

PROPOSITUM



LIFE IN POVERTY

(TOR Rule, Chapter 6)

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Editorial

In this issue of *Propositum*, we would like to consider the vow of poverty as it is lived in different cultural contexts and how it may be made more vibrant in the living of the TOR Rule in the 21st century. As we did with obedience, we open with a reflection on the famous fresco in the lower basilica of St. Francis in Assisi representing Francis' relationship to holy poverty. Dr. Loredana Nepi introduces us to the iconic symbols and their meaning in the vaulting over the main altar by the school of Giotto. We are surprised how poverty is surrounded by the virtues of charity and hope. This leads to grasp the meaning of poverty has to do with the virtue of faith in the life of Francis and his followers. What is also interesting in this description, is the reaction to the Franciscan ideal of the counsel of poverty by the world at that time as well as the debates within the Order over the meaning of the vow itself. A debate which led to division within the Order, something which in a certain sense continues until today. In fact this is the reason for the project of the IFC-TOR in presenting these issues of *Propositum* in light of our next Assembly to be held in 2013 concerning the living of the TOR Rule in a new, fresh, and faithful way.

The first article serves as a provocation and comes from Asia. A Conventual Brother from the Philippines uses Pope Benedict's query: "What did then, Jesus bring if he didn't usher in a better world?" The provocation is to consider whether it was by material goods that the human situation was to be bettered or by leaving new ways of relating. The author continues to develop the ways and the challenges presented by Jesus who wished to reveal new relations between people. Francis and the Order were then to be a radical part of the following of Christ in the application of these

relations to the people of their times. Solidarity is at the heart of this *sequela* and in the Franciscan interpretation this means a life of simplicity and humility.

The next article by Sr. Mary McCarrick of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity continues this reflection from the perspective of North America. She stresses the North American way of living poverty as one of solidarity with those most in need. This living of the counsel challenges not only the society but also the individuals who assume the vow. Realistically, then, the idea of dependence becomes a foundational element in the living out of this vow. In reflecting on this Sr. Mary feels that this is the hardest part of the counsel of poverty. The last element of her article raises the questions about poverty and the challenge to young people to assume the religious life in the North American content. She opines: "This desire to serve, even when coupled with the desire to pray and reflect, rarely translates into the desire to embrace priesthood or religious life." We are left with the question of how to enter into a dialogue with youth about the possibility of a Franciscan religious life today.

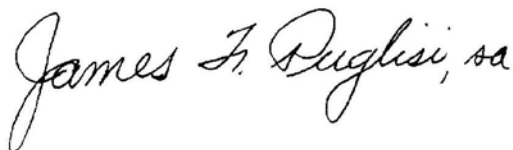
Sr. Martin Flavin of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, takes up the challenge as she interviewed sisters from Africa on their understanding of the meaning of the counsel of poverty in an African context. Coming from a "younger" church and from a context where material poverty is rampant in so many of the countries of Africa, these sister's reflections are very revealing. It is most obvious how biblically they are attached to the realities of everyday life and on how the issue of dependence is very important. The family or tribal system of organized life is very strong so that the issue of responsible dependence is almost second nature. Everyone in this social context has their obligation but with extended familial relations this may also become a burden of the religious community. The interesting information was for the sisters

to be able to explain to their families about the restrictions, namely “not being able to share all things with family but with community first.”

In my brief contribution from a European context we find the opposite. Again the concern for solidarity is seen possibly more in terms of social systemic changes. The tendency is to a more idealized form in the life in poverty. However, not unlike Africa one must make the distinction between poverty and destitution which dehumanizes. This must be avoided at all costs. The eschatological dimension of poverty is appreciated in the European context especially seen from the perspective of pilgrimage, namely realizing that we are passing through this reality to another more lasting one. The biggest challenge for the European context is moving from a common life to a communion of life and this is where we have the greatest inroads with the youth since they would want to see a real spirituality of poverty which is seen as an authentic communion of life as a shared reality.

