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Contents

Following Francis: A Catechism of Franciscan Spirituality

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| Part One: Francis's Life | 3 |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Part Two: Writings | 41 |
| Part Three: Spirituality | 73 |
| Author Index | 105 |
| Title Index | 107 |
| Subject Index | 109 |

Following Francis: A Catechism of Franciscan Spirituality

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Abbreviations

I. Writings of Saint Francis

Adm Admonitions

BenBer Blessing for Brother Bernard BenLeo Blessing for Brother Leo

CantExh Canticle of Exhortation for the Poor Ladies

CantSol Canticle of Brother Sun
EpAnt Letter to St .Anthony
EpCler Letter to the Clergy

1EpCust First Letter to the Custodians 2EpCust Second Letter to the Custodians

1EpFid First Version of the Letter to the Faithful Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful

EpLeo Letter to Brother Leo EpMin Letter to a Minister

EpOrd Letter to the Entire Order

ExhLd Exhortation to the Praise of God
ExpPat Prayer Inspired by the Our Father

FormViv Form of Life for St. Clare

LaudDei Praises of God

LaudHor Praises to be Said at All the Hours

OffPass Office of the Passion
OrCruc Prayer before the Crucifix

RegBLater Rule (1223)RegErRule for HermitagesRegNBEarlier Rule (1221)

SalBVM Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

SalVirt Salutation of the Virtues

Test Testament

TestSen Testament written in Siena UltVol Last Will written for St. Clare

VPLaet True and Perfect Joy

II. Writings of St. Clare

BCI Blessing of St. Clare

1LAg First Letter to St. Agnes of Prague
 2LAg Second Letter to St. Agnes of Prague
 3LAg Third Letter to St. Agnes of Prague
 4LAg Fourth Letter to St. Agnes of Prague
 LEr Letter to Ermentrude of Bruges

RCl Rule of St. Clare
TestCl Testament of St. Clare

III. Other Early Franciscan Sources

AP Anonymous of Perugia

1Cel First Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano2Cel Second Life of St. Francis by Thomas of

Celano

3Cel Treatise on the Miracles by Thomas of

Celano

ConPl Considerations on the Five Wounds

JdV Witness of Jacques de Vitry

LegCl Legend of St. Clare

LM Major Life of St. Francis by St. Bonaventure
LMin Minor Life of St. Francis by St. Bonaventure

LP Legend of Perugia

L3S Legend of the Three Companions
Proc Process of Canonization of St. Clare

RHugo Hugolino's Rule for St. Clare RInn Innocent III's Rule for St. Clare

SC Sacrum Commercium SP Mirror of Perfection

IV. English Translations of Sources

Quotations from the sources are taken from:

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Contents

Introduction

Part One: Francis's Life

| Chapter 1: | |
|---|----|
| Europe and Assisi at the End of the Twelfth Century | 5 |
| 1. Italian society | |
| 2. The Church | |
| 3. The laity | |
| 4. Effect on Francis | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 2: | |
| The Merchant: Birth, Youth, and Conversion | 9 |
| 1. Family | |
| 2. Youth | |
| 3. Conversion | |
| a) Preparation | |
| b) The critical moment | |
| c) After his conversion | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 3: | |
| Living the Gospel | 13 |
| 1. Searching for Christ | |
| 2. Gospel inspiration | |
| 3. First companions | |
| 4. The life of the brothers | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 4: | |
| Between Rome and Assisi | 17 |
| 1. To Rome | |
| 2. The first years in Assisi | |
| Time to Think | |

| Chapter 5: | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Francis and Clare | 20 |
| 1. Women in the thirteenth century | |
| 2. A surprising fact | |
| 3. Clare | |
| 4. Francis and Clare | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 6: | |
| The Order of Friars Minor | 24 |
| 1. Preaching outside Italy | |
| 2. The new situation | |
| 3. Sorrow and joy | |
| 4. The Gospel life for all | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 7: | |
| Preserving the Ideal | 28 |
| 1. Francis's journey to Palestine | |
| 2. A Gospel strategy | |
| 3. Preserving the Ideal | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 8: | |
| The Rule | 32 |
| 1. The need for a Rule | |
| 2. Not one, but three Rules | |
| a) The 'handful of Gospel texts' | |
| b) First Rule | |
| c) Second Rule | |
| 3. A Rule for the Fraternity | |
| 4. Encouraging the brothers | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 9: | |
| The End of the Road | 36 |
| 1. Years of trial | |
| 2. The stigmata | |
| 3. Last words to friends | |

| Part Two: Writings |
|--------------------------------------|
| Chapter 1: Francis and His Writings |
| Chapter 2: Writings in Youth |
| Chapter 3: The First Writings |
| Chapter 4: Miscellaneous Writings |

4. More than a mere representation5. Sister Death

Time to Think

| Chapter 3. |
|--|
| Writings for Clare and Her Sisters 56 |
| 1. The meaning of the Poor Clares' life: The Form of Life Give |
| to St. Clare and Her Sisters |
| 2. Franciscan asceticism: Francis's Advice on Fasting |
| 3. Living the Gospel life fully: The Canticle of Exhortation to S |
| Clare and Her Sisters |
| 4. A brother's last words: The Last Will Written for St. Clare |
| Time to Think |
| Chapter 6: |
| Writings for the Community 59 |
| 1. Authority and mercy: A Letter to a Minister |
| 2. Franciscanism for everyone: The Second Letter to the Faithful |
| 3. A writing for difficult times: The Office of the Passion |
| Time to Think |
| Chapter 7: |
| 'The Eucharistic Letters' 62 |
| 1. Authority at the service of the faith: A Letter to the Rulers the Peoples |
| 2. Priests and the Eucharist: A Letter to the Clergy |
| 3. Christ in the Eucharist: A Letter to the Entire Order |
| 4. The saving power of the Eucharist: The First Letter to the |
| Custodians |
| 5. The Eucharist, 'lofty and sublime:' The Second Letter to to |
| Custodians |
| Time to Think |
| Chapter 8: |
| Norms for the Christian Life |
| 1. Counsels and commands: The Rule of 1221 |
| 2. The definitive document: The Rule of 1223 |
| 3. Study and faith: A Letter to St. Anthony |
| Time to Think |
| |

| Chapter 9: |
|---|
| Last Writings |
| 2. A song of faith: The Canticle of Brother Sun |
| 3. Francis's spiritual Testament |
| 4. A summary of the Franciscan life: The Testament Written in Siena |
| Time to Think |
| Part Three: Spirituality |
| Chapter 1: |
| The Mass and the Eucharist |
| Chapter 2: The Incarnation |
| Chapter 3: |
| The Cross |
| Chapter 4: |
| The Church |
| 1. Francis and the hierarchy |
| 2. Francis and the Church |
| Time to Think |

| Chapter 3: | |
|---|----|
| Franciscan Spirituality | 88 |
| 1. Living the Gospel | |
| 2. Promising obedience | |
| 3. Following Christ | |
| 4. The itinerant life | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 6: | |
| The Form of Life | 91 |
| 1. A life of penance | |
| 2. 'According to the form of the holy Gospel' (Test 14) | |
| 3. Preaching | |
| 4. Poverty | |
| 5. The Fraternity | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 7: | |
| 'With pure hearts' | 94 |
| 1. 'Becoming himself a prayer' | |
| 2. The spiritual basis of Francis's poverty | |
| 3. Franciscan poverty | |
| 4. The primacy of prayer | |
| Time to Think | |
| Chapter 8: | |
| The Rule, the Marrow of the Gospel | 97 |
| 1. 'The marrow of the Gospel' | |
| 2. Common and special elements | |
| a) Common elements | |
| b) Special elements | |
| 3. The new elements in the Franciscan Rule | |
| 4. Rule and life | |
| | |
| Time to Think | |

| Chapter 9: | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| Being a Franciscan Today | 101 |
| 1. Radical Christocentrism | |
| 2. The search for God | |
| 3. Following Christ actively | |
| 4. Reverence for the Church | |
| 5. Love of poverty | |
| 6. Joy and freedom | |
| 7. Everyone's brother | |
| Time to Think | |
| Index: | |
| Author | 105 |
| Title | 107 |
| Subject | 109 |

Introduction

The most appealing thing about Francis of Assisi is the way he and his followers were able to put the teachings of the Gospel into practice so joyfully and yet so completely. When we read the early Franciscan documents and breathe in their spiritual atmosphere, we feel drawn to follow in the footsteps of the early friars. If this present work succeeds in increasing that attraction, we shall be well satisfied.

This book is intended to be a basic course in Franciscanism. While calling upon the latest findings of research into the essential elements of the Franciscan message, we have tried to avoid technical jargon, describing and explaining Francis's life, writings, and spirituality as clearly as possible. In this way, we hope to lay a firm foundation for a true appreciation of Francis and his way of life.

It is our aim to address 'the great Franciscan public:' those who are in any way interested in St. Francis, those who are committed to teaching religion and Franciscanism to young people in schools and parishes, and those members of the Secular Franciscan Order who are looking for solid initial formation in the Franciscan way of life; and also, perhaps, even those Franciscan religious of both sexes who wish to take advantage of newer methods of Franciscan formation which were not available to them in their earlier years in religion.

The book is divided into three parts - St. Francis's *Life*, *Writings*, and *Spirituality*, and perhaps the best way to use it for Franciscan formation would be to begin by reading the *first* chapter in *each* of the three parts, then the *second* chapter in *each* part, and so on. After each short chapter there is a 'time to think,' a series of questions on the contents of the chapter designed to encourage the individual or the group to pause, extract and absorb the main ideas of the chapter, and look for means to put those ideas into practice in everyday life.

Part Ong: Francis's Life



Life in the twelfth century was greatly influenced: first, by the huge changes that were taking place in the structure of society, then, by the growth of commerce, and, finally, by the flowering of the ideals of knighthood. Against this background, the Popes initiated reforms designed to bring the Church back to its Gospel sources. The faithful responded to these reforms in two quite different ways. Some, like the Cathari and the Waldensians, ended up by breaking away from the Church, while others, like Francis of Assisi, set out to live the Gospel life to the full within the Church.

Chapter 1:

Europe and Assisi at the End of the Twelfth Century

It goes without saying that we are all greatly influenced by the surroundings in which we were reared and educated. So it is that, if we know what a particular person's world was like, we shall be much better able to interpret correctly what he or she did and said. In this first chapter of our course on Franciscanism, we shall try to depict, at least in broad outline, the historical context in which Francis of Assisi grew into manhood.

1. Italian society

The first thing we must note is that profound social changes were just beginning to take place in Italy at this time, although such changes had been long in the making. Under the old feudal system, the local lord had complete dominion over his lands and, in most respects, over his tenants, too. But this system had impoverished society, and the countryside could no longer support the growing population. This led to the emergence of a new middle class of merchants and traders, who lived in the cities and towns. Gradually, life had begun to revolve around these cities and towns instead of around the feudal castles, so that the control of an urban population became politically very important. In this context, we must recall that, in his youth, Francis was embroiled in the wars between city states. Perhaps that is why the peace, poverty, and solitude of the countryside appealed to the early Fraternity more than did life in the crowded, prosperous cities and towns.

Trade and commerce were prominent among the various factors that shaped the emerging society. The new middle class, the merchants and traders, began to grow in influence, encouraging the freer movement of goods and the readier availability of services. But perhaps the most profound changes were wrought by the wider use and circulation of money, so that it is not surprising that, when Francis 'left the world,' he should have had the deepest reservations about 'coin or money.'

There was, however, another potent force at work. In Francis's day, the spirit of chivalry, of knighthood and honor, began to spread through society, so that an ambitious middle-class youth could aspire to join the ranks of the nobility by becoming a knight. Accordingly, rich young men like Francis were eager to win their spurs as knights and serve in the armies of the great lords, so that they could fight for justice and the rights of the oppressed.

These idealistic young knights dreamed of great deeds and always had a fair lady who was their inspiration and to whom they dedicated their endeavors. This ideal of chivalry, raised to the spiritual plane, was a significant element in Francis's way of life, as we can see from his devotion to his 'Lady Poverty' (2Cel 55).

2. The Church

During this period of history, the Church, as well as society at large, was subject to the feudal lords, who had the power to appoint and dismiss at will the holders of ecclesiastical office. No wonder, then, that the spiritual, moral, and educational level of the priesthood in general was deplorably low. However, Pope Gregory VII set about separating the civil power from the religious and began the reforms that had notable success under Innocent III, who was Pope in Francis's day (1198-1216). Unfortunately, these reforms were effective only up to a point, and the results were not in proportion to the great efforts expended to achieve them.

At this time, religious life was centred around the monasteries of the Benedictines, Cistercians, and Premonstratensians. Rome relied heavily on these monasteries to bring about reform in the Church, and the monks did indeed do much to spread the reform.

3. The Laity

However, as usually happens in large institutions in the course of time, the great religious Orders themselves suffered a decline. Many of the laity became impatient with the slowness of the Church reform and began their own spiritual movements, which were characterized by an emphasis on collective poverty, lived either in a simple settled life or in itinerant

preaching of the Gospel. So it was that, when the Church called for a return to Gospel values, in many cases the laity responded more radically than did the monks.

The members of these new spiritual movements preached and lived a decidedly reformed spiritual and moral life. But some of their leaders could not countenance the scandal of a Church in which power, money, and corrupt morals played such a large part. Finally, their hostility to the ecclesiastical establishment became so great that they broke all contact with the institutional Church. In its turn, the Church had become increasingly intransigent in dealing with the new Gospel movements, although in the reign of Innocent III there was some relaxation of Church demands. Prominent among the radical breakaway groups were the Humiliati, the Cathari, the Waldensians, and the Poor Men of Durando of Huesca.

Perhaps the most important of these groups were the Cathari, so named from the Greek word meaning 'the pure ones,' who held that the Church was made up of only two kinds of people, the 'good' and the 'bad.' They themselves were the 'good,' living a moral life, valuing Scripture highly, doing penance, and practising collective poverty, while everyone else was 'bad.'

It is not strange, then, that they finally broke completely away from the Church. But then they gradually began to devote themselves more to preaching and arguing than to practising their beliefs.

Later, a rich merchant from Lyons named Peter Valdes (or Waldes) became so dissatisfied with the various radical groups around him that he embarked on a life of poverty and founded a Gospel movement of his own, the members of which came to be known as Waldensians, after their founder. When, in the course of time, the Church hierarchy forbade these Waldensians to preach, they, too, left the Church, saying: 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29). What had started as a movement for the renewal of the Church turned into a heresy in the end.

4. Effect on Francis

The events and subsequent changes that took place at the beginning of the thirteenth century throughout Italy were mirrored exactly in the sociopolitical life of Francis's native city. Assisi was a bustling trade centre and was at war with its neighbour, Perugia. The Church in Assisi, as representative of the Church of Rome, often suffered from the fanatical attacks of the heretical movements.

It was in this city and against this background that Francis began his Gospel life. Like the founders of the other radical poverty movements, Francis, too,

placed great value on complete poverty, an itinerant mode of life, and fraternity. But, unlike many of the others, he immediately recognized that he could not attain his ideal outside the Church. That is why he always lived his vocation in obedience to the Pope and bishops. By remaining utterly faithful to the Church and by devoting himself and his brothers to serve the Church, he gave a new dimension to the Christian and religious life.

Time to Think

- 1. What were the differences between the lay movements in the Middle Ages and the Franciscan movement?
- 2. Generally speaking, what was Francis's attitude toward cities? political power? trade and commerce? money?
- 3. Do you think that there are any similarities between the socio-political scene in Francis's day and in our own?

Francis was born into a rich family. In his youth, he dreamed of attaining great wealth and high social position. However, when his dreams came to nothing, his natural kindness led him to take pity on those who were on the margins of society, the poor, and the lepers; and he was soon led to devote his whole life to following Christ, poor and crucified.

Chapter 2:

The Merchant: Birth, Youth, and Conversion

rancis's contemporaries have left us accounts of his life written in the style popular at the time. Of these biographies, the three most important are, in chronological order of composition, Thomas of Celano's First Life of St. Francis (1Cel), the Legend of the Three Companions (L3S), and Celano's Second Life of St. Francis (2Cel). The Legend of the Three Companions is perhaps the closest to the truth, as we shall see. It would be useful, therefore, to have this biography at hand to follow the sometimes confused course of events in Francis's early life.

1. Family

When describing Francis's family, the early sources speak mostly about his father, Peter Bernardone, who was a merchant dealing in costly cloths. Peter was typical of the new class of businessman, an enthusiastic capitalist, who traded both at home and in foreign markets, such as France. He firmly believed that money was the only real measure of a man's social standing; and it was this conviction that caused most of the friction between him and his son, Francis, whom he truly loved and to whom he wished to leave his prosperous business and the several houses he owned in Assisi.

We know less about Francis's mother, Pica, of whom we learn little until much later in the biographies. She is described as understanding her son's chosen way of life. The medieval accounts are unclear here, but it seems that Francis was the eldest in the family and that he had brothers and sisters. According to documents written later than the thirteenth century, one of these brothers was called Angelo, whom the writers describe as being greedy for the money which Francis despised.

All the sources seem to agree on one thing, however, that Francis's family was rich and belonged to the wealthy merchant class in Assisi. Francis was

born between 1181 and 1182, while his father was in France on business. His mother had him baptized John, but when his father returned home, he changed this to Francis, perhaps because he was so delighted with the success of his business in France. Francis's education was quite good by the standards of the time, and he knew enough Latin to follow the liturgy and enough French to conduct business in that language.

2. Youth

The various biographies paint very differing pictures of Francis's youth, so that, when reading their descriptions, we must take into consideration the purpose for which each book was written.

Celano's First Life of St. Francis: Celano was a Franciscan, a contemporary of Francis, who wrote his biography to hold Francis up as a model and example for all Christians. For this reason, he implied that Francis's parents spoiled him so much that he became a dissolute youth. Celano's moralizing intention is obvious, but his description is nowhere near the truth. (Cf. 1Cel 1).

Celano's Second Life of St. Francis: Celano wrote his second biography at the behest of his General Superiors for the instruction and edification of the friars. That is why Francis's youth is not painted in such dark colours here as in the First Life. Instead, Francis is seen merely as a misguided young man who had no serious purpose in life. (Cf. 2Cel 3-11).

The Legend of the Three Companions was written after Celano's First Life and before his Second Life. It seems to be trustworthy and clearly shows real knowledge of the customs in Assisi in Francis's time. In the first two chapters, Francis is described as being a young merchant, skilled in business, educated and courteous, a lover of luxury and good living, yet generous to the poor. His main ambition was to be first in everything, and he believed that he would accomplish that purpose with the aid of his wealth, upon which his whole future depended. This was the Francis who was to undergo such a complete inner transformation.

3. Conversion

a) Preparation

Francis's dream of great wealth and high social position soon began to vanish into thin air. As a means of reaching the social position to which he aspired, he took part in several local wars, because he reasoned that, if he was victorious in battle, he would ensure his place in society; and he had enough money to do what was necessary to further his ambitions. In 1202,

when he was twenty years of age, he took part in the battle of Collestrada, a venture that cost him a year as a prisoner of war in Perugia. He was freed between 1203 and 1204 and returned home, sick and disappointed, yet ready to resume his normal life. In 1205, he joined the forces of Count Gentile, but after a few days he fell gravely ill and was forced to return to Assisi. All his grandiose plans were coming to nothing. He continued as before in his father's cloth business, but now he became more aware of the poor in general and of poor priests in particular, giving them money without his father's knowledge. An important element in this change in his behaviour was the penitential pilgrimage which, according to the custom of the time, he made to Rome. In fact, he was undergoing an inner transformation caused and accompanied by turbulent feelings of disillusionment, of compassion for the poor, and the growing conviction that something was missing from his life.

b) The critical moment

The critical moment in his conversion came when he met a leper just outside Assisi while he was convalescing from his second illness. In the Middle Ages, the lepers were the real social outcasts, lacking any kind of medical care and living on the outskirts of the cities. In his *Testament* (Test 1-3), Francis tells us what this meeting meant to him. For him, this was the crucial moment of change, the first glimpse of a beckoning light. We find, therefore, that the pivotal point in Francis's conversion was not his discovery of the treasure of poverty but, first, his *compassion* for the human suffering caused by the disease of leprosy in the body and 'the leprosy of sin' in the soul; and, then, his *willingness* to identify with and become one of those who were excluded from society.

