say orthodoxy (*fides et vita catholica*: 3 times), and still others, when used as a substantive (*esse catholici*) it designates either the *faithful* (4 times) or *priests* (2 times), and three times it is used as an adverb: *catholic*, *in a catholic manner*. In any and all cases, it is a question of conformity with the Church, its faith and its discipline. The word presupposes fidelity, in a somewhat polemic opposition to those who believe and behave differently.<sup>5</sup>

The word *Christian* (4 times) is also an indication of belonging. Before the Muslims the brothers will confess that they are *Christian* and if circumstances permit, they will invite their listeners to become Christian (RegNB, XVI, 7). In the spirit of Francis, *Christian* means *Catholic*, member of the Church (2EpFid, 1), faithful to the gospel (EpMin, 7).

2. The second group of words includes the different categories which make up the Church. This group is a great deal more abundant and varied than the previous one. I have selected 12 words which designate these orders (RegNB, 7). In their descending order of frequency, they are: priests: 32 times; clerics: 28; religious: 14; laity: 12; pope: 9; bishop: 8; prelate: 7; Apostolic See: 2; canons: 2; cardinals: 1; theologians: 1; Roman Curia: 1. The terms priest and cleric are used more than that of church; certain ones are found in particular contexts: prelate is used 5 times in Admonition III alone; religious figures 8 times out of 14 in the Admonitions.

The relative richness of the vocabulary when it is a question of designating the "personnel" of the Church is striking when the one who is speaking calls himself *simplex et idiota*, that is, a man without intellectual formation. Elsewhere, the vocabulary alone orients us toward a vision of the Church which can be called "clerical." It is, in fact, especially the hierarchical structure which is designated. But this image would be more "presbyteral" than episcopal or papal. In any case, one must be careful not to draw conclusions too quickly based solely on vocabulary. An attentive reading of the writings will bring important adjustments to this first impression.

<sup>&#</sup>x27;The Latin citations as well as the numeric notations are according to *l'editio minor* of the writings of K. Esser.

### II. Principal Texts

Although referrals or allusions to the Church are found spread throughout his writings, the "doctrine" of Francis on the Church is concentrated in a few major texts, and these texts are part of a particular group.

As I have shown elsewhere, 6 the writings of Francis fall into three categories: 1. Those which give a complete vision of Christian life: Letters to the Faithful for the laity; Rules for the brothers (along with the two Testaments); the Admonitions, which indicate the profound roots of Christian deportment. 2. Prayers: (about 14) which reveal the image which Francis formed of the mystery of God and of Christ and the relationship he had with them. 3. Writings for specific occasions/persons: that is, for a large part, the Testament and all the Letters, with the exception of those to the Faithful.

The principal texts relate in some way to the mystery of the Church and if one treats them with a certain broadness, all of them actually fit into the first category. They are: Admonition XXVI; Letter to the Faithful II, 33-35; The Early Rule: Prologue; XIX; XX: 1,2; XXIII: 7; The Later Rule I: 23; XII: 3,4; Testament, 4-13; Testament of Siena, 5. We might add in a context of praise and prayer (as in c. XXIII of the RegNB), the Salutation of the Virgin (SalBMV), where, as we shall see, we are presented with a mystical vision of the Church.

The Letter to the Clergy and the ones to the Custodians touch without doubt on the theme of the Church with the biases of the ministerial and sacramental priesthood, but their intent is more practical than theological.

Thus, the fact that Francis speaks of the Church when he presents a vision of the whole of Christian life lived by the laity or the brothers, reveals already that for him this life can have no sense, no fullness except in the interior of the Christian community structured by its ministers.

### III. The Church and Its Mystery

The investigation of vocabulary is only an exterior approach. It is more important to see what reality is intended, both by these words and by

 <sup>&</sup>quot;Francois d'Assise, Écrits, (Sources Chretiennes 285) Paris 1981, pp. 50, 51.

other passages of the writings. An attentive reading of the texts of Francis reveals an image of the Church rooted in the mystery of the Trinity and constituted by the people of God.

