

Francis of Assisi and Lay People Living in the World: Beginning of the Third Order?

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Francesco d'Assisi e i laici viventi nel secolo: inizio del Terz'Ordine?

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With regard to the question raised in our intervention, we must remember that an answer will be forthcoming only if we confront two clear and distinct demands. What was Francis's intention in effecting his conversion and choosing a status that would be considered, juridically and formally, that of a penitent ("penitents from Assisi," as Bernard of Quintavalle and his companion would later declare in Florence)? How were Francis's behavior and way of life received: first by those who at a relatively early date decided to imitate him completely (the brothers), and then by those, who although they continued to remain in the world and were perhaps married, wanted to share in some way the religious experience and spirituality that Francis proposed to symbolize within the society of his time?

And so before we go further and come to a series of problems that for various reasons are extremely complex, we must insist as strongly and

explicitly as possible on a preliminary fact: the unique contrast between Francis, a man totally indifferent to juridical-formal institutions as such, and a society for whom such institutions were essential and in some ways crucial, creating an appearance of acceptance or rejection for the one accepted or rejected by the institutional machinery.

That said, we must immediately add that Francis did not intend by his act of conversion to pass to the status of *vir penitentialis*; rather it was others who considered him such. In this regard we need only re-read the passage where he was accused by his father before the civil authorities in the tribunal. The father claimed that his son had in no way left civil society. But the civil authorities saw things differently. They pointed out that since he was the servant only of God, he no longer owed obedience to them (*ex quo servitium Dei est aggressus, de potestate nostra exivit*). As I have already pointed out elsewhere, the expression *servitium Dei* is not, juridically speaking, entirely exact. It indicates a statement of fact rather than a juridical status. But the bishop, interestingly, recognized Francis's *de facto* status and gave his personal approval. What was this *de facto* status, called *servitium Dei* by the civil authorities and approved and protected by the bishop? (We must applaud the latter's intelligence, and not only in this episode.)

At this point we must go back to a document that is essential, and in some ways decisive for an understanding of Francis. We are referring to the *Testament*. There he states very clearly that his conversion consisted in a reversal of values, not in a change of juridical status. What at first had seemed bitter, namely to see lepers, was changed into sweetness of soul and body. In other words, Francis changes, passing from the social status of a rich merchant to that of the humblest and poorest, with no legal protection. It is the bishop of Assisi who would convince Francis, after the formation of a first group of followers, to accept some type of juridical arrangement. (One must be inserted in some way into real life in order to function there.) But it is interesting to note that Jacques de Vitry, a man well acquainted with the Church's life and institutional organization, finds it hard to assign an ecclesiastical classification to the Francis's followers. He prefers to call them what they called themselves: lesser brothers and sisters, a name that indicates a spiritual and psychological condition rather than a juridical state.

We must try, then, to imagine the primitive Franciscan community—from its first organization and the years immediately after until the approval of the proto-rule—as a free fraternity of prayer, penance and penitential exhortation. Exhortation, we repeat, not preaching, which apparently at that time was not even done by those who were priests. On the

same subject, we must remember that this *fraternitas* did not hesitate to use various means to influence the crowds, as was envisioned by their *modus concionandi* and their exhortation to penance. Thus they employed songs and hymns in the public squares. We see in this an essential difference from the true *ordo poenitentiae*, to which Gilles Meersseman has devoted several studies that have led to lively discussions with other scholars.

In reality, when Francis finally made his choice, as he tells us in his Testament, "I tarried a little and left the world." Note well once again the expression he uses. It is one of religious life, not juridical status. In any case, Francis finalizes his choice by leaving the world. But—and this must be noted—to leave the world in the sense of mundane reality, where one lives by exercising economic activities associated with life in society, does not mean to leave civil society. Francis continues to remain there inasmuch as he works there, not from a desire to earn money but to keep himself alive. He works there in virtue of the exhortation to penance.

This is the reality what Francis would present to Pope Innocent III. And it would be approved as a proposal and form of life, not as a juridical institution. It is no accident that the "form of the Holy Gospel" is spelled out once more in the Testament: "I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me." There is no reference whatsoever to any institutionalization. That would come only later, proceeding gradually and following a course that we may summarize in the words *fraternitas, religio* and *ordo*.