That was the profound reversal of perspective and scale of values which Francis experienced in his search for meaning in his life. However, the change was so gradual, and he said so little about it, that it is difficult for us to follow the course of the transformation in his biographies.

c) After his conversion

Francis's new insight into human suffering was further sharpened by the revelation he received in his dialogue with the crucifix at San Damiano. There is an account of this event in *The Legend of the Three Companions* (L3S 5:13f.). The voice from the crucifix confirmed his choice to help the marginalized, and he now had the strength to carry out the specific decisions he was to make: to become a penitent ('to begin to do penance'), to devote himself to solitary prayer, to sell cloth in Foligno and give the money to the poor, to hide for a month to escape his father's wrath, and to endure being

locked up and denounced to the magistrates by his father. This was the painful path he had chosen, but it was also the way that would lead him to a new and different joy in the Gospel way of life he had found.

Time to Think

- 1. Which was the crucial moment in Francis's conversion?
- 2. Should we regard Francis as a 'social outcast' because he chose the Gospel life?
- 3. Among which outcasts of society should the Franciscans work today?

Francis spent two years repairing the church of San Damiano. During this time, he finally resolved to follow the Gospel life, a choice which was confirmed and strengthened when he heard the Gospel description of Christ's sending out of the Apostles. A year later, he was joined by eleven companions who wished to live the Gospel life as a community. This was the birth of the Franciscan Fraternity.

Chapter 3:

Living the Gospel

e shall examine here the first three and a half years after Francis's conversion, a period during which he strove to get to know himself and to see what he was to do with the rest of his life. These were certainly very difficult years for him because of his own uncertainty of purpose and the misunderstanding and even ill-treatment he had to endure from others. Yet these were also fateful years because it was then that he decided once and for all upon the way of life modelled upon the Gospel which, despite many obstacles, he was henceforth to follow.

1. Searching for Christ

This was undoubtedly Francis's task during the two years he spent rebuilding the little church of San Damiano which had been relinquished by the Benedictines of Monte Subasio. He began by clarifying his own position: He did not want to be either a cleric or a monk. He was unwilling to join the clergy, not because he agreed with the Cathari and the Waldensians who rejected dissolute or avaricious priests, but rather because he saw that becoming a member of the clergy would mean joining one of the higher, more powerful social classes, the *majores*, the 'greater ones.' And he did not wish to become a monk because he also regarded the monastic structure as being powerful and *major*.

Instead, he wanted to be one of the *minores*, the 'lesser ones,' like the outcast penitents, and wished to remain an ordinary layman in the Church. Even so, he never uttered a word of criticism about the clerics or the monks. Quite the contrary! As he said in his *Testament* (Test 6), he held all priests in the highest regard because they give us Christ in the Eucharist. The Cathari and other heretics argued fiercely that an unworthy priest could not validly

consecrate the bread and wine. But Francis did not take part in the bitter controversy because he was convinced that only a peaceful and understanding approach could do what no amount of disputation and acrimony could achieve. Therefore, he did not wish to be either a monk or a priest, much less a heretic outside the Church, but rather an ordinary layman faithful to the Church and living a life of penance within it.

We shall not appreciate the full impact of those two years which Francis spent in rebuilding San Damiano if we do not realize that his choice of the Gospel life meant a drastic social change for him. He left his prosperous, middle-class world and went to live with people who had nothing, the lowest class of all. By thus deliberately turning his back on his former life, he laid himself open to great misunderstanding on the part of his fellow citizens, his former friends, and even his father and brother. His father followed him through the streets of Assisi, cursing him when he saw him dressed in a hermit's robe and begging from the passers-by. When we read the Legend of the Three Companions (L3S 6:23), we can glimpse the pain Francis felt in having to listen to his father's curses, a rejection he felt so keenly that he even promised alms to a beggar if he would bless him every time his father cursed him. His own brother sarcastically offered to buy some of his sweat when he was obviously freezing cold on a winter's day. This passage in the Legend gives us some idea of the torments Francis suffered during those two years at San Damiano.

2. Gospel inspiration

During this trying period, in 1208, the Gospel account of the sending-out of the Apostles inspired Francis to make important decisions:

First, he exchanged his hermit's robe and leather belt for the poorer type of garment worn by the penitents, including the cord or rope, which the penitents wore around their waists and sometimes around their necks.

Second, he left San Damiano and embarked on a life of even more rigorous poverty.

Finally, he began to preach simple sermons on the need to do penance, as the Gospel teaches.

This began a new phase in Francis's life, which was further marked by the fact that several companions came to join him.

3. First companions

During his years at San Damiano, Francis was very much alone. But once he had irrevocably chosen the Gospel life, an important development took place. Some of his former neighbours from Assisi came to join him.

Bernard of Quintavalle, a man of considerable wealth, was the first to come, and Francis always had a special affection for him because he was his first companion. Next came a priest named Peter of Catania, whose arrival could have presented problems, since, as we have seen, Francis wanted to remain a layman. Yet they found a solution by having recourse to a practice which was considered rather superstitious. They cast what had come to be known as 'the Apostles' lots,' the *sortes apostolorum* (cf. Acts 1:26), opening the pages of the Gospels three times at random, in search of a text to guide them. As a result, they decided that they would accept anyone, cleric or layman, who wished to join the group. And this set the standard which the infant Fraternity adopted.

As we have said, Francis's personal choice was basically an option to change his position in society, his social standing. The first friars made the same choice: their commitment to the Gospel way of life led them, as a group, to take their place alongside the poor. This was the difference between the friars and the monks. The monks were poor individually but their communities, their monasteries, were rich and powerful, whereas the first Franciscans wished to be absolutely poor and powerless, both as individuals and as a community.

These first friars must have found their chosen life very difficult in the beginning. When the people of Assisi saw some of their prominent citizens joining Francis in his unorthodox life, they reacted with stunned incomprehension or outright mockery. As Francis records in his *Testament*, he used to answer the crowd's criticism and derision with the Gospel greeting: 'The Lord give you peace!,' words which were of great importance to him.

During this same year, 1209, five men from Assisi joined the group. They then began preaching penance in the surrounding districts, where they were greeted in much the same way as they had been in their own city. However, their numbers continued to grow and reached a total of twelve by the end of that year.

4. The life of the brothers

The aims and guiding principles of this first group of Franciscans were: poverty, helping others materially and spiritually, frequent visits to churches and showing respect for priests, public exhortations to practise penance as taught in the Gospels, and an acute awareness that far-reaching changes were taking place in society. That is how the Fraternity began their life of commitment to the Gospel.

Time to Think

- 1. What do we mean when we say that Francis chose to change his position in society?
- 2. What do we mean when we say that Christ's way of life is the 'law' of the Franciscan Fraternity?
- 3. How can we follow today the example left us by the first Franciscans?

From the moment the small band of friars began to form, Francis had only one purpose—to have his form of Gospel life approved by the Church. He went to Rome and the Pope blessed the way he and his companions proposed to live: selling all they possessed, praying fervently, working with their hands, and following a simple, fraternal style of living.

Chapter 4:

Between Rome and Assisi

his period, beginning in 1209-1210, can perhaps be considered the happiest part of Francis's early life, a kind of honeymoon period. He had made the final decision to devote himself completely to the Gospel life and had been encouraged, although somewhat surprised, to see several men from Assisi joining him in his venture. With the Pope's approval, the little Fraternity had begun to live a purely Gospel life. Francis was to retain to the end of his life an indelible memory of these first days, as we see from his *Testament* (Test 14-26), an account which merits thoughtful reading.

1. To Rome

Why did Francis go to Rome when he and his eleven companions wished to begin their Gospel life? The answer seems so obvious that the question scarcely needs to be asked. Yet some doubts have been raised about his motives. There are those who say that it was because Pope Innocent III was a friend of his. But that was not the case, since the two men had never even met. Moreover, during these years, Assisi had resisted being taken over by the Pope, who had begun a policy of 'recovering' territories which he thought belonged by right to the Church, one of which was Francis's native city. Others hold that Francis had pretensions to be a founder and that he went to Rome to make his position official. But that was not the way it was. First, Francis was utterly opposed to seeking any kind of privilege from the Roman Curia (see Test 25). In addition, he had no wish to appear as the Superior of the group who went to Rome. In fact, the brothers chose Brother Bernard as their leader (see L3S 12:46).

What, then, was his real purpose in going to Rome? First, he wanted to show that his group was not one of the many contemporary bands of

heretics who rejected the hierarchical Church. Then, too, he knew that his way of life and that of his devoted companions would come to nothing if they did not follow it within the Church, which was the sole guarantor of the truth. The clarity of Francis's vision here was remarkable, for he was able to see the mystery and wide scope of the faith behind the human face and faults of the Church. And that was why he sought the Pope's approval of his manner of life.

He did everything according to the law, but after his own fashion. He presented a 'Rule,' as was usual with religious founders. However, it seems that this 'Rule'-which has not come down to us-consisted simply of a string of quotations from the Gospels, including, no doubt, those passages that had confirmed him and his companions in their vocation (L3S 8:29).

We must realize that, although Innocent III was ordinarily quite affable, this was not the time to approach him. The Fourth Crusade had failed; the Albigensians (the Cathari in the south of France) were at their most powerful, continually attacking the Church; and the Papal States were being torn apart by revolutions and uprisings. In these trying circumstances, who could expect the Roman Curia to take time to deal with the petitions of a small bedraggled band of semi-beggars? Yet Francis spoke with such limpid sincerity about his desire to live the full Gospel life that the Pope unhesitatingly gave the required approval. (See L3S 12:49, par.1; the rest of 49, 50, and 51 are simply 'embroidery'). So Francis left Rome with the great joy of having his form of Gospel life officially confirmed by the Church.

2. The first years in Assisi

The early days of Francis and his companions' Gospel life were days of joy, spiritual progress, and fraternal unity, which left a deep impression on the brothers, as we can see from Francis's *Testament* (Test 14-26). Here we find the basic elements of the early ideal of Franciscan living. They were:

First, those who joined the community lived in absolute poverty, having sold everything they owned. They were clad in habits of coarse, undyed wool, the material used by the poorest peasants, bound around the waist with a piece of rough cord or rope instead of the leather belt worn by the hermits. A habit of this type, along with a pair of breeches, was all that each friar possessed.

Intense prayer was fundamental to their life. When they returned from Rome, they occupied a hut in Rivotorto, about eight kilometres from Assisi. But they had to leave there because a peasant claimed the hut as a stable for his donkey (L3S 13:55), and they finally arrived at St. Mary of the Angels. They chose both these places with care, for they wanted to be close to the

city, where they could work and preach, and yet far from the noisy streets in order to be left to pray in peace. Their prayer was completely ecclesiastical in character and centred around the liturgy–the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Our Father, etc.

They earned their living by manual labour, working mainly in the fields, in exchange for their food and little else.

They were self-effacing, with no intellectual pretensions ('simple'), treating everyone with respect ('subject to all') and never seeking to protect themselves by asking for privileges from the Roman Curia. Francis's greatest care was that they should always be *minores*, 'lesser ones,' always remembering the choice they had made for the sake of the Gospel. The episode of the peasant and his donkey at Rivotorto related in the *Legend of the Three Companions* (L3S 13:55) is a good example of the first Franciscans' mode of life.

These are, it is true, only the general outlines of the early friars' manner of living, but they are so eloquent that they still speak to us followers of Francis, even in our day. If we ever feel unsure about our Gospel and Franciscan choices, we should read these pages reverently and with a feeling of awe. Then we shall see what we are expected to do before God. Happily, that early Franciscan spirit remains alive and active among us.

Time to Think

- 1. Why did Francis want to have his way of life approved by Rome?
- 2. Why did he not ask for privileges, not even from the Roman Curia?
- 3. How can we apply to present-day conditions the four characteristic marks of the early Franciscan ideal?

At first, Francis did not intend to make provision for women to follow his form of life. However, Clare persuaded him to express the Franciscan charism in a new way, that of the Poor Ladies. This new group of Franciscans were noted for their faithfulness to Francis and his message of Gospel poverty.

Chapter 5:

Francis and Clare

rancis and Clare were more than mere friends. He was her caring teacher, she his eager pupil; he was her spiritual father, she his obedient daughter. In the biographies of the two Saints and in Francis's writings to Clare and her sisters, we see how great was Francis's influence: first, on the lives of the Poor Ladies in the thirteenth century and then on all the other women who, down through the centuries, have wished to follow the Franciscan way of life.

1. Women in the thirteenth century

We are accustomed to thinking that, by and large, the early Middle Ages were backward, even primitive. And, indeed, that was true in the main as regards the position of women in society. For example, they had little or no say about when or whom they would marry. Nevertheless, in the Europe of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, women began to play an increasingly active part in society. During the gradual transition from the feudal system to the system of communes, women acquired new standing in fact and in law. In certain areas of the economy, their substantial contribution and commercial prowess were coming to be acknowledged. Although the average woman still had little access to education and culture, in some ways things were improving. In fact, we can regard this period as a kind of 'little golden age' for women since a wider appreciation of their talents and skills was bringing about changes that augured well for the future. On the other hand, however, in the Church, the traditional life for women religious at that time was somewhat in decline, whereas the heretical Gospel movements, such as the Cathari and the Waldensians, were allowing women greater participation in their affairs.

2. A surprising fact

For the first six years and more of the early Fraternity's existence, there were no women in the group, or connected with it, or even among those who sympathized with the brothers' mode of life. There is no evidence that Francis ever had any intention of having women take part in his Gospel movement. There were several reasons for this, the principal one being that, unlike the heretical groups, he did not feel called to 'proselytize,' to set out deliberately to win new members, men or women, for his fraternity from among the general public. Moreover, in the rigid social system of the times, what woman would risk everything, her reputation included, by becoming a social outcast, as Francis and his companions had? Again, given the contemporary patriarchal attitude toward her sex, what woman would be willing to leave the security of home and family and face a hostile world alone, unprotected and depending on the charity of others for food and shelter?

But two events changed all that: the Pope's approval of Francis's community and Clare's urgent plea to be allowed to share the Franciscan way of life. Even though the Pope had approved Francis's plan only verbally, the brothers felt that they were now officially recognized as a well-defined, authorized part of the ecclesiastical structure. And Clare, a member of a prominent family in the city and a cousin of Rufino, one of Francis's first companions, decided to adopt the same type of life as her fellow citizen, Francis.

3. Clare

Clare was born into a noble family in 1193 or 1194 and was, therefore, eleven years younger than Francis. She was given the religious upbringing suitable to a girl of her social class (Proc 1:4). She must have been beautiful since many young men of her own social standing were eager to marry her (Proc 18:1). But when this girl of seventeen heard Francis speak about following Christ, poor and crucified, she decided to do as he had done (Proc 20:6; 12:2). In the course of many conversations with Francis, Clare became so firm in her resolution that she was able to withstand even the fierce opposition of her family. On Palm Sunday, 1212, she fled from her home at night and made her way to the Portiuncula, where the brothers received her into the Franciscan way of life. Then she was escorted to the convent of San Paolo in Bastia and, after a few days, to the church of San Angelo in Panso, about three kilometres from Assisi. Some sixteen days later, her sister, Agnes, also fled from home and joined her.

Clare's struggle to live up to the Franciscan ideal had begun. As we saw, the first obstacle she had to overcome was the enormous resistance of her family. Then she had to endure the initial, difficult years of her new life, years which she spent in extreme poverty in a narrow cell attached to the church of San Damiano, to which Francis had brought the two sisters. They had to suffer humiliation and scorn and were compelled to work hard merely to survive. Francis could only wonder at the courage of these two young women of noble birth who were following his Gospel ideal to the last heroic letter.

4. Francis and Clare

Francis and Clare were both warm-hearted, generous souls drawn together by their love of poverty and their absolute devotion to the Gospel way of life. Their friendship was a perfect combination of chaste affection for each other and whole-hearted commitment to a common cause, a cause that they knew was greater than either of them. Their affection and respect for each other ran deep, as is evident from their writings. For example, in her *Testament*, Clare calls herself 'the little plant of the holy father,' Francis, and says that he was 'a pillar of strength' to her. These were no empty phrases of flattery because Francis had been her guide in the way of the Gospel since the moment she had set foot on that path.

Clare devoted her life to the Franciscan ideal because her mind and heart had been captured by the beauty of Francis's vision. Yet she had to fight long and hard to be allowed to live up to her ideal. The Church authorities at first insisted that she follow the Benedictine Rule, Hugolino's Rule and many other regulations. But, with the gentle, patient perseverance of those who have made an irrevocable commitment, she kept begging to be allowed 'the privilege of poverty.' Her insistence bore fruit, and at length she obtained the short document that permitted her and her sisters to live in Franciscan poverty even though, at that time, they still had to follow the Benedictine Rule. Finally, she was allowed to write her own Rule, and she was buried on August 11, 1253, with this Rule in her hands.

Clare was truly Francis's disciple. While the First Order of friars suffered devastating divisions all through the thirteenth century, Clare and her sisters were unswerving in their resolve to live in Gospel poverty without any deviation from the Franciscan way, as Francis himself had wished (cf. UltVol).

Time to Think

1. Why was Francis surprised to find that his ideal attracted Clare and other women from Assisi?

- 2. Why may Clare be considered as being completely faithful to the Franciscan ideal?
- 3. How can we remain faithful to the basic elements of Franciscanism in the materialistic world of today?

The difficulties which the brothers experienced during their first mission outside Italy convinced them that they needed better organization. This early group of friars, so formless at first, was beginning to take shape as the Order of Friars Minor, a development which demanded a change in outlook on the part of the official Church, of Francis, and of the brothers themselves. The new perspective made it possible for Franciscanism to survive in the Church, and although the spontaneity of the early way of Gospel life was lessened, the essential Franciscan spirit remained alive and active in the burgeoning Order of Friars Minor.

Chapter 6:

The Order of Friars Minor

It is doubtful if it ever crossed Francis's mind to 'found' an Order, as the great medieval saints, St. Benedict, St. Bernard, and St. Bruno, had done. The beginning of Francis's Order was spontaneous and was directed more by circumstances and heavenly inspiration than by any kind of planning on his part. Although the small group of brothers who gathered around Francis to live the Gospel life of prayer, poverty, and penance grew rapidly, no one anticipated that the enormous increase in numbers would cause any problems.

It is true that these early friars did hold meetings, which they called 'chapters,' but that was the extent of their organization, and they simply had no infrastructure of any kind. When Francis and his now numerous brothers set out to preach their Gospel message far and wide, they relied on prayer and their own powers of discernment to guide them in their travels; but sometimes they took the wrong direction and were compelled to turn back. This was the beginning of the long history of the Order of Friars Minor, a history that was sometimes glorious, but at other times crucifying.

