Greyfriars Review

Volume 18

2004

Supplement

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"Thus Says the Lord" The Gospel in the Writings of Saint Francis

Dino Dozzi

"Cosi dice il signore" Il vangelo negli scritti di san Francesco

Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna, 2000

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

Introduction

his book follows a path that runs along the crest of a hill. On one side are the scripture scholars, on the other the Franciscan scholars. The path is wide and scenic. It does not claim to break new ground or conquer peaks never before scaled. The specialized equipment of the climber-exegete is not required, and the critical apparatus is kept to a minimum so as not to burden our steps.

Fifteen years ago I had the opportunity to defend a thesis at the Pontifical Biblical Institute on "The Gospel in the Earlier Rule of Francis of Assisi." The study was later published and then taken up and developed in various articles. But it was also translated orally into popular language for Franciscans, religious and lay. The good reception of the oral and popular version encouraged me to accept the invitation of the friends of the Formation Project group and publish it.¹

^{&#}x27;I must thank my confreres Vincenzo and Marino, who gave me time to devote to this work, and Antonietta Valsecchi, who helped me correct the proofs.

I have always walked along the crest between the Bible and Franciscanism, dividing my time and energy between the two sides. The disadvantage is that it robs time and energy from a single specialty, but the advantage is that it sets up a dialogue between two realities I feel are complementary and mutually enriching. For a lecture, three-day workshop or longer retreat, I begin with the Bible and the writings of Saint Francis, knowing that these will be more than enough for me.

It is no coincidence that the topic of my scripture thesis was the Earlier Rule. In this work, the most important and longest of Francis's writings, almost half the text consists of Gospel citations, and the rest is either commentary or application. Certainly anyone who wants to study Francis's reading and interpretation of the Gospel must start here. This is also what we will do. Then we will extend our treatment to the Gospel citations in the other writings of Francis of Assisi.'

Francis was neither a scripture scholar nor a professional theologian. He was not even a priest, and whether he was a deacon is debated. He was a man who, between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, encountered the Gospel, which changed his life. In his writings—unusually numerous for a man who had no higher education and in fact questioned its importance—we find countless scripture citations, especially from the New Testament and the Gospels in particular. They are introduced by the refrain, "The Lord says." The hermeneutic question was certainly not foreign to him, at least if it is understood as a search for how to interpret the Gospel in one's life. But perhaps this is actually the decisive and fundamental hermeneutic question.

We will not be able to look in the writings of Saint Francis for a historical-critical, rhetorical, semiotic or any other kind of specialized interpretation. This is not why or how Francis cites and interprets the Gospel texts. He cites them and comments on them as light for his existential journey, as a source of meaning for his life. The question Francis asks is not how to interpret the Gospel in itself, but how to live in the light of the Gospel. Francis's writings show us how he translates the Gospel into real life: in ways of thinking and judging, in feelings and attitudes, in judgments and behaviors, in outlook and concreteness. To know how Francis interprets the Gospel, we have to see how the Gospel changes his thinking and his life.

^{&#}x27;Those wishing more detailed philological and bibliographic references, especially on the *Earlier Rule*, may consult our study *Il vangelo nella Regola non bollata di Francesco d'Assisi* (see the bibliography at the end of this volume).

We will first give an overview of the Gospel citations in Francis's writings in order to draw from them his hermeneutic principle (Chapter One). Confronted with "the Lord says," Francis "responds" (Chapter Two), "speaks of human relationships" (Chapter Three), "speaks of mission" (Chapter Four), "speaks of creation" (Chapter Five), "speaks of God" (Chapter Six), "speaks of his Gospel life" (Chapter Seven). Responding to the Lord who speaks, Francis speaks of himself and his way of reading and interpreting the Gospel. Indeed, the title of the Earlier Rule is, "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Chapter One

Thus Says the Lord

The Presence and Word of the Lord

It is useful to begin our study with a quick overview of the writings of Saint Francis that we have and the numerous Gospel citations we find in them (regularly introduced by the words, "The Lord says") in order to highlight at once the assumption that is the starting point of his Gospel hermeneutic, namely the living presence of the Lord who says, "I am with you all days."

1. The Writings of Saint Francis

The biographers link Francis's conversion either to the words of the San Damiano Crucifix, "Francis, go and repair my house which, as you see, is all being destroyed," or to his hearing the Gospel passage about the sending of the disciples and its explanation in the church of the Portiuncula:

When he heard that Christ's disciples should not possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, not to have shoes nor two tunics, but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance, the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God. "This is what I want," he said, "this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart."

Both of these links, to be sure, are very significant—the first because of the importance Francis was to give to the living crucified Christ who speaks to him, and to the Church; the second because of the importance the Gospel was to have for him, with Jesus' invitation to live the kingdom of God and bear witness to it, taking nothing with oneself.

But the remarkable thing is that when Francis, at the end of his life, recalled and described again his beginning, he did not mention the words of the San Damiano Crucifix or reading the Gospel, but rather his meeting lepers:

LMj II, 1 (FA:ED II, 536).

⁴1C 22 (FA:ED I, 201-02).

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.⁵

This fact would be enough to explain the unique importance the writings have for a knowledge of Francis. In the biographies and the chronicles we come to know how others saw him; in his writings we come into direct contact with him.

It is surprising to learn that it is only a century since people have at last turned for a knowledge of Francis primarily to his writings, prompted also by scholars who were neither Franciscans nor Catholics. Practically speaking, it was only after the Second World War that Franciscans began to study the writings, guided by that great master Kajetan Esser. The long and patient research that enabled him to present the critical edition has been exceptionally valuable.⁶

The writings of Francis are traditionally divided into three groups: rules and exhortations, letters, praises and prayers. For the time in which he lived, Francis's education was fair, his knowledge of the Bible good, his artistic sensitivity excellent. We still have three of his autographs: the Blessing for Brother Leo (FA:ED I, 112) and the Praises of God (FA:ED I, 109) on the back of the same parchment kept in the basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, and the Letter to Brother Leo (FA:ED I, 122) kept in the cathedral of Spoleto. In general "he had [his words] written down" (see Test 15). The Latin of the various writings, more or less correct, shows the work of different secretaries. The Office of the Passion shows that he understood Latin well. He was also able to express himself in the vernacular, and Italian literature places the Canticle of the Creatures (FA:ED I, 113) by Francis of Assisi among the very earliest texts in its history.

The relationship between Francis and his collaborators and that between written and spoken language is well summarized by Stanislao da Campagnola. Francis the writer has for centuries remained in the shadows. His writings have been consulted solely for edification or moral directives. Thus his image could be buried by his biographers, ancient and modern, in an enchanted world, like a legend. But the writings really occupy a privileged place among the Franciscan sources. They are the primary source

⁵Test 1-3 (FA:ED I, 124).

⁶Published in 1976, it was revised in the *editio minor* of 1978. A new critical edition and Italian version has been available since 1982: Gli scritti di s. Francesco d'Assisi.

for studying Francis's life and experience, even if they are not all of equal importance and the sources must not be reduced exclusively to them. The writings of Francis, with good introductions, are available today in the various languages and are an object of attention by many qualified researchers and even lay scholars.'

2. "The Lord Says": Gospel Citations in the Writings of Saint Francis

In his writings Francis shows a good knowledge of the biblical texts. In the parish school of San Giorgio in Assisi he received an elementary education and learned a little Latin, probably from the Psalter. The main source of Francis's knowledge of the biblical texts was no doubt the liturgy (missal, breviary, evangelary), but also personal reading (despite the scarcity of books), meditation, art and liturgical drama. It is a fact that not only the biographical sources, but also the saint's writings, show a remarkable knowledge of the New Testament and even of the Old, especially the Psalms.

The biblical citations in Francis's writings are most often from the New Testament and especially from the Gospels. Contrary to what we might expect, Francis almost never cites the Acts of the Apostles and never the two summaries of the life of the first Christian community (Acts 2:42-48 and 4:32-35). Francis goes directly to Jesus Christ who speaks in the Gospel.

Certainly it can be useful to count the biblical texts or the words or biblical allusions found in the writings. The "figures" and preferred biblical "teachings" in Francis's writings are presented by Lázaro Iriarte and Optatus van Asseldonk respectively. Francis often cites the golden rule of Mt 7:12: "Do to others what you would have them do to you." Next are the beatitudes of Mt 5:3-13, especially the one about those who are persecuted. There is Mt 20:25-28 with Jesus' invitation to become the servant of others.

⁷Bibliographia Franciscana, edited by the Capuchin Historical Institute since 1931, gives a yearly list of what is being published in the world, also listing material on the writings. L. Pellegrini sums up the trend in Franciscan studies in the last few decades with this catch phrase: "From the Francis of the biographies to the Francis of the Writings and the sayings." A good systematic presentation of the writings of Francis is provided by C. Paolazzi, Lettura degli "Scritti" di Francesco d'Assisi (Collana di teologia e di spiritualità, 4), Edizione O.R., Milan 1987. For the historical, social and cultural context of Francis's writings see Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francescana.

⁸A useful work is that of J.F. Godet - G. Mailleux, Opuscula sancti Francisci, Scripta sanctae Clarae. Concordance, Index, Listes de fréquence. Tables comparatives ("Corpus des Sources Franciscaines," V), Louvain 1976.

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From Luke he especially cites the discourse on the sending of the Twelve (Lk 9:1-6) and the sending of the seventy-two disciples (Lk 10:1-9). Then there is Lk 18:19: "God alone is good." John is certainly the most-cited of the evangelists: God is spirit and must be worshiped in spirit and truth (4:23-24), my words are spirit and life (6:64), Jesus the Good Shepherd (10:1-16), the washing of the feet (13), I am the way, the truth and the life (14:6), the indwelling of the Trinity in those who believe (14:23), Jesus' high priestly prayer (17).

This quick overview can give us an idea of Francis's preferences, but it is nevertheless true that such texts are to be pondered rather than numbered. The number of articles and books about the relationship between Francis and the Bible, especially the Gospel, is truly enormous, but their quality often leaves something to be desired."

The Eurlier Rule, besides containing conciliar and papal norms, explicitly cites some patristic expressions and especially biblical texts, almost always from the New Testament. These citations, in particular those from the Gospels, are fundamental not only quantitatively (they make up almost half of the entire text), but also qualitatively (the rest forms a single body with these citations, commenting on them, explaining them and actualizing them).

To discover the meaning of the *Earlier Rule*, ¹⁰ it is essential that we carefully check these biblical citations, noting all variations (omissions, additions, changes, combinations) with respect to the text Francis knew, the Vulgate, in the version attested to by the evangelary. ¹¹

They are all listed and cataloged in *Bibliographia Franciscana*. Here we mention AA.VV., "Parola di Dio e Francesco d'Assisi," and A. Rotzetter - W. van Dijk - T. Matura, "Vivere il vangelo. Francesco d'Assisi ieri e oggi." For medieval exegesis, in which the exegesis of Francis should be included, it is necessary to bear in mind the specialists H. de Lubac, M.-D. Chenu, C. Spicq and B. Smalley.

¹⁰The following are especially useful: D. Flood - W. van Dijk - T. Matura, La nascita di un carisma. Una lettura della prima Regola di san Francesco [English translation: The Birth of a Charism]; F. Accrocca - A Ciceri, Francesco e suoi frati. La Regola non bollata: una regola in cammino.

[&]quot;In the sacristy of the Protomonastery of Saint Clare in Assisi a precious relic is jealously preserved. It is the breviary of Saint Francis with the evangelary that is bound with it. It gets its name from the autograph of Brother Leo who explains the origin of the two parts (breviary and evangelary) and its use by Francis himself: "Blessed Francis obtained this breviary for his companions Brother Angelo and Brother Leo, because when he was in good health he always wanted to say the office as prescribed in the Rule, and during the time of his illness, when he was unable to recite it, he wanted to hear it read. And he continued in this way until his death. He also had this evangelary written, and on days when he was unable to hear Mass

For exegetes this is a time of deep reflection and lively debate on the purpose of their work, methods used, the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics, the Bible and Tradition, the Bible and the Church, text and life." Dei Verbum is over thirty years old. There are those who think it is now outdated or at least in need of further clarifications. With good reason the Pontifical Biblical Commission drafted in 1993 an invaluable document: "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church." There is need for greater interdisciplinary dialogue to prevent theology from falling into extrincisism, spirituality from becoming spiritualism and exegesis from being reduced to archaeologism."

Hermeneutics today attaches great importance to the history of biblical interpretation. The exegete we are considering is Francis of Assisi, who was not a professional exegete. He read the Gospel in order to live it; he saw in the Gospel his rule of life. But in doing this he was interpreting the Gospel text. We can draw his interpretation of the Gospel from his writings, especially the *Earlier Rule*. In it the Gospel is described as the rule of life of the Franciscan fraternity, and the life of this first fraternity—which quickly grew and developed to become a religious order—is described as a lived interpretation of the Gospel.

Of all the writings, the Earlier Rule is the longest, most systematic and most representative of Francis of Assisi's spirituality. We find here his manner of interpreting and living the Gospel. Why does almost half of this Rule consist of words from the Gospel? Why and in what sense is the life described herein defined as "the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?"

because of sickness or some other obvious impediment, he would have read the Gospel that was read that day in church at Mass. And he continued in this way until his death."

¹⁷As such, the hermeneutic question is a modern question, but it has always been raised in various forms. H. de Lubac especially deserves credit for showing the importance and theological richness of biblical interpretation in Tradition.

[&]quot;Today it is accepted, at least theoretically, that "exegesis in the manner of the Sorbonne" cannot be set up in opposition to "exegesis in the Church." The stated aim of the journal of biblical interpretation Parola, Spirito e vita is to restore the unity of exegesis. But we must not forget that the first and essential way of gaining access to the meaning of the text is the text itself.

¹⁴The Earlier Rule or Regula non bullata is so called in order to distinguish it from the Regula bullata approved by Honorius III with the bull Solet annuere of November 29, 1223. It is a text that gradually took shape between 1209-10 and 1221. The "life" of the first years, which Francis had written down "simply and in a few words" as he himself says (Test 15), was approved orally by Innocent III in 1209-10 but was then gradually expanded, either to include answers to new questions being asked as time went by, or to conform to church legislation.

If it is true that the history of biblical interpretation is important, that the understanding of Sacred Scripture grows as it is reread in the Church, that the best interpretation of the Gospel is had in the lives of the saints, is it is also useful for exegesis today to learn how Francis of Assisi interpreted the Gospel. This can be a small contribution "towards a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture" (Dei Verbum, 12).

We need experts who can help us to read Scripture historically, as well as spiritual persons who can help us to delve into it in the spirit (H. de Lubac). Francis of Assisi is certainly one of these spiritual persons.

In the history the Gospel text and its effects, the great flowering of Franciscan holiness over the course of eight centuries along with the hundreds of religious and secular institutes still trying today to embody the Gospel life after the Franciscan model constitute, we think, good evidence that the writings of Francis of Assisi are of hermeneutical importance.¹⁶

3. "I Am with You All Days": The Gospel Hermeneutic of Saint Francis

The great purpose of Jesus' mission and the great theme of the Gospel is the proclamation of the kingdom of God. But where is this kingdom of God? When and how will it be realized? Whether through ancestral fear of the divine, or because we sense that it involves us personally, the fact is that we are always tempted to keep it at a distance, projecting it into a far-off future or confining it to church or identifying it with some extraordinary apparition. Asked by the Pharisees, "When is the kingdom of God to come?" Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, "There it is.' For behold, the kingdom of God is among you" (Lk 17:20-21).

Francis describes himself as simple and unlettered. He did not know or make use of the exegetical techniques in use at his time, 17 but his

^{15&}quot;Who is the living interpreter of the Christian meaning of the text? It is the saint, the faithful Christian who lives in full accord with the reality and mystery expressed by the texts. It is the Church in its holiness. This is the 'fifth Gospel,' the lived Gospel, which is also a means for interpreting the written Gospel. We can say that Saint Francis of Assisi is a more faithful interpreter of the Gospel than many doctors and exegetes, because he grasped it in its existential realities and lived it" (C.M. Martini).

¹⁶M. Blondel noted that Christianity is not based solely on literary relics. There are certainly other threads that link us to Christ, another history made up of living relics.

¹⁷Medieval exegesis can be summarized in some ways by the famous

hermeneutic becomes clear from the way he cites the Bible. He often combines Gospel citations, regularly introducing them with the words, "Thus says the Lord in the Gospel." The word "Gospel" is in the singular, for it is the same Lord who speaks in the four Gospels. He is not interested in distinguishing one Gospel from another. And we must emphasize the force of that present tense "says." It is not a historical present equivalent to "said," but a true present. It is the Lord who is speaking today to Francis through the words of the Gospels.

The great insight that is the starting point of all Francis's hermeneutic is extremely simple. But perhaps because it is so simple it is easy to forget. It is Christ's presence in the Gospel and in the life of the Christian. The essential thing is that Christ is living, he is present, and he speaks in the Gospel.

For Francis, Jesus Christ is living in the Church, in the Eucharist, in the Gospel, in the life of the Christian. Many of today's hermeneutic assumptions find surprising practical confirmation in the simple and unlettered Francis. He always introduces the Gospel citations with the expression, "The Lord says." The Second Vatican Council states that Christ "is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church." Francis has the same devotion to the Eucharist and to the Word of God. The Second Vatican Council says: "The church has always venerated the divine scriptures as it has venerated the Body of the Lord." Esser has rightly spoken of Francis's shocking anticipation of the council teaching. Francis senses that in the Gospel it is Jesus Christ who is speaking to him. This is the starting point of his entire hermeneutic, and this is why he was "no deaf hearer of the Gospel."

Jesus Christ reveals himself to Francis in the Gospel as the truth to be followed and lived. Francis sits, not before a mere literary text but before the Mystery of a living presence, that of Christ. It is with this Mystery, this "Thing" revealed and hidden by the text, that he enters into communication, and testimony is the only homogeneous vehicle for this communication (M.-D. Chenu). Indeed, the Christian Mystery is not

couplet, "The literal sense teaches what happened, the allegorical what you believe, / the moral what you should do, the anagogical where you are going," even though the picture is much bigger and more varied. See H. de Lubac, Esegssi medievale. I quattro sensi della Scrittura, Ed. Paoline, Rome 1972 (2 vols.) and B. Smalley, Lo studio della Bibbia nel medioevo, Ed. Il Mulino, Bologna 1972 [Both works are also available in English translation.]

¹⁸Sacrosanctum Concilium, 7.

¹⁹Dei Verbum, 21.

²⁰See 1C 22 (FA:ED I, 202).

something to be contemplated with curiosity like a mere scientific object; it must be internalized and lived. The spiritual meaning of the Mystery is the meaning that is discovered, or rather into which one enters, by living it. Even more basically, the entire process of spiritual understanding is essentially the same as the process of conversion. The Word of God, a living and effective word, does not attain its true fulfillment and full meaning except through the transformation it brings about in the one who receives it (H. de Lubac). The truth of faith is a path to follow (P. Ricoeur), and we do not attain the truth except to the extent that we commit ourselves before it and testify to it (S. Kierkegaard). True knowledge of the Gospel text is the Gospel lived (F. Manns).

For Francis the truth of the Gospel is not a thing to be known, but a living person to be followed, a life to be lived with this person, with Christ. In the lively hermeneutical dialogue that is taking place today, we can also make some room for Francis of Assisi, of whom Bonaventure writes that in the Church he conceived and brought to birth the spirit of the Gospel truth.⁷¹

Jesus Christ, Gospel, and life are for Francis three realities that recall and shed light on each other. Jesus Christ can be encountered in the lived Gospel, the Gospel is the revelation of an incarnate presence, Christian life is the incarnation of a revealed presence, the presence of Christ the way, the truth and the life. In this sense, Christian life is the place where the truth of Christ continues to shine in its two inseparable aspects of revelation and incarnation. The titles "angel of the sixth seal" and "other Christ," which tradition has applied to Francis, are meant to express this idea.

Admonition VII shows clearly that for Francis the biblical text must not be studied in itself but must be taken as a source of light for a journey to be made, a life to be lived. In the response of faith there is realized that hermeneutic circle between interpreter and interpreted on which Ricoeur insists so strongly.

In this hermeneutics of incarnate presence, there is an extraordinary yet simple fusion of horizons, not only between past and present, text and life, but also between sectorial and general hermeneutics. Francis was able to recognize, love and serve this Truth, identified as the living presence of Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit, the true key to interpreting all reality in every age.

The true "science" of the Scriptures, in the older meaning of the term, does not depend at all on science in the modern sense, even though it profits

²¹See LMj III, 1 (FA:ED II, 542).

greatly from it. It cannot be separated from the eyes by which we recognize Christ. Just as it is closely related to faith, so also is it related to humility, purity of heart, perfection of life (H. de Lubac).

The living and incarnate presence of Christ is the great truth Francis discovered in the Gospel, and it enabled him to unite the different stages and various ways in which it is expressed. With Christ, Francis knew where he was going. Sabatier has some very beautiful words: "What Francis was seeking in his new meditations was only his daily bread; and in the Gospel he found it in superabundance because his eye was able to recognize spiritual nourishment where so many others had seen only stones."

For Francis, the truth of the Gospel is the presence in it of Christ who is truth. The truth of the Christian life is the presence in it of Christ who is truth. The task of hermeneutics is to reveal in the Gospel the presence of Christ who is truth and to help incarnate the presence of Christ who is truth in our own life, which can then rightly be called "life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Francis was able to recognize the Lord's presence in its various forms: Word, Eucharist, lepers, events. But he knew only too well that it takes the eyes of faith to discern this living presence. This appears with particular clarity in the conclusion of *Admonition* I:

16 Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne (Wis 18:15) into the Virgin's womb; 17 each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; 18 each day He comes down from the bosom of the Father (Jn 1:18; 6:38) upon the altar in the hands of a priest. 19 As He revealed Himself to the holy apostles in true flesh, so He reveals Himself to us now in sacred bread. 20 And as they saw only His flesh by an insight of their flesh, yet believed that He was God as they contemplated Him with their spiritual eyes, 21 let us, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, see and firmly believe that they are His most holy Body and Blood living and true. 22 And in this way the Lord is always with His faithful, as He Himself says: Behold I am with you until the end of the age (Mt 28:20) [Adm I, 16-22; FA:ED I, 129].

Chapter Two

If You Wish To Be Perfect...Come, Follow Me

Francis Responds to the Lord

Francis hears the Gospel words addressed to himself. To the Lord who speaks in the Gospel Francis responds with his typical courage, concreteness and essentiality. He considers it his pleasant duty to obey Christ who speaks in the Gospel lived in the Church, to preserve the word of the Lord in his heart, and to follow Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.

1. Obeying Christ Who Speaks in the Gospel Lived in the Church

The first written witness to the response Francis proposes to give the Lord who speaks to him in the Gospel is the *Earlier Rule*. The beginning and end of the *Earlier Rule* are thematically linked and form a great inclusion of the plan of life set forth here. The essential words and ideas are "life" and "obedience."

Francis's obedience to whatever the Lord asks of him in the Gospel is present in all his writings, especially in the two Rules. Let us take a look at the first chapter of the *Earlier Rule*.

The rule and life of these brothers is this, namely: "to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own," and to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who says: 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven (Mt 19:21); and come, follow me (Mt 16:24). 'And: If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Lk 14:26). 'Again: If anyone wishes to come to me and does not hate father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Mt 19:29; Mk 10:29). 'And: Everyone who has left father or mother, brother or sisters, wife or children, houses or lands because of me, will receive a hundredfold and will possess eternal life (Lk 18:29) [ER I, 1-5; FA:ED I, 63-64].

The words with which Chapter I begins ("The rule and life of these brothers is this") recall the beginning of the Prologue 2: "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The way of introducing the four citations of I, 2-5 shows that for our text Jesus Christ speaks today through the words of the Gospel, no matter which evangelist reports them.

The words "sell everything" in I, 2 are linked with living "without anything of their own"; the words "let him deny himself" in I, 3 refer especially to living "in obedience"; to "hate" one's family in I, 4 refers particularly to living "in chastity"; I, 5 is a summary of everything we must leave in order to follow the Lord. These references strongly reinforce the connection the text wishes to make between obedience to the Church and obedience to the Gospel.

Verses 2-5 are directly included in the definition of the "rule and life," which is "to live in obedience, in chastity and without anything of one's own" and "to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who says...." But here we also find the conditions for making this rule and life our own: I, 2 says in essence that it is perfection; I, 3 says that it is following; I, 4 that it is discipleship; I, 5 that it means to receive a hundredfold and to possess eternal life.

The first three citations begin with a conditional clause, go on to refer to the concepts of obedience, chastity and nothing of one's own, and end in a way that is extremely similar ("follow me," "follow me," "be my disciple"), thus explicitly recalling the word "follow" in I, 1. Notice also, in these first three Gospel citations, the large number of action verbs, which are also consistent with the programmatic following of I, 1: "go, sell, give, come, follow" (I,2); "come, deny, take up, follow" (I, 4); "come, hate, be my disciple" (I, 4).

All these verbs can apparently be summarized in three movements or moments: leave, follow, receive. And these seem to be especially highlighted in the summary I, 5: "Everyone who has left...because of me...will receive." Belonging to the movement or moment of "leaving" are "go, sell, give" (I, 4), "deny" (I, 3), "hate" (I, 4). Belonging to the movement or moment of "following" Jesus Christ, which is also the reason for leaving everything else ("because of me"), are "come, follow" (I, 2), "take up your cross, follow" (I, 3), "be my disciple" (I, 4). Belonging to the movement or moment of "receiving," which is also the fruit or result of the two previous movements, are "be perfect" and "have treasure in heaven" (I, 2), "come after" (I, 3), and "come to me" (I, 4).

To make the life here described one's own, it is not enough to "leave." There are two other movements or moments, to "follow" and to "receive." Each of the first three Gospel citations, after speaking of leaving, adds that it is necessary to follow Jesus Christ, to be his disciple. The fourth citation (I, 5) is even more explicit; it speaks of leaving all "because of me." So the rule and life of the brothers consists in living in obedience, in chastity and without anything of one's own, in order to follow Jesus Christ.

The third movement or moment is that of "receiving." Whoever leaves everything and follows Jesus Christ, receives this: he is perfect and will have treasure in heaven (I, 2), he comes after Jesus (I, 3), he comes to him (I, 4), he will receive a hundredfold and will have eternal life (I, 5). What we receive after leaving all to follow Jesus is expressed in different ways: it is eternal life, which is the hundredfold of what we have left, it is perfection, it is treasure in heaven. Eternal life also consists in going after Jesus, in going to him. To leave everything, to follow Jesus Christ, to receive eternal life—these are three inseparable and complementary movements or moments.

Now let us take a look at the Prologue, which immediately precedes:

'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. 'This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Brother Francis petitioned the Lord Pope to grant and confirm for him; and he did grant and confirm it for him and his brothers present and to come. 'Brother Francis—and whoever is head of this religion—promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Innocent and his successors. 'Let all the brothers be bound to obey Brother Francis and his successors [ER Prol. 1-4; FA:ED I, 63].