## 1. A Trinitarian and Marian Image

The restitution by the critical edition of K. Esser<sup>7</sup> of the reading "[Virgin] made *Church*" in the first verses of the *Sahutation of the Virgin*, constitutes a sort of theological event. These two words confer upon this Marian praise an incontestably ecclesial character. A brief analysis of this text is necessary in order to reveal the double symbolism and the relationship which exists between Mary and the Church.<sup>8</sup>

The praises are unquestionably addressed to Mary. The introductory verse (1) salutes her under five titles: Lady, Queen, Mother of God, Virgin, Church. The first two are attributes of honor; the third, a theogical attribute, is the root of her dignity; Virgin is the traditional title founded on the personal mystery of Mary; Church, as strange as that might appear, is also a title of glory, of dignity. Mary appears to Francis as the figure, the icon of the Church; what she is, the Church is called to become.

The word *Church*, itself, has a double signification: community of faithful and material edifice which houses this community. In the text, both meanings apply, as the following shows (2, 3). Mary, Virgin made Church, is first chosen (*electa*) by the Father, she is then consecrated (*consecravit*), in a way, dedicated, always by the Father, through the Son and Holy Spirit. (The *cum sanctissimo* can be translated in two ways: *through* or, *at the same time as* the Son...; both interpretations are possible). She becomes a dwelling place, containing within herself "all the fullness of grace and all good;" she is Church-edifice.

The images of the election and the consecration of the dwelling place, even if they are bound to the theme of the consecration or dedication of the church-edifice, make an allusion equally applicable to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>K. Esser justifies this choice in *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, Grottaferrata 1976, p. 416.

<sup>\*</sup>The definitive study on this point is that of H. Pyfferoen, "Ave Dei Genetrix Maria, quae es Virgo, Ecclesia facta," *Laurentianum* 12 (1971) 412-434.

Annunciation (Lk 1: 26-38). Here, the Father sends his messenger to Mary "full of grace" and causes her to be covered with the shadow of the Holy Spirit that she might carry within her the Most High Son.

The following verses (6 salutations, all beginning with *Ave*) strongly insist upon the idea of *home*. Four different words express this insistence. Mary "in whom was and is all fullness," is greeted as *palace*, *tabernacle*, *home*, *robe*. All these terms, with diverse nuances, underline the theme of containing. The two terms at the end lead us back to traditional words: *handmaid* (as in the recitation of the Annunciation: Lk 1: 38) and *Mother*.

Notice the Trinitarian character of the text, with insistence on the primacy of the Father: it is the Father who intervenes in order to choose and consecrate Mary, with and through the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the extraordinary grandeur and dignity of the Virgin are founded on the gift of the Triune God.

But since Mary is compared to the Church, the traits attributed to her are found in the latter; Mary is an anticipated realization of that which is already in germ and of that which will be eschatologically in fullness, the Church of Christ. In calling Mary "Virgin made Church," Francis attributes to one and the other not only the same titles, he considers their profound reality, their ultimate mystery, as the same.

Certainly, what I have said is a development, a deepening of an image, but I do not see any other serious approach, unless we consider this metaphor simply as a symbol without any basis in reality.

If what is said of Mary can and ought be said of the Church, then the Church, too, is *Lady*, *Queen*, etc. It also has been chosen by the Father and consecrated by the Son and the Spirit. In it is found all plenitude of grace and all good. *Palace*, *tabernacle*, *home*, *robe of God*, it carries in itself the Lord and his Gospel. It is simultaneously servant, humble, submissive, dependent, and glorious mother of the Word.

If the attribution to the Church of such ties to God and his mystery appear exorbitant, let us not forget that elsewhere, with great serenity, Francis identifies this same link comparing believers to spouses, brothers and mothers of Christ (2EpFid, 51-53) (cf also FormViv 1). And a simple believer is certainly less than the entire Church in its mystery.

This brief text is, then, pregnant with a very rich theological vision relative to Mary as well as to the Church. For Francis the heart of the mystery of the Church, its glory, its dignity rests on the free choice of the Father, on its sanctification by the Son and the Spirit. In that way, by pure grace the Church becomes the living space where are found "all riches ... to sufficiency" (LaudDei 4), that is to say the very presence of the Most High. We have to take this text into account in what will follow; in it can be read the most profound spiritual understanding of the Church which, in its ultimate achievement, will surpass even the mystery of Mary who is the first realization of it.