1. Preaching outside Italy

An event in the early history of the Franciscan group shows how this band of brothers, by now quite numerous, wished to act with the freedom of the Gospel, not worrying about precautions or details of organization. The results, however, were painful. When the brothers met in chapter in 1217, they took their inspiration from Francis to go to preach the Gospel in other

European countries, for until then they had not travelled outside Italy. Francis himself wished to go to France (see the *Legend of Perugia*, 79), but, later in Florence, he met Cardinal Hugolino, who convinced him not to venture abroad, but to remain in Italy, where his presence was needed. The other brothers left Italy in small groups in the purest Gospel tradition, without money, with no knowledge of foreign languages or customs, and with no letters of authorization from the Roman Curia. As he recorded in his *Testament*, Francis did not wish his brothers to seek such privileges (Test 25f.). The result was a long list of disappointments and hardships.

The chronicler, Jordan of Giano, relates that in Germany the friars were stripped naked, beaten, imprisoned, and ridiculed because the people thought they were heretics. Jordan also tells us that in Hungary the friars fell into the hands of some shepherds who pelted them with stones and thrashed them because they took them for sorcerers. In France, too, they were mistaken for heretics, although on this occasion the misunderstanding was resolved less violently. However, those who crossed from Spain to Morocco were butchered by the Saracens. From other sources (L3S 16:62; AP 11:44), we learn that preaching the Gospel in foreign lands resulted in disillusionment and even some bitterness for many of the friars.

Francis realized that the character of his group had changed. They were no longer a small band of free-spirited, uncomplicated men preaching the Gospel in simple words to the people of their own country. Now there were many more of them, they were going much farther afield, and they realized that they needed external support (AP 11:45), which shows how the friars' views on official protection had altered. This change resulted in a situation which would be a heavy cross for the Friars Minor to bear all through their history.

2. The new situation

This 'second birth' of the Order, which took place because of the turn of events, had a series of important consequences for everyone interested in the Gospel renewal initiated by the Franciscan movement:

For Francis, it was a cause of great suffering in the closing years of his life because he did not know how to reconcile Gospel freedom with the structured organization necessary for a large group. He accepted the rulings of the Roman Curia and governed the Order to the best of his ability in the circumstances, but in his heart he remained God's troubadour, the young merchant who found himself drawn to follow Christ, poor and crucified. His spirituality was still basically that of the ordinary people. (LM 6:9, for example, for an episode from this period). It was, indeed, difficult for him to

correlate his ideal of the Gospel life with the new organizational demands. Superiors had to be put in place, the Order divided into provinces, official chapters convened, houses established, and friars prevented from wandering blindly into dangerous situations. How were they to follow such a regulated mode of life and still maintain the simplicity of their original vision? No wonder, then, that tensions and divisions arose among the brothers. But, fortunately, they had clear-sighted men like John of Parma and St. Bonaventure to guide them, and they succeeded in keeping alive the Gospel ideal they had received from Francis. They strove hard to maintain that ideal: they suffered for it, and they even fought and wounded each other in their endeavour to preserve it.

The change was important for the Church also. The Friars Minor were no longer an ill-regulated group with an uncertain future. Their Order was quite different from the existing ones, for it had a new spirit and brought with it new energy, and was, therefore, a force for renewal and a Gospel hope for the whole Church. That is how the official Church viewed the Order, for the Popes had always appreciated and valued highly the Franciscan movement.

3. Sorrow and joy

The situation in the Order at this time can be viewed from two different angles. On the one hand, the consolidation and restructuring of the Order of Friars Minor ensured its survival in the future, widened its horizons, helped to spread the Gospel to a greater number of people, guaranteed its orthodoxy, and brought it into the mainstream of the salvation history of the Church of Christ. On the other hand, however, the newly structured Order did not have the freedom of spirit and joyful spontaneity of the first Franciscans, and wasted much energy on matters that had nothing to do with living and spreading the Gospel.

Nevertheless, as the Order evolved, its Gospel ideal was by no means lost, but was successfully incorporated into the Church's general plan of salvation. The Franciscan spirit is still very much alive in the Order of Friars Minor, and Francis's Gospel inspiration continues to motivate his followers everywhere. To preserve that spirit and follow that inspiration, the friars must conduct all their future activities in the light of Francis's original ideal of the Gospel life, as also must everyone who wishes to live the Gospel in the Franciscan way.

4. The Gospel life for all

Because of the preaching and example of the early friars, many lay people were moved to think about following the Franciscan way without changing their state in life. So Francis's inspiration spread far and wide because many of the faithful saw his message as a way to achieve their desire to live the Gospel life more fully. This broad-based group of ordinary people seeking to practise penance in their everyday lives came to be known as the Third Order, now called the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO). Many groups and projects animated by the spirit of Francis of Assisi have sprung and continue to spring from the Third Order.

- 1. Was the Franciscan ideal hindered or helped by the Order's great increase in numbers?
- 2. Did the Friars Minor succeed in keeping alive Francis's Gospel inspiration despite the structural changes in their Order?
- 3. How can we make the Gospel the real motivation of those who wish to live the Gospel life as Francis of Assisi did?

Francis travelled to Palestine to preach Christ's message there humbly and peacefully, even though it could have meant martyrdom for him. However, in his absence from Italy, his original Gospel ideal was being threatened by some of the friars who wished to imitate the organization of the older Orders. When he returned to Italy, he exerted every effort to keep his brothers on the path which, from the beginning, they had all committed themselves to follow. He asked Rome for a Cardinal Protector who would keep the Fraternity in contact with the Church. To set a Gospel example to all the brothers, he renounced his leadership of the Fraternity and wrote a Rule which embodied the essence of the Gospel. In this way, he saved the Gospel ideal in spite of many difficulties and doubts.

Chapter 7:

Preserving the Ideal

In the last chapter, we saw that Francis's first companions and those who joined them later were, in the beginning, happily unconcerned about, and unhampered by, a mass of regulations. This changed, though, when their numbers grew much larger and they became the Order of Friars Minor. The effects of the rapid expansion of the group were, in many respects, beneficial. Yet the change did pose a threat to the very foundations of the Franciscan way of life, which was then in danger of being forgotten or even deliberately abandoned. But the friars proved their devotion to their heritage by their strenuous efforts to save their way of life. The new crisis was most evident during the period between Francis's journey to Palestine in 1219 and the drawing up of the *Rule* in 1221. The following were the main incidents:

1. Francis's journey to Palestine

Although Celano (1Cel 55f.) tells us that Francis had *always* wanted to go to the lands of the Saracens to become a martyr, this is not mentioned in any of the other sources. For example, neither the *Legend of the Three Companions* nor Celano's own *Second Life of St. Francis* records that the Saint had a constant desire to be a martyr. In fact, his main motive for wishing to go among the Saracens was to preach the Gospel, not to become a martyr. The lands of the Saracens, that is, the territory occupied by the Arab armies,

were then the focus of Christian evangelization and of a missionary fervor that had been aroused by the first four Crusades. Francis wished to preach the Gospel in those countries and was aware of, and prepared to take, the risks involved, including death itself. Yet, he was not actively seeking the martyr's crown. For him the most important thing was to spread knowledge of Christ, and if martyrdom came, he was ready to accept it.

This view is amply proved by the journey which Francis finally made to the Saracens in 1219. Accompanied by one of the brothers, he crossed to Damietta in Egypt, where the crusaders were besieging the city. It was a situation of horror and cruelty into which Francis went as a prophet and man of peace, armed only with the word of God and his own humility. It was during this journey that an event occurred which is well documented in the sources (LM 9:6-9; JdV, History of the Orient, quoted in M. Habig, Omnibus of Sources, p. 1612), namely, Francis's audience with the Sultan, Melek-Al-Kamel, and his preaching to the Sultan and his court. The Fioretti (Fior 24) adds that a friendship developed between Francis and the Muslim ruler. But the question remains: how did Francis succeed in gaining an audience with the Sultan? Previously, he had been only a helpless bystander at the siege of Damietta. Later, he had been with the crusaders in Syria and perhaps in Palestine, returning to Italy in the spring of 1219.

His return was sudden because he had received news that the two vicars, Matthew of Narnia and Gregory of Naples, whom he had left in charge of the friars in Italy, were imitating the practices of the older Orders, such as stability, authority, and installation of officials, and acquiring houses, privileges, etc. The old temptation to dilute the pure Gospel ideal was at work again.

2. A Gospel strategy

Francis now had to fight to preserve his initial inspiration in the emerging Order, and he chose to do so by following a plan which we can call 'a Gospel strategy:'

He saw that an Order such as his, committed to living in poverty and without permanent privileges, would be compelled to have frequent recourse to Rome, unlike the other, older Orders whose legal apparatus and lines of communication were already well established. For that reason, he asked the Pope to give his Fraternity Cardinal Hugolino of Ostia as 'Cardinal Protector' (L3S 65). In this way, he would ensure that his Fraternity would develop in the right direction, in the faith of the Church.

Next, Francis did something that had a profound effect on the brothers. At the chapter of 1220, he resigned as General of the Order in favour of his companion, Peter of Catania (2Cel 143). He saw that the Fraternity was in imminent danger of losing its spirit of 'minority,' seeking to acquire 'majority,' that is, to become strong, powerful. To counteract this peril, he wished to set an example for his brothers by stepping down voluntarily and becoming only one among many. In this dramatic way, he showed them that their main concern should be the Gospel way of 'minority' which they had committed themselves to follow and not the efficient organization of the Order, no matter how necessary that might be (2Cel 151). With this gesture, Francis also removed another danger. He was aware that he was becoming a mere symbol for the friars, an object to be venerated instead of a living example to follow. The more he was honored, the more he was isolated, cut off from his brothers. We can imagine how anxious he must have been when he thought it necessary to take such a drastic measure.

Francis's next move was to write a *Rule* that was centred on the Gospel and was not just a list of legal requirements.

3. Preserving the ideal

That was the basic preoccupation of Francis's whole Gospel journey, the cause to which he devoted all his physical and spiritual powers. Jordan of Giano paints the moving, even pathetic, picture of Francis at the chapter of 1221, seated at the feet of Brother Elias, the second General of the Order and tugging at Elias's habit when he wished to give his opinion on some point. In his *Chronicle*, Jordan writes:

Francis, seated at the feet of Brother Elias, would pull at his habit, and Elias, leaning down and listening to what Francis had to say, would straighten up and announce: "Brothers, the brother says that...." (Chronicle 17).

Here Francis was teaching a profound lesson on the real meaning of the Gospel life to his brothers, who were beginning to forget their Gospel 'minority' and were worrying about offices and precedence in the Order. Speaking through his Superior to the assembled friars, he renounced everything, including his leadership of the Order and even his own voice at the chapter. It is significant that at this chapter he preached a homily on the words of Ps 144:1: 'Blessed be the Lord, my God, who trains my hand for war.' This was his 'war,' his fight, to keep the original Gospel ideal alive and unchanged among the now numerous brothers (cf. Jordan of Giano, *Chronicle* 17).

We may well wonder if Francis's strategy was successful in keeping the growing Order faithful to his Gospel ideal. It would seem that he was completely overcome by the unforeseen problems that had arisen. Being

straightforward and uncomplicated himself, he was undoubtedly bewildered when confronted with the complex character and endless demands of a structured Order. In fact, when we remember the later vicissitudes in the long history of the Franciscan family, we may be tempted to conclude that his efforts to save his legacy failed. At any rate, Francis obviously did all he could to pass down to his followers his most precious legacy, the determination to live the life of the Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And he succeeded, since those who love Franciscanism are always aware of their Father's call to be faithful to his teaching.

- 1. What was unusual about Francis's journey to Palestine?
- 2. What do you think of 'the Gospel strategy' that Francis used to save the Franciscan ideal?
- 3. Do you think that the most attractive aspect of Franciscanism is its ability to make us think about and follow the Gospel of our Lord?

When the friars had greatly increased in number, Francis was obliged to write a form of life, a *Rule*, so that they could preserve the fundamentals of their Gospel life. He drew up the third and definitive *Rule of the Friars Minor* in consultation with his brothers, to whom he had given a dramatic demonstration of the meaning of the Gospel life. This *Rule* was approved by the Pope in 1223.

Chapter 8:

The Rule

e have seen that Francis adopted 'a Gospel strategy' to preserve the Gospel ideal in the emerging Order; and, as we said, one part of this strategy was to draw up a Rule of life for his community. In a sense, this was the natural thing to do in the circumstances, because a large group cannot function well without central guidance. In fact, the question of a Rule had already arisen in the very first years of the Fraternity. In 1210, Francis and his first companions had gone to Rome to have the Pope approve their way of life, which Francis presented in the form of a Rule consisting simply of a handful of Gospel texts (Test 15). Why, then, did he write, not one, but two more Rules eleven years later? What lay behind those three documents which have inspired the friars from the very beginning until now? We shall try to answer these questions.

1. The need for a Rule

Francis was no lover of official documents (Test 25f.; LP 20), but sometimes he had to have recourse to them in the last years of his life, when the number of brothers and houses had increased enormously. Thus, it was force of circumstances that moved him to give his brothers a *Rule* of life. When his Fraternity was small in size, the brothers were free to live the Gospel life without compromise. But when their numbers increased greatly and they became an Order that was hugely successful everywhere, Francis found that his ideal had to be protected from being diluted or even forgotten. That was his main concern.

2. Not one, but three Rules

Before discussing each of the Rules, we must remember that:

Francis did not sit down at a desk in an office and write his *Rules* with cold precision, as if they were so many lists of impersonal regulations. Instead, each *Rule* was the fruit of much experience and the reflection of many dreams.

He composed each of his three *Rules* in response to a particular need in the life of the early Fraternity, so that each *Rule* rose out of its own context.

With these points in mind, we shall examine the Rules in turn.

The 'handful of Gospel texts'

Apparently, Francis wrote three *Rules*. The *Legend of the Three Companions* tells us that 'he made and tried several rules before the last one which he left to his brothers' (L3S 9:35). We have already referred to the first of these 'several rules,' the one which was composed about 1210, when he went to Rome to get the Pope's approval (L3S 12:46-53). Unfortunately, this *Rule* has not come down to us, although we can say that it apparently consisted of some Gospel texts similar to the ones which Francis heard in February, 1208 (L3S 8:25), and which expressed simply and plainly the aspirations and ideals of the small band of brothers.

In compiling this first document, Francis's purpose was not to set down a code of specific legal norms, but merely to show that the brothers' way of life was in complete harmony with the Gospel of Christ. This elementary structure was sufficient for the Fraternity during the first eight to ten years of its existence.

First Rule (Regula non bullata, or RegNB)

When the Order grew large in numbers, it needed a definite norm of life that would preserve the fundamentals of the friars' commitment to the Gospel way. So it came about, that, around the year 1221, Francis felt obliged to write a 'real' *Rule*, with chapters, norms, directives, etc. Because he was convinced that all faith was based on the word of God, he consulted an expert Scripture scholar named Caesar of Speyer and filled several pages with quotations from the Gospels (RegNB 22f.). To these, he added those experiences of the Christian life which he thought important for retaining his initial inspiration, such as the manner of working (RegNB 7), not using money (RegNB 9), the way to go about in the world (RegNB 15), going among the Saracens (RegNB 16), preaching by example (RegNB 17), and love of the Eucharist (RegNB 20).

Many years of effort and dreams by Francis and his companions went into the composition of these pages. Yet we know that he was not pleased with the result, for he thought that the *Rule* he had drawn up was too long and complicated, too diffuse and impractical. The brothers needed something more specific, clear, and unambiguous, while the lawyers in the Roman Curia, good jurists that they were, wanted a more legal type of document.

Second Rule (Regula bullata, or RegB)

On November 29, 1223, the Pope issued a Bull confirming the definitive *Rule* of the Order of Minors. This second *Rule* was shorter than the first and was more directive, ensuring, on the one hand, the retention of the essentials of the Gospel life and, on the other, the ability to accommodate itself to the new conditions in the Order. In it, the Gospel guidelines were reduced to the basics, but were well represented. The wisdom accumulated over many years of Gospel living was retained and lent vitality to the arid, precise style of the legal elements in it.

Francis was a realist and was clear-sighted enough to accept the consequences of an irreversible process of change. He knew that he had to avoid or minimize the risk of decay which he had seen occur in the great religious Orders that had preceded him. That was his main task as a founder.

3. A Rule for the Fraternity

As we have observed, Francis was not a lawyer who sat in an office, writing pages of the best regulations of which he could think. Instead, he put down on paper what he had lived for and striven after with his brothers in the faith. That is why his second *Rule*, too, was fundamentally a dialogue with his brothers, trying to discern what God's will was for himself and them. Undoubtedly, that was the only reason why he wrote those first 'trial' documents.

We can be sure that the whole process was not without its tensions and agonies. There are many references in the sources to the suffering which the Fraternity underwent during the formulation of the *Rule* (LP 16-18; 20; 102; 108, etc.). One particularly dramatic incident is recorded in the *Mirror of Perfection*, telling how a delegation of Ministers of the Order appealed to Francis not to make his new *Rule* too harsh (SP 1), but this seems to be an exaggerated description of the event. Yet it is not surprising to find that incidents of this type should have occurred. The formulation of the *Rule* was the culmination of an arduous process of spiritual discernment which Francis and his brothers had been engaged in since the very first days of their Gospel life together.

4. Encouraging the brothers

Francis's role as a legislator cannot be separated from his fatherly duty to encourage his brothers in their commitment to live the full Gospel life. As we have already pointed out, he used an elementary, but very sound, method for this purpose. By his own conduct, he showed them what living the Gospel really meant, as we find recorded in numerous texts from the sources (L3S 13:54; 1Cel 41, 54, 90,etc.). He believed that, since he had been the first to start on the Gospel life, he should continue to be the guide for his brothers in that life. In addition, he foresaw that, after his death, they would need someone who would also set an example for them. This task fell to Bernard of Quintavalle, the man whom Francis had always admired because he had been the first brother to come to the Fraternity and had given all his considerable wealth to the poor (SP 107).

Finally, Francis apparently wished to have the community at the Portiuncula serve as a model for the whole Fraternity (LP 56). So it was obvious that he was not interested in making laws, but simply wished to go to the heart of the Gospel with his brothers beside him.

- 1. Why did Francis write three 'Rules,' since the Friars Minor have only one Rule, the Gospel?
- 2. Do you think that the *Rule* has played an important part in the Franciscan groups down through the centuries?
- 3. How are we to deepen appreciation for the Gospel among Francis's followers?

At Greccio, Francis had dramatically represented the hardship and poverty of the surroundings into which Christ was born. Now, on Mount La Verna, Christ made Francis a living representation of His death by imprinting the five wounds of His Passion on the body of the Saint who had striven all his life to imitate his Master perfectly. And soon his brothers and sisters were to mourn the death of him who had made it possible for them to live the Gospel life to the full.

Chapter 9:

The End of the Road

he last few years of Francis's life (1223-1226) were the most painful but also, in one sense, the most fulfilling period of his life; painful because of a series of adverse circumstances, and fulfilling because he was able to form a synthesis of the Christian life. That is to say, he saw more clearly than ever before that Christ was both Lord and Servant, the standard by whom everything was to be judged. From Christ, Francis was able to draw the strength to continue working to the end for the consolidation of his Gospel ideal.

1. Years of trial

During the last three years of his life, Francis suffered greatly in body and soul. His body, already weak, was further ravaged by illness. In addition to his bodily afflictions, he was suffering because his brothers, too, were causing him pain. From texts like the curious passage in Celano (2Cel 51), we can gather that there was a sad, but understandably human, deterioration in the signs of care and affection shown Francis by those who should have loved him most. This is not surprising because, besides being an invalid, Francis was also widely regarded as a saint, an 'object of veneration.' The combined burden of tending to a very sick patient while dealing with the importunity of the pious medieval public had begun to wear down some of the brothers.