As in I, 2, "life" is also the essential term in Prologue 2 (it is also found in II, 1, 2 and 3 and in the conclusion to the Rule XXIV, 1 and 4). Notice the correspondence between "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" of Prologue 2 and "The rule and life of these brothers is this" of I, 1. The intention to describe this life is obvious, and the close connection between the life of the brothers and that of the Gospel is immediately highlighted. Note the great variety in the terms used here: from "this is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Prol 2), to "this religion" (Prol 3), to "the rule and life of these brothers is this" (I, 1), to "this life" (II, 1), to "our life" (II, 2 and 3), to "obedience" (II, 9), to "Order" (II, 10), again to "obedience" (II, 10 and 13), to "this life" (XXIV, 1 and 4), to "rule" in XXIV, 4.

The Prologue and the Earlier Rule begin "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Perhaps this is not just homage to a literary genre of the age. The remembrance of the Trinity suggests to the reader the importance of faith, which will soon be shown to be an essential element both in the description or definition of this life, and as a condition for making it one's own.

Prologue 2 begins with the words "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The life project that Brother Francis asked the Pope to grant and confirm, and which he did in fact grant and confirm, is presented and described here. It is immediately defined as "life of the Gospel of Jesus

Christ," a difficult expression that establishes a direct relationship between the life of the brothers and the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Alongside this first essential relationship with the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Prologue 2 places another equally important relationship: approval and confirmation by the Pope.

The life here described and defined as "life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" is not opposed to or independent of church structure, but is actually inseparable from it. It continues in a never-ending relationship of obedience and reverence to the Pope as the supreme representative of church structure. The life described here is life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as lived, and only if lived, in obedience to the Pope—in other words, in the Church and in obedience to the Church.

In Chapter Two of the Earlier Rule "this life" is called "obedience" three times: "When the year and term of probation has ended, he [the candidate] may be received into obedience" (II, 9); "After this it will be unlawful for him to join another Order or to 'wander outside obedience" (II, 10); "All the other brothers who have already promised obedience..." (II, 13). In II, 12 it is stated categorically: "No one may be received contrary to the rite and practice of the Holy Church."

As in the Prologue and Chapter I, here too the Pope's directives are not opposed to or independent of those of the Gospel. Rather there is mutual clarification: to be received into "this life" is the same as being received into "obedience," which is at the same time obedience to Jesus Christ, to the Gospel and to the Church. In presenting his life and that of the brothers, Francis lists four elements in the Prologue that must be considered essential: life, Gospel, Jesus Christ, papal confirmation.

In the Prologue and Chapter I Francis presents his life and that of the brothers as obedience. First of all, obedience to Jesus Christ. The brothers must follow his "teaching and footprints" (I, 1), in other words obey him. He says we must sell all and follow him (I,3), deny ourselves and follow him (I, 3), prefer him above anyone else (I, 4), leave everything else for him (I, 5). This life consists in obeying Jesus Christ by putting into practice everything he says. Next, obedience to the Gospel. The words in Prologue 2, "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," are rather enigmatic, but the first meaning is certainly that this life consists in living the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in other words obeying his Gospel. This is confirmed in the whole first chapter. The teaching and footprints of Jesus Christ that we must follow are indicated in the Gospel; to obey him we must concretely obey the Gospel. Finally, obedience to the Church in the person of the Pope who confirms the rule and to whom Francis and his successors promise obedience and reverence.

Obedience to Jesus Christ, to the Gospel and to the Church is therefore the most significant element, and it is essential to note how these three obediences are intimately related. To obey Jesus Christ we must obey what he says in the Gospel (I, 1; II, 14; III,1-2). The life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be granted and confirmed by the Pope, and obedience to the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be accompanied by constant obedience to the Pope (Prol 3-4) and the Church (II, 12).

In II, 9-10, after mentioning two juridic and ecclesial consequences of being received into obedience after the year of probation, it says, citing the text of the bull of Honorius III, "according to the decree of the Lord Pope and the Gospel." The Church authoritatively interprets and actualizes the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To be aware of this and draw the conclusions that flow from it, one condition, never explicitly stated but clearly implied, is required. That condition is faith. Only faith makes obedience to Jesus Christ possible. Only faith makes it possible to link obedience to Jesus Christ indissolubly with obedience to the Gospel and to the Church.

Now let us take a look at the conclusion of the *Earlier Rule*, which forms an inclusion with the Prologue:

'In the name of the Lord! I ask all my brothers to learn and frequently call to mind the tenor and sense of what has been written in this life for the salvation of our souls. 'I beg God, Who is All-powerful, Three and One, to bless all who teach, learn, retain, remember, and put into practice these things, each time they repeat and do what has been written there for the salvation of our soul, 'and, kissing their feet, I implore everyone to love, keep, and treasure them greatly. 'On behalf of Almighty God and of the Lord Pope, and by obedience, I, Brother Francis, firmly command and decree that no one delete or add to what has been written in this life. The brothers may have no other Rule. 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen[ER XXIV, 1-5; FA:ED I, 86].

At the end of the *Earlier Rule*, Francis solemnly addresses all his brothers. But the first thing he asks them is, not that they observe what is written in the Rule, but that they call to mind "the tenor and sense of what has been written in this life."

We have already noticed in the Prologue and the first two passages the significant shift from rule to life and the preference for this second term.

²⁷Cfr. XXIV, 1: "In nomine Domini! Rogo omnes fratres ut addiscant tenorem et sensum eorum quae in ista vita ad salvationem animae nostrae scripta sunt."

Here again at the end the entire *Earlier Rule* is called "this life." Also striking is the expression "what has been written in this life." We would expect a request to live this life, or to observe this rule, or to learn the content of this writing. Instead we are asked to learn the tenor and sense of what has been written in this life.

"The tenor and sense" refers to something that is contained ("written") in this life but not immediately evident, something we must look for, discover, learn. That something is the profound meaning of this life, and it must be no small matter if the salvation of our soul depends on it.

"I ask all my brothers" is followed by "I beg God" to bless all who do what is asked here. But what is it that is asked here? It is striking that out of ten verbs only two ("practice" and "do") refer to putting it into practice. The other eight verbs refer to learning, studying in depth, internalizing. So we are in line with what is asked in XXIV, 1: to learn the tenor and sense of the things written in this life and frequently call them to mind.

In verse 4 Francis, appealing to all the authority he has, decrees that the brothers shall have no other rule. They shall not delete or add anything to "what has been written in this life," namely to the rule presented here. We infer from this that it contains nothing he deems superfluous (that could be deleted) and it lacks nothing essential (that could be added). Their only rule must be "what has been written in this life."

Why, at the end of the Rule, is the first thing the brothers are asked to do is to learn the tenor and sense of what has been written there? And why is it stated so strongly and clearly that the brothers must not have any other rule? The answer is that the rule and life presented there consists in obedience to Christ who speaks in the Gospel lived in the Church; therefore the brothers may have no other rule. And in this rule of life there is nothing to add and nothing to delete. It contains everything essential and nothing superfluous.

To learn the tenor and sense of this rule of life means to understand it and live it as obedience to Christ who speaks in the Gospel lived in the Church. Only in this sense does the rule of life presented there need no additions (in all situations it will be a matter of obedience to Christ who speaks in the Gospel lived in the Church) and ask that nothing be deleted from it (the three elements—Christ, Gospel, Church—are inseparable). Only in this sense are the brothers to have no other rule.

After obedience to Christ who speaks in the Gospel lived in the Church, the two key elements of Francis's response are keeping the word of the Lord in our heart and following Christ. They are elements that form the foundation of all his writings, especially the entire *Earlier Rule*. But Chapter

XXII of this work is without question the essential text for studying the importance he attaches to the word of the Lord, and how he understands following the Lord.

We will devote special attention to Chapter XXII, first analyzing it for what it tells us about preserving the word of the Lord in our heart. Then we will study it to discover Francis's original way of understanding the following of Christ as the way, the truth and the life. As we shall see, the two aspects are closely linked (it is here that Francis's originality lies). But for a clearer exposition, it is appropriate to distinguish them here. The first reading of Chapter XXII of the Earlier Rule will put us in direct contact with the entire text, and we will discover in it the importance Francis attaches to preserving the word of the Lord in our heart. The second will lead us into its deeper dynamic and show us how Francis interprets following Christ as a journey of faith.

2. Preserving the Word of the Lord in Our Heart

Francis, attentive as he was to the word of the Lord, could not overlook the parable of the sower, whose explanation he cites in full in Chapter XXII of the *Earlier Rule*. As usual, he combines the three synoptic versions and introduces the very long citation with a direct application to himself and his followers:

¹⁰Let us be careful that we are not earth along the wayside, or that which is rocky or full of thorns, in keeping with what the Lord says in the Gospel: ¹¹The word of God is a seed [ER XXII, 10-11; FA:ED I, 79].

Two-thirds of the chapter consists of Gospel citations, and all four evangelists are represented—in the first part mostly the Synoptics and in the second part almost exclusively John. This unusual concentration of Gospel citations already suggests that the center of attention in this chapter, which is the longest in the *Earlier Rule*, is the Lord's Gospel word, to be preserved in our heart so that can produce its fruit.

a) A Basic Choice: Paying Attention to the Lord and Hating Our Body

The first part of Chapter XXII of the Earlier Rule (1-9) is a solemn and heartfelt exhortation to "pay attention to what the Lord says" and to "hate our body with its vices and sins."

'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, (1Pt 2:21) called His betrayer a friend (Mt 26:50) and willingly offered Himself to His executioners. 'Our friends,

therefore, are all those who unjustly inflict upon us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martrydom and death. 'We must love them greatly for we shall possess eternal life because of what they bring us. 'And let us hate our body with its vices and sins, because by living according to the flesh, the devil wishes to take away from us the love of Jesus Christ and eternal life and to lose himself in hell with everyone else. 'Because, by our own fault, we are disgusting, miserable and opposed to good, yet prompt and inclined to evil, for, as the Lord says in the Gospel: 'From the heart proceed and come evil thoughts, adultery, fornication, murder, theft, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, false witness, blasphemy, foolishness (Mt 15:19; Mk 7:21-22). 'All these evils come from within, from a person's heart, and these are what defile a person (Mk 7:23; Mt 15:20). 'Now that we have left the world, however, we have nothing else to do but follow the will of the Lord and to please Him. [ER XXII, 1-9; FA:ED I, 79].

Chapter XXII begins by setting before the brothers the teaching and example of Jesus. The teaching is "love your enemies and do good to those who hate you" (XXII, 1); the example is "our Lord Jesus Christ...called his betrayer a friend and willingly offered himself to his executioners" (XXII, 2). The phrase that governs the entire sentence is "let us pay attention." We must pay attention to what Jesus says and to his example because the life project of the brothers is to follow the footprints of the Lord, who thus becomes the reference point and criterion for our judgments and choices.

In this regard, the order in which the two consequences in XXII, 3-4 are treated is interesting. They are introduced by the conjunction "therefore." The first consequence is not something we must do, but a statement: "Our friends, therefore, are all those who unjustly..." (XXII, 3). Only then are we also presented with the concrete attitude we must have toward those who cause us to suffer: "We must love them greatly" (XXII, 4).

The words "let us hate" of XXII, 5 recall, by contrast, the words "we must love" of XXII, 4. We must hate our body with its vices and sins because not to do so would mean to live according to the flesh. By living according to the flesh, the devil wishes to take away from us the love of Jesus Christ and eternal life. So, living according to the flesh is the same as loving our body with its vices and sins, in other words egotistically loving ourselves alone.

The passage XXII, 1-9 is divided into two parts (XXII, 1-4 and XXII, 5-9), meant to present the two complementary aspects of an orientation and basic choice. Loving our enemies is the opposite of hating our body with its vices and sins; following the Lord's footprints is the

opposite of living according to the flesh; having eternal life is the opposite of losing the love of Jesus Christ.

Two ways are set before the brothers: following the Lord's footprints or living according to the flesh. The two ways are diametrically opposed. The first involves considering as friends and loving those who cause us to suffer, and hating our body with its vices and sins. The second means loving our body and giving free rein to the evil desires that proceed from our heart. Following the Lord's footprints leads to eternal life; living according to the flesh leads losing the love of Jesus and eternal life.

Following the Lord's footprints means doing violence to ourselves, coming out of our shell in order to follow, not our own natural criteria for judging and our own natural tendencies, but the criteria for judging and the choices of Jesus Christ. Living according to the flesh requires no effort, since "by our own fault...we are opposed to good" (XXII, 6) and "from the heart proceed...all these evils" (XXII, 7-8). The light that enlightens both ways is the word of the Lord. It is this word that tells us what it means to follow the Lord's footprints or to live according to the flesh, and where it leads.

Following the Lord's footprints will require a new heart, one that is purified, one from which no longer proceed "all these evils...that defile a person" (XXII, 7-8). The meaning of "leaving the world" (XXII, 9) is not so much sociological as theological. It consists in hearing what the Lord says and in hating our body. Following the Lord's footprints (XXII, 2) is replaced here by following the Lord's will and pleasing him.

b) Preserving the Word

Once we have made the basic choice to pay attention to what the Lord says, there is the second step, which is to preserve the word of the Lord. We will be able to do this by being careful that we are not earth that is unfit for the word, and by being on guard against Satan.

- Being careful that we are not earth along the wayside, or earth that is rocky or full of thorns

To follow the Lord's will to please him (XXII, 9) means, first of all, to be careful that we are not earth along the wayside, full of rocks or overgrown with thorns (XXII, 10). The terminology is clearly that of the Gospel parable, whose explanation is given in full (XXII, 11-17):

¹⁰Let us be careful that we are not earth along the wayside, or that which is rocky or full of thorns, in keeping with what the Lord says in the Gospel: ¹¹The word of God is a seed. ¹²What fell along the wayside and was trampled under foot, however, are those who hear the word and do not

understand it. ¹³The devil comes immediately and snatches what was planted in their hearts and takes the word from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved. ¹⁴What fell on rocky ground, however, are those who, as soon as they hear the word, receive it at once with joy. ¹³But when tribulation and persecution come because of the word, they immediately fall away. These have no roots in them; they last only for a time, because they believe only for a time and fall away in time of trial. ¹⁶What fell among thorns, however, are those who hear the word of God and the anxiety and worries of this world, the lure of riches, and other inordinate desires intrude and choke the word and they remain without fruit. ¹⁷But what was sown in good soil are those who hear the word with a good and excellent heart, understand and preserve it and bear fruit in patience (Mt 13:9-23; Mk 4:15-20; Lk 8:11-15). [ER XXII, 10-18; FA:ED I, 79-80].

A comparison between our text and the corresponding synoptic passages shows that attention here is focused especially on "word," "heart," "understanding/believing," and on "losing" the word or "preserving" it. A material encounter with the word is not enough, nor is it enough to hear it. We must receive it with faith. It is not even enough to believe for a time (XXII,15); we must understand the word of God and preserve it in our heart. Only in this way is our encounter fruitful.

In XXII, 11-17 we are presented with four cases of encounter between the word and the heart. But only in the last case does the encounter produce fruit. In all four cases the word is heard (XXII, 12, 14, 16, 17), but in the first case "they do not understand it" (XXII, 12) and the devil immediately comes and "snatches what was planted in their hearts" (XXII, 13). In the second case "they believe only for a time and fall away in time of trial (XXII, 15). In the third case "the anxieties and worries of this world...choke the word and they remain without fruit" (XXII, 16). But in the fourth case "they understand it" (unlike the first ones), "they preserve it" (unlike the second ones), and "they bear fruit" (unlike the third ones).

But hearing the word is also described in a different way. While in the first three cases the word "hear" is used alone, in the fourth case the expression "hear with a good and excellent heart" is used." In the three previous cases the word is heard, but for one reason or another it quickly disappears from the heart. Only in the fourth case is the word preserved. If we do not understand the word with faith, we lose it (XXII, 12-13); if we do not withstand in tribulation, persecution and temptation, we lose the word (XXII, 14-15); if we are intent on worldly concerns, the word is choked and

¹³This expression will, in a way, be repeated later: "with a clean/pure heart" (XXII, 26.30).

for all practical purposes lost (XXII, 16). So, being careful "that we are not earth along the wayside, or that which is rocky or full of thorns" (XXII, 10) means hearing the word so that we "understand and preserve it, and bear fruit in patience" (XXII, 17).

- Being on guard against Satan who wants to take the word and choke it out

After the heartfelt warning that introduced the explanation of the parable of the sower, we have a second warning. There is an enemy who wants to take the word of the Lord and choke it out:

¹⁸Therefore, as the Lord says, brothers, let us let the dead bury their own dead (Mt 8:22). ¹⁹And let us beware of the malice and craftiness of Satan, who does not want anyone to turn his mind and heart to God. ²⁰And prowling around he wants to ensnare a person's heart under the guise of some reward or assistance, to choke out the word and precepts of the Lord from our memory, and, desiring a person's heart, [he wants] to blind it through worldly affairs and concerns and to live there, as the Lord says: ²¹When an unclean spirit goes out of a person, it roams through arid and waterless regions seeking rest; ²¹and not finding any, it says: "I will return to my home from which I came." ²¹And coming upon it, it finds it empty, swept, clean and tidied. ²⁴And it goes off and brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself, who move in and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. [ER XXII, 18-24; FA:ED I, 80].

Chapter XXII, 18 applies to the brothers Christ's advice to the disciple who asked him if he could first go and bury his father (Mt 8:22). The only way that leads to eternal life is to follow the Lord by preserving his word; everything else is part of the kingdom of the dead and we must no longer busy ourselves with that. The words "let us beware" in XXII, 19, which introduce and summarize XXII, 19-24, parallel "let us be careful" of XXII, 10. The objects of the two heartfelt warnings are also closely connected. In XXII, 10-17 it was a matter of being careful not to be earth along the wayside, or earth that is rocky or full of thorns. In XXII, 19-24 it is a question of being wary of the malice and craftiness of Satan who does not want the seed of the word of God to fall on good earth, in other words to remain in our heart.

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The presence of the word places our heart in relationship with God (verbum in corde – cor ad Deum is how W. Egger summarizes the whole chapter). It is precisely this latter relationship that Satan does not want. To prevent this from happening, he tries to remove that which causes our heart to turn to God, in other words, he tries to remove the word from our heart. Satan wants to blind the human heart. We can see with faith only with a

heart in which the word is present. The means Satan uses are worldly affairs and concerns. When we are interested in these things, our heart is blinded, it no longer sees God, it loses faith.

In XXII, 21-24 Satan's intentions are described in words from the Gospel: we have here a combination of Mt 12:43-45 and Lk 11:24-26. Satan is called the "unclean spirit." This expression recalls XXII, 8 with all the evils that proceed from the heart and defile us, and the clean heart and pure mind of XXII, 26 and 30. If Satan, the unclean spirit, is in a person, from the heart proceed all the evils that make that person unclean. On the other hand, if Satan, the unclean spirit, goes out of a person, then the person has a clean heart.

The person—or the person's heart—is described as a house from which the unclean spirit has gone out when the word has entered. But we must continue to beware of Satan who wants to return, and can do so, but only if our heart, under the guise of some reward or advantage, chokes the word and precepts of the Lord from our memory and if our heart is blinded by worldly concerns (XXII, 20).

c) Remaining in Christ

After the fundamental choice (XXII, 1-8) and the exhortation to preserve the word (XXII, 9-24), we come to the third part (XXII, 25-42), which is to remain in Christ. It will speak of adoring God with a pure heart (XXII, 25-31) and acknowledging Christ as the way, the truth and the life (XXII, 32-40).

- Adoring God with a pure heart

25 Therefore, all my brothers, let us be very much on our guard that, under the guise of some reward or assistance, we do not lose or take our mind away from God. 26But, in the holy love which is God (1 Jn 4:16), I beg all my brothers, both the ministers and the others, after overcoming every impediment and putting aside every care and anxiety, to serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind in whatever way they are best able to do so, for that is what He wants above all else. ²⁷Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him Who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Who says: Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man (Lk 21:16). 28 When you stand to pray say: Our Father in heaven (Mk 11:25). 29 And let us adore Him with a pure heart, because it is necessary to pray always and not lose heart (Lk 18:1); ¹⁰ for the Father seeks such people who adore Him. ¹¹ God is Spirit and those who adore Him must adore Him in Spirit and truth (Jn 4:23-24). [ER XXII, 25-32; FA:ED I, 80].

Chapter XXII, 25 summarizes all the preceding warnings about preserving the word of the Lord in us, and it presents a very important transition. From the relationship between word and heart we move to the relationship between heart and Lord. Losing the word from our heart would mean to lose our heart from the Lord. Chapter XXII, 26 begins with an especially solemn expression, "But, in the holy love which is God...," which comes from John (see 1 Jn 4:16). The prayer or request addressed to all is that they should serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God. The important manner—with a clean heart and pure mind—is to be stressed.

The heart and the mind have been mentioned several times before. In XXII, 1-8 there is the unclean heart, a heart from which proceed all the evils that defile a person; in XXII, 9-25 we see a heart in the process of purification; in XXII, 26-31 we have at last a pure heart. What has changed that unclean heart into a clean heart? It is the entrance and abiding presence in it of the word of God. This purification of the heart through the word recalls the words from John: "You are already clean because of the word I spoke to you" (Jn 15:3).

Purification of the heart by means of the word makes it possible to serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind. This is what the Lord God wants above all else (XXII, 26), and so it is what the brothers must do (see XXII, 9 and 26). The concrete way in which we can serve, love, honor and the adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind is explained in XXII, 27: "Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him Who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The word "always" emphasizes the idea that this is not something to be done once and for all; it is an ongoing activity. The word "there" refers to the heart.

"Dwelling place" goes back to the verb "to live/dwell" of XXII, 20 and the image of the human heart as a home presented in XXII, 22. "Dwelling place" recalls Jn 14:23, relating the presence of God's word in our heart to the indwelling of the Trinity. In order to escape the tribulations mentioned in XXII, 28 and preserve the word of the Lord in our heart, we must be vigilant and pray. It is only with a heart watchful in prayer and in faith, only with a heart purified by the presence of the word that we can stand before the Son of Man and say the prayer of children to their Father, not only at the end of time but also now, in our everyday life.

Chapter XXII, 29 says: "And let us adore Him with a pure heart." "To adore" expresses the deeper meaning of "to pray." "Heart" is one of the essential words in the chapter. "With a pure heart" results from the long journey of inner purification brought about by the word received and preserved with faith. These are the adorers whom the Father seeks. "In

Spirit and truth" is the same as "with a pure heart." It means adoration with a heart purified by the word of God received and preserved with faith. Only with this pure heart can we adore the Father in Spirit and truth because Christ has been internalized there by the Spirit through the word. Christ is the new and only temple in which we can adore the Father. Internalization of the word in our heart has "christified" it, and therefore it has become a temple in which to adore God.

- Having recourse to Christ who is the way, the truth and the life

¹²Let us have recourse to Him as to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (1 Pt 2:25), Who says: I am the Good Shepherd who feeds My sheep and I lay down My life for My sheep (Jn 10:11, 15).

"All of you are brothers." Do not call anyone on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. "Do not call yourselves teachers; you have but one Teacher in heaven (Mt 25:8-10). "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you (Jn 15:7). "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Mt 18:20). "Behold I am with you until the end of the world (Mt 28:20). "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life (Jn 6:64). "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6) [ER XXII, 33-42; FA:ED I, 80-81].

Chapter XXII, 32-40 is characterized by constant and explicit reference to Christ, presented as the Good Shepherd and then as the way, the truth and the life. In XXII, 32 the image and terminology are from 1 Peter 2:25 ("You had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls"). It is interesting to note that XXII, 2 of our text has already taken the expression "follow the footprints" from 1 Peter 2:21.

The short hymn of 1 Peter 2:21-25 presents Christ as a model to imitate, or better, as a guide to follow ("Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps"). In XXII, 32 the expression "let us have recourse to him" goes back to the idea of following his footprints. "As to the shepherd" emphasizes, as in 1 Peter, the idea of guide. "Guardian" conveys the idea of the security offered by such a guide.

Chapter XXII, 32 continues with the image of shepherd and sheep, but now it is Jesus himself, the guide and the shepherd, who speaks to the sheep who follow him, reassuring them: "I am the Good Shepherd who feeds my sheep and I lay down my life for my sheep." The words are clearly taken from John 10 but are not found there in exactly this form. The reference is to the whole context of John 10:1-30; Francis summarizes the whole chapter from John.

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we can have recourse to him with confidence in order to allow ourselves to be guided by him. "I feed my sheep and I lay down my life for my sheep" stresses the shepherd's solicitous care and the fact that the sheep belong to him. The relationship between shepherd and sheep, the adjective "good," the insistence on the possessive adjective "my," the two attitudes of the shepherd toward his sheep ("feed" and "give life") are enough to recall all the theological depth of the allegory of the good shepherd.

By following Christ the Good Shepherd we come to know that we are all brothers (XXII, 33) because we have but one Father (XXII, 34). The next verse brings out the idea of "truth," which follows the idea of "way" (the Good Shepherd we must follow) and the idea of "life" (Jesus our brother gives us a share in the Father's life).

Chapter XXII, 36 uses the same verb "remain" to refer to the word and to Christ. The way to always make a dwelling place for the Trinity in our heart is to remain in Christ. And the way to remain in Christ is to let his words remain in us. Then we will be able to ask for whatever we want and it will be given to us.

Chapter XXII, 37-38 juxtaposes and cites two lines from Matthew that are very far apart from one another (18:20 and 28:20). What they have in common is their assurance of Jesus' presence. This presence depends on faith in him ("Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name"). Therefore, remaining in Christ and letting his words remain in us depends on faith.

In XXII, 39-40 two descriptions are juxtaposed. We are told what the words of Jesus are and who Jesus is himself. Both descriptions are drawn from the Gospel of John, the first from John 6:64 and the second from John 14:6. The juxtaposition is obviously deliberate: from the words to the Word, from the words to Christ.

But this movement occurs through the Spirit. The word, received with faith and preserved with perseverance, purifies our heart, which thus become a spiritual heart, impregnated with the Spirit of Christ and as such able to adore God. How was the word able to accomplish this miracle? The answer is given in XXII, 39-40. The words of Jesus communicate Spirit and life because they are Spirit and life; and they are Spirit and life because they are words of Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.

Thus the role of the word and the Spirit is to lead us to Christ. Word and Spirit act together and are closely related. Indeed the words of Jesus are Spirit (XXII, 39). The word received and preserved in their heart has led the brothers to Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.

c) Seeing the glory of the Father

Christ is the way to the Father. The text has already mentioned the Father four times (XXII, 27, 28, 30, 34) in order to present the new relationship established with the Trinity in a heart that remains in Christ by preserving the word. But it is in the final part of the chapter that references to the Father are especially frequent (the term "Father" occurs four times, and eighteen times we find pronouns or possessive adjectives referring to the Father).