#### 2. Immense people of the Church

Another text which merits our attention is that of Chapter XXIII of the *Earlier Rule*, v. 7. The exhaustive list of the various clerical "orders" which begins his litany of Church members could lead us to see Francis as having a "clerical" view of the Church. However, nothing, in fact, indicates better than this passage the true "Catholic" dimension and the vision of the Church as people of God which Francis held.

After an act of thanksgiving addressed to God (1-4) and an epiclesial invocation to the Son, to the Spirit (5) as well as the saints (6) in order that they, too, sing this praise which sinful humankind is incapable of singing alone, Francis and his brothers turn toward "all those who wish to serve the Lord God within the holy, catholic and apostolic church." They [the brothers] ask of them [all the above] the only thing necessary: "in all things persevere in the true faith and in penance."

It is on this occasion that the text unfolds before our eyes an immense procession in which pass all the categories which constitute the Church. It is a litany in movement, an immense crowd which presses forward. At the head come the clerical orders: priests, deacons and the five lesser orders, followed by pairs (with two exceptions: 8 and 9) of 15 diverse categories, of which the last three are no longer made up of individuals, but of enormous crowds.

A simple enumeration of the groups among these people in procession is quite impressive:... all those who wish to serve the Lord God within the holy, catholic, apostolic church.

- 1. all the following orders: priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, lectors, porters, and all clerics
  - 2. all religious men and women
  - 3. all lay brothers and youths
  - 4. the poor and the needy
  - 5. kings and princes
  - 6. workers and farmers
  - 7. servants and masters
  - 8. all virgins, as well as chaste and married women
  - 9. all laity, both men and women
  - 10. all children, adolescents
  - 11. the young and the old
  - 12. the healthy and the sick
  - 13. all small and great
  - 14. all peoples, races
  - 15. tribes and tongues
- 16. all nations and all people everywhere on earth who *are* and *will* be...

One might notice on the one hand the absence of bishops (could this be because they are the shepherds of this immense flock?) and on the other hand the respect for the hierarchical order of the Church. The clerics, the religious, the lay brothers and youth. In my estimation, the youth could designate the children raised in the monasteries, who were numerous at this time. All have precedence, as well as the women living in chastity (such is for me, the sense of n. 8). After the ecclesiastical group come the poor and the indigent who lead the rest, before kings and princes; the servants precede the masters and the little, the great. The distinction is made, first of all, according to social categories (5, 7), then with regard to sex (8, 9), to age (10, 11), to health. Number 13 (the small and the great) is a social recapitulation, numbers 14 to 16 embrace ethnic, linguistic, national

universality, only to close on the evocation of all humanity, in spatial (everywhere in the world) and in temporal (who are and will be) universality.

For Francis the Church is an immense crowd where the poor, the little, and children are privileged, along with the hierarchy and those of social distinction. Even while very precisely delineating the various classes of people, Francis's Church is open to all people who are or who ever will be. Nothing is said on the role, the responsibility of all these groups, it is simply they who form the Church, from the fact that they "wish to serve the Lord God within the... church." It is they whom the brothers exhort to "persevere in all things in true faith and in penance."

This universalist vision of the Church as people of God should impress itself on our imaginations. Along with the mystical vision analyzed previously, it is the key which allows us to situate in their proper places, the diverse structures of this Church.

### 3. Structures of the Church

These structures seem well delineated, so much so that too rapid a scanning could lead us into a clerical interpretation of Francis's vision of the Church. There is, in the first place, the Lord Pope (Innocent or Honorius, protector of the Rule, to whom Francis promises "obedience and reverence" [RegNB, Prol. 3; RegB I, 2; Test 15]). Then there is one of the cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, whom Francis wishes to have for "governor, protector and corrector of this fraternity" (RegB XII, 3) and whom in the Testament he calls the Lord of Ostia (Test 33). Francis has experience with the Apostolic See (RegB, XI, 2) and the Roman Curia, to which the brothers are too easily tempted to run with their difficulties (Test 25). The bishops are mentioned when it is a question of certain instances of admission into the Order (RegB II, 4) or of preaching (RegB IX, 11), and brother Anthony receives the honorable title "Bishop" (EpAnt 1).