In the last article representing Latin America, Sr. Sônia de Fátima Marani Lunardelli of the Congregation of the Third Order Capuchin Sisters of the Holy Family begins with a serious reflection on Franciscan sources as they relate to the understanding of poverty. The awareness of the fact that community poverty led to the discovery of the attention and of the care given with love and tenderness toward neighbor, emerges more evidently in what Francis says in the *Regula non Bollata* concerning the use of money in behalf of the sick friars: ‘No friar... in any way take with him or receive from another or allow that money be received... but only for a clear need of the sick friars.’” This interesting corollary is insightful as to what relationships are the most important for the Franciscan family, namely the care for the weakest and most defenseless. This leads to the understanding of poverty in solidarity

but as a choice for the weak, the poor, those without means of defense. Having this a top priority allows the community then to make fraternal choices together about material things, about relationships and about the living of the Beatitudes, especially, being poor in spirit thereby inheriting the earth and all its fruits.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James F. Puglisi, SA". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Br. James F. Puglisi, SA
President IFC-TOR

The Allegory of Poverty



The Allegory of Poverty in the Frescoes of the Lower Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi

Brief iconographic notes

Dr.sa Loredana Nepi

Assisi, Lower Basilica of Saint Francis, Vault of the transept, Maestro delle Vele (Master of the Assisi vaults), Allegory of Poverty, 1315-1320 approximately.

The paintings in the lunettes of the vaults in the Lower Church of St. Francis at Assisi depict the three allegories of Obedience, Poverty and Chastity and the Glory of St. Francis. The frescoes are commonly attributed to a pupil of Giotto, the so-called Maestro delle Vele, (Master of the vaults) and dated approximately around the second decade of 14th century.¹

The Allegory of Poverty is in front of the lunette of the Glory of St. Francis and its significance is explained by an inscription along the vaulting rib.²

Upon the summit of a bare, rocky hill, the Poverty stands amid thorns, but roses and lilies flower behind her. Poverty is a woman tall and emaciated, clad in a patched gown, tied about her waist by a cord. Christ stands at her side; he takes her by the hand and presents her to Francis who puts on her finger the nuptial ring, celebrating in this way the mystical marriage of Francis with Lady Poverty. The ceremony takes place between two groups of angels. On the right of Poverty, stand in attendance Hope, dressed in green, and Charity, that offers a heart to the spouses. In the space above, a reclining figure receives an offering brought by two angels: a rich red garment and a bag and a miniature palace with an enclosed garden.

Lower down, to the extreme left, an angel leads toward the centre, a young man who takes off his mantle to give it to an aged beggar. In the opposite foreground, another angel seeks to draw

the attention of three men towards Poverty: two of them, grasping their bags of gold, turn their back to the angel; turning toward the centre of the scene, the first man, a falconer, shows a mocking attitude. In the foreground, beneath the scene of the mystical marriage, two boys threaten Poverty with stones and sticks and a dog barks at her.

The allegorical representation of Poverty divides the scene into levels spaced symmetrically and conceptually opposed. Above the group constituted by Poverty, Christ, Francis and the Virtues, the space defines the heavenly world: the angels' offering represents the heavenly transfiguration of the act that confirms the entrance into the Order and the adherence to the vow of poverty, that is, the renunciation and the distribution of earthly goods to the poor.³ This iconographic detail recalls an episode reported by the literary sources closer to the first Franciscan generation: near the Porziuncola a friar, after having given his mantle to a beggar, felt permeated by an inexpressible joy, because it seemed to him that his alms had come to Heaven.⁴

On the lower level of the fresco, instead, we find the diverse reactions that Poverty arouses in the world: the young man who gives away his mantle follows St. Francis's example, while the rejection of Poverty, expressed in the right corner of the scene by the indecent gesture of the falconer and by the two men grasping their bags of gold, is emphasized at the fresco's centre by the scene of the boys and the dog threatening Poverty. In the *Sacrum commercium sancti Francisci cum domina Paupertate*,⁵ Lady Persecution (*domina Persecutio*) goes hand in hand with Poverty and this iconographic detail certainly refers to the hostility experienced by the first friars and vividly recorded by St. Francis's first companions in the pages of the *Anonymous of Perugia* and of the *Legenda trium sociorum*.⁶ This scene of hostility represents the extreme consequences for the one who voluntarily chooses poverty by giving away all his goods and joyfully embracing a life of

marginalization and insecurity, as sign of a contradictory and incomprehensible value, but in the light of his *conversio*.⁷