Naturally it is not about the Father in himself, but about the relationship between the Father, the Son and the brothers, a relationship that leads the brothers to see the glory of the Father (XXII, 55). But the relationship between the brothers and the Father takes place through the mediation of the Son. It will be about knowing the Father in the Son (XXII, 41-44) and being sanctified in truth (XXII, 45-55).

-Knowing the Father in the Son

⁴¹Let us, therefore, hold onto the words, the life, the teaching and the Holy Gospel of Him Who humbled Himself to beg His Father for us and to make His name known saying: Father, glorify Your name and glorify Your Son that Your Son may glorify You. ⁴² Father, I have made Your name known to those whom You have given me (Jn 17:6). The words You gave to me I have given to them, and they have accepted them and truly have known that I came from You and they have believed that You sent me. ⁴³I pray for them, not for the world, but for those You have given me, because they are Yours and everything of mine is Yours (Jn 17:8-10) [ER XXII, 43-46; FA:ED I, 81].

Chapter XXII, 41 serves as a link with what precedes: "Let us...hold onto...the Holy Gospel" summarizes preserving the word in order to remain in Christ. "Who humbled Himself to beg His Father for us and make His name known" anticipates and summarizes what will be developed later. The life and teaching of Jesus that we are to hold onto goes back to the Lord's teaching and example that we are to follow (see ER I, 2). In XXII, 41 we also notice the strong actualization expressed by "for us" and "to us." The prayer of Jesus, taken freely from John 17, begins with XXII, 41b.

In XXII, 41-42 great prominence is given to the verb "manifest." In XXII, 42b-43 there is emphasis on the terminology of acceptance, knowledge and belief. Jesus' task consists in giving the Father's words (XXII, 42). Everything can be traced back to the Father, but everything becomes historically visible in the Son. The words we are to accept are those of the Father given to us by Jesus. What we must know is that Jesus has come from the Father; what we must believe is that Jesus is the one sent by the Father.

The revelation and knowledge of the Father take place in the Son. What distinguishes the world from those whom the Father has given to Jesus (XXII, 43) is faith. Just as Jesus' entire person and activity is of the Father, and Jesus is revealed as of the Father in his self-knowledge, self-revelation and activity as Son, so the brothers are of the Father and are revealed as such in allowing themselves be given to the Son through faith.

-Sanctified in truth

"Holy Father, keep in Your name those You have given me that they may be one as We are (Jn 17:11). "I say this while in the world that they may have joy completely. "I gave them Your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world as I do not belong to the world. "I do not ask You to take them out of the world but that You keep them from the evil one (Jn 17:13-15). "Glorify them in truth. "Your word is truth." As You sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. "And I sanctify myself for them that they also may be sanctified in truth. "I ask not only for them but also for those who will believe in me through them (Jn 17:17-20), that they may be brought to perfection as one, and the world may know that You have sent me and loved them as You loved me (Jn 17:23). "I shall make known to them Your name, that the love with which You loved me may be in them and I in them (Jn 17:26). "Father, I wish that those whom You have given me may be where I am that they may see Your glory in Your kingdom (Jn 17:24) [ER XXII, 47-57; FA:ED I, 81].

Whereas in XXII, 41-43 the basic concept is the revelation of the Father in the Son and thus the knowledge of the Father in the Son on the part of the brothers, in XXII, 45 we have a development in which the dominant idea is sanctification. Of course it is still a continuation of Jesus' prayer to the Father.

In XXII, 45 "Father" is modified by the adjective "holy" because he is asked to manifest his holiness in the brothers by keeping them in his name, as in a sacred place, and by giving them a share in the unity that exists between Father and Son. The name can only be that of Father. This is the name of God revealed by Jesus, and it is by manifesting himself as Father that God also manifests himself as holy.

The Father is asked to keep in his name those he has given to Jesus. And so there is a close relationship between being kept in the Father's name and being given to Jesus. The reason is that the "place" where the Father's name is revealed (and thus the "place" where the Father is asked to keep the brothers) is Jesus. To be kept in the Father's name means to be kept in Jesus, to remain in Jesus as the one who reveals the Father's name. The joy of XXII, 46 is the joy of children who have found their Father.

In XXII, 47 the idea is stressed that the word Jesus gave the brothers is that of the Father. The fact that they received it with faith has caused the world to hate them. But this too is reason for joy because it is a result, and thus a proof, of the divine presence in the brothers as it was in Jesus.

In XXII, 49-52 there is close link between Father-Jesus-word-brothers and between mission-revelation-sanctification. They are the links that constitute the entire last part of the chapter. Holiness is the inner life of the Father communicated to us in the Son, who is the Father's way to us, the Father's truth and life offered to us. "Glorify/sanctify them in truth" means help them live as sons in the Son.

Indeed, it is only in Jesus Christ that the brothers can know the Father, and it is only in the Son that they can live as sons, because Jesus, besides being the truth, is also the life the Father communicates (XXII, 42). Just as Jesus sanctifies himself by living as Son of the Father and by doing the Father's works, so the brothers are sanctified in Jesus by living united to the Father and doing his works. Jesus, besides being the truth and the life, is also the way to the Father (XXII, 40). The "place" where the brothers are sanctified is Jesus Christ.

So, to be sanctified means to remain in Christ and, in him, to enter into a profound relationship with the word and with the Trinity. It is a question of two closely linked meanings: to receive with faith the revelation of the Father in the Son by internalizing the word and Spirit, and to live as sons of the Father in the Son.

The chapter concludes with XXII, 55, which cites John 17:24 with a small but important change. Where John has "my glory" (Jesus' glory), our text has "your glory" (the Father's glory), and then it adds "in your kingdom." "Those whom you have given me" suggests an image of the Father who takes us by the hand and leads us to Jesus, so that in him we might encounter the Father's word and the Father himself. "I wish" has a special force that seems to refer to Jesus' final, summary, definitive request to the Father. His wish is that "they may be where I am." But where is Jesus? What follows helps us give an answer: "That they may see your glory in your kingdom." The special "place" from which or in which we can see the Father's glory—and which can be called the kingdom of the Father—is Jesus himself, revealed and known as Son of the Father. Jesus not only reveals the Father's truth; he "is" the Father's truth. He not only communicates the Father's life; he is the Father's life. He not only points out the way to the Father; he is the way to the Father. This is the "place" in which we can see the Father's glory. To be where Jesus is means to be in him, that is, in the way, the truth and the life of the Father.

Preserving the word of the Lord in his heart is Francis's second great response to Jesus who speaks to him in the Gospel.

3. Following Christ the Way, the Truth and the Life As a Journey of Faith

As we have shown, Chapter XXII of the Earlier Rule is certainly the fundamental text for understanding the importance of the word of the Lord for Francis. Let us continue our investigation and we will find that this chapter also answers the question of what Francis means by following Christ, which is so important for him.

As we have already seen, Francis's first response to Jesus who speaks to him is to obey him, that is, put into practice what he asks. To follow the footprints of our Lord (XXII, 2) means to follow the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ (I, 1); it means to as he did. In XXII, 1-4 Jesus is placed before the brothers as a model to imitate (even though "imitate/imitation" are never used in the Earlier Rule or in Francis's other writings). We must do as Jesus did. Loving our enemies (XXII, 1-4) is just one example; there are many in the Earlier Rule. But the originality of the Earlier Rule XXII is that presents following as a journey of faith.

Orientation and faith choice

In all four parts of Chapter XXII it is clear that following is conceived as a faith journey. The goal is to remain more fully in Christ, the way, the truth and the life, by knowing the Father ever more deeply in him and by entering into an ever closer union with him. One indication of this Johannine concept of following is the many citations of John 17 found in Chapter XXII.

Chapter XXII, 1-8 presents following the Lord's footprints as the goal and thus also the criterion on whose basis we must orient ourselves and make a fundamental choice. Chapter XXII, 1-4 urges us to actively orient ourselves toward what the Lord says. And the Lord says unsettling things, such as to love our enemies as he himself loved us. We must enter into his logic and make this attitude of his our own, by regarding as friends and loving all who unjustly cause us to suffer. These are the Lord's footprints we must follow, and this is the path on which we must set out in order to have eternal life (XXII, 4). We must change our direction and outlook, reverse our hierarchy of values, no longer taking ourselves with our vices and sins as reference point, but rather the Gospel. Indeed XXII, 1-8 presents two opposite paths, and they are judged by the words of the Gospel. It is a faith judgment. It is the words and attitudes of Jesus that tell us who are our true friends and who are our true enemies.

Relationship between faith and the word of God

Chapter XXII, 9-24 presents hearing the word, understanding it, preserving it, and producing fruit as an essential step in the act of following. Both the terminology and the ideas expressed all clearly refer to faith. The word of God is like a seed that must encounter good soil in order to produce fruit.

The words "we must follow the Lord's footprints" of XXII, 2 are taken up again in XXII, 9 with "we have nothing else to do but follow the will of the Lord and please him." We will need to be very careful not to be ground incapable of receiving the seed of the word (XXII, 10-17), and we will need to beware of Satan who wants to take the word from our heart in order to turn our heart from God (XXII, 19-25).

The verb "blind" suggests that if the word does not dwell in our heart, it cannot see God and thus keep itself oriented toward him. From the idea of hearing we have now moved to the idea of the vision that will culminate in seeing the Father's glory (XXII, 55). In the Gospel (and especially in John), hearing and seeing are ways of expressing the journey of faith.

The verb "dwell" and its related terminology expresses, both in the New Testament and in the Earlier Rule XXII, the relationship of faith. By faith the word has entered into and remains in that heart from which evil was proceeding. Therefore Satan has had to go out. But Satan tries to return to his house. If he finds it empty, he moves back into our heart and the situation becomes worse than before, because we have failed to take advantage of the one way to escape Satan's dominion, namely the encounter between faith and the word of God.

The words "let us be careful" (XXII, 10) are meant to prepare good ground for the word and faith. The words "let us beware" (XXII, 19) are meant to ensure that the word and faith remain in our heart. Both demand great inner effort, which consists in freeing our heart from all other concerns and in keeping it free in order to make room for the word of God. The only way to escape the unhappy situation described in XXII, 6-8, and thus the only way to begin to follow Christ, is to receive and preserve the word of God, establishing and deepening a relationship of faith with it.

Relationship between faith and Christ

Closely connected with the relationship between faith and the word is the relationship between faith and Christ (XXII, 26-40). The effect of preserving the word in us is remaining in Christ. In our journey of faith and following, the word is like the front door; in the house is the Lord Jesus. By

keeping the word with faith, we enter into an ever deeper faith relationship with Christ; we remain in him.

It is the presence of the word in our heart and mind, in other words faith, that cleanses our heart and purifies our mind, that makes it possible to serve, love, honor and adore God as he wants (XXII, 26). It is precisely this relationship imbued with faith, and this kind of following, that God wants above all else. Our heart is clean because it is purified by the presence of the word, that is faith, just as it is only faith that enables our heart to become a home and dwelling place for the Trinity.

Chapter XXII, 27 presents vigilance in prayer as a permanent instrument for the gradual purification of our heart and as a way that enables us to stand assured before the Son of Man. The word and prayer lead us to Christ, and in Christ we find the Father. The important syntheses of XXII, 29-30 reveal that the Father seeks people to adore him with a pure heart, in Spirit and truth, in Christ. These are not three different "places." Just as there is but one "place" of God's revelation, so there is but one place where God can be encountered and adored (and thus followed). It is Christ, the truth of the Father internalized in our heart by the Spirit through faith.

The two themes of following and faith are again perfectly combined in the allegory of the shepherd and the sheep from John 10 recalled in XXII, 32. "To have recourse" to Christ the Good Shepherd means to find the Father of all.

Chapter XXII, 36 establishes a close relationship between the words of Jesus remaining in us and Jesus' remaining in us. Jesus remains in us if his words remain in us. This is the journey, proposed in the *Earlier Rule XXII*, from preserving the word in us to remaining in Christ. They are two essential stages and closely linked by following, which is presented as a journey of faith. From a first stage of internalization (the word in our heart) we pass to a second stage of internalization (us in Christ). Faith becomes communion, and following becomes remaining.

Chapter XXII, 39-40 presents the deep relationship between keeping the word in ourselves and remaining in Christ, between the word and Christ, between the word and the Spirit, between the Spirit and Christ. In this way it also makes clear the "place" of adoration of the Father and of following, namely in Spirit and truth. Summarized here is the journey of faith and following: from the words of Jesus Christ, which are Spirit and life, to Jesus Christ himself who is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus' words, received with faith, that is as bearers of Spirit and life, bring us into communion with Christ. He is the way between the Father and us, whether

as revelation (Father-Jesus-us) and knowledge-faith (us-Jesus-Father), or as life (Father-Jesus-us) and communion (us-Jesus-Father).

The mediation of revelation is ordered to the mediation of communion. Jesus is the truth in order that he might be for us the way and the life. In the *Earlier Rule* XXII the faith journey is presented as an ascent from the word to Christ, and through him an ability to know the Father in the Son and to live as children of the Father in the Son.

Relationship between faith and the Father

As a faith journey, following has led us to Christ, but the journey is not yet over because Christ is the way to the Father. The journey that leads to Christ is one of faith, and the journey that follows is also one of faith. The entire terminology of XXII, 41-55 is one of revelation, and revelation must be received in faith.

"Let us hold onto" of XXII, 41 repeats and summarizes "preserve the word in us" and "remain in Christ." Preserving the Gospel is essential because it is the same as remaining in Christ; it is in the Gospel that Jesus is present and reveals to us the Father. This idea is also repeated in XXII, 42: the manifestation of the Father's name by Jesus consists in his giving the brothers the words he has received from the Father, and this takes place in his giving them the Gospel.

"Manifest" and "glorify," both in John and in the Earlier Rule XXII, are virtually synonymous and call for a response of faith. The glorification of the Father and the Son consists in the manifestation of the Father as Father of Jesus and of Jesus as Son of the Father. The revelation received with faith constitutes the true glorification of the Father and the Son. Just as Jesus, during his earthly life, manifested his glory and glorified the Father by living as Son in constant union with the Father and thus revealing himself as the truth of the Father, so now the brothers who preserve the Gospel with active faith will be the ones who will continue that same glorification of the Son and the Father."

Chapter XXII, 45-55 speaks of sanctification in truth. The holy Father is asked to keep the brothers in his name (XXII, 45), in other words keep them in their faith and in their life as sons so that they might share in the union between Father and Son. The Father's word is truth (XXII, 50) and the Father's word is identified with Jesus (XXII: 40, "I am...the

²⁴The connection between faith, glorification-revelation and sanctification is subtly implied in many of Francis's writings. It is present more explicitly in the *Prayer Inspired by the Our Father*, where "Holy be Your Name" is explained: "May knowledge of You become clearer in us..." (FA:ED I, 158).

Truth..."). Thus the Father's words that Jesus has given to the brothers are Jesus himself. The living presence of Christ in his Gospel is confirmed. By keeping the Gospel we are in Christ who is the truth and revelation of the Father's name, and we live as sons in the Son. It is a life imbued with faith.

The unbelieving world hates the brothers just as it hated Jesus and for the same reason. The distinguishing mark is faith. But Jesus has sent the brothers into the world just as the Father sent him into the world. It is the same revealing mission in view of faith that continues. Jesus sanctifies himself by living as Son and so revealing the Father. From his sanctification-revelation comes the possibility of sanctification-revelation for the brothers, who are called to live as sons in the Son. This lived Gospel and this word incarnate, the fruit of faith, will become an instrument of revelation, so that others too may believe in the Son sent by the Father, and so that the family of sons loved by the Father in the Son may grow.

Where there is faith in the Son, there is the Son and thus also the Father's love. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of the Father is the Son. He is the "place" where we can see the Father's glory (XXII, 55). But the Son is present wherever two or three people are gathered in his name (XXII, 37), that is with faith in him.

The long journey of following leads to the kingdom of the Father. It is a journey of faith. Under the Spirit's guidance, it leads from the word to Christ and in him to the Father, from hearing the word to seeing the Father through an ongoing internalization of the word of Christ in faith.

Only then will we have a pure heart, able to serve, love, honor and adore God as he wants. Only by preserving the Gospel in the sense of internalizing it in faith will we be able to keep the Gospel in the sense of observing it.

Chapter Three

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit, For Theirs Is the Kingdom of Heaven

Francis Speaks of Human Relationships

Prancis listens to Jesus Christ who says in the Gospel: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He sees the Lord of glory who humbled himself to share the human condition and chose a life of poverty. What else could Francis do except follow Jesus in humility and poverty as well? Unlike what many evangelical-pauperist movements of his time were doing, Francis kept poverty firmly linked to humility and fraternity.

So poverty becomes the great requirement of minority, which in turn becomes the great requirement of fraternity. Like fraternity and minority, poverty is a way of relating to others rather than to things. Unfortunately this relational dimension was sometimes forgotten, reducing poverty to a relationship with things to have or not to have, even with fierce fraternal battles to determine which group was poorest.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" was the favorite beatitude of Francis, who saw in the kingdom of heaven the good news of God's paternity and human fraternity, and in the poor in spirit minority and poverty. The way of the Gospel beatitude that leads the poor in spirit to possess the kingdom of heaven was interpreted and presented again by Francis as a way of sharing that leads us to live with the poor and humble Christ among the outcasts, with nothing of our own, poor and lesser ones in order that we might be brothers to all. This is how Francis speaks of the beatitude of the poor in spirit; this is how he speaks of human relationships in the language of the Gospel.

1. With the Poor and Humble Christ among the Outcasts

The first chapter of the Earlier Rule is of fundamental importance because it defines the rule and life of the brothers and presents the great requirement that makes it possible for us to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ. This definition and this requirement revolve around poverty.

The four foundational Gospel texts (Mt 19:21 and 16:24; Lk 14:26; Mt 19:29) indicate the goal (perfection and eternal life), the way to follow in

order to reach this goal (following of Jesus and discipleship), the essential requirements for setting out to follow Jesus and attain perfection and eternal life (sell all we have, deny ourselves, "hate" our parents and our very life, leave our family and possessions). The essential requirements for setting out to follow Jesus can be reduced to just one. We must give up all: things, people, and even ourselves, for love of Jesus whom we have discovered to be the treasure for which it is worth selling everything else to acquire.

This definition of the rule and life of the brothers presents "without anything of one's own" as essential but, at the same time, as relative. It is essential since it is the great requirement, but relative with respect to the still more important following of Jesus," which alone enables us to attain perfection and eternal life. So from the beginning it is made clear that poverty is important, indeed essential, but only as a requirement. It will make no sense to absolutize it. And it is also made clear that poverty applies not just to things, or to people, but also to ourselves, to our own life, to our own will. The entry that leads into the rule and life of the brothers is truly to be without anything of one's own.

This is the image that inspires Francis, shortly before his death, as he recalls and describes the beginnings of this life—his and that of the first brothers: "And those who came to receive life gave whatever they had to the poor and were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and short trousers. We desired nothing more" (Test 16-17; FA:ED I, 125). The first thing they did was to give everything to the poor. They knew and felt that to perform this act and keep themselves in this state was a necessary requirement for living this Gospel life as followers of Christ. Contentment is the inner confirmation, simple and profound, that the choice they had made was good.

Francis's love of poverty as an essential requirement for the Gospel life is also clearly expressed in the *Last Will* he wrote to Clare of Assisi, who faithfully preserved it until her death:

¹I, 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; ² and I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and in poverty. ³ And keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone (CA:ED, 320).

¹⁵For the relationship between following and poverty, see Dalla "sequela Christi" di Francesco d'Assisi all'apologia della povertà. Atti del XVIII Convegno internazionale di studi francescani.

In Chapter I of the Earlier Rule the life of the brothers was defined as following the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here Francis repeats that expression, replacing "the teaching and footprints" with "the life and poverty" of our Lord (UltVol I). The Lord's teaching is embodied and summed up with increasing clarity in his life of poverty, and it is this that Francis solemnly professes that he wishes to follow. This proposal, this discovery and treasure, he tenderly and jealously entrusts to his ladies, stressing what a precious gift he is giving them, and warning them with respectful and gentle solicitude never to depart from living in this most holy life and in poverty.

Francis wishes to follow, and he proposes that all his brothers follow, our Lord's humility and poverty: "Let the brothers strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ" (ER IX, 1; FA:ED I, 70). A comparison between the *Earlier Rule* IX,1 and the *Last Will* 1" reveals that the humility and poverty of our Lord are presented as closely linked. The life of Jesus Christ is characterized first of all by humility; Jesus' humility seems to be even more significant than his poverty.

It is here that we see the difference between Francis's spirituality and that of the evangelical-pauperist movements of his time." Francis is able to grasp the profound meaning of the New Testament texts, as is shown for example in the Second Letter to the Faithful 5 (FA:ED I, 46): "Though He was rich, He wished, together with the most Blessed Virgin, His mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else." The preceding verse speaks of the incarnation ("Mary, from whose womb He received the flesh of our humanity and frailty"). The words "though he was rich" refer to 2Cor 8:9 ("...though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor..."), but also to Phil 2:6-8 ("...Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself,

²⁶"The model Francis adopts is no longer that of the Jerusalem apostolic community, but the example of Christ himself, as told us and presented to us in the Gospel" (R. Manselli, *Francesco e i suoi compagni*, 210).

¹⁷ER IX, 1: "Let the brothers strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ"; UltVol 1: "I, brother Francis, the little one, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ."

¹⁸"We must remember—because on this point the testimony of Saint Francis is clear—that, contrary to what people usually think, his conversion is not that of a rich man who decided to become poor. In other words, we are not looking at another Waldo. It arises instead from an awareness of pain and suffering. In this pain and in this suffering he finds both Christ and poverty. On this point the testimony of Francis himself in his *Testament* is unequivocal" (R. Manselli, *Francesco e i suoi compagni*, 205).

taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself...").

The great example to imitate in Jesus ("Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" - Phil 2:5) and in his mother is not so much material poverty as the humility that leads the Son of God to take the human form of a slave, "becoming obedient to death" (Phil 2:8). Mary is associated with this great example of poverty and humility as mother, that is, as the place and instrument of the humiliation and incarnation, and since she too, with her freely-given *fiat*, is obedient to the death of her Son.

If this link between poverty, humility and sharing is true for Jesus, it must also be true for those who, like Francis and his brothers, wish to set out to follow him." The Earlier Rule IX, 2 (FA:ED I, 70) says that the brothers "must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside." Occupying the most prominent place is not poverty, but humility, an attitude that is more interior, more profound and more important than poverty. It is the only soil in which the little plant of poverty can spring up and live. Without humility, poverty is joyless; it is merely a lack of something. Of course humility, unlike poverty, is hard to measure. Perhaps that is why, in the Earlier Rule VI, 3, the terms "humility" and "poverty" will be reversed, and the casuistry of "most high poverty" will occupy more and more space and will prevail, often to the detriment of humility, and sometimes even common sense. "

But in the beginning it was not that way. Francis, shortly before his death, recalls and describes in his Testament the beginning of his new life:

¹The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed to bitter for me to see lepers. ²And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. ³And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world (Test 1-3; FA:ED I, 124).

¹⁹For a picture of the social, political and economic setting, see Assisi al tempo di san Francesco. Atti del V Convegno internazionale.

³⁰For the first Franciscan century, see M.D. Lambert, Povertà francescana. La dottrina dell'assoluta povertà di Cristo e degli Apostoli nell'Ordine francescano (1210-1323), Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, 1995. For a more extensive view, see La conversione alla povertà nell'Italia dei secoli XII-XIV. Atti del XXVIII Convegno storico internazionale.

Unlike his biographers, Francis describes his conversion as linked, not to the opening and reading of the Gospel book or to the invitation addressed to him by the San Damiano Crucifix, but rather to his association with lepers." In Francis's own precious description of his conversion, he does not talk about leaving his possessions but about his merciful stay among lepers, marginalized more than anyone else and in need of sympathetic friendship and genuine love even more than material goods." Francis knows that a real reversal of values took place in him at the moment of his conversion: from avoiding the outcasts to choosing them. And it was in this choice of the outcasts that Francis understood the essential meaning of his following of Christ. The choice was one of social class, and it gave concreteness to his proposal to follow Christ's footprints.

It has been rightly said that the central moment of Francis's conversion was not the "poverty" moment, but the passing from one human condition to another, the acceptance of his insertion into a marginal situation, his entry among the excluded (R. Manselli). There is still too much rhetoric about the "poverello," rhetoric that empties Francis of Assisi's religious experience and Christian proposal of their radical novelty and their more subversive aspect with respect to the traditional patterns of medieval Christianity (F. Accrocca).

This was the kind of merciful condescension, of mutual sharing, that struck Francis in the attitude of God who become human in Jesus Christ. And this was the experience that Francis too, in his own small way, was able to have with lepers, finding there the change from bitterness to sweetness, and the strength to leave the world (almost an inability to do otherwise), the sinful world of journeying alone to God unable to see lepers. Without this kind poverty, present in the eyes and in the heart, even a poverty that is radical and absolute, but only material and external, would become arid, useless, elitist and offensive. To be sure, Francis's poverty was radical, but it flowed from an even more difficult and radical choice, the

[&]quot;The conversion of Saint Francis is the overcoming of his horror of the leper and the recognition in him of Christ's pain, of the meaning of a new and different crucifixion, that of a person steadfastly closed and isolated in the curse of his illness. This conversion is the starting point, the psychological setting in which the meaning of the poverty of Saint Francis of Assisi must be situated" (R. Manselli, Francesco e i suoi compagni, 206).

¹²F. Accrocca notes that "Francis did not so much choose to come to the aid of the lowest. There were already many people to do this, even in his time. He simply chose to become one of them, embracing the human pain and marginalization as a preferred way to follow the footprints of Christ crucified" (F. Accrocca – A. Ciceri, Francesco e i suoi frati, 21).

choice of solidarity and sharing life with the outcasts, thus following the footprints of Christ."

¹The Lord teaches in the Gospel: Watch, beware of all malice and greed (Lk 12:15). ²Guard yourselves against the anxieties of this world and the cares of this life (Lk 21:34).

³Let none of the brothers, therefore, wherever he may be or go, carry, receive, or have received in any way coin or money, whether for clothing, books, or payment for some work—indeed, not for any reason, unless for an evident need of the sick brothers...[ER VIII, 1-3; FA:ED I, 69].

The Gospel words that Francis cites, freely taking the liberty of joining two verses from Luke (12:15 and 21:34) but with great respect for the original meaning, strictly warn the brothers against all forms of ownership, greed, avarice and concern about the things of this world. What is striking is how this warning, in itself general, is concretized in the absolute prohibition to receive money. This concretization seems very radical and shows the extreme seriousness with which Francis intends to accept Jesus' invitation. Not to receive money for any reason is certainly a practical means for guaranteeing poverty, and thus the following of Christ, by sharing with the poor and outcasts.