But, it is the priests (sacerdos: employed 32 times), and the clerics (clericus: 28 times) who are most often mentioned. It is with them that the first fraternity had the most numerous contacts and the most frequent difficulties. All the more so since at this time, the clergy, often mediocre, ignorant, even scandalous, was the object of the virulent criticism of all reformers' movements. Francis speaks of the intellectual and moral situation which was often deficient: "even though they may be sinful," (Adm XXVI, 1); "if they are sinners," (2EpFid, 33); "I do not wish to consider sin in

them," (Test, 9); "pitiful priests of this world," (Test 7). Sometimes, the clerics persecuted the brothers (Test 6). However, he invites the faithful and the brothers to have toward them a faith (portare fidem) similar to his own (Test 6; Adm XXVI, 1), to show them respect. The words which he employs to describe this attitude are: venerate (RegNB XIX, 3; 2EpFid II, 33); reverence (2EpFid II, 33); honor (Test 8); love (Test 8); fear (Test 8). One must hold them "as our Lord" (RegNB XIX, 3; Test 8, 9); "never enter into conflict with them" (Test 6, 25); "receive from them alone the sacraments" (Adm XXVI, 3; 2EpFid II, 35; RegNB XX, 4; Test 10). Nevertheless, he does not hesitate to address a letter to them [clergy] in order to exhort them vigorously with regard to the sacrament and to the written words, "according to the precepts of the Lord and the constitutions of holy Mother Church" (EpCler, 13). We see that respect does not deter him from being perceptive and demanding when in this same regard, he speaks of "great sin and ignorance" (1) regarding the administration of the sacrament without discretion (4, 5). He invites the clerics to correct themselves while threatening them with the judgment of God (9, 10, 14).

Still other categories appear: *religious* (RegNB XIX, 3), *theologians* and those who administer the very holy divine words (Test 13). Both of these ought to be held as "in the Lord" (RegNB XIX, 3); we should "honor and respect" (Test 13) them; but only those "who have not deviated from our religion" and only "in those things which pertain to the salvation of the soul" (RegNB XIX, 3).

Thus, the people of God, the Church, which we have seen filing through time and space, possess certain connections which Francis knows and respects, and whose meaning he is going to show us.

#### 4. Francis and his fraternity in the Church<sup>9</sup>

Before looking at the manner in which Francis places himself, along with his fraternity, in the bosom of the Church, I offer to you a characteristic of his prayers which manifests a profound sense of Church. It is the plural we which we find in all his prayers set forth in the Writings.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>On this theme see O. Schmucki, "Franziskus von Assisi erfährt Kirche in seiner Brüderschaft," *Franziskanische Studien* 58 (1976) 1-26.

Putting aside the three prayers placed on the lips of Christ (OffPass; 2EpFid, 8-10; 56-60; RegNB XXII, 41-55), of the 15 or so prayers addressed by Francis to God, one alone is in the singular (PrCruc), two have no subject (LaudDei; SalBMV); all the others are collective: the we is understood. So, when Francis prays, he does it as Jesus taught us in the Our Father and as the Church practices it in its liturgy: he places his voice in the chorus of the whole body of Christ. Francis's prayers are not at all an individual conversation with God; they are a part of the incessant prayer which the Spirit maintains in the heart of the Church.

Where is the rightful place of the free-spirited Francis in this highly complex Church? And where will his fraternity fit in the structure of religious orders?

What strikes us at first, paradoxically, is that according to the Prologue of the Earlier Rule and according to his Testament (14), Francis attributes his initial conversion to God directly, and not to the Church: "No one showed me what I should do," (Test 14) "the Most High Himself revealed [it] to me" (Test 14). These two works agree on the fact that it is he who, inspired by God, conceives and composes his Rule, his way of life. It is only after this that he presents himself before Innocent III in order to ask for approbation (petiit a domino papa concedi et confirmari sibi: RegNB, Prol, 2; Test 15). These texts then lay claim from the start to individual liberty. Francis knows he was inspired directly by God; this is a conviction he will never abandon; however, he experiences the need to present himself before the hierarchical authority—in this case before the Holy See—in order to present his form of life and obtain [the Pope's] ruling and agreement. Neither in the Testament, nor in the Rule, is there any trace of tension or of conflict.