The iconographic theme of the mystical marriage of Francis with Poverty, represented in the centre of the vault, seems to have been inspired later by the literary sources. In the writings of Francis, Poverty appears as “*domina paupertas*”, not as bride, and in the most ancient sources she is presented as bride of God or of Christ, but not of Francis. It is the case of the *Sacrum commercium*, the title of which, since the 14th century, was sometimes translated as: *The mystical marriage of Francis with Lady Poverty*. The theme of Poverty-bride appears for the first time in Thomas of Celano in his *Vita secunda*, 55: “*charitate perpetua desponsare*”.⁸

The use of the golden background and the chromatic splendour of the frescoes are in open contradiction with the theme that illustrates the Franciscan vows. During the second decade of the 14th century, when the frescoes seemed to have been executed, one sees the effects that sharpen the contrast within the Order concerning the interpretation of the Rule and of the vows. The vaulting panels represent a vision of the Franciscan life in which no echo of the more radical position proposed by the Spirituals is found. Instead they seem to be inspired by the attempt of conciliation in regard to the Papal positions, enforced by Michele da Cesena, under whose mandate as general, probably the decoration of the vaults was realized.⁹

Loredana Nepi ,has a degree in Letters from the University of Rome-La Sapienza with a thesis in Medieval Art and is Librarian at the Centro Pro Unione.

¹ For the discussion concerning the date and the attribution of the frescoes, see Giorgio Bonsanti, ed., *La Basilica di San Francesco ad Assisi*, (Mirabilia Italiae. Panini, 2002), 394f.

² The text of the inscription reads: “[*Paupertas*] sic contemnitur dum spernit mundi gaudia, veste vili contegitur, querit celi solatis. Compungitur duris sentibus, mundi carens divitiis, rosis plena virentibus [celestis letitiis. Franciscus semper adiuv]ant celestis spes et caritas et angeli coadjuvant ut placeat necessitas. Hanc sponsam Christus tribuit Francisco ut custodiat nam omnis eam re[spuit]”.

“Thus Poverty is disregarded, while she rejects the earthly joys, she is covered by a miserable garment, but seeks the pleasures of Heaven. She is pricked by thorns, she is out of worldly goods, but she is full of blooming roses and heavenly joys. Divine hope and charity help Francis and the angels help so that Poverty may be pleasing to him. Christ gave to Francis such a bride to treasure, because everyone refuses her.” See G. Bonsanti, *La Basilica di San Francesco ad Assisi...*, 395f.

³ Maria Teresa Dolso, « Le vœu et l’entrée dans l’Ordre franciscain au moyen âge, » *Les Cahiers du Centre des recherches historiques*, 16 (1996) [En ligne] mis en ligne le 27 février 2009. <http://ccrh.revues.org/index2641.html>. Consulted on April 19, 2011.

⁴ *Legenda trium sociorum*, 44; *Anonymous of Perugia*, 28.

⁵ *Sacrum commercium sancti Francisci cum domina Paupertate*, 36.

⁶ *Legenda trium sociorum* 35, 40; *Anonymous of Perugia*, 23

⁷ Raoul Manselli, *San Francesco d’Assisi*, (Roma: Bulzoni, 1980), 42-69. Even in the lunette of Obedience an iconographic detail illustrates the extreme consequences of the vow: the Crucifixion sketch behind Obedience underlines the link between Obedience and the Passion of Christ, echoing the letter of St. Paul to the Philippians (2:8): “Christ humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on cross”. See Peter Bokody, *Pictorial and Iconographic Reflexivity: Images within Images in the Italian Painting (1278 – 1348)*, (Budapest, CEU Budapest College, 2010), 30.

⁸ Lise Bettais, « La courtoisie de François d’Assisi. Influence de la littérature épique et courtoise sur la première génération franciscaine.,» *Mélanges de l’école française de Rome* 109, 1 (1997), 146-147.

⁹ G. Bonsanti, *La Basilica di San Francesco ad Assisi...*, 394.

Turning Stones into Bread: A reflection on poverty as a disturbing expression of the *Sequela Christi*

Concordio (Emmanuel) Giva Jr., OFM Conv.

The question of poverty is very much alive in the Franciscan tradition. In the course of time, literature of every kind abound which speaks of this reality. And yet, the fountain of poverty which inspires every serious follower of Christ has no hope of drying up. In fact, one of the first writings that came out after the death of the saint was the *Sacrum Commercium*,¹ an allegory to Lady Poverty whom Francis and his followers searched far and wide in their faith-journey.