2. The stigmata

Francis received the stigmata in September, 1224 (L3S 17:69f.), an event of the utmost importance in his spiritual life. It would be impossible to

estimate the far-reaching effects of this unheard of privilege, but several points are relatively clear:

Francis could not have 'copied' someone else since he was the first in recorded history to receive the stigmata.

The stigmata were the external manifestation of a long and unusually intense process of reflection upon, and imitation of, Christ crucified.

The biographies record that Francis forbade those around him to speak about the stigmata, an indication that the event really occurred.

It is undeniable that Francis regarded the stigmata as a purely supernatural experience.

If we interpret Francis's stigmata in the light of the experiences of later stigmatists, we shall miss the really important factor in Francis's case, namely, the personal element.

3. Last words to friends

When we examine the relationship between Francis and those closest to him during the last years of his life, we find that his love for them increased:

This was the case with Brother Leo, that great admirer of Francis, with whom the Saint, in the past, had painful disagreements about the future of the Order. To Leo, Francis gave a prayer and a blessing (LaudDei and BenLeo), as 'a special gift,' and also sent him an affectionate letter (EpLeo; cf. 2Cel 22). The differences between them only served to strengthen their friendship.

There was never any dissension between Francis and Clare. Their affection for each other never lessened, as we can see from the short manuscript which Francis sent Clare and her sisters toward the end of his life (UltVol). Clare kept this document carefully and incorporated it into her own *Rule* (RCl 6).

During this time, Francis dictated a touching letter to be sent to his close friend of many years, Jacoba de Settesoli (SP 112; 3Cel 37f.), asking her to come to see him before he died.

We have already spoken about the special affection which Francis had for Bernard of Quintavalle, whom he had held up as an example for the brothers. From this period, we have a brief manuscript in which Francis declared that he felt 'bound to love (Brother Bernard) more than any other brother in the entire Order' (BenBer; cf. SP 107; LP 12). The *Fioretti*, however, gives quite a different version (Fior 6).

4. More than a mere representation

The episode familiar to all lovers of things Franciscan, the making of the crib at Greccio (1Cel 84-87; LM 10:7), occurred in the third year before Francis's death:

For Francis, the birth of Christ was, above all, a mystery of poverty and vulnerability and a foreshadowing of the sufferings of the Passion. The newborn Child suffered in the manger, while the man, Christ, suffered on the cross. The joy of Christmas is a Christian joy, a joy that is especially keen because it arises out of suffering.

Greccio is close to Calvary, close to Christ's wounds. Greccio and La Verna represent the two pillars upon which Franciscan spirituality rests, the Incarnation and the death of Christ, the Servant and the Lord.

Francis was not, as is often claimed, the first to build a Christmas crib. The manger at Greccio was actually empty, but St. Bonaventure and Celano tell us that a good man, John of Greccio, had a vision in which he saw the child Jesus in the manger there (LM 10:7; 1Cel 86). The crib at Greccio was more than a simple scenic representation: it was a reminder and veneration of the poverty surrounding Christ's birth.

5. Sister Death

The descriptions of Francis's death express heartfelt sorrow intermingled with Franciscan joy (L3S 17:68; 1Cel 110; 2Cel 117; LM 14:6):

According to St. Bonaventure and Celano (LM 14:3; 2Cel 214), Francis wished to die completely naked, out of love of poverty and humility. We suspect that he also acted in this way to give an example to those brothers in the Order who were tempted to look for offices, privileges and strict organization at the expense of Gospel simplicity and self-abnegation. Celano records that Francis 'commanded that a hair shirt be put upon him and that he be sprinkled with ashes' (1Cel 110). Perhaps Francis did this to rebuke the greediness of those who were already dividing up the spoils, the 'relics of the saint,' and starting to sell them nearby. At any rate, his actions were unusual and even harsh.

'The Poor Clares' lament,' as it is called, was quite different. Although Celano's account (1Cel 117) is somewhat exaggerated, the event did occur and proved a point. After Francis's death at the Portiuncula, the brothers brought his body to Assisi. On the way, they stopped at San Damiano, where Clare and her sisters were able to gaze for the last time on Francis and weep over him. Their tears were a sign of their affection as well as proof of their fidelity. From the beginning, the Poor Clares had preserved intact the ideal which Francis had held up to them.

- 1. What did the cross of Christ mean to Francis?
- 2. Why did Francis, at the end of his life, express more than his usual affection for particular brothers and sisters?
- 3. Is Francis still a Gospel inspiration for the men and women of today?

Part Two: Writings



We have twenty-eight writings and five dictated documents firmly attributed to St. Francis, most of which were written down by a brother 'secretary,' who translated them into Latin from Francis's Umbrian Italian dialect. Other writings of his have been lost, while still other documents have been mistakenly attributed to him. The best way to know Francis is to read and re-read his writings.

Chapter 1:

Francis and His Writings

e are fortunate in having a considerable number of the Saint's writings, twenty-eight in all, plus five dictated documents. Most of these writings are short (opuscula or 'little works') and were composed for a specific occasion or purpose. We have few documents from his youth and the time of his conversion. Yet, from those writings which we do have, we can learn much about Francis's personality; and that is important for understanding him and his Order.

We must remember that most of us know Francis more from his biographics than from his own writings and that some of these biographies, such as the *Fioretti*, were written many years after his death. Obviously, we can come to know someone better from his own words than from what other people tell us about him. Therefore, if we want to become better acquainted with Francis, we must turn to his writings and patiently read and re-read them.

1. Was Francis the author?

Francis knew how to write at a time in history when this skill was uncommon. He probably learned how to read and write in the parish school of St. George in Assisi, and we have samples of his handwriting in Latin and Umbrian Italian. From these samples, we can see that he found writing difficult, since they show clearly the awkwardness that is usual with adults who are unskilled at writing.

At any rate, most of the writings that have come down to us were apparently taken down by other brothers who were more adept at penmanship than Francis (cf. Test 15; 1Cel 82; 2Cel 163).

Those who have studied the Saint's writings closely have found surprisingly great variations in language and style between one manuscript and another.

For example, compare the simple beauty of the *Prayer Before the Crucifix* with the elegant style of the *Letter to the Entire Order*. The only explanation for this discrepancy is that Francis apparently employed different brothers as secretaries and that some of these brothers were better stylists than others.

There is another factor to consider. The writings we have are in Latin, and Francis assuredly did not know that language sufficiently well to have composed them. He normally spoke Umbrian Italian, the language of his native place, and we are told that he liked to sing in French when he was happy (1Cel 16). But he seems to have found Latin difficult, perhaps because it was a 'literary' language, learned in the schoolroom, used only in the liturgy and in official documents and never in the everyday conversation of the ordinary people. Accordingly, he dictated his material in Italian, and his secretaries wrote it down in Latin, the 'official' language. This explains the frequent awkward phrases and clumsy syntax in his works.

From Jordan of Giano's *Chronicle*, we learn that one of Francis's secretaries was named Caesar of Speyer and that he was an expert Scripture scholar. According to Jordan, it was Caesar of Speyer who selected the biblical quotations for Francis's first *Rule* (1221). A glance at this *Rule* will show how numerous these quotations are and the skill with which they are woven into the text. It is true that the main ideas here are Francis's, but the beautiful style in which those ideas are written is the work of Caesar of Speyer.

2. Francis's authentic writings

Modern experts in Franciscan studies say that we have twenty-eight writings and five dictated documents which were undoubtedly composed by Francis, while there are references in the biographies to other writings by the Saint which are now lost. Some of these missing manuscripts are: letters from Francis to Cardinal Hugolino (1Cel 100); letters of greeting and exhortation to the brothers (1Cel 82); some writings for Clare and her sisters, which Clare mentions in her *Testament*; a letter to St. Elizabeth of Hungary and another to a lady whose son was ill. These documents are a great loss, especially the letters to Cardinal Hugolino, which would have given us new details about the earliest days of the Franciscan Fraternity.

In the course of time, other writings have been attributed to St. Francis, but they are either false or at best dubious. Scholars have collected some thirty such documents, but we shall comment on just one of them, the famous 'Peace Prayer:' 'Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace...,' widely attributed to Francis. It is certainly a beautiful prayer and it faithfully echoes the Saint's lifelong philosophy, but he did not compose it. Instead, it first appeared at the beginning of this century, before the start of the First World

War and was later attributed to St. Francis. It received much attention when it was quoted in 1945 by Senator Tom Connally at the United Nations and, more recently, by then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

3. Reading Francis's writings

The best and most modern edition in English of Francis's writings is: Armstrong, Hellman, and Short, Eds. *St. Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volume I*, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999.

- 1. To what extent can we consider Francis as the author of the writings attributed to him?
- 2. How can we acquire a better knowledge of Francis's writings?
- 3. Do Franciscan groups make sufficient use of Francis's writings?

From the period of Francis's youth, we have only one prayer, the Prayer Before the Crucifix, in which he asks for the enlightenment to live the life God wills for him. We do not know, however, when Francis composed other prayers, such as the Prayer Inspired by the Our Father and the Praises to be Said at All the Hours, which he used all during his life and in which the theme of God's goodness to us in sending us His beloved Son make them ideal forms of Franciscan prayer.

Chapter 2:

Writings in Youth

part from the *Prayer Before the Crucifix*, we have no prayers from Francis's youth. We place writings like the *Prayer Inspired by the Our Father* and the *Praises to be Said at All the Hours* in this period because they can be attributed to any period of his life and because they surely went with him everywhere. But be that as it may, they are prayers from the heart and are focused on Christ the Saviour.

1. A prayer for enlightenment: The Prayer Before the Crucifix

All the manuscripts which contain this prayer regard it as dating from the time of Francis's conversion and declare that he used it when he heard the command: 'Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin' (2Cel 10). This episode occurred in 1206, probably in January, when the feast of San Feliciano was being celebrated in Foligno, where Francis had taken a horse laden with cloth for sale.

Naturally, Francis said the prayer in his mother tongue, the Italian dialect spoken in Umbria, and only later was it translated into Latin. As we have said, almost all of Francis's extant writings are in Latin. In the course of time, many variations of this prayer have appeared, but no one doubts that Francis was the author of the original.

Francis composed and used this prayer at a time of crisis in his faith and in his life. It was not unusual for him to have recourse to prayer and, on this occasion, he knelt and prayed before the painted crucifix in San Damiano. This crucifix is a serene image of Christ in which the drama of the cross and the triumph of the Resurrection are combined.

Apparently, this crucifix at San Damiano was very dear to Francis. In his prayer, he asked to be enlightened and allowed to see what God wished him to do. After his encounter with the leper, he had begun to see that his was to be a life lived as God willed, that is, a life devoted to following the Christ of the Gospels. Now he was about to set out on that path without hesitation or anxiety. Possibly he recited this prayer, not only in the days of his youth, but also all during his life, for following the Gospel way, the Christian way, is not an easy thing to do.

2. A prayer for the brothers to say: Prayer Inspired by the Our Father

There has been more discussion about the authenticity of the *Prayer Inspired* by the Our Father than about the origin of any of Francis's other prayers. Most sound authors say that, according to present evidence, Francis did not compose all of this prayer himself. Instead, he borrowed heavily from other medieval paraphrases of the Our Father, adapting them to his own style. His selective borrowing and his adaptation of other medieval prayers give him some claim to be the author of this one, which he often urged his brothers to use.

We know that Francis said this long prayer several times a day, for he was, indeed, a man of prayer. It was the custom at that time to begin the Divine Office with the Our Father, a practice which Francis may have expanded and deepened by using his own prayer for that purpose. He fully appreciated the meaning of the title 'Our Father' since leaving home and father behind and returning everything, even the clothes off his back, to Peter Bernardone in the presence of the Bishop of Assisi. From that moment on, he had known the trials but also the joys of being a true son of God the Father. That is why he never tired of recommending this prayer to his brothers.

The prayer is centred on the love of God above all else and the tireless search for Him in our neighbor. Francis was living the Gospel life for one reason only, and that was because it was the path that Christ Himself had trodden. This prayer, then, is a kind of short summary of the Gospel which Francis had turned into a prayer.

3. A litany of praise: The Praises to be Said at All the Hours

While we do not know when *The Praises to be Said at All the Hours* was written, everyone admits that Francis was the author, even though it is made up almost entirely of direct and indirect quotations for Scripture. Most of the verses are taken from the Book of Revelation, and the recurring refrain: 'Let us praise and glorify Him forever' makes the prayer a kind of litany.

It is sometimes said that the Christ of Francis was too 'earthly,' that the Saint concentrated more on the Christ of history than on the Christ of faith. However, it is more than likely that such distinctions never occurred to Francis. But even if there had been some doubt on the matter, this prayer certainly removes it because here the Saint focuses on the vision of Christ triumphant in heaven. In fact, this is purely a prayer of praise, which Francis was accustomed to repeat several times a day before beginning the Divine Office.

This is a prayer made for repetition, a kind of litany. Here Francis adopted the method of praying so widespread in the Eastern Church, the repetition of the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord, have mercy on me, a poor sinner!,' or repeating a phrase or word from the Bible more or less in rhythm with one's breathing so that praise can arise easily and spontaneously. It was typical of Francis to pray in this way.

For the rest, this prayer gives us further insight into how Francis prayed, Scripture in hand, using the words of the Bible itself. He did not 'invent' his prayers, but travelled the path of prayer guided by the inspired word of God. From the very source of every prayer and every sacrament, he learned how to give thanks to God and to praise Him. In that scriptural prayer and with its help, his prayers of praise and thanksgiving were raised and absorbed into the contemplation of the love and goodness of God, his Father in heaven.

The three prayers we have just discussed, the *Prayer Before the Crucifix, The Prayer Inspired by the Our Father*, and *The Praises to be Said at All the Hours*, were composed to be prayed and accompanied Francis all through his life. After each chapter of this book, the prayers discussed in that chapter should be read over reflectively and one of them recited devoutly with others who are seeking to follow Christ in the Franciscan way.

- 1. What is Francis asking for in his Prayer Before the Crucifix?
- 2. Why did Francis love the Our Father so much?
- 3. How can a Franciscan today combine an intense life of prayer with a life of intense activity?
- 4. Read and reflect upon the Prayer Before the Crucifix, The Prayer Inspired by the Our Father, and The Praises to be Said at All the Hours.

Francis perfected a distinct type of prayer, consisting of contemplation and continuous praise. Moreover, he saw and taught that we owe our salvation entirely to God and that we can serve Him best by serving our neighbors. We find his prayer and his practice reflected all through his writings.

Chapter 3:

The First Writings

t is not easy to ascertain the dates of Francis's Exhortation to the Praise of God, Letter to Brother Leo, Admonitions, and Rule for Hermitages. We call them the 'first' writings because they belong to the earliest stage of Franciscanism and have all the freshness of a new venture, reflecting, as they do, the first steps taken by Francis and his companions. They are of great interest to us because in them we are witnessing the birth of something beautiful.

1. A different way to praise: The Exhortation to the Praise of God

Francis wrote the *Exhortation to the Praise of God* around the year 1213, in the first decade of Franciscanism. Judging by verse 10: 'Praise the Lord for He is good; all you who *read* this, bless the Lord,' Francis intended this document to be read and prayed in praise of God. There is little original in this text since all Francis did was link together some direct and indirect quotations from Scripture, especially from the Psalms. But, even so, the *Exhortation* bears the mark of one who 'remained unshaken and happy, and (who) sang songs of happiness in his heart to himself and to God' (1Cel 93).

The Exhortation illustrates the Christian joy that is so characteristic of early Franciscanism. The first friars were not just naturally happy by temperament; they were happy because God existed and because Christ had saved the world. Theirs was a joy begotten of faith, which they expressed by praising God.

Perhaps the originality of this simple document lies in Francis's approach to praising God. Here he does not praise God in His creatures or for the creatures He has made. Instead, he praises the Creator with His creatures, adding his voice to the mighty chorus of praise rising to God from all His creation. When we praise God in this way, we are doing so as part of the

universe for which we are praising Him. We shall find it easy to pray and praise God when we join our voices to those of the world around us.

2. A different way to obey: The Letter to Brother Leo

The Letter to Brother Leo is one of the two documents that we have in Francis's own handwriting, the other being the Blessing for Brother Leo. The Letter is written in poor Latin, showing how difficult it was for Francis to express himself in that language. The manuscript is preserved in the cathedral at Spoleto and seems to belong to the first part of Francis's life as a friar.

This is a short, but moving, composition, in which Francis describes in simple terms a new way to understand obedience, different from the contemporary view. At that time, the ideal of obedience was that of a son to his all-powerful father. According to that model, absolute obedience was to be given to the one who represented the father: in fact, the monastic term, 'abbot,' means 'father.' This brief document shows that Francis regarded the relationship between superior and subject as being more like that between mother and son than that between father and son. He believed that there should be a close, fraternal relationship between the one who serves the community as superior and those who obey. That makes it possible for obedience to perform its most important task, that is, to put the Gospel into practice. This was Francis's different and distinct way of seeing obedience: it is the Gospel way.

The Letter also makes it clear that the really important motive for obedience in the Franciscan life is pleasing the Lord and following in His footsteps. Everything else is secondary to that; and it is an objective that cannot be reached unless there is a warm and mutually respectful relationship between superiors and subjects.

3. A different way to see others: Admonitions

We cannot say for sure when Francis wrote his Admonitions. Most likely, throughout his life he expressed his views and experiences in words which his brothers remembered and recorded as his Admonitions. Actually, the uniformity of style throughout the document and the abundance of biblical quotations seem to indicate that the Admonitions are the work of a compiler. At any rate, this is a collection of precious pearls of wisdom, a kind of mirror of perfection, for those who wish to follow in Francis's footsteps. The Admonitions also reflect the human and Christian ideal which Francis set out to achieve, and in them we find not only the essence of Franciscanism but

also the ideal toward which we should all strive. In addition, we shall discover there a new vision of humanity:

We begin to walk in the Gospel way through the gift of the Spirit, and we draw the strength to continue therein from the Sacrament of the bread and wine (Adm 1).

If we appropriate this gift to ourselves, if we think that we have received the gift of faith through our own efforts, then we are stealing from God (Adm 2).

If we see obedience as the Gospel way, then we are on the right track (Adm 3).

We should be indifferent to success and failure. The important thing is to do everything for God (Adm 17).

We must not blame other people for our sins, nor must we claim as our own whatever good we may do (Adm 18; 21).

When we envy our neighbor, we are envying God 'who says and does every good' (Adm 8; 17).

We must be patient with our limitations (Adm 13).

We should accept correction humbly because we know what we are and what we really deserve (Adm 22f.).

We must not think that we are good simply because we can recount the good deeds of others (Adm 6; 28).

If we act on these words of Francis, so full of wisdom and spiritual experience, we shall indeed be renewed in spirit.

4. A different way to pray: The Rule for Hermitages

The brief document, the *Rule for Hermitages*, probably belongs to the period when the Franciscan life was quite well developed, about 1217, perhaps. It directs and encourages those brothers who wish to dedicate themselves more fully to the contemplative life. This document did not appeal to all the brothers, perhaps because of the different trends of thought in the Order at the time.

The most striking feature of this approach to contemplative prayer is the great freedom it allows as well as the importance which Francis placed in prayer as an integral part of the Christian life. External factors, such as large abbeys, a strictly regimented life, monastic offices, and responsibilities, were of no consequence to Francis. The main thing was intense prayer, with a minimal fraternal structure to support it. If those conditions were fulfilled,

Francis was confident that the Spirit of God would direct the brothers along the path of prayer.