On the contrary, the two Rules show a firm will to anchor the new fraternity in the basic structure of the Church, in its very Roman center of unity. In these two texts Francis binds himself by obedience to the Pope, to his canonical successors and to the Church of Rome like a vassal would to his lord. As for the brothers, they are bound by obedience to Francis and to his successors (RegNB, Prol 3; RegB I, 2,3). The *Later Rule* ends with a very strong affirmation of this bond: "always submissive and prostrate at the feet of that same holy Church." It thus indicates the goal: rootedness in the faith, for a better practice of the gospel and of its precepts: "that steadfast in the

Catholic Church, we may observe the poverty and the humility and the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." (RegB XII, 4)

This direct recourse to the Holy See is explained partially both by the geographical situation and especially by the more and more assertive role and focus of the papacy at that time. There was unquestionably an expectation if not a curial pressure in this direction. Everything which precedes testifies to the fact that Francis must have seized intuitively the place which the Church of Rome occupies in the service of unity and of catholic universality, and it is for that reason that he had recourse to it with faith.

We have already spoken of the bishops, the priests, the theologians and the religious. Let it suffice to point out here that Francis, while being submissive to them, while surrounding them with reverence, honor and even love, knows equally how to assure liberty for the charism received from God. If this charism is not respected, rather than have recourse to protection or guarantees, it is better, conforming to the Gospel (Mt 10:23), "[to] flee into another country to do penance with the blessing of God" (Test 26).

### IV. Functions of the Church

We ought to look also at what, according to Francis, are the functions of the Church—what she does. This will explain the reason for his almost visceral attachment to the institution and its ministers.

# 1. Church—Place of faith and of evangelical conversion

It is again Chapter XXIII of the Earlier Rule which reveals to us what, for Francis, is the essential service of the Church. "To serve the Lord God within the holy... Church" (RegNB XXIII, 7) means to live "in true faith and penitence" (Ibid.). Life in faith is manifestly for him the marvelous assimilation of the work accomplished by the "holy and just Father" in favor of humanity, as the beginning of this same chapter sings (1-4). "Penance" means this new life, this radical change, this knowledge and adoration of God. ("Who have known you, and have adored you, and have served you in penance" are the words applied to the 'happy ones,') (Ibid. 4), [and this is] expected of those who place themselves within the plan of God, revealing the transfigured world. The lines which follow (verses 8-11) serve as a focus on this one single point. Francis will always repeat the same exhortation: let us love God, let us desire nothing other than him, let us adore him and serve

him in an explosion of praise. The heart of faith, and of the life now converted, is the reality of God, inexpressible and unattainable but at the same time infinitely delectable. It is thus that I interpret these verses: they explain, by repetition and increasing depth, what it means to live in true faith and conversion in the bosom of the Church.

To live within the Church is primarily to live in the way described. The Church serves this need, exists to meet this need. The Church is the space, at the interior of which the immense human crowd is without ceasing called to the unique need which is God, [now] entered into history through Jesus and by the Spirit. We can see to what point the vision which Francis had of the Church is by nature mystical. The greatest Good for humanity is God, but it is "within the holy, catholic and apostolic Church" (XXIII, 7) that we find it.

## 2. Church—Place of the presence of the Son of God

What saves us, says Francis, is the body and blood of Jesus Christ, as well as his Word: "No one can be saved except through the holy words and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2EpFid II, 34). This body and this blood are the only realities accessible to the senses, which make it possible for us to see "corporally" the Most High Son of God. "Since I see nothing corporally of the Most High Son of God in this world except His Most holy Body and Blood" (Test 10) parallels the passage which adds "and the words through which we have been made and have been redeemed from death to life" (EpCler 3). How do we receive this body and this blood, how do we understand the word of life, "spirit and life" (Test 13; 2EpFid, 3) if not in the Church and by the ministry of the priests who alone are charged with this service? 10 Francis's faith in priests, the respect, the reverence, the love he bore them and the theologians have their root in this. For him it is they, the ordained and duly mandated ministers who are the backbone of the body of the Church. He clearly identifies the Church as the only place in which believers are offered the authentic word of God and the sacramental mystery of Christ's body and his blood, and the remission of sins (by baptism:

This insistence on *alone* is aimed at heretical abuses such as the frequent distribution of the sacraments by the laity. References are many: Adm XXVI, 4: "they alone administer to others"; Ep Fid II, 35: "they alone must administer, not others"; Test 10: "they alone administer to others"; RegNB XX, 4: "the power of binding and loosing is granted only to priests."

