

The Letters of Peter in the Writings of St. Francis

Optatus van Asseldonk, O.F.M. Cap.

Le lettere di s. Pietro negli scritti di s. Francesco

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Translated by Edward Hagman, O.F.M. Cap.

Scholars today have at their disposal lists of biblical texts cited in the writings of St. Francis. The Letters of Peter, especially the First Letter, occupy an important place on these lists. But even more impressive than the number of such citations is their quality. These are citations that have to do with basic elements in the Poverello's spirituality; for example: to follow the footprints of Christ, the Shepherd, unjustly put to death for our sins, doing good in order to overcome evil; to be subject to every human creature in humble and loving obedience; to journey toward the promised land, divested of all things like pilgrims and strangers.

Our subject's special importance is clear from two facts. First of all, Franciscan scholars today, chief among them Kajetan Esser, believe that "to follow the footprints of Christ" (*sequi vestigia Christi*) lies at the vital center of the spirituality of St. Francis and his Order.¹ The second fact is the idea of scripture scholars that the texts cited by Francis are part of the essence of the Petrine Letters. The Jerusalem Bible, for example, says:

¹K. Esser, "Studien und Wissenschaft im Geiste des hl. Franziskus von Assisi," in *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 39 (1976) 28f. In their encyclical letter, written after their spiritual retreat at the Sanctuary of LaVerna, the four ministers general of the entire Franciscan family said: "Anyone who reads the *Writings* or *Lives* of St. Francis attentively will easily see that the following elements are of central importance: to follow according to the Gospel the footprints of the poor, humble, crucified Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" (*Habere Spiritum Domini*, n. 9, Rome 1977).

Though a very practical letter, it is also a valuable summary of apostolic theology. The dominating theme is fortitude in trial, for which Christ himself is the model, 2:21-25; 3:18; 4:1. Christians must suffer patiently like him when their trials are due to their faith and to their saintly lives, 2:19f; 3:14; 4:12-19; 5:9, i.e. if, in return for evil, they offer: charity, obedience to civil authority, 2:13-17, and gentleness to all, 3:8-17; 4:7-11, 19.²

Let us begin with the more important texts drawn from Peter—either by way of the liturgical readings of the time, or directly by personal and continuous meditation on the sacred texts themselves. We know, in fact, that the texts particularly dear to Francis formed part of the Eucharistic Liturgy and the Liturgy of the Hours, especially those for the Easter season.³

To Follow the Footprints of Christ (sequi vestigia Christi)

The Petrine text (and context) are as follows:

Servants, be subject to your masters in all fear, not only to the good and moderate, but also to the severe. This is indeed a grace, if for consciousness of God anyone endures sorrows, suffering unjustly. For what is the glory if, when you sin and are buffeted, you endure it? But if, when you do right and suffer, you take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. Unto this, indeed, you have been called, because Christ also has suffered for you, leaving you an example that you may follow in his steps: Who did no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. Who, when he was reviled, did not revile, when he suffered, did not threaten, but yielded himself to him who judged him unjustly; who himself bore our sins in his body upon the tree, that we, having died to sin, might live to justice; and by his stripes you were healed.

²*La Bibbia di Gerusalemme*, ed. F. Vattioni, Bologna 1971, 2588.

³It should be noted that at the time of St. Francis, Peter and John were read together at Mass and the Divine Office (Letters of Peter; Gospel, Letters and Apocalypse of John) from the week after Easter until the third Sunday. Specifically this included chapter 2 of the Letter of Peter: *Christus passus est pro nobis.... Tradebat autem iudicanti se iniuste. Eratis sicut oves.... Subditi estote....* etc. See S.J.P. van Dijk, *The Ordinal of the Papal Court from Innocent III to Boniface VIII and Related Documents*. Completed by J.H. Walker, (Fribourg 1975), 305-07; 333f (second Sunday after Pentecost: 1 Pt 5:6; fifth Sunday: 1 Pt 3:8: "Humiliamini sub potenti....," "Unanimes estote...."). Even today, the same biblical sources are found in the Liturgy after Easter.

For you were as sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Pt 2:18-25).

The central nucleus is the words: "Unto this, indeed, you have been called, because Christ also has suffered for you, leaving you an example that you may follow in his steps [follow his footprints]"(v. 21).

There are two texts in the writings of St. Francis that speak clearly of following the footprints of the crucified Christ. In the *Earlier Rule* we read: "For our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footprints we must follow, called his betrayer a friend and willingly offered himself to his executioners. Our friends, therefore, are all those who unjustly bring us distress and anguish...."⁴ The Petrine context seems very clear—even more so by reason of the word "unjustly" which is taken from this Letter.