- 1. What is Franciscan joy according to the Exhortation to the Praise of God?
- 2. What is obedience according to the Letter to Brother Leo?
- 3. How can we apply Francis's Admonitions in our lives today?
- 4. Read and reflect on the Exhortation to the Praise of God, the Letter to Brother Leo, the Admonitions and the Rule for Hermitages.

While we have none of Francis's writings that specifically belong to the first Franciscan era, there are some which reflect the kind of life led by the early Fraternity. The first friars were happy living the Gospel life (True and Perfect Joy), their piety was uncompromisingly ecclesial (Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary), and they preached the Gospel in simple language (Salutation of the Virtues). Such were the beginning years of Franciscanism, and they still provide an ideal for every follower of Francisc

Chapter 4:

Miscellaneous Writings

s we have observed before, the aim of the early friars was to follow joyfully and faithfully the form of life which Christ lived. 'Unlearned' as they were, they were not preoccupied with recording events and ideas as they occurred, nor did they have the time or the opportunity to do so. Nevertheless, we propose to group together here some writings that Francis could have dictated at any time during his life. For example, the only indication we are given about when Francis dictated his thoughts on *True and Perfect Joy* is that he did so 'one day.' Yet, judging by the mode of life reflected in these writings, we can place them in the years before Francis wrote his Rule of 1221; and, while they are simple documents, they are still vibrant with fervour.

1. The joy of the Gospel life: True and Perfect Joy

Francis could have dictated the document *True and Perfect Joy* at almost any time in the earlier days of the Fraternity. He and his faithful friend, Brother Leo, travelled many roads together, exchanging ideas and listening to one another with respect and affection. The authenticity of the text of *True and Perfect Joy* is beyond all doubt. The contents were popularized by the *Fioretti* in the section on perfect joy (Fior 8), and, in fact, a rough outline of the text appears in *Admonition 5*, while the document itself is a kind of dramatization of that *Admonition*.

Describing exactly how a good Franciscan should act, Francis wanted each friar to realize that his path to truth lies in 'minority' and poverty. Therefore, a brother is none the better for being praised and none the worse for being rejected. He must follow Christ in humility and total rejection of

pride in any form. He will find his deepest joy in poverty and 'minority' because, as Francis said elsewhere, 'What a man is before God, that he is and nothing more' (Adm 19).

The true joy of the Friar Minor, the man of the Gospel, is something more than a simple psychological state. It comes, instead, from knowing that Christ is our Saviour and from realizing that even the smallest detail of our lives is in the gentle hands of our loving Father.

2. Mary, 'the virgin made church:' The Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

It is not easy to estimate the dates of the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Salutation of the Virtues. There is some indication that they may belong to the time when the Fraternity had acquired a certain structure, as we shall see in the Salutation of the Virtues in regard to obedience.

The Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a beautiful prayer to our Lady which, along with the praise of Mary in the Office of the Passion and the Salutation of the Virtues, provides ample material for a study of Francis's Mariology, of which these are the characteristics:

It is trinitarian: Mary is 'the one chosen by the most holy Father in heaven' to be the spouse of the Holy Spirit and the mother of His Son.

Mary is the 'tabernacle' of God; she is His mother, who carried Him in her womb.

Mary, is 'the virgin made church,' in whom dwell all the virtues. She is the Church personified in a faithful soul. In her are all the virtues poured out by the Holy Spirit.

We are not sure what Francis meant about Mary and the Church when he called her 'the virgin made church.' But there is certainly tenderness and deep faith in his metaphor, a simple faith, the faith 'of the people,' as was that of those early Franciscans.

3. The preaching of the Friars Minor: The Salutation of the Virtues

As Francis prescribed for the brothers in his Rule of 1223 (RegB 9), the friars preached penance in 'well-considered and simple' words, in contrast to the formal, profoundly theological, and often very lengthy, sermons of learned clerics. The brothers were to speak 'of vices and virtues,' not with the bitter zeal of the reformer, but rather with joy and peace.

The traditional title for this text is the 'Salutation of the Virtues,' and it does consist of greetings and praise. It is a lyrical, chivalrous, and oratorical work

based on the angel's greeting to Mary at the Annunciation. Here Francis greets the virtues as if they were persons, in much the same way as the Old Testament speaks about Wisdom and as many other Franciscan texts refer to Lady Poverty.

We should note that Francis places great emphasis on obedience here, while he gives no more prominence to poverty than to any of the other virtues. In fact, he speaks as much about the value of obedience as about all the other virtues combined. This emphasis may be special to Francis, although he had always recognized the basic importance of obedience, both in the Christian life and in the common life of the Fraternity. Here he concentrates more on the religious dimension of obedience than on its sociological aspect, as the last words of the *Salutation* clearly show.

Despite a wealth of detail, the *Salutation* is composed in the simple, penitential style which the first friars developed in their early days of preaching when they went to work in the fields around Assisi. Their preaching was really an echo of their way of life, their fidelity in following the path of the Gospel.

- 1. What image of Mary does the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary present?
- 2. According to the *Salutation of the Virtues*, how should the Friars Minor preach the Gospel today?
- 3. How can we followers of Francis effectively preach the faith to the people of today?
- 4. Read and reflect on True and Perfect Joy, the Salutation of the Virtues, and the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Francis wrote some short, but meaningful, documents for Clare and her sisters. These writings point out the essential elements of Franciscanism: namely, that the life of the Poor Clares consists in living the Gospel fully, that Franciscan asceticism is aimed at helping us to follow the Gospel, and that the path of total poverty is the best way to live the Gospel. Here, too, are the last words of Francis, who, all during his life, followed closely the example of His Master, Christ, poor and crucified.

Chapter 5:

Writings for Clare and Her Sisters

rancis was so impressed by the fervour with which Clare and her sisters set out to follow Christ in poverty that he promised her that he and his friars would never abandon them (The Form of Life Given to St. Clare and Her Sisters, 2). He was always close to them at difficult moments, encouraging them with his presence and his writings. We have four of these documents, which, though brief, are of great interest: The Form of Life Given to St. Clare and Her Sisters; Clare's Third Letter to Agnes of Prague, pars. 29-42, on Francis's advice about fasting (see Armstrong-Brady, op.cit. pp. 201f.); the Canticle of Exhortation to St. Clare and Her Sisters; and Francis's Last Will, Written for St. Clare and Her Sisters. These short texts give us glimpses of the highly spiritual and deeply affectionate relationship between Francis and the Poor Clares.

1. The meaning of the Poor Clares' life: The Form of Life Given to St. Clare and Her Sisters

Very soon after Clare and her sisters had settled at San Damiano in about 1212 or 1213, Francis wrote a short 'form of life' for them. Clare included in chapter 6 of her own *Rule* one of the norms that Francis had given her in those early days in the small convent at San Damiano. This is the *Form of Life Given to St. Clare and Her Sisters*, which states very briefly the essence of the Poor Clares'—and the Franciscan—life, namely, living the holy Gospel. If our life is not completely absorbed in, and directed by, the Gospel, it is not truly Franciscan.

This document also shows the pristine purity of the Franciscan ideal. Francis wanted the Poor Clares to live 'according to the perfection of the

holy Gospel, 'while, in his Rule of 1223, he directed his brothers 'to observe the holy Gospel.' What is the difference between living 'according to the perfection of the holy Gospel' and 'observ(ing) the holy Gospel'?

Simply that the brothers could lead the same kind of life as Christ, living in poverty and preaching penance to the people. But the Poor Clares, because they were enclosed, which was a necessary condition for women religious in those days, could not live the actual life of the Gospel. Yet they could aim at the 'perfection' of that life, giving up everything for the kingdom of God in their contemplative life. In the case of both the friars and the Poor Clares, the Gospel was the supreme rule.

2. Franciscan asceticism: Francis's Advice on Fasting

The life of the first Poor Clares was particularly difficult during their early days at San Damiano. At that period in history, the normal way to begin living the Christian life seriously was to have recourse to the ascetical practices of the Church, the most usual of which was fasting. According to a letter which Clare wrote to a Poor Clare friend of hers, Agnes of Prague, she had consulted Francis on the matter of fasting and had received an unusual answer. (See Armstrong-Brady, *op.cit.* pp. 201f.)

Francis had his own views on fasting, quite in contrast to the rigid regulations in force in the traditional Orders. He held that people are more important than fasting, so that the weak and the sick were to be exempted (verse 31). He taught that a spirit of true fraternal freedom should be maintained in all such matters (v. 33) and that asceticism was not to be made into a god, but merely used as a means of following the Gospel life more closely (v. 33). If Francis had not been such an austere man himself, this would seem like the advice of someone who wished to mitigate the law on fasting. But the whole reason for Francis's view on fasting was precisely that any form of asceticism was useful only when it helped to foster the Gospel life. Otherwise it was meaningless.

3. Living the Gospel life fully: The Canticle of Exhortation to St. Clare and Her Sisters

Great people usually have traits of character which distinguish them and make them memorable. This was true of Francis, who was noted for the way he liked to express his thoughts in the fashion of the troubadours, that is, by singing about simple matters in simple verses. His main intention in this was not to entertain his listeners, but to tell them in a friendly, pleasant manner about the faith that was so close to his heart. Francis sang for Clare and her sisters (LP 85), and one of his writings, the *Canticle of Exhortation to St. Clare*

and Her Sisters, which was discovered as recently as 1976, seems to have been one of his songs (LP 45; SP 90: see Armstrong-Brady, op.cit. pp. 41f.).

The text contains the elements of Francis's deep spirituality-fidelity to the Gospel as a rule of life, the value of remaining in obedience to the end as befits every Christian soul, doing God's will, and, finally, the hope of reigning with Mary in heaven. This simple but beautiful song sums up the whole Gospel way of life.

4. A brother's last words: The Last Will Written for St. Clare

The short document, Francis's Last Will Written for St. Clare, like his Form of Life, was engraved deeply on Clare's heart, and she incorporated them both into chapter 6 of her Rule. The Last Will was written during the final days of Francis's life, toward the end of September or the beginning of October, 1226. These were the last words of a loving brother to his beloved sisters, who were so faithfully following the path he had shown them.

Francis himself had walked the way of poverty, after the example of Christ (verse 1). Therefore, he could counsel Clare and her sisters never to abandon what he believed was the essential element in the following of Christ, that is, living in poverty as Christ did (v. 2f.). Clare learned this lesson so well that her whole battle for the Franciscan ideal was directed to one objective, to be allowed to live without possessions, without rights, and in poverty, like the crucified Christ.

- 1. What is the Franciscan interpretation of asceticism?
- 2. What kind of Gospel life is described in Francis's Last Will?
- 3. How can we promote the interrelationship between the Franciscan families today?
- 4. Read and reflect on the Form of Life, Francis's advice to St. Clare on fasting (cf. RegCl 6), the Canticle of Exhortation and the Last Will of St. Francis.

Francis's Letter to a Minister is an important document for understanding the changes that took place when the little group of brothers was becoming an Order. As we see in his Second Letter to the Faithful, these changes gave the laity, both men and women, access to Franciscan spirituality. In his Office of the Passion, he shows how he was able to overcome and put in their proper context the great difficulties which the new changes were causing him.

Chapter 6:

Writings for the Community

e can say that, in one way or another, all of Francis's writings were meant for the brothers of his Fraternity. He wrote letters to encourage them, prayers to say with them, rules to direct them, etc. We have brought together here a series of writings, which, while they are very diverse in character, all arose out of circumstances within the Fraternity before 1221, when the group was being organized as an Order. During this trying period, Francis found support in his faith in Christ and his trust in his brothers as he tried to find a way to preserve his Gospel ideal, which was being threatened by outside influences.

1. Authority and mercy: A Letter to a Minister

Francis's Letter to a Minister, which he wrote in 1219, is one of the most important documents for giving us an insight into the history of the Order and its early spirituality. Besides acquainting us with the special nature of Franciscan spirituality and of Francis's own outlook, this letter tells us much about the changes in the law governing the early Fraternity, changes which would be enshrined in the *Rules* of 1221 and 1223.

In this letter, Francis describes a type of Gospel life that can be lived in the midst of the everyday world, and he indicates that the eremitical aspect is not an essential part of the Franciscan charism. In the early Fraternity authority was always wielded with mercy, and this letter is, as it were, a bridge between the early way of Franciscan life and the new mode that was being introduced as the numbers of the brothers increased. Authority and mercy had to be balanced against each other, just as the old, unstructured Gospel way had to be reconciled with the Gospel being lived within the

confines of a structure. Francis and his brothers had to move carefully in this area of possible conflict and great promise.

2. Franciscanism for everyone: The Second Letter to the Faithful

As we have said, the new structure of an Order was emerging among the first Franciscans. At the same time, Franciscanism itself was opening up to include a broad spectrum of the laity, of people who now saw that they could live the Christian life in the Franciscan way without leaving their spouses and families. The *Second Letter to the Faithful* is the best evidence of this movement towards 'Franciscanism for everyone.'

This letter was written around 1222 and presents a summary of Franciscan spirituality, mentioning the interior attitudes it requires as well as its norms for external conduct. Here Francis was addressing Christians of every state of life-clerics and laity, men and women-who had a certain degree of Christian commitment and to whom Francis believed he was indebted and for whose Christian development he felt responsible. To them he proposed a radical program of life very different from the lukewarm spirituality of the middle classes of the time. His aim was to lead those who were serious about living the Christian life to realize his own ideal of 'the form of life of the holy Gospel.' In few of Francis's other writings is this type of life described so clearly and precisely.

3. A writing for difficult times: The Office of the Passion

The Office of the Passion, as we have it today, does not date from the time immediately before the Rule of 1221. Indeed, it is possible that it was gradually taking shape in Francis's mind all through his life. While the Office had no direct connection with the problems of the emerging Order, most authors agree that Francis found in this contemplation of Christ's Passion and Resurrection a strong spiritual refuge when he was assailed with the difficulties that the new situation in the Order were causing him.

As we said, the Office of the Passion is a meditation on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, a meditation that is original in both form and content. Francis used the language of the psalms, which he knew so well, and he followed the traditional method of relating the hours of the Divine Office to the various stages of the Passion and Resurrection. Within this framework, he composed a theological meditation which is actually a prolonged act of faith. He believed that the death of Christ had brought about a reorientation of all things toward the Father, and that, no matter how great our human frailty may seem, we still carry within us the seed of a new life, a risen life with Christ.

There is a progression of events in the Office of the Passion. At Compline, when our Lord was seized by the soldiers in Gethsemane, everything is dark, although we still trust in the Father. At Matins, the darkness remains, the darkness of that terrible night during which Christ was interrogated and tortured, which was the last night of His life, yet which was also a night of salvation, just as the first night of His life had been-a clear reference to the Nativity. At Prime, there dawns the distant but certain hope that the Father will cause Christ to triumph. Terce and Sext are the two tragic hours when Christ was condemned to die on the cross, but the Father is still present throughout the saving suffering of Christ. In the second part of None and in Vespers, we sing of the restoration of all things in the cosmic triumph of Christ. In fact, the whole Office of the Passion is a reiteration of the hope of salvation which Christ has given us by His death and Resurrection.

We can imagine the support this writing gave Francis when he was finding it difficult to see the way ahead or in the even worse moments when he saw that the Fraternity was not following the Gospel way as fervently as he would wish. From contemplating Christ on the cross, he derived the strength to remain faithful to Him whom he had loved and followed so closely, Christ, the Word of God, the Promise of eternal life.

- 1. How should authority be regarded among the Friars Minor?
- 2. What was Francis's purpose in writing the Office of the Passion, and how did he use the Office himself?
- 3. How are we to make Franciscanism a living reality for everyone today?
- 4. Read and reflect on the Letter to a Minister, the Second Letter to the Faithful, and the Office of the Passion.

After returning from Palestine, Francis joined enthusiastically in Honorius III's efforts to rekindle respect and veneration for the Eucharist among the clergy and the faithful. For this purpose, the Saint wrote five letters to different religious and social groups. In these letters, he repeatedly begged his readers to respect and revere the Eucharist and, in doing so, revealed important aspects of his own attitude towards the Eucharist.

Chapter 7:

'The Eucharistic Letters'

mong those of Francis's writings which have come down to us, there is a group of five letters called 'the Eucharistic letters,' which, generally speaking, were written about the same time, with the same theme and in the same style. On November 22, 1219, a few months after Francis's return from Palestine, Pope Honorius III, appalled by the abuses being committed against the Eucharist, issued a Bull, Sane cum olim ('Recalling how in former times...'), for the sole purpose of reviving respect for the sacrament of the altar. As we have seen, it was during Mass that Francis had learned what kind of life he was to lead, so he gave himself, heart and soul, to the Pope's 'campaign' and wrote five letters with the Eucharist as their central theme, his 'Eucharistic letters.' He wrote them about the year 1220 and sent them where he judged they would be most effective. They are short but interesting documents, particularly since they tell us much about Francis's own faith in, and devotion to, the Eucharist.

1. Authority at the service of the faith: A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples

The society in which Francis lived was a Christian society, in which the authorities were expected to be, and normally were, Christians. With this in mind, Francis wrote to these rulers, pleading with them to practise the faith sincerely (the theme of the 'commandments' in v. 2-5), to 'receive with joy' and to honor the Eucharist, and to encourage their subjects to do likewise. That is to say, he urged the rulers to use their authority to serve the Gospel. Obviously, the main theme of the letter is the Eucharist; but, in the background, we see what Francis's overall intention was—to have the people realize the absolute primacy of their faith and to express that faith in praise.

It was not unusual for Francis to write this type of letter to prominent personages, and he did so, not because he was eager to correspond with powerful people, but solely because he wished to strengthen the faith of the rulers and their peoples.

2. Priests and the Eucharist: A Letter to the Clergy

In this letter, Francis addressed not only the clerics in the Order, but also all the clergy in general. We know from history the sorry state of the clergy in Francis's day, especially the lower ranks and the country priests. And we have already spoken about the unconditional faith which Francis had in priests because of their sacerdotal ministry. In this letter, therefore, he urges the clergy to be diligent in their ministry in matters that were central to the faith, that is, the Eucharist and the words of the Lord, the two pillars upon which rests the faith of both priests and people, that faith which gives meaning to the Christian life.

The letter is written in uncompromising terms, but has overtones of exhortation and loving care. It is aimed at convincing its readers that the Eucharist and the words of God are readily available and inexhaustible sources of strong, solid faith and an intensely Christian life. This way of thinking was the fruit of Francis's personal experience, rather than the result of preconceived ideas or theological reasoning.

3. Christ in the Eucharist: A Letter to the Entire Order

Francis asked one of the brothers to write down a letter he wished to send to the whole Order, and that is why some authors regard this document as 'a letter to the General Chapter.' Francis wished to urge the brothers on to greater reverence and respect for the Eucharist, as Pope Honorius III had decreed for the whole Church. But besides this immediate aim, he also wanted to say something of even deeper significance to his brothers -- and to us. He wished us to know that when we understand fully what the Eucharist really is, we shall not keep anything back for ourselves. And we shall see that all our sacrifices, no matter what they are, acquire meaning only in the light of Christ's sacrifice of Himself for us. By this he meant that those who wish to follow Christ as Franciscans will find the most profound motive for their self-sacrifice in the daily offering which Christ makes of Himself to us in the Mass and the Eucharist.