At this point we must ask ourselves what was novel in what we have seen thus far of Francis and primitive Franciscanism. In the first place, we have their choice of marginalization, or if that term seems too modern, of humility and total humiliation. The name *minor* makes this clear, for I think it expresses a constant pressure to place themselves lower than all others. After a period of genuine hostility, which only the *Legend of the Three Companions* explicitly mentions and acknowledges, Franciscanism appears with one of its characteristics which is, at a certain point, sentimentally and devotionally distinctive. With regard to external manifestations, the most impressive and characteristic feature of early Franciscanism is joy. Just as Francis used to sing with his gang of young friends in Assisi (when he was happiest he would sing in French), so he continued to do after his conversion, even though the songs were no longer of love but the praises of the Lord. And the fact that he showed compassion toward lepers, seeing in them the suffering Christ, shows a tendency that cannot be traced back merely to an act of devotion. Yet such it must have seemed to the faithful of

his time, for whom Christ was seen in his humanity and essentially represented in his earthly, everyday life. Moreover, that everyday life must have figured deeply in the motives of popular piety. Translations of the apocryphal writings concerning the childhood of Jesus, which were widespread, are a proof of this. Here I would remind you that when scholars are looking at the major figures in medieval philosophy and theology, too often they are so eager to see the tops of the trees that they forget about the undergrowth of legends, traditions and information on the life of Jesus which support and add to the data of the canonical gospels. Think of the legends about the Magi, the details about Jesus' childhood, the additions to the passion accounts and so forth.

Even though Francis does not (as far as I know) refer to these texts explicitly, he did give considerable weight to the tradition of the God-Man in which Christ's humanity has a reality and consistency quite different from that of earlier ages. Although I must not overstress this point, I would remind you that in this sense Francis concludes and in a way summarizes the tendencies of an entire age. We also see this with regard to Mary.

And so Francis and his companions appear as a genuinely new reality in the society of their time. The *Legend of the Three Companions* tells us: "Many people mocked him as a madman, but others were moved to tears when they saw how quickly he had passed from worldly pampering and vanity to loving God." Later it says: "Opinions varied about these men who were so obviously set on following the Gospel: some people declared that they were fools or drunk, but others maintained that such words were not those of folly." Their contemporaries, we notice, realized that this was a new movement. Thus we must ask ourselves how and why their perplexity—and at least in some cases, even hostility—in the face of Franciscan movement gradually became overwhelming acceptance. Here we must prescind to a certain extent from Francis's charisma. Although he doubtless grasped the importance, value and need for a new form of religious life and practice (a fact that must be strongly emphasized from an historical point of view), we must not for that reason overlook the importance of those who took up his ideals and life and carried them beyond Assisi and the area in which Francis worked—in practice, most of Italy. We cannot speak here about the Friars Minor and the Lesser Sisters, the Poor Ladies of St. Damian. But let us take the case of Anthony of Lisbon (St. Anthony of Padua) as an example. He was a man profoundly fascinated by the Franciscan ideal, even before he met Francis personally. In any case, it is interesting to ask what it was that people

saw in Francis and his brothers. For even though they were laity who lived in the world, nevertheless they felt admiration and affection for them.

Here we must remember that between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, European piety in general, and Italian piety in particular, kept a close eye on the relationship between preaching and behavior in the lives of the monks and clergy. The success of such heresies as that of the Waldensians or Cathari is explained in most cases by the fact that the heretics lived what they preached, whereas the clergy did not. That is why the primary reason for the impression made by the Friars Minor wherever they went was the consistency of their life. The above-mentioned episode of Bernard of Quintavalle in Florence is proof beyond question of this. We see it, for example, in details such as surprise they caused when they refused alms in church, saying that these should go to people who were truly poor and were such by reason of their social condition, not to people like themselves who were such voluntarily. Moreover, the Friars Minor were characterized by their inner joy. Although Brother Pacificus was "the king of verses," the others too, as Francis had advised, were to avoid appearing "outwardly as sad and gloomy hypocrites." Instead they were to show themselves "joyful, cheerful and consistently gracious in the Lord." True, this admonition disappears in the *Later Rule*, unsuited as it was to the latter's more obvious juridical character, but it certainly did not disappear from Francis's mind. If proof of this is needed, there is the *Canticle of Brother Sun*.

To the faithful's sense of sight Francis offered a series of "inventions"—obviously in a relative, not absolute sense—such as the crib, more intense Eucharistic practice (with stress on devotion to the Real Presence and respect for priests since they are endowed with the charism of consecrating the body of Christ), and finally a sense of the passion of Christ. All of the art, poetry, and liturgy related to the sufferings of Christ and Mary, along with the Christmas celebrations, come from Francis and serve to explain the faithful's adherence to Franciscanism. Incidentally, other reasons (which we cannot go into here) were to lead other members of the faithful to the Dominicans. It would be interesting to compare the two tendencies.

At this point, then, we raise the essential question: did Francis intend to found and did he indeed found a third order? And if so, what was it supposed to be or what could it be? This is not a trivial question, but as I said at the beginning, I believe it must be framed in terms that are completely unequivocal.