It is clear from Francis's writings taken as a whole that the prohibition to receive money was not motivated by Manichean considerations, but by a strong need for concreteness that would lead him to clearly identify the objective and the most effective means to achieve it. All this is done with disarming simplicity, coherence and courage. Not to accept money allows him to remain in a state of sharing the life of the poor and outcasts. And he does this not simply for reasons of social solidarity but for theological reasons as well, for it is Christ himself who chose the poor to represent him." This, essentially, is the *sine glossa* with which Francis interprets the Gospel and insists upon so strongly in the *Testament* 45-47 (FA:ED I, 127).

In order to remain in most high poverty, the brothers must not receive money, "not for any reason, unless for an evident need of the sick brothers." Here we have an exception, which is precious in Francis's rigid

³⁶For Saint Francis, poverty is not just a matter of renunciation, not just an ascetic means for attaining perfection. It is not even just a way of being closer to Christ. Rather it is the only possible way he sees to descend to the level of the truly poor, of those who daily endure humiliation, need, and the risk of starvation" (R. Manselli, Francesco e i suoi compagni, 212).

³⁴In the Last Judgment as described in Mt 25:31-46 there appear different categories of poor: the hungry, the naked, but also the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned. These are virtually the same categories listed in ER IX, 3 (FA:ED I, 70).

and coherent ecosystem. Not to receive money is a function of poverty, but the exception to the absolute prohibition to receive money indicates that there is something even more important than poverty. The evident need of the sick brothers is a sufficient reason to receive money; the care of the sick brothers is more important than the wall to be built around poverty. Poverty is extremely important, but charity is more important.

A clear and precious confirmation of this hierarchy of values can be found in the *Earlier Rule* VIII, 10 (FA:ED I, 70), at the end of the chapter devoted entirely to the prohibition to receive money: "Nevertheless, the brothers can beg alms for a manifest need of the lepers." Here he does not mention money explicitly, but there is a clear parallelism with the "evident need of the sick brothers" (ER VIII, 3), in which they are allowed to receive money.

Humility and poverty are the typical forms of Francis's Gospel life of following Christ. But the fact that he did not call himself and those who joined him "poor ones" but "lesser brothers" demands that poverty be linked to minority and minority to fraternity. Francis's Gospel program, his basic manner of following Christ, can be summarized as being lesser ones always and for all, in order to be brothers always and for all." Then the two exceptions to the rigid prohibition to receive money become explainable and coherent.

Francis proposes to follow the Lord's humility and poverty; this leads him to the concrete choice of marginalization, not because this is something good in itself, but for reasons of fraternal solidarity with the least ones. In Francis's original intuition, and before the inevitable institutional adjustments, the lesser brothers are a group of people who, setting out to follow the humble and poor Christ, cannot help but make the same kinds of choices as their Lord, which leads them to share, in solidarity and fraternity, the life of the outcasts of that time.

³⁶aIt is impressive how the young son of a merchant discovered, not through the study of theology but through an immediate and direct understanding of Christ's message, the supreme value of human beings, not in the world's rich and powerful ones but in the poorest, most abandoned, most despised—as was the leper. This rediscovery of the value of the human person—because redeemed by Christ and by this fact alone at once a brother—is one of Francis of Assisi's loftiest teachings" (R. Manselli, Francesco e i suoi compagni, 198).

2. Without Anything of One's Own

Instead of the more abstract term "poverty," Francis prefers the more radical and concrete expression "without anything of one's own." "Without anything" means "without anything." It is a matter of giving up all things, all rights, all possessions.

Giving up all things

When the brothers go through the world, writes Francis in the Earlier Rule XIV, they should take nothing for the journey, neither knapsack, nor purse, nor bread, nor money, nor walking stick. They do not even have the right to resist evil persons or the right to own their own clothes. Nor must they display a kind of austerity that would prevent them from receiving anyone with kindness, whether foe, thief or robber. In the mind and spirituality of Francis, a happy and welcoming spirit of joy is preferable to a rigid and aloof penitential air—which might run the risk of inner self-complacency, even if it is spiritual. It is also poverty to give up the image of heroic asceticism we are so fond of, in order to make room, in a humble and friendly way, for anyone, even those who cannot allow themselves the luxuries of the spiritually elite: studied austerity, strict silence, fixed schedule, regular observance.

And this must be done with sincerity, as true poor men and true lesser brothers, without benign condescension and without judging others. With a very timely citation of Romans 14:3, the *Earlier Rule* IX, 12 (FA:ED I, 71) reminds them: "Let the one who does not eat not judge the one who does." Francis has grasped the meaning of the Pauline text perfectly. Poverty without charity is not authentic, and neither is charity without poverty, that is to say, a charity that is unable, even when expressing itself, to renounce the temptation to be judgmental or self-complacent.

While the Earlier Rule IX, 12 is speaking mainly in the context of fraternity, the same strict and profound warning is expressed in the Later Rule II, 17 (FA:ED I, 101), speaking mainly of the outside: "I admonish and exhort them [the brothers] not to look down upon or judge those whom they see dressed in soft and fine clothes and enjoying the choicest food and drink, but rather let everyone judge and look down upon himself." To dress in poor clothes is an expression of poverty (LR II, 16), but it would be a

³⁶Whoever comes to them, friend or foe, thief or robber, let him be received with kindness" (ER VII, 14; FA:ED I, 69).

³⁷"Let them be careful not to appear outwardly as sad and gloomy hypocrites but show themselves joyful, cheerful and consistently gracious in the Lord" (ER VII, 16; FA:ED I, 69).

caricature of poverty to then look down upon and judge those dressed in fine clothes. It is not enough to give up rich garments and deprive ourselves of fine foods; we must also and above all give up the garment of pride and the practice of judging and looking down on others, a habit we not infrequently hide by claiming the role of "prophets" and "spiritual" persons.

This is the kind of poverty to which the *Later Rule* III, 10-11 (FA:ED I, 102) refers: "I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ not to quarrel or argue or judge others when they go about in the world; but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming." It is a poverty we are asked to practice at all times and before all people ("when they go about in the world"). It presupposes giving up the right to defend our own rights, real or imaginary, so that the very pretext for the quarrel or argument is avoided. It is a poverty and minority in which our authority to judge is precluded. It is a poverty that recognizes only the right and duty to be, simply and with a sense of gratitude, at all times and to all people, "meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble." Once again it is clear that the little plant of Franciscan poverty can spring up only in the soil called minority.

In his Testament Francis writes, from his heart:

²⁵I strictly command all the brothers through obedience, wherever they may be, not to dare to ask any letter from the Roman Curia, either personally or through an intermediary, whether for a church or another place or under the pretext of preaching or the persecution of their bodies. ²⁶But, wherever they have not been received, let them flee into another country to do penance with the blessing of God (Test 25-26; FA:ED I, 126).

Reading this statement, we immediately notice the authentic Gospel freedom the author has achieved. But we can also see something of the cheap tricks used by others to take back, more or less furtively, what they had given up. Francis is trying here to expose the endless casuistry used by those who, even though they no longer have the heart of a humble and lesser brother, still want to feel and appear poor.

Not possessing anything restores our freedom to go through the world as pilgrims and strangers.

Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, 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. 'This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of

the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue [(LR VI, 1-4; FA:ED I, 103].

Francis was profoundly inspired by the expression "pilgrims and strangers" (1Pt 2:11). In place of the monastic model of stabilitas loci he felt the need to substitute the model of mobilitas loci. Pointing to the whole world, the brothers say to Lady Poverty, "This is our enclosure." But in order to be at home anywhere, we must first have found the courage to give up everything. Only from this perspective can we appreciate the stunning concreteness and deepest meaning of the command not to make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all. What is required if we are to be free is the ability to be pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility."

It is the condition that enables us to be heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven. The concept and terminology are clearly taken from James 2:5: "Did God not choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?" "That sublime height of most exalted poverty" as described in the *Later Rule* VI, 4 (FA:ED I, 103) means "not making anything their own," which refers to material things, but it also includes all other goods or rights we are constantly tempted to make our own. Total renunciation begins and ends with an attitude of unconditional faith and trust in Providence.

Giving up all rights

The first of the two forms of evangelization proposed to the brothers who go among nonbelievers (ER XVI) expresses an internal and external attitude closely linked to poverty and minority. It consists in the brothers not engaging in arguments or disputes with those whose faith is different, in being subject to all for love of God, and in acknowledging that they are Christians. The command of 1 Peter 2:13 is repeated (in the biblical context it says only "to every human institution") and extended to include being subject to every human creature, an attitude and behavior possible in those who feel they have given up the duty or right not only to impose their faith on others, but even simply to defend it verbally.

Francis also cites 1 Peter 2:13 in the Second Letter to the Faithful 47 (FA:ED I, 48): "We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we

¹⁸The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty, 63; FA:ED I, 552.

³⁹It is repeated in ER VII, 13 (FA:ED I, 69): "Wherever the brothers may be, either in hermitages or other places, let them be careful not to make any place their own or contend with anyone for it."

must be servants and subject (servi et subditi) to every human creature for God's sake." The term subditi occurs in the Earlier Rule VII, 1-2 (FA:ED I, 68), where we find examples of the same attitude applied to those who work in the houses of others:

'None of the brothers may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others. They may not be in charge in the houses in which they serve nor accept any office which would generate scandal or be harmful to theirs souls; 'let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject (minores et subditi) to all in the same house.

Here we have other concrete examples of what it means to live as lesser brothers when working among others, a kind of job that, far from being a problem, at least in an earlier setting, seems to have been normal. Living as lesser brothers is not perceived as contrary either to work itself or to working in the service of others and dependent on them. What is expressly excluded are managerial positions or positions of power and prestige.

In the *Testament* 19 (FA:ED I, 125) Francis recalls—nostalgically and by way of reproposal—the early days, when "we were simple and subject to all" (idiotae et subditi omnibus). A Salutation of the Virtues 14 (FA:ED I, 165) expands further upon this:

¹⁴Holy Obedience confounds every corporal and carnal wish, binds its mortified body to obedience of the Spirit and obedience to one's brother, so that it 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 it insofar as it has been given to them from above by the Lord.⁴⁰

It is a matter of being in a state of poverty and submission, poverty and service, poverty and minority with respect to whoever is around. At the time of Francis the terms minores and maiores referred to two socially distinct and opposed groups. The terms subjecti and subditi, on the other hand, do not technically refer to a social group, but in many ways they describe the existential reality of the minores. Francis's choice, for himself and for those who would wish to live as he did, is to be at the same time minores, subditi and subjecti in every situation and toward all. There is not only a poverty in material things; there is also a poverty in power." And this second kind of

^{*}The Latin reads: "Subditus et suppositus omnibus hominibus qui sunt in mundo, et non tantum solis hominibus, sed etiam omnibus bestiis et feris."

⁴¹"It is no accident that the medieval vocabulary of poverty, along with the terms that express material destitution (famelicus, esuriens, mendicus, pannosus, indigens,

poverty, certainly more demanding than the first, is what is referred to in the three passages cited, which go back more or less explicitly to 1 Peter 2:13. This state of minority and submission places the brothers at the mercy of all, defenseless in the face of possible violence from anyone whatsoever.

The link Francis sees between poverty, obedience and fraternity is revealed very clearly in one of his *Admonitions*.

The Lord says in the Gospel: Whoever does not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple (Lk 14:33); ²and: Whoever wishes to save his life must lose it (Mt 16:25). That person who offers himself totally to obedience in the hands of his prelate leaves all that he possesses and loses his body. And whatever he does and says which he knows is not contrary to his will is true obedience, provided that what he does is good. 'And should a subject see that some things might be better and more useful for his soul than what a prelate commands, let him willingly offer such things to God as a sacrifice; and, instead, let him earnestly strive to fulfill the prelate's wishes. For this is loving obedience because it pleases God and neighbor. If the prelate, however, commands something contrary to his conscience, even though he may not obey him, let him not, however, abandon him. ⁸And if he then suffers persecution from others, let him love them all the more for the sake of God. For whoever chooses to suffer persecution rather than wish to be separated from his brothers truly remains in perfect obedience because he lays down his life (Jn 15:13) for his brothers [(Adm III, 1-9; FA:ED I, 130].

The Gospel words with which the Admonition begins (Lk 14:33) refer to poverty, but then it speaks of obedience, presenting a series of three cases and describing them as true obedience (v. 4), loving obedience (v. 6) and perfect obedience (v. 9). It is curious to note that the case in which there is no obedience, and cannot be, because it would be against one's conscience is described as perfect obedience. But here the subject, "even though he may not obey him [the superior], let him not, however, abandon him." What is stressed is the inner attitude of caring for one's brother, and it is the

inops, egens), is much broader and includes terms that refer to weakness and physical, cultural and juridical frailty, to the lack or privation of social status and power (peregrinus, debilis, humilis, orphanus, vidua, exiliatus, captivus, senex, aegrotus, leprosus, infirmus, ydiota, simplex, etc.). The variety and the web of connections with which such terms are presented constitute a powerful sign of how people tend to view and characterize the world of the poor. It is a world lacking, first of all, the characteristics, the guarantees, the instruments of power that belong to social hierarchies (military and religious) and to those associated with them" (G. Miccoli, Francesco d'Assisi, 67).

⁴²Notice the syntactic subtlety: not obeying is a subordinate clause, while not abandoning the superior is the principal clause.

stronger brother who must care for the weaker. In this case, the weaker brother is the brother superior, who has deviated from the Gospel. This Admonition starts with poverty, moves on to obedience and concludes with charity, already anticipated in verse 6 by the adjective "loving." It is a strange "confusion" of the virtues."

The essential part is verse 3, which says that the one who submits himself totally to obedience leaves all that he possesses. In Francis's spirituality, obedience is also a form of poverty, and by no means the least important, since here the good to be renounced is one's own will, rightly equated with oneself. Likewise in *Admonition* II (FA:ED I, 129), commenting on Gen 2:16-17 ("Eat of every tree; you may not eat, however, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"), Francis explains that "that person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good who makes his will his own." The sin par excellence, whether of our first parents or of anyone after them, is disobedience.

Giving up all possessions

Another element of poverty we find stressed frequently in Francis's writings is that we must not boast because of any good that God does in us, but must refer it to him as the only source of all good. We must not make our own that which is not ours but the Lord's, as expressed clearly and emphatically in the *Earlier Rule XVII*, 17 (FA:ED I, 76): "Let us refer all good to the Lord, God Almighty and Most High, acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him, from Whom all good comes, for everything."

In the Earlier Rule XVII, 5-7 (FA:ED I, 75) all the brothers, no matter what role or position they hold, are urged to humble themselves in everything, not to boast or delight in themselves or inwardly exalt themselves "because of the good words and deeds or, for that matter, because of any good that God sometimes says or does or works in and through them." Each and every good thing comes from God; the brothers are only instruments God uses to do good. The temporal adverb "sometimes" further relativizes the importance of the instrument.

We find a very beautiful expression in Admonition XI, 4 (FA:ED I, 133): "Blessed is the one for whom nothing remains except for him to return

⁴³What is important in the writings of Francis is not the definition or precise distinction of one virtue from another but the basic internal attitude. On this, see the very original *Salutation of the Virtues*, especially verses 6-7 (FA:ED I, 164): "Whoever possesses one and does not offend the others possess all. Whoever offends one does not possess any and offends all."

to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The application to poverty is deliberate, also from the verse that immediately precedes: "That servant of God who does not become angry or disturbed at anyone lives correctly without anything of his own." By becoming angry or disturbed at the sin of another we appropriate the sin itself, just as by boasting of good we appropriate what belongs to God alone. This is also the subject of Admonition XVIII, 2 (FA:ED I, 134): "Blessed is the servant who returns every good to the Lord God because whoever holds onto something for himself hides the money of his Lord God within himself, and what he thinks he has will be taken away from him."

For Francis, poverty means to live without anything of one's own: without anything to defend, without rights to claim, without power, without self-love, without judging others, but as lesser ones, submissive and subject to all. Manselli points out that this is not an attitude of capitulation or defeatism. Francis does not preach revolution.

[This is] not because he does not perceive injustice, wickedness, suffering and poverty, but because he is convinced that human beings can and must have the moral strength to go beyond all this. The goal and the example of this victory is Christ crucified, Christ humble and suffering, whom he purposely wished to bring to the crowds again, in his humble and true humanity. From the crib to the cross. 46

Without anything, in order to have everything, total renunciation, external and internal—all this creates room to receive God himself, who gives himself totally to us. Again it is Francis who finds the most concise and beautiful words to express the meaning and purpose of poverty: "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!" (LtOrd 29; FA:ED I, 118)."

For Francis, being poor means desiring to be exactly what we are, whether well or sick, sincerely thanking the Lord for this: "I beg the sick brother to thank God for everything and to desire to be whatever the Lord wills, whether sick or well" (ER X, 3; FA:ED I, 71).

In the face of difficult persons and situations, poverty means not to judge our neighbor, but to accept and love him as he is, as a gift from God,

⁴⁴See Mt 22:21.

⁴⁵The Gospel reference is to the parable of the talents (see especially Mt 25:18) and to the saying of Jesus reported in Lk 8:18.

⁴⁶Francesco e i suoi compagni, 221.

The contrast nothing-everything is even clearer in the Latin: "Nihil ergo de vobis retineatis vobis, ut totos vos recipiat, qui se vobis exhibet totum."

without wanting him to be different. In his Letter to a Minister who is fed up and disappointed with his brothers, Francis writes: "You must consider as grace all that impedes you from loving the Lord God and whoever has become an impediment to you, whether brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you" (LtMin 2; FA:ED I, 97). Notice the deliberate contrast "impediment-grace." Francis adds that he should not "wish anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you." Behind "them" is the Lord. Here we have a clear expression of Francis's suggestion that history and everyday life be read with the eyes of faith: "And do not wish that they be better Christians. And let this be more than a hermitage for you." Others are fine just as they are; they are a gift from God. Poverty is also renunciation of the demand or desire that others be different than they are.

Poverty, as understood by Francis, really involves our entire way of relating to God, to ourselves, to others, to things, and to the our whole inner world. In this sense—but only in this all-inclusive sense—poverty is the characteristic feature of Francis. Everything is joyfully interconnected: "Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance. Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice" (Adm XXVII, 2-3; FA:ED I, 136-37). "Lady holy Poverty, may the Lord protect You, with Your Sister holy Humility!... Holy Poverty confounds the desire for riches, greed, and the cares of this world" (SalV 2, 11; FA:ED I, 164-65).

3. Poor and Lesser Ones in Order to Be Brothers

In the writings of Francis the relational significance of poverty is clear: it must always be accompanied by minority, of which it is an expression. But the process is complete only if those who choose to live as poor and lesser ones do so in order to live truly as brothers, whether among themselves or with all people and in all circumstances. This connection is Francis's particular way of interpreting the Gospel beatitude of poverty.

Like other poor people

"Like other poor people" is an expression found in the Earlier Rule VII, 9, where Francis speaks of the brothers' work, alms and situations of necessity in which they may happen to find themselves. It is a phrase that expresses the concrete and routine nature of the marginalization chosen by Francis. But it also shows the purpose of sharing and fraternity.

³Let the brothers who know how to work do so and exercise that trade they have learned, provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly. ⁴For the prophet says: You shall eat the fruit of your

labors; you are blessed and it shall be well for you (Ps 127:2). The Apostle says: Whoever does not wish to work shall not eat (2 Thes 3:10), and Let everyone remain in that trade and office in which he has been called (1 Cor 7:20, 24).

⁷And for their work they can receive whatever is necessary excepting money. ⁸And when it is necessary, they may seek alms like other poor people. [ER VII, 3-8; FA:ED I, 68-69].

Chapter VII of the Earlier Rule, and the corresponding Chapter V of the Later Rule, present work as the brothers' ordinary means of support." The first two scripture citations make it very clear that the brothers must not think of themselves as being in a special state that would exempt them from the need to work for whatever is necessary. Both at the time of Francis and later, people appealed widely to Luke 10:7, "Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you, for the laborer deserves his payment," and to 1 Corinthians 9:13, "Do you not know that those who perform the temple services eat what belongs to the temple, and those who minister at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings?"

Francis moves in a totally different direction. He does not want to dissociate his brothers from the normal condition of all people, indeed from the condition of all other poor people. He does not even want the brothers to have a special job to do. It is also poverty to work in order to eat like everyone else; to do the work a person knows, if it is honest work; to receive whatever is necessary for one's work; to seek alms when necessary. Just like "other poor people" (ER VII, 8), who cannot afford not to work or to choose their work. And, almost as if to compensate for the difference between those who are poor by necessity and those who are poor by choice, Francis allows his brothers to receive whatever is necessary for their work, but he strictly forbids them to accept money. In the Later Rule V, 1-3 (FA:ED I, 102) work is described as a grace to be accepted "faithfully and devotedly," so as not to extinguish "the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute." Notice here the concern not to let work absorb all one's attention and time to the detriment of prayer. Notice also the clear vision of faith and gratitude for this reality that so often is experienced only as a necessity.

At the end of his life, in his *Testament*, Francis repeats his insistence on the importance of work. He does so by recalling that from the beginning he himself always worked with his hands, and he says that he still wishes to do so:

⁴⁸For work as a life-choice of Francis and his fraternity, see F. Accrocca – A. Ciceri, *Francesco e i suoi frati*, 31-48.

²⁰And I worked with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all brothers to give themselves to honest work. ²¹Let those who do not know how to work learn, not from desire to receive wages, but for example and to avoid idleness. ²²And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door (Test 20-22; FA:ED I, 125-26).

His example gives greater weight to the command, which is strongly restated and applies to all the brothers. As for the formulation of rules, added here is the command to learn how to work, addressed to those who do not know how. Evidently the increase in the number of brothers or specious casuistry now make necessary this addition, which stresses the importance Francis gives to the connection between work and poverty. Indeed, it is clearly stated that the purpose of working, and of learning a trade if necessary, is not to receive pay but for example and to avoid idleness. The example is first of all solidarity with the poor, who are compelled to work in order to eat. But then there is also the inner freedom from all forms of desire.

³When it is necessary, they may go for alms. ⁴Let them not be ashamed and remember, moreover, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the all powerful living God, set His face like flint (Is 50:7) and was not ashamed. ⁵He was poor and a stranger and lived on alms—He, the Blessed Virgin, and His disciples [(ER IX, 3-5; FA:ED I, 70].

¹⁰Let each one confidently make known his need to another that the other might discover what is needed and minister to him. [ER IX, 10; FA:ED I, 71].

To grasp the deeper meaning of Francis's poverty, a careful rereading of this passage is instructive. Essentially, it is not a kind of competition to see who has less. When necessary the brothers may go for alms, in order to ask for and have what is useful to them. Obviously they must take into account what has already been said, namely that the first and basic means of support is from their work (see ER VII) and that money may be accepted only for the sick brothers and for the lepers (ER VIII, 3, 10). The focus of the verses cited here is not so much on the permission to seek alms as on the exhortation that they should not to be ashamed to do so. It is no accident that the word "ashamed" occurs twice in verse 4. The example of Jesus Christ (the title "Son of the all powerful living God" emphasizes the contrast), who was not ashamed to be poor and a stranger and to live on alms, encourages the brothers that neither should they be ashamed to seek alms when necessary.

The citation of Isaiah 50:7 is instructive. In the third song, the Servant of Yahweh, although insulted and beaten, expresses his complete trust in God: "The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame." The poverty proposed here by Francis consists not so much in being without the necessities of life as in being free from pride and self-love."

After the first part of the Earlier Rule IX, which speaks of not being ashamed to seek alms when necessary, we have verse 10, which exhorts the brothers not to be ashamed to seek help. But the context changes: we move from alms outside to alms inside the fraternity. The idea is essentially the same, but "let them not be ashamed" of verse 3 is replaced by the more familiar and discreet "confidently" of verse 10. Just as the poverty of not being ashamed to beg for necessities outside the fraternity was emphasized earlier, so here the poverty of confidently seeking help when necessary within the fraternity is emphasized. To seek help means to admit that we need help, that we are not perfect or self-sufficient, that we are weak, lacking something, in need of others, thus poor.

This kind of poverty is not easy to acknowledge, but it is more radical, more profound, more genuine and more precious than mere material poverty. Once again Francis's poverty goes well beyond the renunciation of material goods alone. It is a more essential poverty, more creaturely, more related not only to things but also to ourselves, to God and to others.

Verse 9 concludes the exhortation not to be ashamed to go for alms outside the fraternity. They must also do this because "they will have a reward from the Lord for the charity and almsgiving they have done." They must not be ashamed to do good. The brothers who go for alms are doing good to those who will give something, since they are giving them the opportunity to receive a reward from the Lord. The same line of reasoning is presented even more discreetly and subtly in verse 10 in support of the exhortation to confidently seek help within the fraternity "that the other might discover what is needed and minister to him." This ability to get away from being the center of attention oneself—even in case of objective need—and turn outward, to others, is also poverty. And all of this is to be lived in the routine of everyday life and relationships with others.

⁴⁹Such insistence on overcoming shame probably also reflects difficulties that arose, but this in no way detracts from the significance Francis attaches to not being ashamed to seek alms.

¹³Whenever a need arises, all the brothers, wherever they may be, are permitted to consume whatever food people can eat, as the Lord says of David who ate the loaves of offering that only the priests could lawfully eat (Mk 2:26) [(ER IX, 13; FA:ED I, 71].

Francis's concept of poverty is also clarified by his frequent references to cases of necessity. We have already noticed in the *Earlier Rule* VIII, 3 and 12 that for an evident or manifest need of the sick brothers or the lepers, the brothers can even receive money. This has shown us that in Francis's mind there is something more important than poverty, even though the latter is very important, and this is charity and fraternity.

The Earlier Rule IX, 13 says that "whenever a need arises, all the brothers, wherever they may be, are permitted to consume whatever food people can eat." It cites Mark 2:26, where Jesus defends the disciples who had picked ears of grain on the Sabbath to satisfy their hunger: "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry?" And Jesus concludes with the clarifying and liberating statement: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27).

Notice the universality of the terms used: whenever, all the brothers, wherever they may be, whatever food (the only condition is that it be food). We find the same liberating and universal openness at the end of the chapter (ER IX, 16): "Similarly, in time of an obvious need, all the brothers may do as the Lord has given them the grace to satisfy their needs, because necessity has no law."

This respect for necessity is also seen at other times in the legislative writings of Francis. In the Later Rule II, 14-15 (FA:ED I, 101) the clothing of the brothers is described in detail: "One tunic with a hood and another, if they wish, without a hood. And those who are compelled by necessity may wear shoes." In the Later Rule III, 12 (FA:ED I, 102) all are forbidden to ride horseback "unless they are compelled by an obvious need or an infirmity." What the different cases have in common is the situation of necessity, and necessity has no law.

And who will be the one to judge the situation of necessity? The answer allows for freedom while calling for responsibility. To Brother Leo Francis writes: "In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience" (LtL 3; FA:ED I, 122). In the *Earlier Rule* XVI, 7 (FA:ED I, 74) the choice between the two ways of living among unbelievers is left to the judgment of the brothers themselves: "The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord."