In the *Letter to the Faithful* Francis speaks directly of Christ who offers himself on the cross for our sins: "Not for himself through whom all things were made, but for our sins, leaving us an example that we might follow his footprints."⁵ Without using the word *vestigia*, the *Office of the Passion* expresses the same idea: "Offer up your bodies and take up his holy cross; and follow his most holy commands even to the end."⁶ In the *Earlier Rule* we find this characteristic expression again, although it does not mention the Passion: "The rule and life...is to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ...."⁷

The same is true, in a Trinitarian context, of the prayer at the end of the *Letter to the Entire Order*: "Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, may we be able to follow in the footprints of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and, by your grace alone, may we make our way to you, Most High, who live and rule in perfect

⁴RegNB XXII, 2: K. Esser, *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi. Neue textkritische Edition*, Grottaferrata (Rome) 1976, 395 [hereafter Esser, *Opuscula*]. See also: Fragmentum RegNB, 1-2: *ibid.* 301.

⁵2 EpFid 13: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 208.

⁶OffPass, Ps VII, v. 8, and XV, v. 13: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 344 and 351.

⁷RegNB I, 1: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 377f.

Trinity and simple Unity, and are glorified God all-powerful, forever and ever. Amen."⁸

In the *Letter to Brother Leo* emphasis is placed on following the footprints and poverty of Christ.⁹ In the *Last Will* given to St. Clare, Francis exhorts the sisters 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."¹⁰ St. Clare, referring to this *Last Will* in her *Testament*, states that Francis wished to follow the footprints of Christ in poverty until the end.¹¹ Thus she clearly explains that the words of the *Last Will* mean to follow the *footprints* of Christ and our Lady. In the bull of Innocent IV approving the Rule of St. Clare, the desire of the Poor Clares to follow the footprints of Christ and his holy Mother in poverty is expressly mentioned.¹² St. Clare herself exhorts Agnes of Prague to follow with absolute fidelity the footprints of the poor and humble Christ, her Spouse. But the expression used is *adhaerere vestigiis*.¹³ In the third letter, she speaks of following the footprints of the poor and humble Christ, as well as those of the Virgin Mary, in poverty and humility.¹⁴

It is clear from all these citations that St. Francis and his "little plant," St. Clare, wished to follow the footprints of the crucified Christ and his Mother in poverty and humility. It is true that 1 Peter does not speak of poverty in this context, but rather of the Savior's total willingness to suffer death with patience, bearing every injustice and persecution from his enemies in order to save us from our sins. St. Francis was deeply struck by

⁸EpOrd 51f: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 263.

⁹EpLeo 3: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 222.

¹⁰UltVol 1: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 449.

¹¹TestCl 5: I. Omaechevarría, *Escritos de Santa Clara y documentos contemporáneos*, Madrid 1970, 281: "eius vestigia imitatus". See also 7: ivi, 282.

¹²RCl prologue: I. Omaechevarría, *Escritos* 252: "ipsius Christi eiusque sanctissimae Matris sequentes vestigia...."

¹³2LAg 2: I. Omaechevarría, *Escritos* 325.

¹⁴3LAg 2: I. Omaechevarría, *Escritos* 332: "vestigia pauperis et humilis Iesu Christi imitationibus supplere." Ivi 4: 334f: "sequens eius [Mariae] vestigia, humilitatis et paupertatis praesertim."

the example of such peaceful and loving obedience toward all is pleasing to God and will do good, even to nonbelievers, without words. The Petrine context suggests how effective such silent behavior can be: "In like manner also let wives be subject to their husbands; so that even if any do not believe the words, they may without word be won through the behavior of their wives, observing reverently your chaste behavior" (1 Pt 3:1).

St. Francis followed this method during his entire life, even among the Saracens, and he also insists on it for all the brothers in the *Later Rule*: "When they go about in the world, let them not quarrel or dispute or judge others; but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming."¹⁷ It seems no exaggeration to see in these expressions a reminiscence of 1 Peter, where in the context of subjection to all, we read: "Finally, be all like-minded, compassionate, lovers of the brethren, merciful, modest, humble" (1 Pt 3:8). In his *Testament*, Francis takes a certain "minorite" satisfaction in himself and his brothers as he recalls, "We were simple and subject to all," thus affirming that they practiced the words of the *Earlier Rule*, "Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house."¹⁸

But it is in the two versions of the *Letter to the Faithful* that the saint reveals the secret of his preference for this universal obedience. The context of the *Second Letter* speaks of simplicity, humility and purity, and ends with complete obedience to every human creature:

We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon all those men and women who have done and persevered in these things, and it shall make a home and dwelling-place in them. And they will be the children of the heavenly Father whose works they do. And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁹

Although the text about the Spirit of the Lord and its dwelling in us derives from Isaiah and John (as the editors of the *Writings* usually note), we could also refer to the Petrine context, which is not that different: "If you

¹⁷RegB III, 10: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 368; see also RegNB XI, 1-13: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 387f.