A provocative question

Let me continue this reflection quoting the thought-provoking question raised by the present Pope in the first part of his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*. The Pope asked, *what did then, Jesus bring if he didn't usher in a better world?* It is provocative inasmuch as he suggests that Christ did not offer the world a recipe for progress as we would expect. This was a constant temptation also faced by Christianity throughout the ages. It is to be said that the temptation of Christ on the mountain corresponds mainly to the longing of every man and woman, a dream of a better world. Of course, Jesus is sensitive to men's needs as his miracles show, but then Jesus puts everything in their right perspective, that is, in their proper context and in their proper order.

The perspective that Jesus teaches is a perspective from his Father in heaven. His answer to the subtle suggestion of the tempter: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). It was said that by virtue of God's omnipotence, he can make bread rain down from heaven and end all hunger. But why would God not do that

which is in human terms the easiest way for an omnipotent God. Well, simply because, if men have not learned to share, the abundance of bread would not satiate the greed in men's hearts, for as the saying goes, there is enough for man's need, but not for man's greed. The worst case scenario therefore, would be bloodbath not because of hunger but because of greed.

On the other hand, if things are placed in their proper context and order, then men would learn to share the little they have with those who are in need. God's wisdom invites everyone to open and extend their hands with full trust in Divine Providence. And yet, if we would open only our hands to the poor, then they would be short-changed. We need to open also our hearts, and if need be, to raise our voices in praise and thanksgiving for all that God has done for us.

Going back to the experience of Francis

One striking point about Francis was that his goal was not in itself poverty, but an intimate discipleship with Christ. Christ is the center from which all his reflections, decisions and actions flow. A faithful child of the Church, he would consult the Holy Scriptures for guidance for himself and his followers (Ap 11: II 38)² and would ask an explanation of those in authority about the same Word of God (1C 22: I 201-202). From this long search it was revealed to Him that to follow Christ means trodding the path with Jesus in poverty, (Test 14: I 125). It is no wonder then that popular religious imagination associates him with poverty, inasmuch as wisdom is attributed to Solomon in the Judaic tradition.

Poverty henceforth became an indelible mark of his person. It is the deepest expression of Francis' evangelical life that unfortunately, like the bread that rained down from heaven became a source of division rather than of unity. For those

whose hearts were stone believed that by partaking the same bread, their hearts would turn to flesh even without putting Christ at the center. The proper perspective in which Francis placed poverty was replaced by these illusions, and there was a real and looming danger that the bread of poverty would turn into a stone.

And it did turn into a stone. It is a stone from which Francis would fulfill the voice he heard saying: *repair my Church, which as you see is falling into ruins*. On a sad note, we may say that it is the same stone which the friars used to accuse each other of betraying the ideal of poverty. In other words, instead of using these stone to build bridges and repair churches, they were put, one after the other, to construct an alarming wall that separates one friar from the other. A sweeping glance of the history of the Franciscan ideal of poverty is a never-ending struggle to obtain the fabled bread which would satisfy all hunger and to collect the finest stone to build the grandest temple of the God-born- poor in a manger.

Poverty then is both stone and bread. It is the bread that the early friars, who were, materially poor begged to fill their hungry stomach after they have done some lowly work. In addition, it was stone for the friars who had ready bread at table. They, too, went begging from house to house, in order to continue rebuilding the churches which were literally falling into ruins.

Starting afresh from the fragrant words of the Lord ³

It is very clear that from the beginning of Francis' conversion, the sweet words of our Lord Jesus Christ were at the center of his faith journey. *It is not by bread alone that man lives but by every word that comes from the word of God* was emblematic of his discipleship in the midst of the medieval hierarchy's seemingly formidable *plenitudo potestatis*. It is by

taking this perspective, better still, by receiving and putting this precept into practice that we will be able to become a disturbing presence in the world of today.

Solidarity as an expression of Franciscan poverty

The vow of Franciscan poverty is lived today within the context of a globalized and secularized society. And yet, the issues facing the vows are substantially the same as in the past. In fact, today poverty has been very much alive in the hearts of the friars, and it comes various disturbing expressions. As always, it has become the fount of riches.