RegNB XVI, 7; by sacramental penance: RegNB XX, 4; XXI, 6; 2EpFid, 22). So, whatever be the moral condition of priests ("if they are sinners" 2EpFid, 33 and the texts cited above), as long as they remain catholic, they remain always, and they alone, the authentic guarantors of the graces of salvation. Because of this Francis does not wish to consider their sins: "I do not wish to consider sin in them" (Test 9), nor does he wish to judge them: "no one is to judge them" (Adm XXVI), nor despise them: "woe to those who look down upon them" (Ibid); he does not wish to oppose them in preaching: "preach contrary to their will" (Test 7). To the contrary, he sees in them his masters (*lords*: 3 times), and intends to stay consolidated with them.

All this is true, not because of their personal qualities, but by reason of their sacred ministry. In speaking of them Francis uses three words: *administration*: 3 times; *office*: 2 times; *order*: 2 times.

His "clericalism" if indeed there is any, is founded on faith in the Son of God which he discerns behind the ministerial structure of the Church: "because I discern the Son of God in them" (Test 9). Since he holds with all his being to this Son of God and to his Gospel, where could he more surely find him if not there?

#### 3. Church—Criteria of true faith

In the time of Francis, one of the great temptations of the evangelical movements, the Waldensians especially, was to reject as useless, if not totally deniable, the institutional Church, often scandalously unfaithful to the ethical precepts of the Gospel. Francis took the opposite approach to this tendency, as we have already indicated in his speaking of the priests. He chooses to be Catholic; it is his wish that his brothers and his order root themselves in the faith: "steadfast in the catholic faith" (RegB XII, 4.) The criteria of true faith is the fact of adhering to the Catholic and Roman Church. The brothers ought to be "catholic, living and speaking in a catholic manner," not distancing themselves "from the faith and catholic life." If that were to happen, they would be completely chased from the

<sup>&</sup>quot;See especially: H. Grundmann, Religious Movements in the Middle Ages. trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). Ilarino da Milano, La Spiritualità evangelica nei secoli XI e XII, Rome, 1971.

fraternity (penitus expellantur: RegNB XIX, 1,2). That is why, prior to admitting them, they will [demonstrate] respect [for] the forms and the institutions of the Church (RegNB II, 12) and [the ministers] will assure themselves, through an examination, of their Catholic faith and their attitude regarding the sacraments of the Church (RegB II, 2). The same demand is addressed to those for whom the Letters to the Faithful were written "we must... be catholic." (2EpFid, 32)

This insistence, which one would be tempted to attribute to the influences, if not to the demands of the Curia, is however very personal to Francis; we find it reaffirmed with energy in that writing which is the least dependent upon others: the Testament. The brothers "who are not Catholic" will be treated as prisoners and remitted into the hands of the cardinal protector (Test 31-33).

With regard to priests, Francis presents no other precept than that of being catholic (RegNB XX,2), of living "according to the norms of the Roman Church" (Adm XXVI, 1; Test 6), which, given the context, outlines orthodoxy of faith and not orthopraxis of life. Such an attitude seems strange. It testifies, however, to the importance that Francis attached to the authenticity of faith; an importance which, in this case, was greater than that attached to conduct. We will recognize that it is a paradox for a man to whom the evangelical life is more important than anything else.

Doubtless, he thought as he says in the finale of the Later Rule (XII, 4), that it is submission to the Church and the solidity of faith which was, once and for all, the best guarantee of the faithful practice of the Gospel.

#### 4. Church—Norm of conduct

We are struck by the insistence of Francis upon practical conformity with the disciplinary precepts of the Church. When he writes to the Clergy, he reminds them that they must, with regard to the administration of the body of Christ, respect the "constitution of holy Mother Church" (EpCler 13). The custodians are asked to alert these same clerics to this responsibility, which they have accepted "according to the mandate of the Church" (IEpCust, 4). In his rules, in order to reinforce his own authority by that of the Pope, he refers to the "mandate of the Lord Pope" which forbids the brothers to leave the fraternity after having been received into obedience (RegNB II, 10; RegB II, 12). The admission of the