¹⁸Test 19 and RegNB VII, 2: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 440 and 382.

¹⁹2 EpFid 47-49: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 210f.

are upbraided for the name of Christ, blessed will you be, because the honor, the glory and the power of God and his Spirit rest upon you" (1 Pt 4:14). And why not mention the context of the *First Letter to the Faithful*, "O how happy and blessed are these men and women while they do such things...."?

The deeper meaning given by Francis to this subjection to every human creature seems very clear: on all those who live in simplicity, purity and humility, obedient to every human creature—or, as the *First Letter to the Faithful* says, on all true penitents—the Spirit of the Lord will rest and will make them children of the Father, spouses of the Holy Spirit, and mothers and brothers of Christ.

The consequences of such total obedience are described by Francis in the *Salutation of the Virtues*:

Holy Obedience confounds every corporal and carnal wish, binds its mortified body to obedience of the Spirit and obedience to one's brother, so that he is subject and submissive to everyone in the world, not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well, that they may do whatever they want with him insofar as it has been given to them from above by the Lord.²⁰

The Obedience of Charity (oboedientia caritatis)

Let us cite the Petrine text in Latin from the Vulgate in order to understand better the idea of Francis: "Animas vestras castificantes in oboedientia caritatis, in fraternitatis amore, simplici ex corde invicem diligite attentius. [Purifying your souls in the obedience of charity, with a brotherly love, from a sincere heart love one another earnestly]" (1 Pt 1:22). Verse 14 speaks of "children of obedience." The expression "obedience of charity" is unique in the Vulgate. Modern translations, which follow the original text, read "obedience to the truth." The Petrine context clearly refers to fraternal charity, lived in sincere and mutual loving service.

In *Admonition III* Francis writes: "Nam haec est caritativa oboedientia, quia Deo et proximo satisfacit. [For this is loving obedience

²⁰SalVirt 14-18: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 428. Why do the editors fail to mention Peter here?

because it pleases God and neighbor.]”²¹ We also notice an allusion to the Second Letter of Peter on the return to the *vomit* of their own will (see 2 Pt 2:22), taken from Proverbs 26:11.²² By *oboedientia caritatis* or *caritativa*, Francis means perfect obedience to the superiors, completely renouncing our own will and faithfully united to our brothers, even if this means persecution by those same brothers. This is the true and perfect obedience of Christ who gave his life for his friends (and enemies). In the *Earlier Rule* Francis gives a very deep explanation of this obedience of charity, also using an idea of St. Paul: “Let no brother do or say anything evil to another; on the contrary, through the charity of the Spirit, let them serve and obey one another voluntarily (Gal 5:13). This is the true and holy obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²³

As we can see, Francis introduces the words “obey one another voluntarily” into the Pauline text. As a matter of fact, the link between love and obedience, emphasized by the Saint here and elsewhere, is found, not in Paul but in Peter. For Francis, charity and obedience are sisters, as he writes in the *Salutation of the Virtues*.²⁴ And in the *Letter to a Minister* he shows that true love of God and the brothers consists in true obedience to the superior, with boundless mercy toward every brother who has sinned and is in need of kindness and forgiveness.²⁵ The obedience of charity—this mutual service of the brothers for love of God, based on the example of the obedience of Christ crucified—which is so characteristic of Francis and his “lesser” brothers, is certainly close to Peter, but without intending to exclude other influences.

A final mention of the example of the obedience of charity that his brothers must show toward all is found in the *Earlier Rule*, where the Poverello exhorts the brothers to receive everyone into their houses—even enemies, thieves or other foes—without opposition. All are to be received

²¹Adm III 6: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 108.

²²Adm III 10: ivi.

²³RegNB V, 13-15: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 382.

²⁴SalVirt 3: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 427: “Lady holy Charity, may the Lord protect you with your sister, holy Obedience.”

²⁵EpMin 1-12: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 232; see also 2 EpFid 42: Esser, 210.