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It is poverty to eat only certain food, it is poverty to go barefoot, it is poverty to have a strict but definite rule to follow in every situation. But it is also poverty to accept with simplicity the dictates of necessity. Other poor people, who have no special rules to profess or consult, must do this every day. They have only the humble and unheralded rule of necessity by which to work things out at their own risk and danger. Francis is able to recognize that this poverty, which many may not choose but to which they must submit, is also authentic and precious, and he is able to view the necessity that has no law as a grace given by the Lord (see ER IX, 16) and propose that we also view it as such. Instead of rigid poverty, heroic and elitist and perhaps smelling of pharisaism, Francis shows his preference for a kind of poverty that is more everyday, more humble, more "publican."

The poverty proposed by Francis is hard and demanding. It is a poverty that requires us to give up not only all external and material things, but also our own will and our pride. It requires us to give up as well every right to our own ideas, our own goods, our very life. It even requires us to give up every good in order to return it to its sole owner, who is God. This utterly all-inclusive poverty is striking, but even more striking is the joy that Francise describes as the fruit of such total renunciation: "This is true joy." It is the Gospel of the cross. It is cross, but it is Gospel even more, news that fills us with joy, a treasure we have found, for which it is worth joyfully selling everything else, in a hurry lest we lose the chance to make this great purchase.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3). There are many who, while insisting on prayers and obligations, inflict many abstinences and punishments upon their bodies. But they are immediately offended and disturbed about a single word which seems to be harmful to their bodies or about something which might be taken away from them. These people are not poor in spirit, for someone who is truly poor in spirit hates himself (see Lk 14:26) and loves those who strike him on the cheek (see Mt 5:39). [Adm XIV; (FA:ED I, 133-34].

In Admonition XIV Francis highlights the all-inclusive meaning of poverty, which also includes self-love and pride. True poverty springs solely from the heart, the spirit, the innermost part of each person. It is the sincere humility that eradicates all feeling of competition and defense of our rights, real or imaginary.

But what is emphasized above all here is the contrast between the beatitude of poverty (v. 1) and being offended (v. 3). To be truly poor means to be dispossessed of everything. Those who are offended or disturbed about something that might be taken away from them show that they still have something that could be taken away from them. We find the same

expression in Admonition IV (FA:ED I, 130) addressed to those in authority: "And if they are more upset at having their place over others taken away from them than at losing their position at their feet, the more they store up a money bag to the peril of their soul." In Admonition XIV there is the deliberate and revealing contrast between the beatitude of poverty and offense at feeling deprived of something. In Admonition IV there is the implicit contrast between the Gospel treasure of true poverty and the false treasure laid up by those who become disturbed when a position is taken away from them."

For Francis, poverty is the renunciation of everything, outside and within oneself. And this total renunciation is the treasure mentioned in Jesus' parable that makes us truly blessed. It is a poverty that includes the external, but even more the internal; it is a relationship with things, but even more with persons. "Like other poor people" is the social and existential reference point to which Francis adds a Gospel motivation, style and purpose: we are poor and lesser ones so that we might be brothers.

Within the fraternity

Chapters IV-VI of the Earlier Rule present relationships within the fraternity. In V, 9 we read: "Let all the brothers not have power or control in this instance, especially among themselves." And in VI, 3 we find the categorical statement: "Let no one be called 'prior,' but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother." But notice that in these three chapters we find eleven examples of a clear distinction between the ministers and servants and the other brothers. On the one hand, these chapters present us with a type of fraternity that favors horizontal relationships and seems to positively exclude all hierarchical roles. On the other hand, we find just such a clear distinction of roles. Why?

The ministers and servants are presented here as brothers who have a precise and juridically defined role. Those who have been designated ministers and servants of the other brothers are to assign them in places where they may be, and should visit, admonish and encourage them (IV, 1). They must remember that their role is not to be served but to serve, and that the care of the brothers' souls has been entrusted to them, for which they will have to render an account (IV, 6). Therefore they must keep watch over the souls of the brothers (V, 1) and provide for them when they have problems (VI, 2). In IV, 3 we are told that all the other brothers, in other

⁵⁰The same idea also appears in ER XVII, 4 (FA:ED I, 75): "No minister or preacher may make a ministry of the brothers or the office of preaching his own, but, when he is told, let him set it aside without objection."

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words those who are not ministers and servants, should diligently obey them [the ministers and servants].

But in V, 14 it says that all the brothers should serve and obey one another. We have to admit that the roles within the fraternity are not very clear, at least juridically speaking. Why are some called ministers and servants if all should serve and obey one another? What is the relationship between the obedience of the subjects to the ministers and the mutual obedience among all the brothers? How do we reconcile the horizontal and the vertical relationships?

In these chapters we find a clear example of how the Earlier Rule gradually took shape. We find here two types of material. In the older material, relationships among the brothers were presented according to the Gospel, as relationships of mutual service (V, 14), the terms "minister and servant" being addressed to all. When it later became necessary to create an organized structure with persons in charge, either because of the great increase in the number of brothers or because of external pressures, the latter also came to be called ministers, or ministers and servants.

It had become necessary to distinguish clearly and juridically between the ministers and servants, and the other brothers. But they did not want to choose a term explicitly forbidden in the Gospel, such as "superiors" or "priors," or one expressing power or dominion, or one that would obscure the Gospel terminology and meaning of minority (V, 12), fraternity (VI, 3) and humble service by all to all (V, 11; VI, 4). There was not really much possibility of choice. The ones in charge were called ministers, or ministers and servants, and the others were called simply the other brothers. So, from a terminological and juridical point of view, some confusion arose.

The older material in the *Earlier Rule* drew exclusively from the Gospel and presented the relationships among the brothers as doing to others what they wanted for themselves, namely, humble service and obedience to one another:

⁴Let them behave among themselves according to what the Lord says: Do to others what you would have them do to you (see Mt 7:12); ⁵and "Do not do to another what you would not have done to you" [ER IV, 4-5; FA:ED I, 66].

⁹Likewise, let all the brothers not have power or control in this instance, especially among themselves; ¹⁰for, as the Lord says in the Gospel: The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and the great ones make their authority over them felt (Mt 20:25); it shall not be so among the brothers. ¹¹Let whoever wishes to be the greater among them be their minister and servant (Mt 20:26-27). ¹²Let whoever is the greater among them become the least (Lk 22:26) [ER V, 9-12; FA:ED I, 67].

"Let no brother do or say anything evil to another; ¹⁴ on the contrary, through the charity of the Spirit, let them serve and obey one another voluntarily. "This is the true and holy obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ [ER V, 13-15; FA:ED I, 67-68].

³Let no one be called "prior," but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother. Let one wash the feet of the other (Jn 13:14) [ER VI, 3; FA:ED I, 68].

When it became necessary to provide a juridical structure for the fraternity, the duty of service was particularly stressed for the ministers and servants, who might be tempted to interpret their role differently. But it was impossible not to recall, with concrete examples, that mutual service is still the basic relationship of everyone to everyone else. On the one hand, this clear dependence of the juridical and moral material on the Gospel material creates some juridical confusion in the present text. On the other hand, it serves to strongly emphasize that the juridical relationships must not nullify or marginalize the Gospel relationships. Likewise for obedience, when it became necessary to go from a Gospel type of purely horizontal relationships to relationships that were juridically structured, the need for the other brothers to obey the ministers and servants was stressed. But it was impossible to forget the mutual obedience clearly expressed in V, 14 and implicit in the relationships as lesser brothers ready to wash one another's feet (see VI, 3). In this case, as in the case of service, some confusion can be caused by developments in the text, but it stresses that even the juridical relationships cannot prescind from the Gospel relationships summarized in the words "let them serve and obey one another."" In Chapters IV-VI of the Earlier Rule we have a clear example of dialogue between Gospel and life and a clear example of recognition, based on the Gospel, that fraternal relationships have priority over those of a juridical and institutional nature. If we are to live according to the Gospel as brothers, we must also be poor and lesser ones within the fraternity.

At all times and to all people

After presenting the relationships of the lesser brothers with one another (Chapters IV-VI), the *Earlier Rule* goes on to describe how the lesser brothers should relate to others in various situations. It is not meant to be an exhaustive list of every situation in which they must live as lesser

⁵¹The formulation of V, 14 ("through the charity of the Spirit, let them serve and obey one another") recalls Galations 5:13: "Serve one another through love." Both cases stress that the culmination of freedom is to willingly become slaves of one another.

brothers. A few examples serve to illustrate a specific and constant way of living as lesser brothers, namely, at all times and to all people.

As before in Chapters IV-VI, so also in VII-XI it is clear that they must live as brothers at all times and to all people. But it is also clear that they must live as lesser ones at all times and to all people. The two attitudes are closely and systematically linked by a relationship in which living as lesser ones is subordinate to, and a function of, living as brothers.

In all of Francis's writings the term "brothers" occurs much more often than the term "lesser ones." No doubt for Francis—and this is especially evident in these chapters of the Earlier Rule—it is much more important to live as brothers than to live as lesser ones. Note that the demands of living as lesser ones must never be to the detriment of living as brothers. Quite the contrary. They will work as lesser ones, refusing positions of management or prestige. But their work as lesser ones will never involve withdrawal from society. In case of need they will seek alms, but only in case of need and after resorting to work. So we are not looking at a group that lives apart from society, with rules of its own, that refuses to accept, in the name of minority, the common lot of people who must work in order to live.

Rather, they must remain among the people and open their hearts and their fraternity, at all times and to all people. At all times, even when they experience humiliations; to all people, including the poor, the sick, lepers, beggars and even those who are "difficult." Seeking alms and seeking help are clear expressions of minority, but they are also fine expressions of fraternity. To accept sickness and thank God for it means to accept oneself as a lesser one and to view this state of minority with faith, that is, as providential. It means fraternal and joyful sharing of the human condition among the most difficult and most ordinary people.

That our text understands living as lesser ones to be a function of living as brothers is particularly clear from the norms about not making any place their own and not receiving money.

The norms in Chapter VIII on the prohibition to receive money are exceptionally strict and inflexible. Such rigidity can be explained only by the conviction that money is a mortal risk to minority. Minority is an essential condition and dimension of fraternity, and so the lesser brothers must be extremely careful when it comes to money. Positively stated, the reasoning is as follows. In order to live as true brothers at all times and to all people, they

⁵²For example, in the *Earlier Rule* "brothers" occurs ninety three times and "lesser ones" four times.

must live as lesser ones at all times and to all people. But in order to remain lesser ones at all times and to all people, it is necessary that they not receive money. Confirmation comes from the two exceptions (VIII, 3 and 10): they can receive money for the sick brothers and for the lepers. When he has to choose between the heroism of never touching money and the concrete demands of fraternal charity, Francis has no doubts. Not to receive money is a normal condition and dimension of living as lesser ones. Living as lesser ones is a normal dimension and condition of living as brothers at all times and to all people. When required by fraternal charity, there can be exceptions to the prohibition against receiving money, but no exception is envisioned to living as brothers at all times and to all people.

The most beautiful expression of this kind of relationship between minority and fraternity is seen in IX, 1-2. To follow the humility and poverty of our Lord (IX, 1) does not mean to heroically pursue an ideal of minority as an end in itself. It means something more concrete and specific: to live joyfully and fraternally among the least ones (IX, 2).

Chapters VII-XI of the *Earlier Rule* describe living as lesser brothers at all times and to all people. The two attitudes are closely connected, but they are not on the same level. Poverty and minority are a function of fraternity. Living as poor and lesser ones at all times and to all people is a condition and dimension of living as brothers at all times and to all people.

It would make no sense to live heroically as poor and lesser ones if we did not live as brothers. We must live as lesser ones at all times and to all people so that we can live as brothers at all times and to all people. What is clearly expressed here is not only a particular hierarchy of values, but also a concept of fraternity. Wishing to include all people and needing to concretely express itself by sharing life with all people, it cannot help but courageously place the brothers on a level with the least. Thus Francis speaks of human relationships in the language of the Gospel.

Chapter Four

Go, I Am Sending You

Francis Speaks of Mission

Francis hears our Lord's words to the Apostles and Disciples, "Go, I am sending you," as addressed to him. To understand the passion with which Francis perceives this mission to the whole world, we need only reread the beginning of the letter he wrote to all the faithful. Love and imagination suggested to him this letter urbi et orbi, this "encyclical" letter.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Brother Francis, their servant and subject, sends esteem and reverence, true peace from heaven and sincere love in the Lord to all Christian religious people: clergy and laity, men and women, and to all who live in the whole world.

²Because I am the servant of all, I am obliged to serve all and to administer the fragrant words of my Lord to them. ³Therefore, realizing that I could not visit each one of you personally because of sickness and the weakness of my body, I decided to offer you in this 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 (Jn 6:63) [2LtF 1-3; FA:ED I, 45].

The Letter to the Faithful clearly reveals Francis's missionary passion-expressed as service in administering the fragrant words of the Lord to all—as well as the universality of his horizons. But the clearest indication of the content and forms of mission are found in Chapters XIV-XVII of the Earlier Rule, which contain a strong concentration of apostolicmissionary Gospel citations from Mt 10:142 (apostolic discourse), Lk 9:1-6 (sending of the Twelve), and Lk 10:1-20 (sending and return of the 72 Disciples). The remaining Gospel material cited is taken from the beatitudes discourse (XIV, 4-6; XVI, 12, 15-16), the eschatological discourse (XVI, 17-21) and the discourse on the requirements for following Jesus (XVI, 9, 11b). But it is all part of a missionary perspective. Statistically speaking, we have in these four chapters of the Earlier Rule ten citations from the accounts of the sending, six from the beatitudes discourse, three from the eschatological discourse, and two from the discourse on the requirements for following Jesus. But it is the essential role played by the apostolic-missionary citations that tells us that what we have is Francis's missionary Magna Carta.

1. The Forms of Mission

All are missionaries

All the material in the Earlier Rule XIV-XVII is part of a fundamental structure constructed of Gospel citations taken from the mission discourses. In this context, the rest of the Gospel material and the explanations and norms given also take on an overall missionary significance. Thus we might expect the text to be addressed only to those who go on mission. But such is not the case.

All of Chapter XIV is address to the brothers "when they go through the world." To them are applied the norms Jesus gave to the twelve or to the 72 disciples when sending them on mission, as well as norms from the beatitudes discourse addressed to all. Chapter XIV is addressed to all the brothers, not just the missionaries. The extremely short Chapter XV is also addressed to "all my brothers, both cleric and lay..., [who] go through the world." Its prohibition against keeping animals or riding horseback is an application of the general rule about taking nothing for the journey. Chapter XVI also contains models of behavior for "those going among the Saracens and other nonbelievers" (XVI, 5-9). But the great initial sending (1-2) and all the rest of the chapter (10-21) are addressed to "all the brothers, wherever they may be" (XVI, 10). In Chapter XVII, only the first four verses are addressed to the preachers (with the addition, in verse 3, that "all the brothers should preach by their deeds"). The rest is addressed to all. The fact that Francis presents these norms to all and not just to the missionaries reveals something that is simple but very important. For Francis, all the brothers, wherever they are or whatever they may be doing, are sent by the Lord on mission in the world. Their Gospel life is in itself missionary.

Here Francis does not cite the mission discourses of Jesus in full. Instead he chooses, completely ignoring or downplaying certain ideas while emphasizing others. Let us now compare the synoptic mission texts (Mt 10:1-42; Lk 9:1-6, 10; 10:1-20; Mk 6:7-13, 30-32) with the text of Francis in order to see which Gospel ideas are downplayed or ignored and which are picked up on and emphasized. In this way Francis's missionary style will emerge.

Gospel forms of mission downplayed or ignored by Francis

Let us look at the important ideas in the Gospel mission passages that are downplayed in our text. We can see two: go and preach. In the four Gospel passages of mission, the idea of going is strongly emphasized and has a spatial meaning. Francis, on the other hand, does not stress the idea of going. At times it does not have a spatial meaning, and it never appears as essential for mission. "When the brothers go through the world" (XIV, 1) has more of a social and theological meaning rather than a geographical and spatial one. Likewise, "take nothing for the journey," which in XV is addressed to all the brothers who go through the world or stay in houses. Our text regards not only those who go among nonbelievers, but all the brothers at all times, as being on mission.

In the four Gospel mission passages, preaching is presented as essential. The same cannot be said for our text. Chapter XIV, 2 cites Lk 10:5 verbatim: "Whatever house they enter, let them first say: Peace to this house." Chapter XVI, 6 presents the first way to live as missionaries among unbelievers: not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to all and to acknowledge that they are Christians. Oral preaching is certainly not characteristic of the first way.

Chapter XVI, 7 presents the second way to live among unbelievers, and here at last we find "let them announce the word of God." But we notice two things: announcing the word of God is part of the second way (thus not the most important), and there is also the limiting clause "when they see it pleases the Lord." Chapter XVI, 8 resumes the subject of speaking, but in a deliberately detached manner: "They can say to them and the others these and others things that please God." The text is not that interested in the ones spoken to, and the expression "they can" gives the impression of a concession.

Only in XVII, 1 do we find the verb "preach," but it is in a prohibition: "Let no brother preach contrary to the rite and practice of the Church and without the permission of his minister." The next verse admonishes the minister that he should be careful in granting permission to preach.

We certainly cannot say that the *Earlier Rule* regards preaching—at least preaching in words—as essential and sufficient, because XVII, 3 presents another form of preaching, this time in a positive way and incumbent on all: "Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds." Here the word "however" clearly expresses the kind of preaching that is considered more important, possible and incumbent on all.

Chapter XVII, 4 moves again in this direction: "No minister or preacher may make a ministry of the brothers or the office of preaching his own, but, when he is told, let him set it aside without objection." Chapter XVII, 6 addresses a heartfelt warning to the preachers not to boast because of the good words and deeds, for it is God who sometimes says or does or works any good in and through them. Chapter XVII, 11 is quite explicit:

"Because the spirit of the flesh very much desires and strives to have the words but cares little for the activity." We can conclude that oral preaching, essential in the Gospel mission passages, is downplayed here. In this context attention is focused more on bearing witness to the Gospel through one's life.

We can now determine which ideas are present in the four Gospel mission passages and ignored completely in the Earlier Rule. We will consider only the most important of these. Let us begin with the most significant omission. All four Gospel mission passages strongly emphasize the powers Jesus gives to those he sends to cast out demons and heal the sick (Mk 6:7b; Lk 9:1-2). They also mention the command to use these powers: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Mt 10:8b). And finally they tell how those sent used these powers (Mk 6:13; Lk 9:6, 10; 10:17). In the Earlier Rule XIV-XVII all such material is systematically omitted. In XVII, 6 the only citation is Lk 10:20 where the whole emphasis is not on "the spirits are subject to you," but on "do not rejoice" because of this, an idea developed in the entire passage XVII, 5-13.

The justification "the laborer deserves his payment" (Lk 10:7; Mt 10:10) is omitted. In all four Gospel mission passages it is said that if someone will not receive those who are sent, they should leave, shaking the dust from their sandals in testimony against them (Mt 10:14; Mk 6:11; Lk 9:5; 10:10-11). Here there is none of this. Instead it says: "Let them not resist anyone evil" (XIV, 4), "let them be subject to every human creature for God's sake" (XVI, 6), and "they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible" (XVI, 11).

In Mt 10:16-17 we read: "Behold am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be prudent as serpents and simple as doves. But beware of people, for they will hand you over...." The *Earlier Rule XVI*, 1-2 cites Mt 10:17 in full, but it omits "beware of people" (Mt 10:17). And the norms that follow (going among unbelievers, being subject to all, acknowledging that they are Christians, proclaiming the word of God) do not really seem to be typical examples of simplicity or, especially, prudence.

The forms of mission taken from the Gospels and emphasized

Now let us look at the forms of mission the Earlier Rule takes verbatim from the Gospel mission passages: "Let them take nothing for the journey, neither knapsack, nor purse, nor bread, nor money, nor walking stick (XIV, 1) from Lk 9:3 and 10:4; "Whatever house they enter, let them first say: Peace to this house" (XIV, 2) from Lk 10:5; "They may eat and drink what is placed before them for as long as they stay in that house (XIV, 3) from Lk 10:7a. "Behold I am sending you like sheep in the midst of

wolves. Therefore, be prudent as serpents and simple as doves" (XVI, 1-2) from Mt 10:16; "Whoever acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father (XVI, 8) from Mt 10:32; "Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father" (XVI, 9) from Lk 9:26; "Whoever loses his life because of me will save it in eternal life" (XVI, 11) from Lk 9:24; "If they persecute you in one town, flee to another" (XVI, 14) from Mt 10:23a; "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of them and do not fear those who kill the body and afterwards have nothing more to do" (XVI, 17-18) from Mt 10:28 and Lk 12:4; "Whoever perseveres to the end will be saved" (XVI, 21) from Mt 10:22b; "Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you" (XVII, 6) from Lk 10:20.

Comparing the mission texts in the synoptics with the Earlier Rule XIV-XVII, we can draw some conclusions. In Francis's text there is nothing about the exercise of special powers, nothing about the kind of welcome received, nor about prudence understood as being on guard against persecutors, nor about courage based on divine protection. It is neither essential nor sufficient to "go" in a spatial sense or to preach in words. The privileged, and thus fundamental, ideas of this missionary Magna Carta stand out clearly: poverty of means ("let them take nothing for the journey"), persecution as a normal situation ("I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves"), not boasting about results ("do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you").

The Gospel material not taken from the mission passages also attests to these preferred forms. Chapter XIV, 4-6 presents five norms taken from the beatitudes discourse (Mt 5:39 and Lk 6:29-30): "Let them not resist anyone evil;" "let them offer the other cheek as well;" "let them not withhold their tunic;" "let them give to all who ask;" and "whoever takes what is theirs, let them not seek to take it back."

The justice of the scribes demanded "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Mt 5:38). Jesus, on the other hand, says that we must not resist anyone evil, but rather let them have even what they unjustly ask or take. These norms answer the question of how we are to act in the face of injustice. The answer is that we must not offer any resistance. Chapter XIV, 4-6 draws from the beatitudes discourse to give an example of one of the three fundamental ideas: "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves." Chapter XVI, 3-4 is certainly not an example of "be prudent as serpents and simple as doves," but rather of "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves." It is the Lord who is sending them into that situation which, humanly speaking, is hopeless.

Chapter XVI, 5-7 presents the two possible ways of living among unbelievers. The order of presentation is already a good enough indication of which one the text prefers. The first way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but be subject to every human creature for God's sake and acknowledge that they are Christians. We have here a beautiful example of taking nothing for the journey (their ability to debate and convince) and being like sheep in the midst of wolves (let them be subject, let them be at the mercy of all). The second way ("announce the Word of God") is circumscribed and justified by "when they see it pleases the Lord."

Chapter XVI, 10 says: "Wherever they may be, let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ," and

"the Lord says: "Whoever loses his life because of me will save it in eternal life." Having given themselves and their bodies to the Lord, they do not need to take anything for the road (it is enough to take the Lord), they must not be surprised or afraid should wolves tear them to pieces like sheep, and they must not boast about any results.

Chapter XVI, 11 immediately draws an exemplary conclusion: "For love of Him, they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible." They have given themselves to the Lord and he sends them like sheep in the midst of wolves. What is there to do except make themselves vulnerable to being torn to pieces? "For love of Him" relates the persecution of the brothers to the persecution encountered by Jesus, and "they must" actualizes for the brothers the meaning of the passion predictions in the Synoptics. Just as Jesus had to (and freely chose to) give himself into the hands of his enemies, so the brothers must out of love make themselves vulnerable to their enemies.

In the long chain of citations listed in XVI, 12-21 the material that does not come from Gospel mission passages is presented as justification, explanation and development of the idea "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves."

Chapter XVII, 1, "Let no brother preach contrary to the rite and practice of the Church or without the permission of his minister" is a precious example of taking nothing for the journey. They should not take with them the pretentious claim to set themselves up as judges of the Church or to preach without permission. The words "let all the brothers preach, however, by their deeds" (XVII, 3) relativizes preaching in words and gives the more prominent place to preaching by deeds. Chapter XVII, 4, which prohibits the ministers and preachers from making their ministry or

office their own, and enjoins them to set these aside when asked to do so, is a beautiful actualizing example of taking nothing for the journey.

In XVII, 5-6 there is introduced the third fundamental idea of the *Magna Carta* of the apostolate: Do not boast about anything.

⁵In the love that is God, therefore, I beg all my brothers—those who preach, pray, or work, cleric or lay—to strive to humble themselves in everything, ⁶not to boast or delight in themselves or inwardly exalt themselves because of the good words and deeds, or, for that matter, because of any good that God sometimes says or does or works in and through them, in keeping with what the Lord says: Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you.

Chapter XVII, 8 extends the concept of wolves to include not only material enemies, but also spiritual enemies, and it broadens the idea of persecution to include every kind of anguish or distress of soul and body. Chapter XVII, 10 repeats XVI, 2, explaining its meaning. Prudence and simplicity are understood as the wisdom and prudence, not of this world or of the flesh, but of the Spirit of the Lord. This idea is then clarified in the contrast between the desires of the spirit of the flesh and those of the Spirit of the Lord (XVII, 11-15). Chapter XVII, 16-17 repeats in a positive and complete form the idea expressed in XVII, 5-8. There it said we must not boast because of any good, since it does not belong to us; here it says we must refer all good to the Lord God, Almighty and Most High.

Chapter XVII, 19 seems to summarize the forms of the Franciscan apostolate. In the face of all the evil present in the world ("when we see or hear evil spoken or done or God blasphemed"), the brothers must neither lose courage nor anxiously search for heaven knows what new apostolic tools for overcoming the evil. They should simply bless and praise the Lord, taking nothing with them (not even anxiety or the presumption that they will overcome the evil), living like sheep in the midst of wolves (aware that it is very hard for sheep to get the best of wolves) and not boasting because of any good, but referring it to God alone (without vainglory and without playing the victim).

These, then, are the three Gospel ways emphasized by Francis: "Take nothing for the journey," "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves," and "Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you." These three fundamental ideas do not simply express previous forms, or consequences or judgments of the results of the mission. Rather, they define mission itself as bearing witness to the Gospel in one's daily life.

-Take nothing with you except the Spirit of the Lord

The words "take nothing for the journey" gain great prominence by being found at the beginning of this Magna Carta of the apostolate. To the Gospel list of things not to take when going on mission (knapsack, purse, bread, money, walking stick,) Francis adds things that are even more important: the right to resist anyone evil by rendering an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the right to ownership of their clothes, their tunic and everything that belongs to them. This material is taken from the beatitudes discourse. Those to whom these norms are addressed are no longer just the brothers when they go through the world (XIV, 1), and the journey is the journey of everyone's life.

The words "take nothing for the journey" do not refer simply to equipment. The mission, according to Francis, consists in taking nothing except the Spirit of the Lord (see XVII, 14-16). Our apostolic effectiveness not only does not depend on what we take; it does not even depend on what we are. To take nothing with oneself is already itself a Gospel mission, because it is all the brothers can do, namely, bear witness to the Gospel by making room for the Spirit of the Lord, our only evangelizer and the one who evangelizes all.