Francis wanted at most a *fraternitas*. The decision of Clare to follow him was a surprise, which only his extraordinary ability to love managed to overcome. With her were the other women who had joined her, causing her more than a few problems and serious difficulties with regard to the practice of poverty—as was discussed two years ago in Assisi. I believe that the very transformation of the *fraternitas* into a *religio/ordo* was for Francis a difficult and often bitter experience. Especially in the *Later Rule*, Francis emerges uniquely as an individual with his own characteristic expressions such as “I admonish and exhort,” “I strictly command,” “I command” and so forth. These are the clear sign of a temperament that is suspicious of legal formulas and is more interested in creating a personal relationship between the one who must observe the Rule and the one who in giving it shows how to observe it. I have nothing to add to what I have already said several times regarding the *Testament*.

What then was Francis’s attitude toward lay people living in the world, those whom in a famous letter he calls “all the faithful”? First of all, the very title of the letter excludes the formation of any kind of group whatsoever. The term “all” (*universi*) indicates an equalization that allows for no exceptions. It was not a matter of some people being dearer to Francis and others less so. All were the object of his love, devotion, word and example—and if not of his directly, then that of his brothers whom he had deliberately sent to the all the ends of the earth. If there was any difference at all, it was between those who desired to be converted to a profoundly Christian life and those who did not. I would say at this point, then, that Francis never thought of a third order in the sense of a distinct and legally well-defined entity that would take its place beside the other two. On the other hand, his desire to attract to himself all the faithful led him to give them specific admonitions, with detailed—we would like to say, technical—and precise counsels. These counsels could be accepted as norms to live by, but he was not giving them as such. Rather they were instructions for living a life more in accord with the Gospel, the life of Christ and the admonitions of the Church. Here we must not forget that even as Francis was exhorting the faithful to a more intense Christian life, he was at the same time also exhorting them to follow more closely the discipline of the Church.

I am well aware that a scholar of such caliber as Fr. Esser has dated this letter, chronologically speaking, four or five years before Francis’s death. But I believe the letter is later and belongs to the time in Francis’s life when he could address the faithful and others, including the friars, only in writing. Consideration of the last and painful years of Francis’s life, with all the

problems involved in drawing up the First and Second Rule (need we recall the many episodes?) excludes the possibility of a third order with its own rule of life and discipline.

But there is a final question. If Francis did not found a third order, how in fact did our Third Order later come to be? I must say here that the answer to this question can be found only in Francis himself. That he wished to attract to himself the faithful, that he wished the brothers to remain very close to them, that these brothers were to follow the Gospel and be salt of the earth and light for the world, that they must plant a mustard seed in Christian society—all this is beyond question. Francis desired it. But that did not mean the creation on his part of a set of norms for the faithful living in the world. Rather he wished to give an example that would attract the faithful, that would move them to act, live and feel in a Christian way and follow it spontaneously. Let us be clear, then. Groups of devout souls could have formed, spontaneously and with differences from place to place, around the churches of the friars, to whom they turned for advice and exhortation as well as for directions and more detailed norms on living a Christian life. These faithful, who until then had been left to their popular piety, would come seeking ways to raise the tone of their religious life and deepen their participation in the life of the Church—all of this under guidance of the Franciscans, whom they felt were close to them, quick to understand their needs, and ready to listen to what they had to say. What is more, their father was Francis of Assisi, by now a saint and *alter Christus*.

If we move ahead to the following decades, when by the second half of the thirteenth century a third order was already taking shape—and the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, with groups of Beguines in southern France and some communities in Italy—we can see again how such groups could form spontaneously, originating in the manner we have outlined.

It may seem that in saying this I have wished to deny Francis one of his greatest merits. Instead, I think I have not added to, but clarified one of his greatest merits: to have aroused a spirit of renewal among the faithful, who in many cases felt neglected and abandoned. If you go over the sermons of St. Anthony (a critical edition of which was published a few months ago in Padua), you will see the condition of the faithful at the time of St. Francis and immediately after his death. Then you will see that what was needed was not a third order (St. Anthony says nothing in this regard) but Christian life. It was not Francis of Assisi but the Franciscan movement—by continuing Francis of Assisi and inserting itself into the life of the Church—that

answered and responded to the needs of the faithful. Thus the Third Order was formed spontaneously, receiving from the friars and the hierarchy an institutional character of its own.

But let us remember that its base and origin remain first of all Francis of Assisi and his infinite love for "all the faithful." Then if we wish, we are free to say that in an indirect way the Third Order, those lay people who were moved by his example and that of his brothers to lead a more intense Christian life, also have every right to be called his children.