“with kindness,” according to another expression dear to the Saint.²⁶ This chapter of the *Earlier Rule* concludes with an exhortation to love one another as brothers and honor one another “without complaining.”²⁷ In fact, we read in 1 Peter: “But above all things have a constant mutual charity among yourselves; for charity covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without murmuring” (1 Pt 4:8-9).

Bless and Do Good

Although in this case we do not have clear and direct citations, these concepts occur frequently in Peter and in St. Francis. For this reason, I think it worthwhile to stress the typical similarities that enable us to see more clearly the influence of Peter on St. Francis.

In the First Letter of Peter, the idea of doing good to those who do evil to us, after the example of Christ's patience, is certainly characteristic. These are the principal texts:

For such is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men (1 Pt 2:15).

So Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. You are daughters of hers when you do what is right [*beneficientes*] and fear no disturbance (1 Pt 3:6).

Finally, be all like-minded, compassionate, lovers of the brethren, merciful, humble; not rendering evil for evil, or abuse for abuse, but contrariwise, blessing; for unto this were you called that you might inherit a blessing. For, “He who would love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good, let him seek after peace and pursue it....” And who is there to harm you, if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you suffer anything for justice's sake, blessed are you. So have no fear of their fear and do not be troubled. But hallow the Lord Christ in your hearts. Be ready always with an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do so with gentleness and fear, having a good conscience, so that wherein they speak in disparagement of you, they who revile your good

²⁶RegNB VII, 13-15: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 383f: a “loving” obedience, as it were, not resisting evil but overcoming it with good, as we shall see below.

²⁷RegNB VII, 15: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 384.

behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better, if the will of God should so will, that you suffer for doing good than for doing evil. Because Christ also died once for sins, the Just for the unjust... (1 Pt 3:8-18).

Therefore let them also who suffer according to the will of God commend their souls in well-doing [*in benefactis*] to a faithful Creator (1 Pt 4:19).

The principal texts in the *Writings* of St. Francis are these:

Although they may be called hypocrites, let them nevertheless not cease from doing good....²⁸

Let no brother do or say anything evil to another.²⁹

When we see or hear evil spoken or done or God blasphemed, let us speak well and do well and praise God....³⁰

All my brothers: let us pay attention to what the Lord says: *Love your enemies* and *do good to those who hate you* (Mt 5:44), for our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footprints we must follow (1 Pt 2:21), called his betrayer a friend and willingly offered himself to his executioners. Our friends, therefore, are all those who unjustly bring us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martyrdom and death. We must love them greatly....³¹

Let us, moreover, produce worthy fruits of penance. And let us love our neighbors as ourselves. And if anyone does not want to love them as himself, let him at least not do them any harm, but let him do good.³²

We must love our enemies and do good to those who hate us.³³

It should be noted Francis cites the last text twice, once specifically in connection with *sequi vestigia Christi* of 1 Peter. It would be hard to find

²⁸RegNB II, 15: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 379.

²⁹RegNB V, 14: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 382.

³⁰RegNB XVII, 19: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 393.

³¹RegNB XXII, 1-4: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 395.

³²EpFid 25-27: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 209.

³³EpFid 38: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 210.

in the Bible (even in Paul) texts—such as those just cited—so close to those of Francis, to whom the terms “do good and bless” are most familiar. The same is true even in the case of our enemies, whom we must not resist. Rather we must do good, offering them our house and even our clothes and our cheek.³⁴ Obviously these are gospel concepts, expressed in the Synoptics and drawn from Matthew and Luke in particular. But apparently it was Peter who suggested to Francis the idea of being obedient and subject to every creature for love of God and the brethren, overcoming evil by doing good and blessing everyone, imitating the patience of Christ whose footprints, we must follow. What is more, it is always Peter who speaks of the “fraternity” that is to be loved and served in obedience and humility. Such frequency (five times) is not found anywhere else in the Bible, not even in Paul.³⁵ But such frequency is found regularly in St. Francis, whose spirituality includes “fraternity” as an extremely important concept.

Strangers and Pilgrims (advenae et peregrini)

This is another of the Poverello's central ideas whose scriptural basis is to be found in the First Letter of Peter. The Petrine text reads: “Beloved, I exhort you as strangers and pilgrims to abstain from carnal desires which war against the soul” (1 Pt 2:11). The words used by the Vulgate are *advenae et peregrini*. The concept is profoundly biblical and is often found in Old Testament texts such as Ps 38:13, Gen 23:4, and 1 Chr 29:15. The idea even appears in Ps 68:9, which is very dear to St. Francis.³⁶ But the text of Peter is closer to Francis, who borrowed it in his *Later Rule* and *Testament*. For Peter, Christians are “strangers” in the Dispersion (1 Pt 1:1), where they must conduct themselves with fear “during the time of [their] sojourning” (1 Pt 1:17).