4. The saving power of the Eucharist: The First Letter to the Custodians

The word 'custodian' is a technical term for a friar who is given pastoral responsibility for his brothers and is appointed to protect and encourage them in their faith. Francis here writes to these custodians, repeating the spiritual themes he wrote about in his Letter to the Clergy, especially the supreme importance of the Eucharist. Here, however, he adds a point of deep theological significance, that salvation is possible only through partaking of the Eucharist (v. 6). Just as 'it is for us to accept salvation' because Christ was born to save us, as Francis said in the Mirror of Perfection (SP 114), so also Christ's gift of Himself in the Eucharist makes salvation available to all who receive His Body and Blood worthily. Francis understood what sacrifices he himself had to make when he saw how totally Christ offered Himself to us in the Eucharist.

5. The Eucharist is 'lofty and sublime': The Second Letter to the Custodians

We do not have the original text of this short letter but only a Spanish translation which was discovered by the Irish Franciscan, Luke Wadding, in the archives of the friary in Saragossa, Spain, where it had been preserved since the time of John Parenti, the Provincial Minister in Spain before 1227. Some scholars believe that this letter is important only because it belongs to the 'Eucharistic' group and that the other letters in that group are of much greater significance. And so they wonder why the Spanish friars were careful to preserve this letter and not others of greater importance, such as those which Francis wrote to St. Clare and Cardinal Hugolino and which are referred to in the sources, but have not come down to us. Nevertheless, while it is only a minor work, it does contain substantive doctrinal material from Francis and re-emphasizes the gravity of his other letters on the Eucharist. In verses 2 and 3, he points out that God's judgement of things is not always that of many people and that what people consider 'worthless and inferior,' such as the outward signs of the bread and wine, God estimates as 'lofty and sublime,' as is the Eucharist. In this letter, as in the others in the group, Francis wished to touch the Christian consciences of his readers so that they will value the saving help of the Eucharist in their lives.

- 1. How does the *Letter to the Clergy* bring out the importance of the Eucharist and the word of God?
- 2. How does Francis regard the Eucharist in his Letter to the Entire Order and his First and Second Letters to the Custodians?
- 3. What part should the Eucharist play in the daily life of a follower of Francis?
- 4. Read and reflect on A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples, A Letter to the Clergy, A Letter to the Entire Order, and the First and Second Letters to the Custodians.

Circumstances obliged Francis to write a Rule for his brothers. The first Rule (RegNB) he wrote was a 'spiritual' one, which was officially replaced by another Rule (RegB) and which, while being more practical for the generality of the brothers, still retained the essentials of the Gospel life. In his Letter to St. Anthony, Francis laid down norms for those who devoted themselves to study, reminding them that the faith was to be their first consideration.

Chapter 8:

Norms for the Gospel Life

e have said that we shall not be able to understand Francis's role as a legislator if we think of him as a lawyer laying down cold, impersonal rules and decrees. Instead, Francis was acting as a brother interested only in seeing how he and his companions could live the true Gospel life. For him, that was the whole point of any legislation. When circumstances forced him to draw up norms for his brothers, he did so with the sole aim of preserving the essentials of the Gospel life to which he and they had committed themselves so many years before. We can say, therefore, that both of Francis's *Rules* are norms for living the Christian life.

1. Counsels and commands: The Rule of 1221

We shall say nothing about the original 'Rule', that 'handful of Gospel texts' which Francis had presented to the Pope in 1210 at the beginning of his Gospel life and which, as we have seen, has not come down to us. Therefore, the *Rule of 1221* is the first example we have of Francis's legislation for the Order. Some of the main characteristics of this *Rule* are:

Several people had a hand in composing it: Francis himself (see RegNB 23, a text that is very typical of his style), Caesar of Speyer, the Scripture scholar (note the number of biblical quotation in RegNB 22 & 23), and someone with legal expertise (perhaps Hugolino?).

The length of the text-24 chapters as against 12 in the *Rule of 1223*-which mixes counsels with commands, thus providing the opportunity for a multitude of different interpretations.

The Latin title of this *Rule* is *Regula non bullata*, 'the Rule not approved by a Papal Bull,' because the Pope did not issue a Bull approving it. Why not?

Because it was too spontaneous and not well thought out; it was also unclear from a legal point of view and too long to be of use as a practical document.

It gathers together many experiences of the Fraternity during the years of living the Gospel life that had passed since Francis and his small band of companions went to get the Pope's blessing on their way of life. We can say that this *Rule* reflects the type of life which the brothers had lived since then.

This *Rule* shows especially what Francis thought, desired, and attempted. We can pick out from it the Saint's written expression of the main tenets of his faith. Chapters 22 and 23 are perfect examples of this, for in them we find passages which show us how deeply Francis had penetrated into the mystery of God. We see here also the true spirit of Francis before the great trials and sadness of his last years had descended upon him. This is a magnificent document in its daring flight of thought and vibrant aspiration, while its confidence in the endless possibilities of human goodness and goodwill casts aside all doubt and hesitation. It contains much that is precious and desirable even for us today.

2. The definitive document: The Rule of 1223

When he had consulted the brothers and the Roman Curia, Francis saw that he had to undertake the task of writing a new *Rule* for the Gospel life. In this *Rule*, he made it quite clear that he was 'simple and subject to all.' In drawing up the new *Rule*, he had two main aims in view: first, not to yield in anything that affected the essence of the Gospel life; and second, to accommodate himself as far as possible to the brothers' current situation in the emerging Order. The main characteristics of the *Rule of 1223* are:

It was not exclusively the work of Francis himself, for there are obvious signs that other hands and other interests besides his worked on it.

We can easily see that this *Rule* is not written in Francis's style, which was simple and sparing of words. Instead, the writer was well acquainted with the language and norms of the current Church law and expressed himself in a style that was far removed from that of the Saint.

However, in his *Testament* (Test 38f), Francis insists that he wrote the *Rule* and wished it to be regarded as coming from God: 'The Lord granted me to speak and to write the Rule,' and that it is God's will that the brothers observe it.

There is no doubt that the spirit and main contents of the *Rule* come from Francis himself, as we can see from the many passages written in the first person, such as those beginning with the words, 'I firmly command all the brothers....'

This *Rule* was intended to keep the original spirit of the brothers intact in the new Order and, judging by the course of Franciscan history, it succeeded in doing so. However, we must admit that this newer *Rule of 1223* does not reflect the same fervour as the older one. Yet, although this was the almost inevitable result of change, the Franciscan ideal remained essentially undimmed, and that was the real triumph of this *Rule*.

3. Study and faith: A Letter to St. Anthony

We know that this short document was written by Francis in 1223 or 1224, although it has a certain brusqueness of style that is untypical of the Saint. The text deals with a matter that was of great importance to the first Franciscans, the question of studies. Apparently, Francis was distrustful of studies, not because he thought them evil, but because they pose a threat to humility and 'minority.' He had observed how knowledge often led the one who had acquired it to become proud and to despise those who did not possess it. His suspicions were apparently deep-seated since he makes the same point in the *Rule of 1221*, chapter 7; in the *Rule of 1223*, chapter 10; and again in the *Letter to St. Anthony*. It would seem, then, that his warning 'not to extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion' was not merely a simple counsel but involved the primacy of faith, the absolute necessity to follow the Gospel in everything. Francis never lost his clear-sightedness in matters of this kind, and he interpreted everything in the light of the Gospel way of life.

- 1. How can we sum up the spiritual values in the Rule of 1223?
- 2. Does the Rule of 1223 express the values of Francis's original Gospel insight?
- 3. What style of Franciscanism in the modern world would be faithful to the ideals of the *Rule*?
- 4. Read and reflect on the Rule of 1221, the Rule of 1223, and the Letter to St. Anthony.

Toward the end of his life, Francis wrote a series of documents of great importance. While they are basically theological in tone, they are mainly concerned with preserving the Franciscan ideal in the new situation of the emerging Order. The essential Franciscan values were still very much alive, and Francis valued them highly.

Chapter 9:

Last Writings

The have established that the last years of Francis's life were crowded ones, and the same is true of these documents in which Francis is concerned with ensuring the preservation of the Gospel ideal (Testament, Testament Written in Siena), with helping the brothers closest to him (Blessing for Brother Leo, Blessing for Brother Bernard) and proclaiming his faith in simple terms (Praises of God, Canticle of Brother Sun). As we shall see, none of this material is exceptional. Here Francis's spiritual preoccupations are the same ones that were in his mind all through his Gospel life.

1. Helping a weaker brother: The Praises of God; A Blessing for Brother Leo

In Part One, chapter 9 above, we indicated that the relationship between Francis and his close friend and admirer, Brother Leo, underwent a series of crises in the last few years of Francis's life. But their high esteem for each other was only strengthened by these difficulties, as we can see from the Blessing, the Praises of God, and the letter which Francis wrote in his own hand for Leo. The Saint's purpose was to encourage and support his friend in the difficulties he was then experiencing (cf. 2Cel 49; LM 11:6).

The Blessing for Brother Leo and the Praises of God are written in Francis's own hand on a piece of parchment measuring 10 by 14 cm., which is preserved in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. The year was 1224, after Francis had received the stigmata. On the same piece of parchment, Leo recorded the circumstances in which the manuscript was written (cf. Armstrong-Brady, op.cit., p. 99).

The Praises of God is a short litany of fervent prayer and deep theological content which clearly demonstrates the height of prayer Francis had

reached. Brother Leo wrote on the parchment: 'After the vision and words of the seraph and the impression of the Stigmata of Christ on his body, (Francis) composed these praises, written in his own hand, giving thanks to God for the kindness bestowed on him.'

The Blessing for Brother Leo, also called 'the Blessing of St. Francis,' was not originally composed by Francis but is a quotation from the Old Testament (Num 6:24-26), the words quoted being those which the sons of Levi used to bless the people of Israel. Francis may have taken the blessing from the liturgy, since it was included in the blessings in the Roman Missal to be used at the end of Mass or at other important liturgical acts.

2. A song of faith: The Canticle of Brother Sun

It seems that Francis finished this canticle just before his death by adding the verses on peace and death (cf. 2Cel 213). He was suffering greatly at the time, but the Lord consoled him by allowing him to see that he was being called to eternal life. The salient features of the *Canticle* are:

It is more theological than poetical, and it was written, not in admiration of creation, but in adoration of the Creator.

Francis wrote it during his last illness, when he was close to death, to express his faith that God's plan of salvation extends far beyond this earthly life.

In it, Francis lists the most obvious works of the Creator, the things that we see and feel all around us all our lives. Yet he does not make explicit mention of Christ and His redeeming death.

Nevertheless, in the *Canticle*, Francis teaches us that, by coming on earth, Christ has given everything and everyone in history a radically new orientation, which is a profound insight of faith by Francis into the real nature of all creation.

3. Francis's spiritual Testament

Franciscan history shows that this document has been of supreme importance, both for those who accepted it unconditionally, as well as for those who rejected it out of hand. At present, we know that:

The Testament is Francis's genuine testament.

It was written a few days before his death, at the end of September or the beginning of October, 1226.

It is valuable because it is the dying testament of an extraordinary saint.

Although the text has been polished somewhat, the normal roughness of Francis's style still shows through.

It is neither a complete program of Franciscan life nor an endeavor to supply what he was not allowed to say in the *Rule of 1223*.

The text of the *Testament* is a balance between what the Franciscan life was in the beginning and the adaptations necessary so that the essentials of that early life should not be compromised. It is the reiteration and consolidation of the ideal to which Francis had dedicated so much of his waning strength.

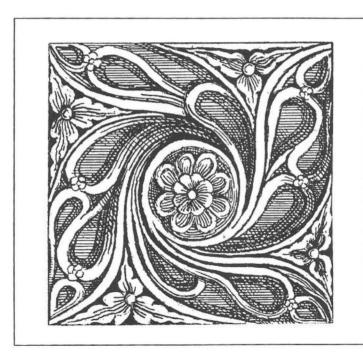
In simple, clear language, the *Testament* sets down the Gospel ideal which every Franciscan should strive to achieve.

4. A summary of the Franciscan life: The Testament Written in Siena

Francis dictated this brief document in Siena around May, 1226, after a crisis in his last illness. It was written down by Brother Benedict of Pioraco (LP 17). It is Francis's own summary of the virtues of the Franciscan life: the Gospel life is founded, first, on charity; then, on fidelity to the Church, which is the only guarantee of faith; and, finally, on the privilege of poverty. Yet, rather than leaving a last will, here Francis wished to emphasize the essentials of the Franciscan life, and that is why this is a document of incalculable value to us, his followers.

- 1. Is the *Canticle of Brother Sun* simply a song praising the beauties of nature, or is it something more?
- 2. Why has the *Testament* evoked such different responses in Franciscan history?
- 3. How can the Franciscan be an eloquent witness to the Gospel for those people today in whose personal and social lives religion plays no part?
- 4. Read and reflect on the Blessing for Brother Leo, the Praises of God, the Canticle of Brother Sun, the Testament and the Testament Written in Siena.

Part Three: Spirituality



Although devotion to the Mass and the Eucharist had fallen off grievously in Francis's day, he saw that the best way for him and his brothers to live the Gospel life was to assist at Mass and receive the Eucharist as often and as devoutly as possible. In the Mass, Francis saw more clearly the love which Christ had shown by sacrificing Himself on the cross for our salvation. This insight gave his life new meaning and led him to follow the same path as Christ, his crucified Lord.

Chapter 1:

The Mass and the Eucharist

e can well say that the Mass and the Eucharist were Francis's starting points in the sense that it was there that he learned really how to live the Gospel life, or, to put it another way, it was in the Mass and the Eucharist that he first learned how to live the faith.

1. The Mass and the Eucharist in Francis's time

From the human point of view, the Mass and the Eucharist were in a disastrous state at the time of Francis. To get more stipends, some priests used to say Mass several times a day, but they were careful to consume the consecrated host and wine at only one of these Masses, thinking to evade in this way the Church law against celebrating more than one Mass a day. Other priests let their sacristies go to rack and ruin, and many of the churches looked more like taverns. The faithful almost never went to communion, and some of them believed that adoring the consecrated host was better than receiving it, so that they went 'to see' the consecration in the Mass instead of receiving communion. Worst of all, there were some priests who said Mass for the people while leading immoral lives, and even the upper ranks of the clergy, the bishops, were not much better in this regard.

It is not surprising, then, that devout Catholics began to feel that if they could not find a good priest, one who was living up to his obligations, they had the right to 'ordain' a conscientious layman to minister to them. The Cathari went even further and said that adoring the Eucharist was sheer

idolatry because it meant worshipping bread and wine, which were material things, whereas they held that God could not be present in any form of matter, but only in spiritual things. The ones who suffered most from this state of affairs were the ordinary faithful, who were attending Mass less and less frequently and who understood little about the meaning of the Mass, which was said in Latin and which even the priests themselves did not value very highly.

2. Francis and the Eucharist

Francis revered the Mass and the Eucharist and received communion as often as he could. In fact, all the great moments of his life were connected with the Mass and the Eucharist: his conversion (1Cel 22), the conversion of his first companions (1Cel 24), the crib at Greccio (1Cel 84), etc. He received communion frequently at a time when this was not encouraged (2Cel 201) and when Mass in most churches was said on Sundays only. Moreover, he preferred to receive under both species, a practice to which he often refers (e.g. EpOrd 6).

In addition, he had the utmost reverence for priests and the priesthood. With the Church, he believed that only a priest could celebrate Mass and that a priest's power to do so did not depend on his personal morality. Francis made this clear in his *Testament* (Test 8-11) and elsewhere in his writings (EpOrd 30-33). He himself was a deacon and probably did not go on to be a priest because he would then have ceased to be one of the *minores*, the lower classes, and would have become one of the *maiores*, the powerful upper classes. But we shall speak about this later.

He never tired of urging his brothers to say Mass and receive the Eucharist with all due reverence (EpOrd 14-16), and he constantly instructed them on the Eucharist and the Mass. We can see this demonstrated in the series of 'Eucharistic letters' (EpRect, EpCler, EpOrd, 1&2EpCust) which he wrote to help in the campaign for eucharistic renewal which Honorius III had called for in his Bull Sane cum olim in 1219. In one of these letters he wrote:

I ... humbly beg the clergy to revere above everything else the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.... The chalices, ... appointments of the altar and everything which pertains to the sacrifice must be of precious metal. And if the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord is very poorly reserved in any place, it should be placed in a precious location under lock and key ... and carried about with great reverence and administered to others with discretion' (1EpCust 2-4).

Francis believed that he was helping to 'repair' the Church by faithfully following the Pope's directions. In the Legend of Perugia (LP 18), we read

how careful he was to do the 'Franciscan' work of sweeping and cleaning churches.

3. The Eucharist in Francis's spiritual life

Francis wished to base his Gospel life and that of his brothers and 'all the faithful' (2EpFid) on the Mass and the Eucharist. For him, the Eucharist consisted, not only of the species of bread and wine, but also of the holy words that consecrated them (EpCler 1f.). Everything is important in the sacramental mystery: the bread, the wine, and the Lord's words said in union with the faith of Holy Church.

It is in the Mass that we can best learn the meaning of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ and realize how great our debt is to Him for redeeming us on the cross. It is in the Mass that we see most clearly what the Gospels mean when they teach us that Christ died for us.

What we learn from the Mass and the Eucharist is not something alien to us or apart from us. Instead, we begin to see that we, too, must bear the cross with Christ. The Mass is the most profound way to get to know Christ (2EpFid 2-14). Francis chose the life of poverty in response to the love which Christ showed for us by the poverty of the cross. So it was that Francis came to realize that his life now had a meaning which it had lacked before: his life derived meaning from Christ's redeeming death. The fact that Christ sacrificed Himself to save us from eternal death gives meaning to our lives.

Francis, then, felt that it was his responsibility to pass on to others the knowledge he had received from God and to tell them that God has made Himself accessible to them by sending His son to die on the cross for them, as Francis himself had learned from the Mass and the Eucharist (2EpFid 1). And those who have learned the lesson of the cross in the Mass and the Eucharist have no other option but to 'do penance' (2EpFid 15-18). In this way, Christ's Redemption becomes tangible and personal to every believer.

We know all this only because we believe in the Church which teaches it to us. The Friar Minor celebrates the Mass in the manner and with the intention prescribed by the Church, and the Church in turn guarantees the truth of his discovery of what the cross of Christ means in his life.

Francis learned the Gospel life in the Mass and the Eucharist because it was there that he learned the secret of Christ's cross. In the same way, we can be Franciscans only by learning from and living the Mass and the Eucharist, for that was the sure path which Francis followed, and it must be ours, too.

- 1. What do we mean when we say that Francis learned from the Eucharist to live the Gospel life?
- 2. Give some examples of Francis's great reverence for the Mass and the Eucharist.
- 3. How can a follower of Francis help to increase devotion to the Eucharist in modern daily life?

Francis came to understand Christ better when he realized more fully the central role which Christ's humanity played in our salvation. In this perspective, the mystery of the Incarnation is seen above all as a mystery of saving poverty. By following in Christ's footsteps along this path of poverty, Francis developed a style of life for himself and his brothers that would bring them to the heart of the Gospel.

Chapter 2:

The Incarnation

e can see from Francis's writings and biographies that he based all his spirituality on the cross and the crib, on Bethlehem and Calvary. He followed as closely as possible in the footsteps of the Christ of the Gospels, the Word-made-flesh, who lived among us. He exerted every effort to penetrate the mystery of Christ, the God-man who saved us. We shall first examine how Francis understood Christ's Incarnation as the key to our redemption.

1. The Incarnation in Francis's writings

The Incarnation played a prominent part, indeed the principal part, in Francis's realization of the importance of Christ's humanity. He did not reach his conclusion by theological reasoning, but rather by the religious sense of those who have great faith and are utterly loyal to the Church. In his Second Letter to the Faithful (2EpFid 4-6), he sums up in a few words the whole doctrine of the Incarnation, 'the marrow of the gospel.' Christ took on our humanity and gave us his Body and Blood as our spiritual food for eternal life.