-Live like sheep in the midst of wolves for love of the Lord

"Behold I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves" (XVI, 1) is preceded by a very simple statement: "The Lord says." All the brothers must know that it is the Lord who sends them thus into the world. "Therefore, be prudent as serpents and simple as doves" (XVI, 2) could be understood as an invitation to keep their eyes open (as Mt 10:17 understands it: beware of people for they will persecute you). But Francis goes in an entirely different direction (in XVII, 10 we will be told explicitly to guard ourselves from the prudence of the flesh). Chapter XVI, 3-4 says that anyone who desires to go among the Saracens and other unbelievers may go. It was certainly not prudent to go among the Saracens; it was the equivalent of going to one's death, to martyrdom. But it is precisely for this reason that permission is given to go and the minister is warned not to oppose them.

Chapter XVI, 6 presents the first way of living the apostolic life among unbelievers: "One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians." The first suggested way of living the apostolic life among unbelievers is to live like sheep in the midst of wolves as a specific missionary choice. In XVI, 10 all, wherever they may be, are told to remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord so that now they belong to him.

The conclusion drawn in XVI, 11 is clear and unequivocal: "For love of Him, they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible." This statement is very important and serves to clarify things. It is addressed to all, wherever they may be. Thus it is a duty of all the brothers at all times to make themselves vulnerable to their enemies. The words "they must" present being vulnerable to their enemies not as a simple and unavoidable consequence of their mission, but as a positive duty, for love of the Lord.

Sheep in the midst of wolves are torn to pieces. The brothers must go in the midst of wolves precisely in order to be torn to pieces, because the Lord says: "Whoever loses his life because of me will save it in eternal life" (XVI, 11). Chapter XVI, 12 adds that those who suffer persecution should consider themselves blessed. "For the sake of justice" is equivalent to "because of me" and "for love of Him" in XVI, 11. "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" of XVI, 13 refers to the theme of following the Lord and is the Christological motivation. If the Lord sends them like sheep in the midst of wolves, it is because he himself has already gone willingly "like a sheep to the slaughter" (Acts 2:32) and has shown that this is the way to eternal life. Chapter XVI, 16 says, even more clearly: "Rejoice and be glad on that day." That day is the long day of persecution. Chapter XVI, 17-21 is a series of invitations not to be afraid, not to be disturbed, and to persevere in this attitude.

To live like sheep in the midst of wolves for love of the Lord is not only, or not so much, a consequence of mission. It is in itself a Gospel mission, since it is a following of the Lord on the way to Calvary with the cross on our shoulders. It is a disconcerting Gospel mission, but it is the one chosen by the Lord for the salvation of humanity. That is why it is proposed by Francis as essential.

-Do not boast because of any good, but refer it to God alone

This way is especially highlighted in XVII, 5-19. In XVII, 5-6 all the brothers, no matter what their role or office, are asked to humble themselves in everything, not to boast or delight in themselves or inwardly exalt themselves "because of the good words and deeds, or for that matter, because of any good that God sometimes says or does or works in and through them." All good and every good comes from God; the brothers are only instruments that God sometimes uses to do good.

Chapter XVII, 7-8 strongly reminds us that nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins and that we must rejoice, not in results or the hope of results, but only in the situation of trials and tribulations in which the Lord keeps us. Pride and vainglory (XVII, 9) would mean that we are

making our own what does not belong to us and are fleeing from our situation. The wisdom of this world and the prudence of the flesh (XVII, 10) have other reasons for joy and other ways to obtain it, consisting in many words and in seeking that which is external.

But the Spirit of the Lord wants mortification, humility, patience, inner peace. Above all it desires divine fear, divine wisdom and divine love. All these and only these are the true results of the mission (XVII, 14-16), and therefore they will be referred and given back with joy and thanksgiving to the Lord God, Almighty and Most High (see XVII, 17-19).

In the midst of a humanity far from God, the brothers should not worry or frantically search for new and ever more "effective" methods. They should only bless and praise the Lord and remain at their post, not even asking about results, for there is Another who sees to that. To remain at their post, with humility and thanksgiving, is already in itself a Gospel mission.

The three fundamental ideas of Chapters XIV-XVII of the Earlier Rule are taken from the Gospel mission passages, where the apostolate consists in going to proclaim the reign of God and exercise the special powers given by Jesus (cure the sick and cast out demons). But for Francis, apostles are those who bear witness to the Gospel in their life by taking nothing with them except the Spirit of the Lord, living like sheep in the midst of wolves for love of the Lord and not boasting because of any good, but referring it to God alone. Nothing more and nothing less. Such are the deeds by which all the brothers can and must preach.

This concept of the apostolate and of being a missionary, however original it may seem, is clearly present in the Bible. It would be enough to recall 2Cor 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness," 1Pt 2:21, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps," Jn 15:4, "Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me," and above all the Sermon on the Mount.

We can see, then, why the Magna Carta of the apostolate is addressed to all the brothers wherever they may be, prescinding from their status and their role. To be apostles means to live and bear witness to the Gospel, bear witness to it by living it. Preaching in words and going through the world physically are not essential, and going among unbelievers is but one example of being a missionary.

2. The Everyday Nature of Mission

All the brothers are called to be missionaries always and everywhere in the routine of their daily life. We find one example of this in the letter Francis wrote to a minister whose name we do not know, but whose difficulty living the Gospel in the everyday life of his fraternity we have come to know about. This minister informs Francis of his situation and asks to leave his position of responsibility and withdraw to a hermitage. Let us read the beginning of the letter Francis sends him:

¹To Brother N., minister: May the Lord bless you.

²I speak to you, as best I can, about the state of your soul. You must consider as grace all that impedes you from loving the Lord God and whoever has become an impediment to you, whether brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you. ³And may you want it to be this way and not otherwise. ⁴And let this be for you the true obedience of the Lord God and my true obedience, for I know with certitude that it is true obedience. ⁵And love those who do those things to you ⁶and do not wish anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you. ⁷And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians. ⁶And let this be more than a hermitage for you [LtMin 1-8; FA:ED I, 97].

The contrast between "impediment" and "grace" is strongly emphasized. Francis does not tell the minister what he should do, but rather how to interpret the situation he is experiencing. All the things the minister considers impediments and obstacles to loving the Lord, he must consider as grace. Francis is very certain of this and extremely resolute in proposing it: "And may you want it to be this way and not otherwise. And let this be for you the true obedience of the Lord God and my true obedience, for I know with certitude that it is true obedience." Francis gets his certitude in judging and discerning from the mens evangelica with which he is imbued, a mens that enables him to see all people and things as providential. The verb "must," employed with unusual insistence, does not refer to remaining at his post despite the impediments, but to considering everything as a grace. It is his sight that is healed. From seeing things in the light of faith there will come the feelings, expectations and practical choices. First the feelings: "And love those who do these things to you"; then the expectations: "And do not wish anything different from them"; and finally the practical choices: "And let this be more than a hermitage for you."

Verses 5-7 reveal Francis's logic in an especially clear way. "Do not wish anything different from them" would imply "unless it is something they give you." But instead there is an extremely significant change of subject: "Do not wish anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you" through them. Francis is able to sense the

presence of the Lord who acts through people and circumstances—all of them, always and in all cases. From this comes the obligation to love all people at all times, accepting all people and all things as a gift from the Lord: "And do not wish that they be better Christians [for your sake]." Others are fine and are a gift from the Lord just as they are. Too often we justify our self-serving expectations of others with the classic, "It's for their own good." Besides, it would be a breach of good manners to accept a gift and wish it were something else.

Take nothing for the journey, not even the wish that other people, things and situations be different from what they are. Go like sheep in the midst of wolves. Wolves can be found among the Saracens and other unbelievers, but also in the fraternity, among our companions on the journey of daily life, perhaps dressed as lambs. It happened even to Jesus, betrayed by Judas. Do not boast because of any good, but refer it to God alone. Every person and every situation is a gift and a grace; the faith that leads us to acknowledge everything as a gift and a grace is itself a gift and a grace; we must not boast because of it, but refer it and give it back to the Lord, acknowledging it as belonging to him alone.

Thus Francis speaks of mission in daily life and of the everyday nature of mission.

3. The Joy of Mission

Francis's radical way of interpreting mission is striking. It is a way that bypasses the exercise of all power, even that of the Gospel, and instead emphasizes going defenseless and stripped of everything, taking with us only the word and presence of the Lord. It is a mission that must be lived in the daily life of each person. Even more striking is the joy of such a mission. Francis experiences the truth of the beatitudes, especially the one about those who are persecuted. He transcribes it in the *Earlier Rule XVI*:

¹²Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:10). ¹³If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you (Jn 15:20). ¹⁴If they persecute you in one town, flee to another (Mt 10:23). ¹⁵Blessed are you when people hate you, speak evil of you, persecute, expel, and abuse you, denounce your name as evil and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. ¹⁶Rejoice and be glad on that day because your reward is great in heaven (Mt 5:11-12; Lk 6:22-23) [ER XVI, 12-16; FA:ED I, 74-75].

To describe the joy of mission, Francis cites especially from the Sermon on the Mount. He fearlessly combines the mission discourse with that of the beatitudes. To go like sheep in the midst of wolves means to encounter persecution, hatred and abuse. But this is the missionary mandate of Jesus that Francis receives. And he adds: with joy. This is the significance of his insertion of the beatitudes into this missionary context.

Nothing is owed us. Do become upset, but be calm and happy, even amid trials and tribulations. This is the Gospel and mission program that Francis summarizes in the Earlier Rule XVII, 8: "We must rejoice, instead, when we fall into various trials and, in this world, suffer every kind of anguish or distress of soul and body for the sake of eternal life." What is striking here—as before in ER IX, 2"—is the verb "must" used to describe how they should feel. The underlying logic is that of result and proof. The beatitudes are the result of having accepted the Gospel in our own life and the proof that we have done so.

The biblical reference is to James 1:2: "Consider it perfect joy, my brothers, when you face trials of any kind." This association is particularly dear to Francis. It is no accident that the expression "perfect joy" calls to mind the famous page in the writings of Francis of Assisi (FA:ED I, 166) even before the Letter of James.

Perhaps as a defense against its extreme and brutal clarity, tradition has chosen the easier and more innocuous interpretation: It is perfect joy to patiently put up with the setbacks we experience from time to time. Moreover, Francis's joy has been called "perfect," whereas the text speaks simply of "true" joy. To a careful reader, the page seems carefully planned in its least details. Besides the autobiographical references, it reveals obvious symbolic and universal meanings.

In the first part Francis describes what true joy is not; in the second part he will describe what true joy is. Three cases are presented.

The first: "A messenger arrives and says that all the Masters of Paris have entered the Order. Write: this isn't true joy!" It is an order of lesser brothers, only a few years old, and no one knows yet if it has a future or not. The Masters of Paris, who represent the learning of the time, not only recognize the young group of lesser brothers, but they have all entered the Order. Wouldn't this be wonderful news? The judgment is succinct: "Write: this isn't true joy." Learning, its recognition or its possession cannot give true joy.

Second case: "All the prelates, archbishops and bishops beyond the mountains, as well as the King of France and the King of England [have

⁵³
"They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside."

entered the Order]. Write: this isn't true joy!" Now it is the great ones of the Church and society, of the ecclesiastical and political power. They not only recognize the young group of lesser brothers, but they have all entered the Order. What extraordinary news! And the refrain: "Write: this isn't true joy." Joy does not come from recognition by ecclesiastical or political powers.

Third case: "Again, that my brothers have gone to the non-believers and converted all of them to the faith; again, that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and perform many miracles. I tell you true joy doesn't consist in any of these things." Didn't Jesus command us to go into the whole world to preach the Gospel and convert all people? Isn't it a grace from God to be able to heal the sick and perform miracles? All this has happened through Francis and his brothers. At least this should be a cause for joy, shouldn't it? No: "True joy doesn't consist in any of these things." Not even the power of faith and the Gospel is for Francis a cause for true joy.

Naturally there comes Brother Leo's question, which separates the first part of the story from the second: "Then what is true joy?"

"I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night. It's winter time, muddy, and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs and blood flows from such wounds. Freezing, covered with mud and ice, I come to the gate and, after I've knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: 'Who are you?' 'Brother Francis,' I answer. 'Go away!' he says, 'This is not a decent hour to be wandering about! You may not come in!" [TPJ 8-10; FA:ED I, 166].

The words used serve to emphasize a movement of gradual approach—return, arrive, knock at the door, call, ask, insist, remain—which is systematically and violently interrupted three times by "Go away," followed by three reasons for the refusal, each one harsher. Granted that the circumstances of his coming are not propitious: long journey, night, winter, mud, cold, wounds. Francis replies to the Brother Porter that it is a brother, that it is Francis, the founder. But the porter comes back at him with the first "Go away" because it is late and after hours.

"When I insist, he replies: 'Go away! You are simple and stupid! Don't come back to us again! There are many of us here like you—we don't need you!" Faced with the offensive humiliation of the first "Go away," Francis does not go away but persists in knocking and asking. There is the second "Go away," with the even more scathing explanation that he is now useless. "I stand again at the door and say: 'For the love of God, take me in tonight!' And he replies: 'I will not! Go to the Crosiers' place and ask there."

Even after the second refusal Frances remains at the door and humbly reframes his request—at least for the love of God and just for tonight. But shockingly there comes the third "Go away," followed by the explanation that not only is he useless, but he is also a burden! Go to the Crosiers where the lepers are supposed to gather at night!

How does it end? Does Francis go away? "I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this." No, Francis does not go away feeling exhausted, offended or irritated. He patiently remains in front of that closed door, without becoming upset. And he says that true joy consists in this. That joy, which cannot come from learning, from ecclesiastical or political power, nor even from supernatural power, comes from fraternally and confidently remaining right there in front of that closed door. Inside are his brothers. While they do not feel or act the part, he feels that they are brothers. The door has a clear symbolic meaning in the account. It is the door of welcome, esteem and friendship on the part of others. It is a door that never opened and perhaps never will. But Francis remains there in front of that closed door, patient and not upset.

His feelings of brotherhood are not determined by the brotherly feelings of the others. Love is sufficient in itself; it has no need of justifications or reasons. There is the joy we feel when a door opens and two arms reach out to welcome us. This joy is easy and we are all familiar with it. Francis describes the joy we can have standing in front of a closed door. This joy is neither stoic nor stubborn, but simply that of the Gospel, where by "simply" we mean "authentically" and "heroically." It is the logic of the grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit, the logic of love that lets itself be insulted and made fun of, remaining on the cross and thus giving its life for those beneath the cross who must be forgiven for they know not what they do. This is the truly important thing in life, the treasure in the Gospel parable. It is the Gospel of the cross, proclaimed with joy in our life; it is the joy of mission, which Francis experiences and never tires of proposing.

Chapter Five

I Give Praise to You, Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth

Francis Speaks of Creation

After working six days, God looked with delight at everything he had made, from nature to human beings, and he found it very good (Gen 1:31). Two thousand years ago in Palestine, the face of a man named Jesus brightened, and he raised his eyes to heaven and said: "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and learned you have revealed them to the little ones" (Mt 11:25). Twelve centuries later—in 1225, to be precise—in a cell of mats built for him at San Damiano, the face of a man named Francis also brightened, and he raised his suffering eyes to heaven and composed the Canticle of the Creatures."

Three moments and three different subjects. What they have in common is the song, the joy, the blessing and eyes that are able to see the beauty of creation and the Creator. The God of Genesis is pleased at the goodness and beauty of his creatures. Jesus praises the Father and Lord of heaven and earth for having revealed himself to the little ones. Francis, one of the little ones and nearly blind, sees clearly the goodness and beauty of creatures, and he praises with them the Father and Lord of heaven and earth. He has received the Gospel revelation of God as Father and creatures as sisters.

Every word of the Canticle of the Creatures exudes joyful and grateful faith. Francis, too, sees and sings that everything around him is very good; Francis, too, praises the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth for having revealed in Jesus, to the little ones, the Gospel of divine fatherhood and cosmic sister-brotherhood.

In the Canticle" creatures are seen simultaneously as instruments of praise, revelation and restoration.

⁵⁴See AC 83; FA:ED II, 184ff.

sistudies on the Canticle of the Creatures are very numerous. Here we mention only some of them that we consider indicative and fundamental: F. Bajetto, "Un trentennio di studi (1941-1973) sul Cantico di frate Sole. Bibliografia ragionata," L'Italia francescana 49 (1974) 5-62; S. Ruggeri, "Materiali per uno studio sul 'Cantico di frate Sole," Accademie e Biblioteche d'Italia 43 (1975) 60-102; G.

'Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing, ²To You alone, Most High, do they belong, and no human is worthy to mention Your name. ³Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom You give us light. ⁴And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor; and bears a likeness of You, Most High One. ⁵Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful. ⁶Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather, through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste. ⁸Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom You light the night, and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong. Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs. ¹⁰Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love, and bear infirmity and tribulation. "Blessed are those who endure in peace for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned. ¹²Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape. "Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will for the second death shall do them no harm. 14Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility [CtC; FA:ED I, 113-14].

1. Creatures As Instruments of Praise

The structure of the *Canticle*, both literary and content-wise, is supported by the refrain "Praised be You," which recurs eight times. The phrase "Yours are the praises" of 1b must be added, to which corresponds

Ravasi, "'Cantico delle creature' e salmi della creazione," in Parola di Dio e Francesco d'Assisi, Assisi 1982, 64-89; C. Paolazzi, "Francesco d'Assisi, la 'lode,' il 'Cantico' e la letteratura volgare," in Il francescanesimo e il teatro medievale (Atti del Convegno nazionale di studi. San Miniato, 8-9-10 ottobre 1982), Castelfiorentino 1984, 70-120.

the concluding "Praise" of 14a in the form of an inclusion. The first fundamental observation is that what we have is a canticle of praise.

The clearest biblical parallel to our *Canticle* is the Canticle of the Three Young Men in Daniel 3:52-90, where the close connection between blessing and praise is particularly evident. In 3:52-56 the first line always begins with "Blessed are you..." and is repeated synonymously in the second with "Praiseworthy and exalted above all forever." In 3:57-90 the first line says over and over "Bless...the Lord" and the second echoes it with "Praise and exalt him above all forever." Both canticles can be described as canticles of praise.

Who is praised in the Canticle? It is the Most High, the all-powerful, good Lord and my Lord. The words "Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures" of 3a could lead us to think that creatures are also an object of praise. But to refute such an interpretation we need only reread 1b-2a, which says: "Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing. To You alone, Most High, do they belong." The idea is confirmed in all of Francis's writings, where praise is always reserved for God alone.

Who is praising? It is Francis, the man Francis and the human beings he speaks of. All Francis's writings—especially his prayers—are imbued with the praise of God. In them the entire Christian life is presented as a response of total and thankful praise to God who gives himself totally to us."

But if the one praised is God and the ones praising are human beings, what is the role of creatures? What is the meaning of the possessive "Canticle of the Creatures"? And how do we explain "Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures" of 3a and the next seven "Praised be You, my Lord, through..."? Of, with and through are three different and closely-connected prepositions that call for one common explanation.

In this strong and clear stream of praise that rises from human beings to God, creatures may play two roles, one causal and one instrumental. In the first case, the overall meaning of the *Canticle* would be "Praised be You, my Lord, because of creatures"; in the second case it would be "Praised be You, my Lord by means of creatures." The causal hypothesis provides a good explanation of the preposition through, but it does not explain the other two (of and with) as well. The instrumental hypothesis, on the other hand, gives a good explanation of all three prepositions. The praise that human beings address to God passes through creatures, who thus become instruments of this praise ("through Sister Moon and the stars") and

⁵⁶See especially ER XXIII; FA:ED I, 81-86.

join in the praise of human beings ("with all Your creatures"), so that this canticle of praise can be called "Canticle of the Creatures."

In the *Canticle* we sense an intense religiosity, a symphonic harmony, a living and shared cosmic liturgy. But the supporting refrain "Praised be You, my Lord" is itself enough to remove any sense of vagueness, anonymity or pantheism. There is a specific activity, which is praise; there is a recipient who is called Lord; and there is a personal subject of the activity, who is expressly referred to with the possessive adjective "my." Only the clear identification of this activity, this subject and this recipient permits us to convincingly place the *Canticle* in the context of Francis's writings with their constant and intense religiosity.

It is only after this clear recognition of the religious activity of praise carried out here, of its principal agent and its exclusively theological direction, can we turn our attention to other important, but secondary, aspects of the Canticle, such as its poetry and ecology. These aspects, if divorced from their theological and religious "humus," will not express completely all that Francis intended.

But the distinctive characteristic of praise in the Canticle is the mediation of creatures. Francis knows that to God alone belongs all honor, all glory and all praise. Before this God—most high, all-powerful and good—human beings, who are not worthy to even mention his name," can only bless him and praise him. And in order not to do this directly, human beings do it by making use of his creatures. They are creatures of God, but they are also our brothers and our sisters. These are the credentials for the role creatures are called to play between human beings and God: mediation of blessing and praise. Thus the trajectory of praise: Francis, creatures, the Lord.

And if the Lord is praised through all creatures, this happens even more clearly and intensely in human creatures, especially when they become conscious instruments of praise. This happens especially in four cases mentioned in the second part of the *Canticle*: when human beings give pardon (10a), when they bear infirmity and tribulation in peace (10b-11),

[&]quot;The words "no human is worthy to mention Your name" (CtC 2b) are echoed in "all of us, wretches and sinners, are not worthy to pronounce Your name" (ER XXIII, 5; FA:ED I, 82). While in the latter case the help of Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary, the angels and saints is asked in order that we might worthily thank the Father, in the *Canticle* the help of creatures is asked in order that we might be able to praise and bless the Lord.

³⁸The Assisi Compilation, 84 (FA:ED II, 187f) says that verses 10-11 of the *Canticle* were composed and added by Francis on the occasion of a violent quarrel between the bishop and the podestà of Assisi, a quarrel that Francis was able to settle.

when they are able to regard death as a sister (12) and when they are found in the Lord's most holy will until the end (13b)." It is interesting and important to notice how the praise and joy that permeate the first part of the Canticle, which we might call the cosmological part, are continued in the second part, which we might label anthropological. It does not consider those who are healthy, happy and satisfied, but rather the people of the Gospel beatitudes, those who bear injustice and give pardon, those who suffer and remain at peace."

The final verse summarizes the *Canticle* by addressing everyone and everything, by restoring the dimension of praise to the life and activity of all creatures, especially human beings (see v. 14: "...give Him thanks, and serve Him with great humility"), and by bringing again to fore the theological direction and deeply religious meaning of the entire Canticle.

2. Creatures As Instruments of Revelation

Our text is not only a canticle of praise but also a canticle of revelation. Who is revealed here? God, first of all, but also human beings and their vocation, as well as creatures and their role. And who is the one who reveals? It is Francis, but it is also creatures.

It is Francis who reveals to us that God is most high, all-powerful, good, and Lord; that to him and him alone belong praise, glory, honor and all blessing; that God is so great that no human is worthy to name him. It is Francis who also reveals to us that between this most high and all-powerful God and human beings there exists a relationship of closeness, of friendship, of mutual belonging, so that humans can call God "my Lord" nine times.

C. Paolazzi (Francesco d'Assisi, 106-07) offers the rather convincing suggestion that the addition consisted only in 10a: "Through those who give pardon for Your love."

⁵⁹The Assisi Compilation, 7 (FA:ED II, 120-21) tells us that verses 12-14 were composed by Francis and added to the *Canticle* when he was told that he was going to die. The "woe" of v. 13a corresponds to the "blessed" of v. 13b. We also find this concept and this juxtaposition in ER XXI, 7-8: "Blessed are those who die in penance, for they shall be in the kingdom of heaven. Woe to those who do not die in penance, for they shall be children of the devil" (FA:ED I, 78).

[&]quot;In vv. 10-13 there are clear references—even though they are not textual—not only to the Sermon on the Mount, but also to two brief sequences from the Book of Revelation: "I know your tribulation and your poverty, even though you are rich.... Do not fear what you are about to suffer.... [Y]ou will have affliction.... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.... The victor shall not be harmed by the second death" (Rv 2:9-11). "Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them" (Rv 14:13).

It is also Francis who reveals to us that creatures are "your creatures," that is, God's creatures; that it is God who lovingly cares for humans by brightening their day with the sun and their night with fire, and by giving them sustenance through the earth and the seasons; that every creature is their brother or sister. Again it is Francis who reveals that those who endure infirmity and tribulation in peace will be crowned by God, and that we will have nothing to fear if Sister Death finds us in his most holy will.

But, as in the case of praise, the distinctive feature of the revelation of the *Canticle* is the mediation of creatures. God is revealed not only through the words of Francis, but also through creatures. And this second type of revelation takes place not only in their static creaturely existence, but above all in their concrete service to human beings.

It has been noted that almost all the many adjectives used in the Canticle to describe creatures are also used by Francis in rest of his writings to describe God. The beauty, preciousness, brightness, strength and humility present in creatures reveal the beauty, preciousness, brightness, strength and humility of God. Creature speak of God; they reveal God.

In that sense the sun becomes a paradigm. It is the first of the creatures through whom the Lord is praised; it is introduced and set apart with the word "especially" (3b). Considering nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs, there are eight qualities used to describe the sun, distributed over four lines (3b-4b). And among these qualities special emphasis is given to those that refer to enlightening or revealing. That is why the whole crescendo reaches its high point in 4b, which concludes by saying explicitly that the sun "bears a likeness of You, Most High One." It is the sun as source of light that in a very special way bears a likeness of God, but it is all creation that bears in itself a reference to him and is thus a revelation of him."

In the Canticle creatures reveal God not so much through what they are in themselves, metaphysically, but more especially through how they reveal themselves to human beings and through what they do for them. The theophany of creatures in the Canticle is not static but dynamic; it is not ontological but historical. The sun lights up the day; the moon and stars

⁶¹Francis clearly grasps and re-expresses the revelatory significance typical of the creation psalms. Read again, for example, Psalm 19:2-5: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."

make the night clear and beautiful; the air, clouds and seasons guarantee creatures' sustenance; water is very useful and precious; fire brightens and warms; mother earth offers nourishment to all with fruit, flowers and herbs. The good and beautiful things that creatures give to humans reveals God's attentive and solicitous care for them.

It is God who enlightens us through the sun, it is God who provides sustenance for his creatures through the seasons, it is God who lights up our night through fire. The likeness of God that creatures bear in themselves becomes the revelation and mediation of his fatherly providence toward us.

In the Canticle we find a perfect integration of the two great books written by the hand of God: the book of the Word and the book of creation. The two books speak of the same God, but in order to be read and understood as revelation they require the eyes of faith.

3. Creatures As Instruments of Restoration

Besides being a canticle of praise and revelation, our text is also a canticle of restoration. Perhaps praise and revelation find their ultimate purpose and deepest meaning in restoration.