For Francis, this term expresses the total expropriation of “mendicant” or itinerant poverty, which frees us from everything and makes us ready to run on the way that leads to the land of the living. In the *Later Rule* we read: “Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house

³⁴RegNB VII, 13-15: XI, 1-12; XIV, 4-6; Adm XIV 1-4: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 383, 387f, 389, 113.

³⁵Fraternity: 1 Pt 2:17; 3:8; 5:9; 2 Pt 1:7.

³⁶See also Eph 2:19, Heb 11:13. For the citations of Psalm 68, see K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 465 (13 times, more than any other).

nor place nor anything at all. As *pilgrims and strangers* in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made himself poor in this world.... Let this be *your portion that leads into the land of the living.*³⁷

We see how Ps 141:7 (which was sung by the Saint before his death) emerges here. The same thing also appears in part in the *Office of the Passion*, where various verses are added from Psalm 68, the psalm most often cited by Francis. One of these is proper: "Extraneus factus sum fratribus meis et peregrinus filiiis matris meae. [I have been made an outcast to my brothers and a stranger to the children of my mother.]" (v. 9). Perhaps Francis was pointing to this reference, when in the words of the *Later Rule* he exhorts his brothers to a love that is more than *maternal*. Having left their natural family ("a stranger to the children of my mother"), his followers are all the more in need of a spiritual family, in other words, fraternal love according to the Spirit, itself capable of being more than maternal. Wherever the brothers are and meet one another, they should be able to find this familiarity, this maternal atmosphere.³⁸ St. Clare repeated these words of chapter 6 of the *Later Rule* in her own *Rule*. In his *Testament*, Francis insists on remaining faithful to poverty in the places built for the brothers: "As pilgrims and strangers, let them always be guests there."³⁹

³⁷RegB VI, 1-5: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 368f; see RegNB IX, 5: Esser, 385: "pauper et hospes."

³⁸OffPass, Ps V, v. 8: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 342; this is Ps 68:9. See also Eph 2:19: "Therefore, you are now no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are citizens with the saints and members of God's household (*domestici Dei*)."³⁹ The word *domestici* occurs in RegB VI, 7: Esser, 369.

³⁹Test 24: K. Esser, *Opuscula*, 441. See RCI VIII, 20: I Omaechevarría, *Escritos*, 266. For the concept of the "way" in the *Writings* of Francis, see Cl. Ch. Billot, "La marche d'après les Ecrits de saint François d'Assise," in *Etudes Franciscaines* n.s. 16 (1966) 311-30; K. Esser and E. Grau, *Der Bund des hl. Franziskus mit der Herrin Armut*, Werl 1966, 87, 177 (in the index under *Weg-Motiv*); L. Bertram, "Pilgrims and Strangers: An Eschatological View of St. Francis," in *Round Table of Franciscan Research* 31 (1966) 138-45. See also *Bibliographia Franciscana* XIII, n. 673. For the biblical teaching of Peter, see M. Adinolfi, "Stato civile dei cristiani forestieri e pellegrini" (1 Pt 2:11) in *Antoniamum* 42 (1967) 420-34; idem, "Temi dell'esodo nella 1 Pt.," in *Studi Biblici Francescani* 16 (1965-66) 179-83; E. Schillibeeckx, *Gerechtigheid en liefde. Genade en bevrijding*, Bloemendaal 1977, 200-14 (present state of the question with related bibliography).

In conclusion, the importance of the *Letters of Peter* as a source of biblical inspiration for St. Francis is very evident. In particular, Chapter 2 of the First Letter proved to be a mine of gospel concepts from which the Saint drew abundantly: to follow the footprints of Christ crucified, to be subject to every human creature, to overcome evil by doing good and by blessing everyone, to live as pilgrims and strangers in this world in poverty and humility, like Christ the Lord. All these concepts have been lifted bodily, not only in their substance, but even in their literal expression.

Indeed, we can say that the influence of these passages from Peter was a determining factor in the formation of Francis's gospel ideal. Alongside *Admonition I*, whose content is profoundly Johannine, we may place the Franciscan texts cited in our study as profoundly Petrine. In fact, I know of no other writing that was so important to St. Francis as this second chapter of the *First Letter of Peter*.