In this letter, Francis also describes the Incarnation as a mystery of poverty and weakness (2EpFid 5). For him, the Incarnation proved that poverty was the path which Christ chose from the beginning, and that therefore it must be the only way for a Friar Minor to follow (Adm 1:8f.). Poverty, that is, being poor, means being united to the cross because Christ's birth and death are simply the beginning and end of the one reality (RegB 23:3; OffPass 15:2,4). This is the earthly aspect of the mystery of Christ's humanity.

This is also the source of the joy of Christmas, a distinctly different kind of joy, the joy of poverty. In Francis's writings, the birth of Christ is celebrated

simply by a relaxation of fasting (e.g. RegB 5; RegNB 3). Following Francis's advice and example, Clare, too, told her sisters not to fast at Christmas (3LAg 31-34), and, in her Rule (RCl 3:8), she gives the sisters permission to eat twice on Christmas Day and to speak together.

Finally, whenever Francis speaks about the Incarnation, our Lady is not far from his thoughts. She is almost always mentioned in his Incarnation texts; and he speaks movingly of her in her capacity as the Mother of Christ, the beloved Son of the Father (SalBVM 3; OffPass antiphon).

2. The Incarnation in the biographies

The same Incarnation themes appear in Francis's biographies as in his writings. Perhaps the most characteristic episode is that of the crib which Francis prepared for Christmas Day in Greccio (1Cel 84). Celano notes that the incident at Greccio at the end of 1223 was followed by the stigmata at La Verna in 1224. That is to say, Francis did not stage an ordinary dramatic festival at Greccio, but rather a sincere re-enactment of the Nativity motivated by faith and love; and this was followed by the stigmata, a divine manifestation that was closely connected with the meaning of the cross, at a time when Francis was very ill. As we have said before, we cannot grasp the full significance of Celano's narrative if we do not relate it to Francis's growing knowledge of the mystery of Christ's humanity as he advanced in the spiritual life. The Saint's representation of the Nativity scene at Greccio shows clearly the pre-eminence of Christ's humanity in the history of salvation. This was in stark contrast with contemporary theological thought, which, because it was highly allegorical, concealed rather than revealed the humanity of Christ. The Nativity scene at Greccio was also quite different from simple folklore or festive drama. At Greccio, Francis was expressing the deep mysteries of his faith and trying to find a way to understand Christ, whom he had followed all his life. Greccio was not theatre or staged drama. In fact, Christ was not represented at all in Francis's crib, since the manger was empty. Instead, Christ was remembered there in the mystery of His humility and poverty, His rejection and vulnerability ('poor king:' 'little town:' 'tiny infant'). This is the Nativity as a mystery of poverty, from which springs spiritual joy, that very different kind of joy, which made Francis sing and stammer with happiness. St. Bonaventure paints the same picture of Greccio as Celano (LM 10:7).

In his Second Life (2Cel 199f.), Celano describes the events at Greccio more systematically, linking the deep joy that comes from a better realization of the mystery–linking that joy with the poverty surrounding the Christ-child. The biographer launches out into a praise of poverty when describing how, when a brother happened to mention the utter poverty of Christ and His

Mother, 'Francis immediately arose from the table and, with great sighs and many tears, ate the rest of the meal on the bare ground.'

Rather more legendary is the narrative in the *Mirror of Perfection* (SP 114; LP 110), relating how the Saint expressed the wish that the larks should not lack for food on the solemn feast day of our Lord's birth. Here again is the theme of poverty and the joy that comes, not from self-indulgence, but from self-sacrifice to save others. The author quotes the well-attested words of Francis: 'Since our Lord has been born for us, it is for us to accept salvation.'

In conclusion, Francis saw the birth of Christ as the beginning of our salvation, as the first step on the way of the cross. This beginning at Bethlehem looks toward Calvary, the supreme moment in our Lord's redeeming life. The poverty, the utter despoiling on the cross, is an echo of the material poverty of the Nativity. Between Bethlehem and Calvary, Christ lived in poverty, and if we follow in His footsteps, we shall experience at least some of the joy that Francis felt at Greccio and La Verna.

Francis understood profoundly that we were saved by the humanity of Christ, which appeared among us at Bethlehem and continued on earth until the sacrifice of Calvary, thus giving us an example of the kind of life we should lead if we wish to follow in Christ's footsteps.

- 1. What do we mean when we say that Francis saw the Incarnation as preeminently a mystery of poverty?
- 2. According to Francis, what is the connection between the Incarnation and the cross?
- 3. How can the Franciscan of today fit into and influence society?

Francis's spiritual life began and developed under the sign of the cross. He meditated on the cross and wrote about it. But he did more: he felt in his own body the pains of Christ's wounds and walked the path of suffering with his crucified Lord. From Christ he learned a new way of life and from Him, too, he gained the strength to bear joyfully every kind of deprivation.

Chapter 3:

The Cross

he cross is the second foundation stone of Francis's spirituality, and it is from the perspective of the cross that he viewed and lived his life. For him, the cross was both the starting point and the final goal of life. It was from Christ crucified that he drew his spiritual strength, and it was by the standard of the cross that he judged all his actions. He used to say with great emotion: 'I know Christ, the poor crucified one' (2Cel 105).

1. From the beginning...

The crucial moment of Francis's conversion was his encounter with the leper. But, previous to this encounter, he had been enlightened by an unusual event, his dialogue with the crucifix at San Damiano (L3S 13), when he was suffering a crisis in his spiritual life. He had already been in contact with the lepers and, as a result, had broken away from his family and his social background. His new course of action was confirmed at San Damiano when he received a deeper insight into the meaning of Christ's cross. He saw that his choice was inspired by the cross and that Christ's suffering explained and gave meaning to all human suffering. In this way, Francis's encounter with the leper became something more than a simple act of charity; it was an act motivated more perhaps by faith in Christ and His cross than by love of neighbour alone.

2. ... And at the end

Francis was gravely ill and weighed down with sorrows when, in September, 1224, he and some companions withdrew to a hermitage on Mount La Verna. He was suffering from stomach trouble, he was almost blind, and was extremely weak. In addition, the Order was experiencing difficulties about

which he could do nothing. And this was the situation when he received on his body the marks of Christ's five wounds (L3S 69). Without attempting to penetrate the profound meaning of this unique experience, we can say that it was the final stage of a long process of meditation and faithful imitation of the cross and Passion of Christ. As Francis's writings show, the last years of his life were concentrated on a search for an ever deeper knowledge of the sufferings and death of Christ.

3. The cross and Francis

Francis had learned in the Mass and the Eucharist that the whole of Christ's life on earth led toward and was summed up in the cross. In order to grasp properly how his understanding of the cross was deepened by the Mass and Eucharist, we must remember that he had a specific idea of what we humans are, of what our actual condition here on earth is. He did not arrive at this idea by himself, but rather absorbed it from the temper of his times. It is called 'the Augustinian idea of man' because it came down from the time of St. Augustine, who, in turn, was inspired by Plato the philosopher. This idea is that we are lost and gone astray and that our salvation can come about only from the free gift of a loving God, the gift of One who shares our human lot, namely, Christ. When we realize this, we draw strength from the love which Christ showed by offering Himself on the cross for us, and, with the help of that love, we are capable of organizing our lives in a new way. Then we begin to live, inspired by the Spirit and capable now of ridding ourselves gradually of those things which could turn us from our purpose, and capable also of reaching an advanced stage of self-sacrifice.

4. A glance at some texts

In one way or another, all of Francis's writings demonstrate his profound spirituality, based on the Lord's cross. Some of these texts deal exclusively with the cross and Passion:

The Office of the Passion

All during his life, Francis was gradually gathering or writing this text, which he based on a series of quotations from the Psalms. In it, he wished to recall, in the manner of a medieval drama, the last moments of Christ's life and to emphasize the significance of these moments for the Christian life.

He used the traditional symbolism which medieval piety assigned to the hours of the Divine Office; for example, Compline recalled the time when Christ was arrested; Matins, Christ's judgement before Annas; Prime, Christ's being brought before Pilate, etc. Then, step by step, Francis followed the story of Christ's saving Passion from the moment of His arrest

to the final triumph of His kingdom (the psalm for Vespers). It is doubtful if any other writing of Francis is as theological as this one. We should read the first seven psalms of the *Office of the Passion* and try to follow the events of the Passion and Resurrection in them.

The prayer, 'We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ...' (Test 5)

Francis derived his inspiration for this prayer from an antiphon in the office for the Feast of the Holy Cross. However, he made the antiphon his own by extending it to all the churches in the world. This prayer has been dear to the hearts of the friars down through the years. Even today many Franciscans and lovers of Francis say this prayer whenever they enter a church. In a few short words, it sums up Francis's faith and ours.

As Francis faithfully and painfully followed in Christ's footsteps to Calvary, his faith grew and matured. His lifelong devotion to, and love of, the crib, the cross, and the Mass are the basic reasons for his importance in our lives as Franciscans today.

- 1. Would it be correct to say that Francis's whole life was devoted to learning the lesson of the cross of Christ?
- 2. What do we mean when we speak about Francis's 'Augustinian' concept of our human condition?
- 3. How are we to relate Christ's redeeming death on the cross to our present-day world?

Francis learned from experience how to live as a faithful son of the Church, showing reverence to the Pope, bishops, and priests because they administer the sacraments and the word of God to the whole Church. He saw that only within the Church can we learn about Christ and learn to live for Him. That is why he never wavered in his loyalty, but revered and loved the Church as a mother.

Chapter 4:

The Church

or Francis, the Church was always Holy Mother Church, a mystery of holiness, a mystery of faith. She was his help, support, and counsellor in his times of need. She was the 'Roman' Church, visibly present with all the possibilities as well as all the human limitations of the individuals who were her children. It is true that Francis's life in the Church was not without its problems and even sufferings, yet it was in the Church that he learned the Gospel way, from the moment he was called to 'repair' the Church (2Cel 10) until his final triumph, when he was 'crowned with glory and honor' by the Church (1Cel 119).

1. Francis and the hierarchy

If we examine Francis's relationship with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, we shall grasp more easily the subtler aspects of the way in which he understood the saving mystery of the Church.

Francis regarded the Pope as his father and acted toward him like a devoted son. Innocent III caused him to suffer when he tried to make him adopt a form of life similar to that of the older Orders; yet Francis sincerely revered Innocent for supporting and encouraging him during the first years of his Gospel life. Honorius III also gave Francis much pain by continually questioning and correcting the Rule which Francis had put forward; but still the Saint promised him obedience and reverence when he finally approved the *Rule of 1223*. Francis did not regard the reigning Pope simply as an instrument of government but, with the eyes of faith, saw him as Christ the Savior present in human history.

Francis had frequent dealings with high-ranking ecclesiastics. Cardinal John of St. Paul helped him greatly in his first audience with the Pope (L3S 47).

Cardinal Hugolino, who later became Pope Gregory IX, taught him the hard lesson that his Gospel ideal, which in itself was so simple and so clear, had to be lived out by the brothers, not all of whom were as fully committed or as self-forgetful as he was. Bishop Guido of Assisi was an unemotional and not very spiritual man, yet he treated Francis like a son from the day he covered the young man with his cloak (L3S 20) until the Saint's death, at which he wept (2Cel 220). In none of these relationships did Francis show the least sign of obsequiousness or fawning, but rather deep respect and complete obedience inspired by his faith.

As we know, Francis was respectful to all priests but especially to the rural clergy, who were the poorest. He refused to judge clerics, no matter how sinful their lives were (Adm 26; **2EpFid** 32-35) and always regarded them as his 'masters' (Test 9). He believed and declared that he would work with them without regard for their life-styles or conduct (2Cel 146, 148). And he did so because, as he said in his *Testament* (Test 10), 'they alone administer' to us the Body and Blood of Christ.

2. Francis and the Church

Francis's approach to clerics of all ranks was so straightforward and unambiguous precisely because of his great faith in Christ:

We have seen how, after his conversion, Francis learned what faith in the Eucharist means. In the Mass and the Eucharist, he came to understand the value and significance of the Body and Blood of Christ and the 'holy words' that consecrate the bread and wine. There he found the secret of the cross. But how did he know that what he had found was the truth? For him, the only guarantor of truth was the Church in which the Mass was celebrated in the spirit, intention, and manner of her founder, Jesus Christ. And he knew that only where the Mass was properly celebrated would he be able to find and follow the path to the kingdom of God, that kingdom which Christ proclaimed in His message and His sacrament. He believed he could not be a Christian without the Mass and that he could not have the Mass without the Church, which alone administers with authority the bread and wine and the holy words of consecration, giving strength to follow the way of life that leads to the kingdom of God.

That is why Francis needed the Church and why his life would have had no meaning outside it. Within the Church, he was able to endure, suffer, overcome his weakness, and see farther than others with less faith. In the Church, he entered the realm of faith, faith in Christ, and saw that his life would have no value outside the way that Christ had marked out. Anything else would mean death and destruction. He knew that his human limitations

would find meaning for salvation only in the cross and in the Mass which the Church alone preaches and celebrates.

This is not mere theological speculation. For Francis, the Church had a human face, a familiar, that is, a 'family' face. In fraternal relationships which were loving and forgiving, Francis saw the motherly influence of Christ's Church. He knew well that only with such relationships between the brothers could the face of the Church take on a new, more appealing beauty (2Cel 192).

Thus, for Francis, the Church was Christ visible in human history, so that following in the footsteps of Mother Church was the same as following in the footsteps of Christ (2Cel 24). This is the logic of one who knew the dynamics of faith.

We would misunderstand Francis completely if we thought that he was one of those clerics who make it their business to hover around the seats of power. In his *Testament*, he sternly forbade his brothers to seek privileges or 'any letter' from the Roman Curia (Test 25): they were, instead, to cherish their freedom, the freedom of the children of God, the freedom that comes from following the Gospel 'simply and plainly.' That is why Francis never demanded anything from anyone except himself and also why he could offer healthy criticism of the Church. He was a spur to the consciences of those who claimed to be good Catholics, but whose lives showed that they were anything but. Time has proved that brotherly criticism based on the Gospel, as Francis's was, is more effective than hurling diatribes and anathemas.

If we wish to find the secret of Franciscanism, all we have to do is look at the way Francis lived out the mystery of the Church. He wanted his followers, his brothers, to live 'in a Catholic manner' (RegNB 19) in the bosom of the Church and to accept, appreciate, and show reverence to those God had given them as mediators of the Catholic faith.

- 1. Why was Francis so loyal to the Church?
- 2. Who represented the Church for Francis?
- 3. How can the Franciscan of today maintain a filial and reverential yet critical attitude towards the Church?

The spirituality of the early Franciscan family was based on accepting the Gospel as the center of Christian life. The brothers put into practice this special view of the Gospel in a way of life dedicated to following Christ as members of the Fraternity and children of the Church. The Franciscan was an itinerant preacher, a man who tried to live as Christ did, owning nothing and having nowhere to lay his head.

Chapter 5:

Franciscan Spirituality

lare was Francis's perfect disciple, the faithful follower who never swerved from the path he traced out for her. Down through history, many other people have tried, and in their own way succeeded, in following Christ in the Franciscan form of life. But what exactly is that form of life?

1. Living the Gospel

For the Friars Minor, faith is summed up in and derived from the Person of Christ and His Gospel, and the vows are only means toward living the Gospel (RegNB 1:1). Following the Gospel way is the prime consideration for the brothers in any situation that may arise (1Cel 22; 2Cel 15; L3S 48). Therefore, while the *Rule* is the most precious legacy which Francis left his brothers, it acquires validity only in so far as it brings them closer to the Gospel. Yet Franciscans do not have two rules to obey, the Gospel and Francis's *Rule*, but only one, the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (RegNB 22:41). They promise to keep the vows because of the Gospel (RegNB 2:11; 20:4) so that, for them, the Gospel, the *Rule* and the Franciscan way of life are all one and the same thing.

Of course, the Gospel is an essential guide for any Christian group, and Francis did not doubt that it was. But seeking and imitating the Person of Christ, is, for the average Christian a *general* intention, whereas it was something quite *specific* for Francis. For him, professing the Gospel was not a vague resolution, but a definite course of action which demanded a radical, total commitment. If there is one thing that is completely contrary to the Franciscan spirit, it is being lukewarm in valuing and carrying out the Gospel of Christ.

2. Promising obedience

Francis referred to another key issue when he spoke about 'promising obedience.' By this he meant being incorporated into the Fraternity and the ecclesiastical structure of the Church. Franciscan obedience, therefore, means religious profession, religious perfection, and fraternal life, whereas living outside obedience is living in sin (RegNB 5:13-17). This dimension of obedience is religious rather than sociological, and it shows us that Franciscan obedience has as its major preoccupation the fulfilment of the Gospel and fidelity in following Christ.

3. Following Christ

Francis was a realist and believed that the Friar Minor must live a concrete, specific form of life. That is what he meant when he said that we live the Gospel by following Christ. He had been deeply impressed by the text in the First Letter of St. Peter (1Pet 2:21), in which the Prince of the Apostles encourages his brothers to follow the example of Christ: "To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps'.

The Franciscan way of following Christ is described in the first chapter of the *Rule of 1221*. Following Christ is more than simply repeating the Master's actions. It requires an understanding of the Word of the Lord under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and has three characteristics: a personal decision (EpLeo 3), for which Christ is the sole motive (EpOrd 50-52), and the avoidance of all occasions of sin (RegNB 12:1f.).

4. The itinerant life

For Francis, following Christ was a dynamic activity directed by the Gospel. His brothers were to live 'as pilgrims,' 'going about the world.' This meant that the friars were not to confine themselves to any one place, but were to remain detached from the world at large, as Christ did. Even in his *Rule for Hermitages*, Francis retained this note of impermanence, this spirit of moving on. But wandering was not to be a way of life in itself, nor was it meant as a form of penance, much less an escape from the obligations of the *Rule*. Instead, the brothers were to live the itinerant life as the best way to follow the form of life that Christ led on earth. Therefore, in living a wandering life, the friars were imitating the life-style of the Apostles on their first missionary journeys, which they in turn had learned from Christ, as we see in the Gospel of St. John, chapter 17, which Francis frequently quoted (cf. RegNB 22) and followed in practice.

This mode of life 'as pilgrims and strangers' made many demands on the friars. They were not to carry any baggage (RegNB 14:1); they were to greet everyone peacefully (*Ibid.*, 2), accept whatever hospitality was first offered them, and were not to go looking for better quarters (*Ibid.*, 3). They were not to 'offer resistance to evil;' they were to share everything they had and were not to demand anything from anyone.

These directions epitomize the spirituality of the early Franciscan group and have served as a guide for countless generations of brothers, keeping them faithful to their chosen way of life. That is why they are dear to the heart of every Friar Minor.

- 1. Explain, in practical terms, the Franciscan way of living the Gospel.
- 2. What do we mean when we say that following Christ is central to the Franciscan life?
- 3. How are we to put into practice today the itinerant element of the Franciscan life?

The early Order of Friars Minor was inspired to undertake a new form of Gospel life, preaching penance and living in poverty.

Chapter 6:

The Form of Life

sing Francis himself as an example, we shall try to describe briefly how to live the Gospel life in a Franciscan way. There are certain elements in this Franciscan way of life that, in one way or another, will always be present wherever a group of Christians look to Francis as their guide and inspiration in the faith. These elements are:

1. A life of penance

Leading a life of penance does not mean that the Franciscans have to be notable for performing many harsh penitential exercises. Francis tells us that he began 'to do penance' (Test 1) when, in the light of the Gospel, he understood that everyone, even a leper, should be treated as an equal and could teach him a lesson. The Franciscan concept of penance derives from Francis's change in outlook and the consequences of this change when it was put into practice. Franciscan penance consists essentially in submitting one's ego to the Gospel and being always receptive to God's will. That is to say, the Franciscan life is ruled by the Gospel teaching that the penitent must break with everything that comes between the soul and God, truly a difficult thing to do, much harder than any amount of bodily mortification.