"To restore" means to give something back to its owner. In the Canticle what are the things to be given back to their owner? In 1b it says "Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing" and in 2a it adds "to You alone, Most High, do they belong." All praise, all glory, all honor and all blessing belong to the Lord alone. To him alone are they befitting; they are things that must be restored to him alone. To restore praise to God means to praise him, to restore glory to him means to glorify him, to restore honor to him means to honor him. The Canticle, since it is a canticle of praise, is restoration to God of the praise, glory and honor that belong to him alone.

Praise becomes the concrete way of restoring to God all that belongs to him. It also becomes the way to constantly make room within ourselves for the gift of God, that is, for God himself who gives himself totally to us. In that sense the contrast between everything and nothing that we find in the *Letter to the Entire Order* (29) is extremely effective: "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally" (FA:ED I, 118).

In 3a it speaks of "all Your creatures," and in 6c it refers again to "Your creatures." Everything is a creature of God and belongs to God. But in the *Canticle* each one of these creatures is also called our brother or sister. Everything is created by God and given to us as brother or sister. To

acknowledge this is already one way of restoring to God that which belongs to him.

But creatures are also said to be the instruments God uses to care for us (see 3c, "through whom You give us light"; 6c, "through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures"; 8b, "through whom You light the night"). To thank the Lord for this—and to do so by retracing the path God travels to reach us, namely, through creatures—is another way of restoration available to us.

The Canticle begins by spotlighting the most important actor, the most high, all-powerful, good Lord, of whom it is said: "Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing." Everything starts with him and must return to him in the form of praise, glory, honor and blessing. The conclusion of the Canticle repeats this whole attitude of restoration in summary form: "Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility." The most high, all-powerful, good Lord of 1a becomes my Lord in 14a, an expression that stresses God's closeness to us ("my") on the one hand, and his Lordship ("Lord") on the other.

All creatures, especially human beings, stand before the Lord in an attitude of service: "Serve Him with great humility" (14b). All creation praises God, reveals him and is restored to him. But it is obvious that praise, revelation and, even more, restoration take place in human beings above all. Indeed only they can become the conscious voice of every creature, gathering and addressing to God the blessing of the cosmos in the form of praise, revelation and restoration.

There are moments when the blessing of humans becomes especially clear and strong. They are the moments when humans divinely pardon ("for Your love") and suffer in peace (10-11), the moments when humans are able to see death as a sister and be found by her in the Lord's most holy will (12-13). These especially clear and strong moments of blessing coincide with the moments when it becomes harder to regard all people and things as gifts from God, and thus harder to praise him, to reveal him as giver of every good, to restore everything to him and restore ourselves completely to him.

The restoration presupposes the gift. The relationship humans-creatures-God as restoration is based on the relationship God-creatures-humans as gift. We are in a clear faith awareness of the gift's circularity. Everything is a gift from God and everything must be restored to God. The reality of revelation is God's gift to humans; the reality of praise is humans' gift to God. In this sense, restoration is the deeper meaning to which praise and revelation definitively point.

Creatures are the instruments God uses to give himself to us and the instruments we must use to restore ourselves to God. As mediating instruments between God and humans and humans and God, it is hard not to see in creatures a reference to the great Mediator, Christ, the locus of blessing in all three meanings encountered in the *Canticle*. This writing, too, ends up confirming Francis's special attention to the mystery of the incarnation and the humanity of the Son of God.

We can say that in the Canticle we find combined three meanings: praise, revelation and restoration. And we find here serenely expressed and fearlessly emphasized the role of creatures as instruments of praise, revelation and restoration. It is truly a "Canticle of the Creatures." But it takes someone like Francis to be able to recognize the individual voices, to be able to harmonize and direct them, thus turning them into a cosmic splendid chorus of praise, revelation, and restoration to the Creator and Lord of all people and all things. The Canticle helps us to recognize that everything—if seen in depth, that is with faith, as a gift from God—is indeed very beautiful and very good.

Jesus praised the Father, Lord of heaven and earth for having revealed these things to the little ones (see Mt 11:25). Francis was certainly one of the little ones who received the revelation of the Father in the Son. It is no accident that the liturgy has chosen this Gospel passage for the feast of Saint Francis. Another time Jesus proclaimed: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Francis, poor and meek, opens the eyes of faith and discovers that he is heir to earth and heaven, and so he speaks of creation in the language of the Gospel.

Chapter Six

Blessed Are the Clean in Heart, For They Shall See God

Francis Speaks of God

There is not a page in Francis that does not speak of God. Rather than how much—we would have to literally cite almost all his writings—we are interested in how Francis sees, experiences and speaks of God. Especially significant is the page that contains the *Praises of God*, where Francis acknowledges the holiness and unity of God, his inner and trinitarian life based on the wonderful things he does, starting with history and ending with the Trinity.

You are the holy Lord God, Who does wonderful things (Ps 77:15).

²You are strong. You are great. You are the most high.

You are the almighty king. You holy Father,

King of heaven and earth.

'You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;

You are the good, all good, the highest good,

Lord God living and true.

You are love, charity; You are wisdom, You are humility,

You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness,

You are security, You are rest,

You are gladness and joy, You are our hope, You are justice,

You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.

'You are beauty, You are meekness,

You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,

You are strength, You are refreshment. You are our hope,

You are our faith, You are our charity,

You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life:

Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior [(PrsG;

FA:ED I, 109].

But we prefer to examine here a text that is more complex and even richer, the *Earlier Rule XXIII*, 1-11.

1. "We Thank You"

The Earlier Rule XXIII, 1-11 is characterized by long lists of adjectives and nouns applied to God, exhortatory verbs addressed to "us" and descriptions of how we relate to him. Other features include the marked theological orientation (everything is addressed to God, who is thanked in

the first part and who alone we are urged to love, desire and believe in the second part); the all-inclusiveness of salvation history (creation, redemption, final salvation); the all-inclusiveness of the recipients of salvation history offered by God and of the exhortation to receive it; the totality of the response. We are looking at a literary and thematic unit that is meant to present the total and grateful response of human beings to the total and gratuitous gift of God.

ER XXIII, 1-6: Thanksgiving

The first part (vv. 1-6) is a solemn hymn of thanksgiving that has caused scholars to think of liturgical influence (*Te Deum*, *Gloria*, *Preface*, *Psalter*). In vv. 1-4 the threefold thanksgiving is direct ("We thank You"); in vv. 5-6 the twofold thanksgiving is indirect ("We ask [them] to give You thanks").

-XXIII, 1-4: We thank You

¹All-powerful, most holy, Almighty and supreme God, Holy and just Father, Lord King of heaven and earth we thank You for Yourself for through Your holy will and through You only Son with the Holy Spirit You have created everything spiritual and corporal and, after making us in Your own image and likeness (Gen 1:26), You placed us in paradise (Gen 2:15). ²Through our own fault we fell. We thank You for as through Your Son You created us, so through Your holy love with which You loved us (Gen 17:26) You brought about His birth as true God and true man by the glorious, ever-virgin, most blessed, holy Mary and You willed to redeem us captives through His cross and blood and death. ⁺We thank You for Your Son Himself will come again in the glory of His majesty to send into the eternal fire the wicked ones

> who have not done penance and have not known You

and to say to all those
who have known You, adored You and served You in penance:
"Come, you blessed of my Father,
receive the kingdom prepared for you
from the beginning of the world" (Mt 25:34) [(ER XXIII, 1-4; FA:ED I, 81-82].

The fact that the expression "we thank You" is repeated the same way three times stresses the importance the text wishes to give to this act of thanksgiving. The fact that this thanksgiving is explicitly motivated by creation (1-2), redemption (3) and the return of the Son (4) clearly links our attitude of thanks with God's creative, redemptive and salvific work on our behalf. Our first and fundamental attitude before God who has created us, redeemed us and will save us is one of thanksgiving.

But the first "we thank You" is accompanied by "for Yourself." Before he is thanked for what he has done and will do for us, God is thanked for and in himself. But this subtle and precious addition is not meant to suggest different objects or motives of thanksgiving. God has revealed himself to us as our Creator, Redeemer and Savior (see v. 9), and it is this God whom we thank.

The liturgical terminology of awe and enthusiasm used to describe God ("All-powerful, most holy, Almighty and supreme God, Holy and just Father, Lord King of heaven and earth") is not derived from philosophy but from revelation. It is not meant to describe God ontologically, but reflects a living and personal experience. The one described here is not God-in-himself but God-for-us.

This experiential knowledge of God and the actuality of the relationship with him are clearly expressed by the fact that salvation history is constantly referred to us: "After making us in Your own image and likeness You placed us in paradise" (1); "Through our own fault we fell" (2); "You created us...You loved us...You willed to redeem us" (3). Immediately in front of us we have, not the universal history of salvation, but the actual and personal relationship between God and us (he created us, redeemed us and will save us) and between us and God (we thank you), even though it is right to note the great things for which God is thanked.

The space devoted to God and us in vv. 1-4 expresses a clear hierarchy of importance: almost everything describes God. But let us compare what is said about us with what is said about God.

With regard to us, there is one event in the past ("we fell"), one in the present ("we thank You") and another reference, also in the present (know/not know God). The verbs are in the past with respect to the time when the Son will come, but they refer to our present. With regard to God, on the other hand, of the three basic concepts (create, redeem, save), two are in the past ("You created" and "You willed to redeem us") and one in the future ("He will come again in glory...to say..."). This will be even clearer in v. 8: "Who has created, redeemed and will save us."

And so the first four verses are a solemn prayer of thanksgiving that places us before God. Our attitude of thanksgiving, faith, adoration and penance is the result and recognition of the fact that God created us, we fell, and God redeemed us; but it is also a condition for being definitively saved by the Son who will come again. Salvation history, for which we give thanks to God, is actualized in our life of thanksgiving, faith and adoration.

-XXIII, 5-6: We ask that Jesus, Mary and the saints give you thanks through us

Because all of us, wretches and sinners, are not worthy to pronounce Your name, we humbly ask our Lord Jesus Christ,
Your beloved Son,
in Whom You were well pleased (Mt 17:5),
together with the Holy Spirit,
the Paraclete,
to give You thanks,
for everything
as it pleases You and Him,
Who always satisfies You in everything,
through Whom You have done so much for us.
Alleluia!

Because of Your love, we humbly beg the glorious Mother, the most blessed, ever-virgin Mary, Blessed Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, all the choirs of the blessed seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, principalities, powers, virtues, angels, archangels, Blessed John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, Peter, Paul, the blessed patriarchs and prophets, the innocents, apostles, evangelists, disciples, the martyrs, confessors and virgins, the blessed Elijah and Henoch, all the saints who were, who will be, and who are

to give You thanks for these things,
as it pleases You,
God true and supreme,
eternal and living,
with Your most beloved Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the Holy Spirit,
the Paraclete,
world without end.
Amen.
Alleluia!
(ER XXIII, 5-6; FA:ED I, 82-83).

We have here two sentences whose concepts and basic structure are essentially identical: "We humbly ask our Lord Jesus Christ...to give You thanks" (5), and "We humbly beg [Mary, the angels and saints]...to give You thanks" (6). The two sentences also have in common the manner of giving thanks ("as it pleases You"), the motive ("for everything" and "for these things"), as well as the mention of the three Persons of the Trinity and the concluding joyful, liturgical cry "Alleluia."

After the threefold "we thank You" of vv. 1-4, notice the beautiful and subtle apparent contradiction from which the second section flows: "Because all of us, wretches and sinners, are not worthy to pronounce Your name..." we beg Christ and the saints to do this for us. The contradiction is only formal. In reality, our thanksgiving to God continues, but united to the thanksgiving of Christ, "Who always satisfies You in everything, through Whom You have done so much for us," and to that of Mary, the angels and the saints, persons already declared "blessed of my Father" and already entered definitively into his kingdom. The pattern "we thank You" of the first section is replaced here by the pattern "we beg Christ and the saints to thank You for us."

The hierarchy of importance of these mediators of our thanksgiving is expressed clearly by the order in which they are mentioned (Christ, Mary, angels, saints). But the essential reason why they are specialists in giving thanks to God is the same: it is the thanksgiving expressed by Jesus Christ. He is able to thank God as it pleases God, because he is the beloved Son in whom God was well pleased, who is sufficient always and in every way, through whom the Father has done so many and such great things. Christ is a specialist is giving thanks because he is a specialist in life as a son. Apart from the uniqueness of Christ, this is the reason why Mary, the angels and the saints can also thank God as it pleases him. We all need their mediation and are not worthy to pronounce God's name for precisely the opposite reason: we are wretches and sinners.

The first part of the chapter (1-6), a quasi-liturgical hymn of praise, compares us who are wretches and sinners with God who created us, redeemed us and will save us. Our two attitudes toward him are thanksgiving, on the one hand, and faith, adoration and penitent service on the other. The two attitudes are closely linked and seem to present themselves as two aspects of one and the same reality, namely our Gospel life, in which salvation history is actualized and which is the true way of giving thanks to God.

2. "Nothing else...except God, the true and supreme good"

XXIII, 7-11: Exhortation

The second part of the chapter (7-11) is characterized by exhortatory verbs, either in the indicative ("ask and beg"), or especially in the subjunctive. Again in the second part, as in the first, we wretches and sinners are compared to God who created us, redeemed us and will save us. Our attitudes toward God—thanksgiving, faith adoration and service—are stated again and linked even more closely. The overall content and profound meaning of the Gospel life here described become clear.

-XXIII, 7: We ask all the small and the great to persevere in the true faith

All of us lesser brothers, useless servants (see Lk 17:10), humbly ask and beg those who wish to serve the Lord God within the holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and all the following orders: priests, deacons, subdeacons. acolytes, exorcists, lectors, porters, and all clerics, all religious men and women, all penitents and youths, the poor and the needy. kings and princes, workers and farmers. servants and masters, all virgins, continent and married women, all lay people, men and women, all children, adolescents, young and old, the healthy and the sick, all the small and the great, all peoples, races, tribes, and tongues (Rv 7:9), all nations and all peoples everywhere on earth, who are and who will be to persevere in the true faith and in penance

for otherwise no one will be saved. (ER XXIII, 7; FA:ED I, 83-84).

The first section is one long sentence whose basic structure is highlighted in the title above. The three adjectives that accompany the noun "Church" ("holy, Catholic and Apostolic") are a clear profession of devotion, orthodoxy and fidelity. But the construction of the sentence ("those who wish to serve the Lord God in the holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church") and the detailed list that follows (clergy, religious and laity), while expressing thanks, respect and veneration for the various states and ministries within the Church, also says that the essential thing for all is "to serve the Lord God."

The apparent lack of order in the list of the laity (from "all youths, the poor and the needy" to "all nations and all peoples everywhere on earth") seems to suggest that in serving God it does not matter much whether we are poor or kings, servants or masters, single or married, men or women, young or old, healthy or sick. If some have a certain advantage, it seems to be the little ones (systematically named first) rather than the great ones.

But notice that at a certain point the list seems to break out, to go beyond the boundaries, whether ecclesiastical or historical, and remind all people of every tribe and tongue, all people of the earth who are and who will be, of the same thing said to be essential for the clergy, religious and laity of the Catholic Church, namely, that they "persevere in the true faith and in penance."

After the detailed and universal list of addressees, we come to the two basic verbs "ask and beg" [in the English translation they come before the list]. Accompanied by the adverb "humbly," they express a heartfelt, respectful and clear request. As in the "humbly ask" of v. 5 addressed to Christ, and the "humbly beg" of v. 6 addressed to the saints, so here the whole world is addressed with humble and clear parrhesía ("boldness").

The subject is "all of us lesser brothers, useless servants," the same as in 1-4, even though it is made explicit only now. "Brothers" places them in a family relationship, not only among themselves and with Catholics, but with all people. "Lesser" enables everyone to regard them without fear and subjection. "Servants" describes their universal prayer and petition as service. "Useless" directs attention away from the messengers and to the Lord and the message. The whole expression places them humbly, and in the last place, among those who must "persevere in the true faith and in penance."

"All" includes all the categories and all the persons mentioned above, including the lesser brothers, as is borne out by the first person plural of the verb "persevere." Faith and penance, as in the first part of the chapter, refer to the life of the brothers with its various elements and meanings: thanksgiving, faith, adoration and service to God, a life in which the history of God's salvation is actualized for us. Faith and penance is a form of hendiadys that harks back to, and expresses, the single-minded response called for by Jesus: "Repent (poenitemini), and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).

Verse 7 is the humble and courageous appeal addressed by the lesser brothers to all those who wish to serve God within and outside the Catholic Church. For all, brothers included, there is only one way to be saved by God. It is the way of perseverance in the true faith and in penance, an attitude that is both a result of and a requirement for salvation, a way and a place in which the true faith is expressed, God is served and thanked, and salvation history is actualized for us.

-XXIII, 8-11: Let us magnify God, the Savior of all who believe and hope in Him, and love Him

*With our whole heart,
our whole soul (Dt 6:5),
our whole mind,
with our whole strength and fortitude
with our whole understanding (Mk 12:30, 33; Lk 10:27)
with all our powers
with every effort,
every affection,
every feeling,

let us all love the Lord God
Who has given and gives to each one of us
our whole body, our whole soul and our whole life,
Who has created, redeemed and will save us by His mercy alone,

every desire and wish

Who did and does everything good for us, miserable and wretched, rotten and foul, ungrateful and evil ones.

Therefore, let us desire nothing else,

let us desire nothing else,
let us want nothing else,
let nothing else please us and cause us delight
except our Creator, Redeemer and Savior,
the only true God,
Who is the fullness of good,

all good, every good, the true and supreme good, Who alone is good (Lk 18:19), merciful, gentle, delightful, and sweet, Who alone is holy, just, true, holy, and upright, Who alone is kind, innocent, clean, from Whom, through Whom and in Whom (see Rom 11:36) is all pardon, all grace, all glory of all the penitents and just ones, of all the blessed rejoicing together in heaven. Therefore, let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us, nothing come between us. "Wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of the day, every day and continually, let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High and Supreme Eternal God Trinity and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Savior of all who believe and hope in Him, and love Him, Who, without beginning and end, is unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, praiseworthy, glorious, exalted, sublime, most high, gentle, lovable, delightful, and totally desirable above all else for ever. Amen (ER XXIII, 8-11; FA:ED I, 84-86).

The entire second part is an exhortation. But, while the exhortation in the first section (7) is in the indicative ("we ask and beg") and is addressed by a subject ("all of us lesser brothers") to recipients ("all people"), in the second section (8-11) the exhortation is in the subjunctive and there is no longer a distinction between subject and recipients. We have here four sentences, three of which are very long and one very short (10). In each of the three long sentences we find the same fixed schema that considers God and us, with a stream of verbs expressing what God has done, does and will do for us, and what we must do for God. There is also a long list of adverbial phrases that accompany these verbs predicated of God and us. And finally there is a whole series of adjectives and nouns describing God and us. Let us summarize all this material.

The 13 verbs that express what God has done, does and will do for us can be reduced to three: created, redeemed, will save. The 11 adverbials phrases that accompany these activities of God on our behalf can be reduced to three: totally, freely, all. It is harder to reduce the 47 adjectives and nouns that describe God: the only true Lord, one and three, totally desirable above all else.

As for us, the 17 exhortations that express what we must do for God can be reduced to seven: believe, desire, love, honor, adore, serve, thank. The 24 adverbial phrases that accompany these verbs can be reduced to seven: all, totally, exclusively, always, in every place, truly, humbly. The 11 adjectives and nouns that describe us can be reduced to eight: wretched, ungrateful, evil, penitent, just, believing, hoping, loving (God). These reductions can help us not only to see more clearly and concisely what vv. 8-11 say about God and about us, but also to uncover their deeper meaning. Let us proceed, one step at a time, to collate them.

Combining the verbs with their corresponding adverbial phrases, we have, on the one hand, God who created us, redeemed us and will save us totally, freely, all of us; on the other hand, we are exhorted to believe in him, desire him, love him, honor him, adore him, serve him and thank him, all of us, totally, exclusively, always, in every place, truly and humbly. On the part of God we have the total, free and universal gift of creation, redemption and salvation. The exhortation to us is that our response be total, grateful and universal.

Now let us collate the adjectives and nouns describing God and us. God is the only true Lord, one and three, the supreme good, totally desirable above all else. The description of us seems confused and even contradictory. First we are described as wretched, ungrateful and evil, then as penitent, just, believing, hoping and loving (God). Actually there is no contradiction. We find again here the same series described in 1-6. We

(through our own fault) are wretched, ungrateful and evil, but God has redeemed us and now are able to live as penitent, just, believing, hoping and loving God. Our passage from a life of wretchedness, ingratitude and evil to a life of penance, justice, faith, hope and love is both the result of God's creative and redemptive activity and the condition for receiving the fullness of God's gift, final salvation.

Now let us examine the very short verse 10: "Therefore, let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us, nothing come between us." On the one hand there is God, and on the other there is us, and verse 10 exhorts us to let nothing hinder our relationship with God, nothing separate us from him, nothing come between him and us. Brief though it is, this verse turns out to be of fundamental importance. The exhortation to avoid every obstacle, everything that would separate us from God or come between us and him means, concretely, that we are asked to avoid everything that might prevent us from living this life of faith and penance.

The basic verb of v. 8 is "love," the first and recapitualtory verb of v. 9 is "desire," and the first of the twelve exhoratory verbs of v. 11 is "believe." The three verbs are repeated in chiastic form in v. 11 before the attributes of God: "...Savior of all who believe and hope in Him, and love Him." Faith, hope and love are the content and meaning of the Gospel life described here.

In v. 8 it is mentioned that God "has created, redeemed and will save us by His mercy alone." In v. 9 God is called "our Creator, Redeemer and Savior." In v. 11 we are urged to give thanks to God, "Creator of all, Savior of all who believe and hope in Him, and love Him. The entire great exhortation of vv. 8-11 is filled with awestruck praise of God and his works and is an expression of profound thanks to him. The last of the many exhortatory verbs in this section is "give thanks" (to God). As in the first part, here too giving thanks to God continues to play a predominant role.

The Earlier Rule XXIII, 8-11 presents, on the one hand, God with his total, free and universal gift of creation, redemption and salvation. On the other hand it presents us, urged to respond in a way that is total, thankful and universal. Our response is both the result and condition of God's saving gift, and it consists in a grateful life of faith, hope and love. The first part of the chapter favors gratitude, the second exhortation. But the theme is the same.

3. Our Life As a Total and Grateful Response to God's Total and Free Gift

Analysis of the *Earlier Rule* XXIII, 8-11 reveals feelings and attitudes clearly and strongly characterized by the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, by thanks and praise to God, and by the actualization of salvation history. The Gospel life described here is presented as a total and grateful response to God's total and free gift.

The Earlier Rule XXIII presents many things God has done, does and will do for us, many gifts he has offered us, offers us and will offer us. But more than God's gifts (even though these have to do with all we have and are), it highlights God's gift, himself as total gift to us. It is very significant that in v. 1 God is thanked for himself before he is thanked for creation, redemption and salvation. This is the real key to interpreting the many adjectives and nouns that describe him.

We know that everything good we have comes from God, but we are urged to believe in him, to desire only him and to love him, not according to the logic of the marketplace ("give in order to receive") but according to the logic of love, in which gift and thanks cease to be a matter of keeping accounts and become instead a full and authentically interpersonal relationship. It is true that God has created us, redeemed us and will save us (8), but now he is "our Creator, Redeemer and Savior" (9). It is true that he has made us and "does everything good for us" (8), but we love him because we acknowledge him and experience him as our "fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good" (9). His gifts too are precious, but it is he above all who is "sublime, most high, gentle, lovable, delightful and totally desirable above all else for ever" (11).

The manner and place in which God's gifts—and still more, God's gift—come to us and we relish them, is the life of sonship and fraternity, the life of faith, hope and love, the life of thanks and praise described here, a life that is a response to God's total gift.

But our response must also be characterized by totality. Reread, for example, the adverbial phrases in v. 11. "Wherever" and "in every place" indicate totality of place; "all of us" indicates totality of persons; "at every hour, at every time of the day, every day and continually" indicates totality of time; "truly and humbly" indicates total authenticity. In v. 10 "nothing else" repeated three times emphasizes that God is the exclusive object of hope. The four verbs "desire, want, please, delight" indicate the totality of feelings involved. "Fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good" indicate God acknowledged as the only good.

The Earlier Rule XXIII presents the encounter between God, who freely gives us all gifts and himself totally as a gift, and us, who respond gratefully with faith, hope, love, thanks and praise. The life described here is the total and grateful response of human beings to the total and free gift of God.⁴¹

-From the Good News that God is father to the Good News that all people are his children and brothers and sisters to one another

A gospel is good news, good news that is pleasing to hear. The Good News par excellence is that of Jesus Christ who, by his life and words, his historical presence and his continuing presence among us, brings us the amazing news that there is a God, that he has the face and heart of a father, that he is all-powerful and good. The Good News of Jesus Christ brings us the amazing news that we are pardoned, welcomed into the house as children in God's trinitarian family. And this is true for all people. All are children of the same father and so all are brothers and sisters. From the Good News that God is father derives the Good News that all people are his children and brothers and sisters of one another.

This is the what we find expressed in the Earlier Rule XXIII, 1-11, not theoretically and schematically, but as the fruit, consequence, effect, experience, sweet fragrance of our encounter with the Gospel. From it derive the overflowing joy, the endless admiration, the unrestrained thanksgiving and the enraptured praise that permeate every word of this text. The writer is immersed in the experience of the Gospel. He feels in every fiber of his being the fatherhood of God, his own sonship, universal sister-brotherhood. Words are not enough for him to express and communicate the intensity of the Gospel experience he is living, and so he urges: "Therefore, let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight except..." (ER XXIII, 9). So great is his joy that he cannot keep it to himself, but feels the need and urgency to communicate to all this Gospel, this amazing news. The detailed and drawnout list of the Earlier Rule XXIII, 7 (but see also the beginning of 2LtF; FA:ED I, 45) reveals his touching concern that in the whole world someone might be excluded from coming to know this amazing news: God is Father, we are his children and brothers and sisters of one another."

⁶²Both in its literary genre and in its content, ER XXIII could be described as St. Francis's *Magnificat*.

⁶³ER XXIII, 1-11 is a precious example of clear and authentic contemplation, and as such it is also an example of extraordinarily effective evangelization, consistent with the way Francis speaks of mission.

Chapter Seven

This is the Life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Francis Speaks of His Gospel Life

The first rule and life that Francis wrote—the Earlier Rule—was described by him as "the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Prol 2). What is the meaning of this original expression? What relationship is there for Francis between the Gospel and the life he describes in his rule?

It is important to clarify, first of all, the relationship between "rule" and "life" of the brothers. The term "rule" figures only twice in the entire *Earlier Rule*, at the beginning and at the end (I, 1; XXIV, 4). It is always linked to the term "life," which we find 26 times, to which must be added five uses of the verb "live." Our text's preference for "life" is obvious.

The writing as such is a rule, but to emphasize that it is a rule of life, preference is clearly given to the second term. Our text describes a way of life, which is described as "the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" insofar as it is life according to the Gospel, life of the Gospel, and life of Jesus Christ.