brothers must not be made "contrary to the form and the prescription of the holy Church" (RegNB II, 12), that is, it ought to be in rigorous conformity with the canonical rules. The same demand is placed on preachers: none among the brothers will preach "contrary to the form and regulations of the holy Church" (RegNB XVII, 1). The celebration of community prayer will be made, according to the Later Rule, "according to the rite of the holy Roman Church" (RegB III, 1). It is the same for the daily Eucharist: "only one Mass is to be celebrated each day, and it must be according to the form of the holy Church" (EpOrd, 30). And when the brothers ignore the recommendations to pray the office according to the Rule and "with devotion" (EpOrd 39-42), when they "wish to alter it in any way" (Test 31), Francis rises up vigorously, almost angrily, against such behavior. He no longer considers such brothers catholic, nor even as still his brothers. He refuses to see them (EpOrd 44), and orders them to be treated as veritable prisoners (Test 31-33). And this is found in his most personal texts where no exterior influence (Curia, ministers) can be presupposed.

But if Francis demands a scrupulous obedience to ecclesiastical prescriptions, he himself speaks out against any privileges from the Roman Curia, be it for a church, a favor for a preacher, or for protection against the opposition of bishops or of priests (Test 25).

In brief, Francis does not discuss the discipline of the Church; he conforms to it with a faithful, almost legalistic application. For instance, the Testament forbids altering in any way "the liturgical prayer of the office" (Test 31). This surprises us coming from a man whom we see as charismatic and free. But without doubt this attitude rests fundamentally on profound faith in the Church which extends even to accepting the structures, laws and weaknesses of that Church.

#### V. Conclusions

At the conclusion of these analyses, three points seem to me to need to be emphasized: a living and profound sense of the Church, deep within Francis; an attitude which is positive, not polemic; [and] the synthesis between charism and authority.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>O. Schmucki, "St. Francis's Letter to the Entire Order," Greyfriars Review 3 (1989) 12.

- 1. It is one of the joys of the exegete and of the theologian to discover in the scant writings of a "simple and uneducated one," a vision so rich and so profound of the great realities of the Christian faith. Also, with regard to the Church, Francis has seized, with great accuracy, its theological essence: its rootedness in the Trinity, and its structure as people of God, without, however, forgetting or neglecting its institutional articulations. He holds tightly the two ends of the chain: while experiencing sometimes the heavy weight of the carnal Church (this can be read between the lines), he adheres with his whole heart to that which carries within itself the Son of God and his Gospel.
- 2. In a century where the attacks, not altogether baseless, against the Church were the order of the day, one is astounded not to find the least trace of it in the writings of Francis. The general recommendation of Chapter XI of the *Earlier Rule* 1-3:

[The] ... brothers should beware that they not slander nor engage in disputes, rather they should strive to keep silence ... Nor should they quarrel among themselves or with others, but they should strive to respond humbly saying: I am a useless servant ...

applies also to the Church and explains the "no one ought to judge them"... "woe to those who look down upon them," of *Admonition XXVI* on the honor due to priests. If there is no critical or polemic note against the Church, there is none either against heretics, who are never taken up directly in the writings; nor against infidels, with regard to whom an attitude of submission, of non-aggression is recommended (RegNB XVI, 6).

3. Finally, as noted earlier, Francis was convinced that he owed his inspiration and his attraction to evangelical life directly to God (Test 14). He was determined to remain faithful to his initial dream and an objective study of the two Rules and of the Testament confirms the substantial permanence of his plan in spite of the growth and changes in his order. It would be wrong, then, to speak of the radical changes which the institutional Church had introduced in the evangelism of Francis. The writings show, on the contrary, that Francis receives from the Church both understanding and support. If there was conflict,—or moral pressure—it does not appear in the texts. If it is true, on the other hand, that the way of life outlined by the

Rules did not survive with integrity after the death of Francis, that is due to the internal evolution of the Order itself rather than to the influence of the Church. But that is another story.

If, then, Francis held on to both charism and the Church, it is because for him there never was—there never could have been—serious conflict between the personal message given to him by God and the institutional structures of the Church.

He knew first hand the decadent situation of the clergy, the secular power and the wealth of priests, the superficial Christianity of the masses, the violence of heretical claims. All of these, too, were the Church. But his vision of reality was so universal, so profound that in the "holy Mother Church" (EpCler, 13) he saw the place of the very presence of God, of the Christ, of his Gospel, of his sacraments.

This Church which he saluted, as he had saluted Mary, with the titles of Lady, Queen, is, like the Virgin herself: Palace, Tabernacle, Home, Robe, Handmaid of God. How then, not feel secure there?