That is how Clare (RCl 6:17) and Francis's first companions understood penance. Therefore, they preached penance (1Cel 22), converted many to a life of penance (1Cel 55), and lived an entirely penitential life, with no home or money, deprived of the moral support of their families, holding nothing back from God, and with no future prospects in this world. The first group of brothers felt they were called to this kind of life and responded generously to that call.

2. 'According to the form of the holy Gospel' (Test 14)

The decisive factor in Francis's understanding of Christ was his conviction that his Master was calling him to live 'according to the form of the holy Gospel.' Living 'according to the form of the holy Gospel' means living

today with the same standards as Christ and, as far as possible, as described in the Gospels. It is not a question of a mechanical mimicry or a merely theoretical imitation of Christ, but living and thinking and acting from the heart as He did. That is what Francis understood by following Christ, and that was his greatest ambition.

Francis's new insight into the Gospel led him to a life of nearness to Christ (1Cel 84), of continuously consulting the text of the Gospels (1Cel 22, 24), of meditating long and lovingly on the style of life that Christ had led in order to make it his own. It is also what those must do who wish to 'accept this life' (RegB 2) in a community of brothers. The main task of those who wish to live as Franciscans will be to reproduce in their own lives that 'form' of the Gospel which is the same as the life of Christ.

3. Preaching

It seems that Francis wished all the brothers to do some kind of preaching, if only by giving good example (RegNB 17) and saying a few edifying words to those who cared to listen. This was preaching in the broadest sense, not done in churches, but informally and in simple language, counseling moral improvement. Only later were the title and office of preacher conferred on those brothers who had passed an appropriate examination (RegNB 7). The preaching by such brothers was official, done in the churches, following a set program and in more formal terms. The early Franciscans practiced both types of preaching, the popular and the formal. As time went by, the more formal kind of preaching prevailed, yet Francis always seems to have preferred the popular type, as if he wished his friars to practice poverty even in their preaching. But we know that he did want them to preach more by the way they lived the Gospel than by their eloquence or erudition.

Preaching peace played an important part in Francis's own life (1Cel 36), and peace was the theme he suggested to the first friars when he sent them out, two by two, to preach in the towns and villages (1Cel 29). Those who entered the new community were expected to be peaceful, inwardly and outwardly, in word and in deed (RegB 10f.), and even in the way they greeted people (RegNB 14:2). This Franciscan emphasis on peace is needed today perhaps more than ever.

4. Poverty

For Francis and his brothers in the first days of the community, poverty was not an end in itself but only an essential element in the life of a disciple of Christ, a special way of putting the Gospel into practice every day. The popular Gospel movements of the time, such as the Cathari and the Poor Men of Lyons, stressed Gospel poverty as much as, or even more than, the Franciscans. But, unlike the heretics, the friars did not try to reform the Church by bitterly criticizing the wealth of the ecclesiastical establishment. Francis and his brothers were humble as well as poor (cf. JdV, *Letter*, Habig, *op.cit.*, p. 1608), living in poor dwellings, wearing poor clothing, and being humble in manner and speech. That was what Francis and his companions understood by poverty. Clare gave a beautiful example of this insight when she fought valiantly to obtain the 'privilege' of poverty for herself and her sisters (cf. R. J. Armstrong: *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, pp. 85f.). Francis was firmly convinced that poverty was the best way for him and his followers to reach the heart of the Gospel.

5. The Fraternity

For Francis and his companions, poverty and self-denial for the sake of the kingdom of God were made more tolerable and were more accurately focused by life in a fraternity. The life of austerity for the sake of the Gospel motivated the Friar Minor to concern himself with the good of his brothers in an immediate and practical way. This gave the new Franciscan Order a special charism or spirit of its own. In this respect, Francis broke the mold of the older Orders, which were structured along the lines of the class divisions in medieval society. Yet the Franciscan fraternity did not take as its model the family in the strict sense of that word. For the sake of the Gospel, Francis wished to build up fraternal love and mutual esteem among the brothers (cf. RegB 6:7-9), that love which each friar should have for those the Spirit has given him as brothers and God has bestowed on him as a gift (1Cel 38f.).

- 1. What does a Franciscan mean when he says that he lives 'according to the form of the holy Gospel'?
- 2. What exactly does Franciscan poverty mean?
- 3. How can we create new forms of universal fraternity in actual present-day situations?

The sources are unanimous in depicting Francis as a man of prayer. His prayer began with his following Christ, it was intensified by the action of the Spirit and resulted in the complete surrender of his life to Christ crucified. For the follower of Francis, then, prayer is not only important, it is essential.

Chapter 7:

'With pure hearts...'

In his Rule of 1223 (RegB 10:2), Francis urges his brothers to pray to the Lord 'with pure hearts,' an apt summary of his own method of prayer and contemplation. Here we shall try to describe Franciscan prayer in general terms because it would clearly be impossible for us to penetrate to the heart of Francis's relationship with Christ. As we can see from Francis's own writings and from the various biographies, prayer was central to Franciscan spirituality. When we speak about Francis's prayer, we are referring to his whole prayer life, liturgical, sacramental, and personal. However, we shall concentrate more on those moments of personal prayer in which Francis entered into direct contact with Him for whom his soul yearned.

1. 'Becoming himself a prayer...'

It is obvious that Francis was a man of prayer. When we examine the biographies and estimate the amount of time he spent in prayer and solitude from 1208, when he was converted, until his death in 1226, we see that prayer was his principal occupation. Celano gives us a long description of Francis's 'zeal for prayer' (2Cel 94-101), and the other sources, too, are unanimous on this point. Francis felt so strongly attracted to the purely contemplative life that he once asked Brother Silvester and Sister Clare to advise him as to whether he should devote himself to prayer or to preaching (LM 12:2).

We can also describe Francis as a man of intense, continual prayer (Adm 16:2; RegNB 23:11; 1Cel 71). Besides being intense, Francis's prayer was 'new' in the sense that it was done, not in the quiet seclusion of a monastery, as was usual then, but amid the uncertainties of an itinerant life-style; not in the well-ordered routine of a monk, but in a kind of life in which one never knew what would happen from moment to moment. This ensured that

Francis's prayer was more rooted in real life, more 'normal,' less formal and stilted, more Gospel-like, in fact more like Christ's own prayer.

2. The spiritual basis of Francis's prayer

Francis prayed because he was a follower of Christ: indeed, he began to pray when he began to follow in Christ's footsteps. The closer we follow Christ, the more we can pray with pure hearts; and we can pray only when Christ has drawn us to Himself. Francis discovered Christ and was drawn to pray to Him under many aspects, as Son of the Father (RegNB 9:4), 'eternally victorious' (EpOrd 22), etc. He prayed because he was, and to the extent that he was, a follower of Christ.

In addition, Francis realized that we do not begin to pray as a result of our own efforts, but only as a result of the Spirit's 'holy manner of working' (RegB 10:8). Prayer is not something we do if and when we please. But although we do not initiate prayer, it impregnates all that we do and all that we are, and leads us to sacrifice ourselves totally for the sake of Him who sacrificed Himself totally for us (EpOrd 28f.).

Therefore, for Francis, prayer was an act of self-abandonment, putting himself into God's hands with absolute trust. He did this so wholeheartedly that his biographers did not hesitate to say that he was 'not so much praying as becoming himself a prayer' (2Cel 95; 1Cel 92). This total self-surrender to God explains why the cross and Passion of Christ occupied such a prominent place in his prayer. The book of the cross was his manual of prayer (LM 4:3), which taught him how to 'offer himself naked into the arms of the crucified Lord' (cf. 2Cel 194).

3. Franciscan prayer

Although Francis did not invent a special method of prayer for his followers to use, his own particular way of living his faith in Christ did give rise to special attitudes which we find recorded in his writings:

Prayer is *listening*: when we pray, we should be alert for, and listen to, the voice of the Son (EpOrd 6).

Prayer is *confident petition*: this is Christ's attitude toward His Father and the Franciscan attitude toward God, the great Giver of alms (2Cel 77), who bestows every good thing (TestCl 9).

Prayer is *praise*: as we can see from numerous texts in Francis's writings, especially his *Office of the Passion*.

Prayer is *union* with the whole Church and the community: this was the reason for Francis's unswerving devotion to the Divine Office and the Mass, as we have seen in his 'Eucharistic letters.'

Franciscan tradition has expressed these attitudes in its own different and special ways, all of which are solidly based on closeness to Christ and a daily life lived according to the laws, and in the spirit, of the Church.

4. The primacy of prayer

According to Francis's way of thinking, prayer is the Franciscan's first duty (RegNB 3; RegB 3) and the most important one (RegB 5; EpAnt), because it is the first and only way to succeed in truly following Christ.

Francis firmly believed that prayer is not just one more element in our devotional life, but an integral part of every Christian life. This is so because, when we cease to pray, our lives as followers of Christ have begun to lose all meaning. Therefore, the primacy of prayer in the Franciscan life does not simply mean that prayer is an important part of that life, but rather that it is *essential* to that life.

- 1. Can we say that prayer was an irreplaceable element in Francis's spiritual life?
- 2. According to Francis, is the primacy of prayer mainly a matter of organization or is it deeply spiritual?
- 3. How can the Franciscan today make prayer the power behind everything he does?

We can truly say that the Franciscan Rule is the marrow of the Gospel. Despite the adaptations required by contemporary Church law, the *Rule* preserved the essentials of the Franciscan way of Gospel life. The *Rule* was new in its special way of looking at Christ as the Servant as well as the Lord of the Friars Minor. When the Franciscan Rule was lived out, it proved that it was true to the Gospel.

Chapter 8:

The Rule, the Marrow of the Gospel

ow that we have seen some of the more external aspects of the Rule, we shall try to examine it in greater depth and assess its spiritual value as a way of life. But because it is a rule of life, we shall be able to speak only in general terms since life cannot be dissected and catalogued.

1. 'The marrow of the Gospel'

The first thing we must realize is that the Franciscan does not have two rules of life, the Gospel and Francis's *Rule*, but only one, the Gospel. The function of Francis's *Rule* is to lead the Friar Minor directly to the heart of the Gospel. That is why the Franciscan *Rule* has been called 'the marrow of the Gospel' (2Cel 208).

Francis reached the essence of the Gospel and put it into practice all during his short but fervent life. He was convinced that keeping the *Rule* was keeping the essential elements of Christ's message, as he stated in his *Rule* of 1223 (RegB 1:1; 12:4). That is why he based his *Rule* on the most fundamental texts of the Gospel, the texts on the following of Christ and the sending out of the Apostles. To keep the *Rule*, the Friar Minor must be a man of the Gospel, and if he is a man of the Gospel, he will keep the *Rule*.

2. Common and special elements

Perhaps we shall be better able to understand the *Rule* if we see which elements in it came from the Church law of the time, although perhaps interpreted in the Franciscan way, and those things which came directly from Francis's own inspiration.

a) Common elements

The basics: following Christ in an approved 'form of life' and observing the three vows, as laid down by the Church (RegB 1: all references in this section are to RegB).

Those who wished to join the Fraternity had to go through the process laid down for all religious, but their joining was regarded in the Franciscan way, as beginning to follow Christ.

Liturgical prayer, according to the rules of the Church (3:1-4).

Fasting in the manner of the time but intended as a means of identification with Christ (3:5-9).

Preaching according to the teachings and regulations of the Church (9).

Consecrated celibacy, according to existing Church law (11).

b) Special elements

Franciscan itinerant life-style; travelling, speaking, and accepting hospitality as Christ did (3:10-14).

Having neither money nor possessions, and being careful to maintain the Franciscan state of 'minority' (4;5:1-6).

Working at humble tasks to earn an honest wage (5).

Warm fraternal relationships between the brothers (6:7-9), which were to include great compassion for an erring brother (7) and a special relationship between superiors and subjects (8; 10).

The Franciscan method of missionary work (12:1f.), using a 'Gospel strategy' to preserve the essence of the Gospel, with the help of the Cardinal Protector (12:3f.).

We can see that Francis had to accede to the demands of contemporary circumstances. However, by interpreting in his own special way the concessions he had to make, he ensured that the ideals of the Gospel and the Franciscan *Rule* were always preserved.

3. The new elements in the Franciscan Rule

To see to what extent the Franciscan way of life was new, we shall compare it with the life led by the typical monk of the time:

For the monk, the word of God was a law to be obeyed, while for the Franciscan it was the very principle on which the Fraternity was founded.

For the monk, the Christian life and the hierarchy were forces for organization, whereas, for the friar, their function was more spiritual and pastoral.

The monk vowed stability, to remain in one place for life, while the Franciscan's life was a wandering one.

The monk worked in and for his monastery, but the friar worked for strangers outside his dwelling place.

The monk's life of penance was aimed at keeping the traditions of his Order, while, for the friar, the important thing was to remain loyal to the laws of the Church.

Preparation for the monastic life was long, whereas, according to the spirit of the Franciscan *Rule*, entrance to the Fraternity required only sincere conversion and the disposal of one's property.

The apostolate played little part in the monk's life, but every friar was expected to work as a laboror in the harvest of souls.

For the monk, charity consisted in the unity of the group, while the Franciscan *Rule* asked for spontaneity and reciprocity in personal relationships.

Monastic humility was born of fear of God, whereas the 'minority' of the friars sprang from contemplation of the poverty of Christ.

Monastic prayer in community took precedence over everything else, but, while the friar prayed with, and in the spirit of, the Church, his liturgical prayer was much more at the mercy of circumstances than was that of the monk.

The monk's poverty was personal whereas the friar's was both communal and personal.

The monk saw Christ as the unifying Center of his monastery, whom he served especially by obedience. But, for the friar, Christ was the Exemplar of the itinerant Fraternity and the Master who was to be followed in poverty and humility.

We could go on quoting characteristics which seem to be in stark contrast to each other, but which, instead, really arise from different ways of looking at, and applying, the same truths of faith. It is this different point of view that makes the Franciscan *Rule* new.

4. Rule and life

We have pointed out before that the Franciscan *Rule* is, in a way, simply a summary of countless experiences of Francis and his companions. It is a *Rule* that was forged by life and that, therefore, is directed toward living. We would understand nothing of this if we regarded the *Rule* merely as a 'document.' It is much more than that. As we said, it was the product of the life that Francis and his brothers lived and was aimed at perpetuating and

enhancing that life and its ideals. The *Rule* yields up its secrets only when it is lived out in daily life. Thus it is true to say that the *Rule* continues to live in the followers of Francis.

- 1. What do we mean when we say that the *Rule* is 'the marrow of the Gospel'?
- 2. Is the Rule a living experience or a legal document?
- 3. How can we live the Franciscan *Rule* in an urban, industrialized, secular world like ours?

Being a Franciscan means making Christ the center of one's faith and searching for union with God by living the Gospel life within the Church. Being a Franciscan also means having a Gospel view of humanity, valuing people for what they are by looking beyond their limitations, and identifying with the marginalized in their struggle. The most direct way to achieve this is to live in poverty, a life-style that does not impede, but rather fosters a life of liberty and joy.

Chapter 9:

Being a Franciscan Today

e do not wish to end this introduction to St. Francis of Assisi without considering the effects which the Franciscan view of life and faith can have on people today. We shall not make direct references to persons or groups, but shall only enumerate some aspects of the Franciscan way of life that may appeal to anyone interested in Christ and St. Francis.

1. Radical Christocentrism

Francis viewed all reality, personal as well as social, in the light of Christ, Servant and Lord. He did not indulge in vague generalities, but emphasized the humanity of Christ, whom he saw both as the Poor Man from Galilee and the Risen Lord he was inspired to follow.

Therefore, for any lover of Franciscanism, Christ must be the beginning and end of any program of life. The good Franciscan is measured by the fervour with which he follows Christ, for there is a radical element in Franciscanism which inspires the true Franciscan not to do things by halves, but to throw himself, heart and soul, into his chosen way of life.

2. The search for God

Francis was not a religious fanatic. His love of God was respectful of God's silence, majesty, and complete 'otherness.' He saw clearly what God was and what he himself was. He knew that the meeting between God and the soul was really profound only when it took into account the true condition of both—the loving liberality of the Father and the soul's need for salvation. Francis's fervent search for God was the driving force behind all he said and

did. As a disciple of Francis, the Franciscan must also be diligent in his own search for God and not allow his fervor to be dimmed by the secular spirit of the modern world.

3. Following Christ actively

Francis was well aware that we really know nothing about Christ when we do not follow Him, when it is obvious that His words have no effect on the way we live. He was convinced of this from the first days of his conversion, when he changed his place in society because he had discovered that the lepers and the marginalized were persons with value, too. That was his real conversion, a conversion to a new vision of life. Today there is much talk about social and political commitment: commitment to the eradication of all kinds of tyranny and injustice. This should be an added inspiration to us disciples of Francis to follow Christ more closely by working harder for those in any kind of need.

4. Reverence for the Church

Francis lived at a time of upheaval in the Church as great as ours. He chose reverence and obedience to the Church in contrast to the prevailing spirit of revolt. He did this because he saw that the Church was the only guarantee of his faith, because only the Church could assure him of what his weak humanity sometimes questioned, that Christ was his Saviour. Only faith in the Church prevents us from falling prey to self-delusion, empty imaginings, and man-made religions.

The most notable thing about Francis is not so much his fidelity to the Church as the profound truths upon which that fidelity was based. The Franciscan knows that his faith in Christ is not just his own personal, very fallible opinion, but is derived from something outside himself, from the Church. He loves the Church because of the faith, which is the only guaranteed path to the truth of Christ.

5. Love of poverty

Francis was pledged to follow Christ in poverty, real poverty, poverty that hurt, and to stand and live with the marginalized, those who had nothing. His was not a theoretical poverty or a mere show: it as not just a matter of words and sweeping declarations. Instead, he was convinced that the most direct route to the heart of the Gospel was through genuine poverty. In addition, with the eyes of faith that looked beyond obvious human limitations, Francis saw Christ in the poor and the marginalized. No wonder, then, that his followers are so devoted to poverty. In fact, the

Franciscan knows very well that poverty is the whole reason for his being what he is.

6. Joy and freedom

Francis's joy and detachment, his freedom from earthly ties, have made him an appealing figure to many very different kinds of people. His joy came from his unbounded confidence in his heavenly Father and his 'clean heart.' His detachment, his freedom, was forged by adversity, poverty and his self-sacrificing love of others. People today see and yearn for the joy and freedom that Francis lived and taught because they see that he had the answer to the consumerism and violence that threaten our society today.

7. Everyone's brother

From all that we have said, it is obvious that Francis valued highly the human element in his universal brotherhood. He believed that Christ's salvation makes everyone equal and that, therefore, everyone can be a brother or sister to everyone else. This is not a fashionable universalism, but a vision of faith. The Franciscan considers as a precious part of his inheritance the knowledge that he is called to contribute to the creation of a world of equals, of brothers and sisters, with no frontiers except those of mutual love, which are not really frontiers, but are, in fact, bridges between peoples.

- 1. Point out some of the most striking characteristics of the Franciscan in the world today.
- 2. How can we make sure that we remain faithful to the Gospel and the Franciscan way?
- 3. What is the best way to present to people today the essentials of the Franciscan message?