1. Life according to the Gospel

The first meaning of the expression, "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," is that the life presented in the *Earlier Rule* is a Gospel life, a way of life inspired by the Gospel, a life according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is presented as a way to follow, a truth to accept with faith, a life to live.

-The brothers must follow the way pointed out by Jesus Christ in the Gospel

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the one absolute point of reference. It is the Gospel, always in the singular, even though all four Gospels are abundantly cited and frequently combined. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is he who speaks today ("speaks" is always in the present tense) through the Gospel.

How are the brothers to live? What is their rule of life? It is Jesus Christ himself who points out the way to them through his Gospel. That is why so much space is given to Gospel citations and why the rest is simply a paraphrase of the Gospel or practical directions for translating into real life

the way pointed out by the Gospel. In the Earlier Rule XXII, 40 it is Jesus himself who says, "I am the Way."

Another way of saying that the brothers must follow the way pointed out by Jesus in the Gospel is the verb "follow," which occurs so often in Francis's writings, especially in the *Earlier Rule*. They are to follow Jesus Christ, his words, his teaching, his example, his will, his footprints, his humility and poverty.

The terminology, the links, and the frequent Gospel citations clearly express this idea that the brothers must follow, faithfully and at all times, the way pointed out by Jesus Christ in the Gospel.

-The brothers must accept with active faith the truth presented by Jesus in the Gospel

It is not enough to simply obey all the Gospel commands of Jesus and meticulously retrace his footprints. There is something even more important: to accept with active faith the truth presented by Jesus in the Gospel.

"The truth" is Jesus Christ insofar as he is the Father's revelation, insofar as he is present in his Gospel, insofar as he is accepted and internalized by the Spirit in faith, and insofar as he is the place where we can be glorified and sanctified, where we can see the Father's glory and live as children in communion with him. "The truth," as the Earlier Rule XXII makes especially clear, is the Christ of the Gospel accepted with active faith. As presented here, following consists in preserving the word (with faith) in order to remain in Christ (the truth), and thus see the glory of the Father.

Holding on to his holy Gospel (XXII, 41)—with the two inseparable meanings of accepting it with faith and observing it—summarizes the entire rule of life of the brothers. It is only when the words of Jesus remain in us through active faith that we remain in Christ the truth.

We cannot follow the way pointed out by Jesus in the Gospel without "doing the truth" in the Johannine sense, that is, without making God's project revealed by Jesus in the Gospel our own through faith. That is why the *Earlier Rule XI*, 5 also cites 1 John 3:18: "Let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth."

-The brothers must live the life described by Jesus in the Gospel

It is in the Gospel that we discover how Jesus lived and how he invites us to live. Therefore the life of the brothers should be faithfully conformed to the life of the Lord. With regard to following the footprints of Jesus, the brothers should serve and obey one another, because this is the true and holy obedience of Jesus (ER V, 14-15). They should be humble and

poor, rejoice when they live among the outcasts and not be ashamed to seek alms when necessary, because Jesus was humble, poor, a stranger who lived on alms and was not ashamed (ER IX, 1-5). They should regard their enemies as friends and love them greatly, since Jesus called his betrayer a friend and willingly offered himself to his executioners (ER XXII, 2-4).

As for the teaching of Jesus that they must follow, we would have to transcribe almost half the entire text. This also shows that the life of the brothers must be conformed to the Gospel life presented by Jesus. The life of the brothers consists in obeying Jesus Christ who speaks in the Gospel lived in the Church.

To live the life described by Jesus in the Gospel, one great and permanent requirement seemed to Francis essential: to live without anything of one's own. This allows us to make room in ourselves for the Lord and to live as brothers at all times and to all people. It is not a matter of giving up just things, but everything, even ourselves. The *Earlier Rule II* translates into concrete norms this need to leave everything. Even clothing will be reduced to an absolute minimum. Nor will they have their own prayers or special norms regarding food, but they will use the prayers of the Church and be allowed, in accordance with the Gospel, to eat everything (ER III, 3, 13). They should have nothing of their own, not even their poverty.

Relations among the brothers (ER IV-VI) are governed by the law of mutual service and obedience (V, 14), and "let everyone in general be called a lesser brother" (VI, 3). The brothers should not have a status that would exempt them from working to earn their living, and they should not make any place their own (ER VII). Money is a grave risk, and they should receive it only for the needs of the sick and the lepers (ER VIII, 3, 12).

"Without anything of their own" and "minority" find a wonderful and concrete socio-psychological expression in the Earlier Rule IX: "They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside." Jesus was "poor and a stranger and lived on alms," and the brothers should do the same. Everyone should confidently make known his needs to the others, never judging his brother. If a brother should fall sick, let him desire to be "whatever the Lord wills, whether sick or well" (ER X, 3). They should have no rights to defend as their own, and so in every situation "let them strive to respond humbly, saying: I am a useless servant" (ER XI, 3).

In the section that presents the brothers as witnesses to the Gospel (ER XIV-XVII), "without anything of their own" plays an essential role.

"Take nothing for the journey" refers not only to material baggage. It also includes the right to defend themselves against injustice and violence, the choice of apostolic means and forms that will be humanly effective, and calculations based on human prudence. It includes not only the use of physical weapons but those of dialectic as well, appropriation of the office of minister or preacher, and even appropriation of the good that results from their life and apostolate.

In the Earlier Rule XXII, "without anything of their own" is expressed in the one task entrusted to the brothers, that of removing obstacles to the efficacy of the word and the Spirit. Every kind of ownership leaves less space for God in our heart and our life. To live without anything of our own means to make ourselves a welcoming place for God's gift; it summarizes the entire life of the brothers as life according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. Life of the Gospel

The second meaning of the expression, "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," complements and, in a certain sense, follows from the first. To the extent that the life of the brothers conforms to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it is also the place where the Gospel lives.

-The life of the brothers is the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a traveled and visible way

The Gospel is a document that points out the way to eternal life. If no one consults it to set out on the way to eternal life, the Gospel remains unused and dead for all practical purposes. To consult it for other reasons or with other interests would be like studying a road map interested only in the kind of paper or printing method used. The Gospel, for Saint Francis, is a road to be traveled. Knowledge and study of the Gospel must help us to live it; otherwise they are good for nothing and in fact harmful.

The Earlier Rule presents the life of the brothers as the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a traveled way. The Prologue says that

⁶⁴Particularly clear and incisive on this subject is Admonition VII (which F. Manns has called "a real treatise in hermeneutics"): "The apostle says: The letter kills, but the spirit gives life (2Cor 3:6). Those people are put to death by the letter who only wish to know the words alone, that they might be esteemed wiser than others and be able to acquire great riches to give to their relatives and friends. And those religious are put to death by the letter who are not willing to follow the spirit of the divine letter but, instead, wish only to know the words and to interpret them for others. And those people are brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter who do not attribute every letter they know, or wish to know, to the body but, by word and example, return them to the most high Lord God to Whom every good belongs."

Francis asked and received confirmation from the Pope for his Gospel life. Certainly it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ itself that has to be granted and confirmed by the Pope. Rather it is the manner, the concrete way traveled by Francis and his followers to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that needs papal confirmation.

For Francis the Gospel is not a literary text, but something living. These are the "fragrant words" of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. If the words of the Gospel are fragrant, it is because they are a living expression of Jesus Christ, who is present and lives in the Gospel, just as he is present and lives in the Eucharist. And it is only the Church that preserves the living presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in his words.

The Church's confirmation that the way followed by Francis and his brothers conforms to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, signifies and guarantees that in their life, as in the life of the Church, the Gospel is living. The only one who can guarantee this is the Church. It has done so, and it is no accident that this confirmation is placed at the very beginning of the *Earlier Rule*.

It is only in real life that the teaching and footprints of Jesus are followed, retraced, made visible again. But this teaching and these footprints are contained in the Gospel. The life of the brothers is the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a traveled and visible way, becomes life, takes on life again. The life of the brothers is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If no one were to travel the way pointed out by the Gospel, this way would become unrecognizable. The comparison with a road that soon deteriorates and disappears, if it is not used, is not out of place, because the Gospel road is a way to be traveled. That is why in Luke, the theologian of the way, the term refers concretely to the life of Christians. And that is also why in John the way is not an abstract thing, but the historical person of Jesus Christ.

"The road that leads to life is constricted; those who find it are few" (ER XI, 13, citing Mt 7:14). The only ones who find it are those who seek it and actually travel it. In the *Earlier Rule* XXII the entire life of the brothers is presented as following, that is, as a way that is actually traveled. And, significantly, this following is also understood to mean continuation of the Father's revelation. This is possible only to the extent that this following makes the brothers' life the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a traveled way, becomes alive, continuing its task of revelation in and

⁶⁵²LtF 2-3 (FA:ED I, 45-46); see also ER XXII, 41 (FA:ED I, 81).

through their life. By "holding onto the Gospel" (ER XXII, 41) the brothers are following the Gospel way, becoming living bearers of the word that continues to live in them.

Again in the Earlier Rule XXII, great emphasis is place on the explanation of the parable of the sower. Only in the good soil, only in the life of the brothers as a Gospel way that is traveled, do the footprints of the Gospel of Jesus Christ make a mark, become visible, take on life. Preserving the word in their heart with active faith gives eternal life to the brothers, but it also gives life to the word of God. The Earlier Rule presents the life of the brothers as the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a way visibly traveled, where it lives.

-The life of the brothers is the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ lives and bears fruit

The life of the brothers, presented in the Earlier Rule XXII as reception of the Gospel revelation with active faith, is the place where the Gospel becomes fully true and living. Just as the life of Jesus was the place where the truth was able to shine brightly, so the life of the brothers is the place where it can continue to live and produce its effects of holiness and revelation. This "truth" is the Gospel as revelation of the mystery of Christ, and as such it lives and produces its fruit in the life of the brothers.

In the Earlier Rule XXII there is a tendency to identify the seed of the Gospel with the brothers who receive it with active faith. This daring concept is revealed by the construction: "As for (the seed/the word of God) that...they are the ones who...." The Synoptics use various expressions, and this form is used only by Luke and only twice (8:14, 15). The fact that, given such a variety of expressions (four in each Synoptic), our text chooses this form for all four cases has to be considered deliberate and significant.

"The word (the Gospel)...are the ones who...." Just as the heart has no history without the Gospel, so the Gospel has no history either (it perishes, it dies) unless it is received with faith. The word that dies are the ones who do not allow the Gospel to live in them, while the word received with faith are the ones who allow the Gospel to live in them. The meaning is strong and clear: the Gospel that lives and produces fruit are those who receive the Gospel word with active faith.

In the Earlier Rule XXIII the life of the brothers is presented as a receptacle that must be emptied completely in order to be filled solely and completely with the one supreme Good who is God. But God gives himself in the Spirit (see XXII, 31) and the Spirit gives himself in the words of Jesus, in the Gospel (XXII, 39). "Therefore, let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us, nothing come between us" (XXIII, 10). The receptacle must be

crystal-clear, perfectly transparent to the living presence of its Gospel content. This insistence on the word "nothing" suggests that we go beyond the image of receptacle to that of Aristotelian "matter." Although conceptually distinct, matter and form cannot exist separately. The brothers get everything from the form of the Gospel, but the Gospel cannot live and produce fruit unless it is in an incarnate and individuated form of life. The life of the brothers is the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ lives and bears fruit.

In the life of the brothers the Gospel becomes a traveled way, and truth that is accepted. This life is the good soil in which the Gospel lives and bears fruit; this is its living and transparent ostensorium. The Gospel lives in the Gospel life of the brothers.

3. Life of Jesus Christ

Closely linked to the latter two ideas is a third meaning. In the life of the brothers, which is life according to the Gospel and life of the Gospel, there lives Jesus Christ. To come to this conclusion we would need only recall the relationship established by the *Earlier Rule* between the Gospel and Jesus Christ. To obey the Gospel is to obey Jesus Christ, to follow the Gospel is to follow Jesus Christ, to preserve the Gospel is to remain in Christ. The Gospel is Jesus Christ who speaks today.

In the Earlier Rule the life of the brothers is "following Christ" and "life in the Spirit." These are two aspects of one reality: following Christ in the Spirit. The Earlier Rule XXII, 39 cites John 6:64: "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life." The Spirit is the one who gives life to us, to the Gospel and to Christ. By causing us to receive the Gospel and preserve it with active faith, he causes us to remain in Christ. Thus the Spirit is the author of our christification. By causing the words of Jesus to be received and preserved with active faith, he gives life again to the Gospel, causing it to pass from the death of the letter to the life of the Spirit. Thus the Spirit is the author of evangelization. Finally, by causing the words of Jesus in which he is present to be received and preserved with active faith, he gives life in the Spirit to Christ again, allowing him to live in us. The Spirit continues to be author of the incarnation. In all three cases, life results from the encounter between the word and the Spirit in the Gospel life of the brothers.

The incarnation took place in the encounter of three elements: Word, Spirit, and a receptive human place. The Word of God became flesh through the working of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary. The Word and the Spirit of God call out to one another, but they can meet only in a

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receptive human place such as Mary. The life of the brothers is presented in the *Earlier Rule* as total and grateful openness to the total and gratuitous gift of God, in other words, as a receptive human place for the encounter between the Word and Spirit of God.

Thus the incarnation, the life of Jesus Christ, can continue in the life of the brothers, again through the working of the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the Gospel and to Jesus Christ in the life of the brothers. Their life as life in the Spirit is the place where Jesus Christ lives.

We have asked ourselves in what sense the Gospel rule and life presented by Francis is defined by him as "life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Having made it clear that the reference point is not the text of the Rule but the life of the brothers, three complementary and mutually dependent answers have surfaced.

The life of the brothers is a life according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The brothers must live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The programmatic "follow the footprints of our Lord" points to the Gospel way to follow. "To follow the will of the Lord and to please Him" (XXII, 9) refers to this life as a journey of active faith that enables us to receive the truth of the Gospel and make it our own. Living without anything of our own is our concrete way of following, with active faith, the Gospel life.

The life of the brothers is the *life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. The Gospel of Jesus Christ lives in the life of the brothers. In it the Gospel way, truth, and life pass from the death of the letter to the life of experience. The way becomes traveled and visible, the truth is received and continues to reveal, the life becomes an experience of encounter. The life lived is the place where the Gospel word can continue to reveal and glorify the Son and the Father, communicating the divine life of which it is the bearer, thus becoming fully true and living.

The Gospel life of the brothers is the actuality of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, who is present and speaks in his Gospel, lives in the life of the brothers. As in Mary's womb, so in the brothers' life the Word becomes flesh again by the working of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ can continue to live and glorify the Father. The brothers, by living the Gospel in the Spirit and in the Church, become themselves Church, the place where Jesus Christ lives today, the actualization of Jesus Christ who is the way, truth and life. When Gospel and life meet, the relationship is vital for both.

We might think that Francis sees such rich meaning only in his own life and that of the brothers who will join him in observing the Rule. That is not the case. Francis did not intend to found a religious order. Even in his first rule, Francis is thinking simply of how to live the Gospel. To convince ourselves of this we need only read the Letter to the Faithful. There we find—applied to all the faithful—the major content of the Earlier Rule. Let us limit ourselves to a short passage the describes the significance Francis sees in the Gospel life of all the faithful:

⁴⁸ And the Spirit of the Lord will rest (Is 11:2) upon all those men and women who have done and persevered in these things and It will make a home and dwelling place in them (Jn 14:23). ⁴⁹ And they will be the children of the heavenly Father (Mt 5:45), Whose works they do. ⁵⁰ And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵¹ We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵² We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of His Father Who is in heaven (Mt 12:50); ⁵³ mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example [2LtF 48-53; FA:ED I, 48-49].

"All those who have done these things" refers to following the footprints of our Lord, receiving with faith and observing "the fragrant words of my Lord" (2LtF 2; see also 34 and 39). "They will be children of the heavenly Father, Whose works they do" expresses clearly and simply what we have already found in the Earlier Rule XXII, that the fruits reveal the tree, that to live as children is to be children of the Father. The idea of christification is already present here. We are children in the Son, because the works we do are the Father's, just as the works Jesus did were the Father's.

But christification is even more evident in the family relationship established with Jesus: we are his spouses, brothers and mothers. "We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ." Here the author of this nuptial union between the faithful soul and Christ is the Holy Spirit (but this takes place only when they "have done and persevered in these things," that is by receiving him with faith and observing his word). In the Earlier Rule XXII it is the word of God (insofar as it is internalized and observed as "Spirit and life"). In both texts this nuptial union, this christification, is the work of the word and the Spirit in those who "hold onto the Gospel."

⁶⁶Very soon his way of living the Gospel also took on institutional form and even became a religious order. All of this was probably providential, "but in the beginning it was not so."

"We are brothers when we do the will of His Father Who is in heaven." Also in the Earlier Rule XXII "to follow the footprints of our Lord" means "to follow the will of the Lord and to please Him." We see and know the Father's will in the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus revealed himself as Son of God by living as Son of the Father, by always doing his will and pleasing him. "To hold onto the Gospel" means to do as he did, thus becoming his brothers, children of the Father like him, sons in the Son, cristified.

But the strongest term is "mothers." "We are His mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example." It is here that cristification is expressed in a highly plastic and daring manner, suggesting the idea of conception (by means of the seed of the word received and preserved) and gestation ("we carry Him in our heart and body") and explicitly using the verb "give birth" (observance of the Gospel as the mature fruit of its internal growth in faith).

Here conception, gestation and birth magnificently present the process of gradual cristification as a maternal, single, gradual process that gives life to Christ. Expressed here is the same journey of following set forth in the Earlier Rule XXII, a following whose deeper meaning is found in gradual cristification. To receive the Gospel with faith is to conceive Christ; "to hold onto the Gospel" in the sense of internalizing it in faith is the moment of gestation and growth of Christ within us; "to hold onto the Gospel" in the sense of observing it is the moment of giving birth. Our "holy activity" is to live as children in the Son, to give birth to Christ the truth who comes forth from the womb that is the life of Christians, in order to continue to glorify and reveal the Father, constantly enlarging the family of God's children.

Just as the word of God took flesh in Mary through the working of the Holy Spirit, and just as in the Eucharist the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ through the working of the word and the Holy Spirit, so Christ is conceived and brought to birth once more in believers, again through the working of the word and the Holy Spirit. In faith and in the life of believers the word of God takes flesh again through the working of the Holy Spirit. When the Gospel becomes life, it is Christ who lives again, and it is the incarnation that continues.

⁶⁷The original Latin reads parturimus.

Conclusion

"Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Ex 3:5). These are the words heard by Moses, who at once hides his face, afraid to look at God. "Who can stand in the presence of this Holy One?" (1Sam 6:20). This is the terrified cry of the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, who hasten to send the ark of the covenant elsewhere. In the Bible the term "holy" expresses the world of the divine, perceived as being so different and far-removed from human beings that it arouses fear. This sacred respect and reverential fear will be slowly overcome in part by God himself, who will gradually draw closer to people, spanning, as far as possible, the abyss that separates them, through the bridges of revelation, the covenant and the incarnation. Even then, the One who is totally other, and all that comes into any kind of contact with him—be it person, place or institution—will always have to be handled with tongs.

And it is with tongs that the seraph of Isaiah 6 takes the glowing coal from the divine brazier to purify the prophet's lips and heart, thus enabling him to hear the voice, see the presence and make known the will of the thrice-holy God. God wishes to create a holy people: "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lv 19:2). It is the meaning of the covenant offered by God to Israel: "I will take you as my own people, and you shall have me as your God" (Ex 6:7). The use of the two personal adjectives "my" and "your" is significant and powerful. The radical difference between God and humans is overcome by the offer and possibility of mutual belonging. Holiness no longer describes only the divine world, but also the world of human beings who accept the divine. Israel asks itself: "Who may go up the mountain of the Lord? Who can stand in his holy place?" And the answer is: "The clean of hand and pure of heart, who are not devoted to idols, who have not sworn falsely" (Ps 24:3-4). So it is possible to make use of the bridge God has placed between himself and humans, and it will be possible to do so with clean hands and pure heart.

In the Old Testament books we find an inevitable, vast, and complex mixture of norms: moral, cultic, legal and hygienic. Even so, the key idea in the holiness required of Israel is acceptance of its relationship with God, being holy because he is holy, being what it has discovered itself to be: the people of God. The law is God's great gift, the wall that protects and marks the boundary, precious directions for how to act in order to be holy as he is holy, to be faithful to the covenant entered into with God. The law is not easy to observe, and indeed God will have to promise a new covenant not linked to the fulfillment of the other party's conditions: "I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God,

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and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). "I will prove the holiness of my great name, profaned among the nations, in whose midst you have profaned it...I will prove my holiness through you...from all your impurities, and for all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart.... I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes" (Ez 36:23-27).

In the Old Testament they had tried to make saints, not in the sense of canonizing people, but in the sense of being holy themselves. The result had been disastrous, for it was almost impossible to be faithful to the covenant with God, to earn holiness. The only hope was to trust in the prophets' promises of a new heart and a new spirit. One way to describe the passage from the first to the second covenant is from holiness as an achievement to holiness as a gift.

The new situation created by the incarnate presence of the Son of God among us is presented in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus describes and rejects the justice of the scribes, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you" (Mt 5:21-48), and the justice of the Pharisees. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting, if performed hypocritically, are useless (Mt 6:1-18). Then he goes on to describe the new kind of justice required of his disciples. The new justice or new holiness does not seem all that different from the first. "Be holy, for I am holy" is replaced by "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." But with a little exegetical work we will see that there is a difference, and it is immense.

In the programmatic Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) we find shocking statements, such as blessed are the poor, blessed are the persecuted. We find demands of Jesus that seem unattainable: do to others whatever you would have them do to you, always forgive everyone, do not judge, be perfect. How are these statements and demands of Jesus to be interpreted? This is the heart of the Gospel and so it is not surprising that this page has constantly attracted the attention of many scholars. Their interpretations can be boiled down to three: it is an expression of perfection, it is an unattainable ideal, or it is an interim ethic.

According to the expression-of-perfection interpretation, Jesus is here making extreme demands, but he knows very well that people will never be able to fulfill them completely. He asks for 100 in order to get at least 50. Everyone will do what they can. There is some truth in this interpretation, and the Gospel does present us with perfection. But we need to remember that already in the Old Testament we find essentially the same demands (Tb 4:15). Would the originality of the Gospel consist only in asking for more? The expression-of-perfection interpretation does not stand up. Yet very often this is how we interpret the Gospel. It is a body of moral

precepts we must observe in order to be saved, to go to heaven, to become saints.

The unattainable-ideal interpretation, typical of Protestantism, maintains that taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously is cause for despair. Who lives that way? Who can live that way? No one. So why does Jesus make such extreme demands? Paul can help us: it is not the law that saves but faith. These demands of Jesus are sure proof of our utter inability to observe the law, and thus of our sin. The gratuitous mercy of God must intervene to save us. There is some truth in this interpretation. It is not the law that saves, but faith. But we wonder whether God really had to become human in Jesus Christ in order to bring to light our weakness. The unattainable-ideal interpretation is not enough. But this, too often, is also how we interpret the Gospel: it reveals our discouragement, our resignation, our sad face.

In the "interim ethic" interpretation, Jesus comes to proclaim that the end is imminent, and his demands are based on the seriousness of the hour. The last judgment is about to arrive; a final effort is required. These are emergency laws, heroic laws, for the short time remaining. There is also some truth in this interpretation. The eschatological dimension is essential in the Gospels. But we must note that in the Gospels Jesus never appears as a crazy and anxiety-ridden fanatic. He speaks of joy and trust because the salvation of God is already present and at work. The interim-ethic interpretation is unacceptable, yet it sometimes leads to feelings and attitudes of fear, anxiety and religious fanaticism incompatible with the Gospel.

Despite their differences, these three interpretations all remain within the logic of the law. They reduce the Sermon on the Mount to law: as perfection, as salvific-pedagogical, or as an emergency measure. But the logic of the Gospel is different. The Gospel is not a law, but a joyful proclamation that is most delightful to hear. It is the proclamation of the presence of God's reign in our midst, that is, of pardon and salvation in Jesus. It is the proclamation that our sins are forgiven, that we are children of the Father, that we should not, and cannot, fear anything any more, not even our sins, not even death.

Only by starting from the proclamation of the Gospel can we understand the seriousness of Jesus' demands, addressed to people whose debts have all been forgiven, to people who have found the precious pearl, and with great joy immediately sell everything else in order to have it. Of those to whom much has been given, much will be demanded. Only on the basis of God's gift can we understand the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. It is not an exhaustive moral code. They are only examples,

indications, signs of what happens to a person who has accepted God's reign, who has experienced God's gift. The law leaves us to our own powers. The Gospel, on the other hand, confronts us with God's gift and asks us to make this gift the foundation of our life. It is not a question of Christian morality, but of faith lived in the light of God's gift, joyful evidence of a gift received.

Christian conduct, even though concretely and seriously regarded, is no longer a requirement for salvation. Rather it is a consequence, almost as if we could not act otherwise. It is also, of course, an indispensable proof that we have accepted God's gift, a proof of our faith. Those who have already experienced the joy of God's total, gratuitous, and unconditional forgiveness of their own enormous and radical debt, are asked to forgive the little debts owed them by others. Those who have already experienced the joy of the prodigal son who, upon his return, found and knew he could always find his father's affectionate embrace, are asked to forgive and love.

The great novelty of the Gospel is not the words "be perfect," but the words "just as your heavenly Father is perfect." It is not for nothing that the parallel passage in Luke 6:36 has, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." The great novelty of the Gospel is the revelation of God's paternal face for all: God's perfection is his mercy. The great Gospel rule is to feel and act like the Father of all, for whom any kind of barrier, discrimination or ostracism is unthinkable. This is the life of the Gospel, namely holiness. The new heart promised by the prophets is the heart of children who have experienced God as their father and so are no longer afraid of anyone or anything, not even their weakness and their inability to be holy. The new spirit promised by Ezekiel is the great gift of children's eyes able to see everything as a free gift.

Gospel holiness never wears a sad face, but is lightness, beauty and freedom. It means to feel like children in our own home, breathing deeply the air of gratuitousness and exhaling joyful gratitude. There is nothing more to earn, gain or merit, and we would never be able to, because of our radical insufficiency. But there is really no need to, because everything has already been given. We are asked only to know the gift of God more and more (see Jn 4:10), to make it the grateful foundation of our life, to come up with our own unique way of celebrating love, of proclaiming the Lord's greatness for the great things done for us by the Almighty, whose name is "Holy."

Saint Francis's response to the Lord who speaks to him in the Gospel is one of gratitude. The path of this "Pilgrim of the Absolute" and pilgrim in the world is not a hard one. If he is to walk quickly, he must not have too much to carry. The Gospel, which is his compass, is enough.

Francis walks safely in the footprints of Jesus, knowing that he will reach the Father, for "thus says the Lord." Along the way he meets himself, others and creatures, but he has with him the interpretive key that enables him to recognize everyone and everything. Thus Francis speaks the Gospel.

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