Jesus preached the beatitudes on the mountain surrounded by people from all walks of life. They were, above all, persons who were poor, who thirsted for justice, who were oppressed, who mourned, and were hungry for the bread of life. Once more, Jesus did not turn the stones around him into bread. Instead, he gave his listeners a teaching similar to a solid rock on which they could construct their lives.⁴

The beatitudes, as Benedict XVI says, are not a social program for sure.⁵ One cannot build an earthly society on such ground. Yet, this particular teaching disturbed and impressed Jesus' listeners (Mt 7:28-29). Solidarity which places God above the rest is true solidarity, for indeed all men and women consciously or unconsciously are looking for what satisfies their life. We are all looking for the bread that came down from Heaven.

Jesus, of course, knows the deepest longing of our heart, nor is he indifferent to people's need. Poverty, to be sure, does not exist in abstraction. It can be touched, smelled, felt, seen and heard, in a word, it belongs to the profoundest of human experience. Therefore, when Jesus was asked to satisfy the bodily needs of men, he yielded. It would seem at first glance that Jesus was now doing exactly what he refused to do at the

suggestion of the tempter in the desert. But then the story of the multiplication of loaves has three aspects to it. *It is preceded by the search for God, for his word, and for the teaching that that sets the whole of life in the right path.*⁶ This perfectly coincides with the conclusion of some modern exegetes who tell us that in the story there was no real miracle. Well, people only shared what they had, and what greater substitute there could have been for a miracle. After they have searched, found and heard Jesus' words, their ways were no longer the same. The word of Jesus touched them; truly it softened their hearts to share what they had at hand-however insignificant it may have been.

This is the eschatological import of the vow of poverty. The Kingdom of God is not some uncertain future to wait for, rather it is here and now. Did not Jesus say, *for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst?* (Lk 17:21) Moreover, the vows make visible among us the Kingdom of God precisely because, *the poor you will always have with you* (Mk 14:7). Moreover, did not Jesus proclaim on the mount, *blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven?* (Mt 5:3).

Poverty, expressed in solidarity, creates a space for God, solidifies our fidelity and trust in Divine Providence. This is the first longing of Francis which he found only in the Crucified God. This is the point of Franciscan poverty -the never-ending thirst for God. This longing is present in the hearts of all, for what is particular in St. Francis is universally felt by all who want to live a better world and observe seriously the commandment of love.

The Lord makes poor and makes rich, he humbles he also exalts! (1 Sam 2:7)

Hannah was able to exclaim that the Lord makes poor and makes rich, that he humbles and he also exalts. True enough, gratitude and joy are distinctive expressions of poverty.

Those who are truly poor are blessed, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Allow me to narrate a story of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

One day a sister asked Mother Teresa if she could go to the poor. But she was unwilling to give her the permission knowing that from the beginning she had been very unhappy in her religious life. One of the fruits that the spirit gives is joy. It is the first fruit of one's inspired life of poverty. This is the joy that the world cannot give, for this joy endures and shines forever as St. Francis recounted to Brother Leo what perfect joy means. If a life of consecration is not marked by gratitude and joy then Mother Teresa would not be happy to send us to the poor, for instead of offering them bread, we would give them stones. The poor cannot be fooled. They know real and enduring happiness. They are indeed blessed. It is because they have accepted poverty with joy as gift from above. With the same poverty they build solidarity which is an expression of poverty.

Conclusion: From hearts of stones to heart of flesh (Ez 36:26)

This reflection has reached its conclusion. And it is good to remember that for us who vowed a life *without anything of our own* in the context of a community, it concerns us more than any other thing. The vows are an exercise or rather the full expression, of our freedom to choose the better part, that is, to anticipate the coming of God's Kingdom. It is supposed to disturb us day and night as Martha was disturbed by the choice of Mary to sit on the Master's feet.⁷

It is the same teacher who said, *foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head* (Lk 9:58). This is another disturbing word that Jesus uttered during his ministry. Genuine poverty from the beginning of the Church's and Order's existence never had a permanent place. For by nature, poverty is expressed in

itinerancy. And so a century later, the celebrated jurist Bartolo da Sassoferrato (+1357) wrote:

*The Order of Friars Minor was founded by Francis, confessor of Christ, in the state of total poverty and was approved by numerous Popes. But this life was so innovative that it did not correspond to any article in the legal system. However, the Church authority established numerous directives on this subject, repelled the biting attacks of adversaries and enlightened consciences. In spite of pontifical approval of the Franciscan form of life, the presence of Franciscans is barely tolerated in the Church and they have to struggle to assure a place for themselves.*⁸

Once again, Franciscan poverty is imbued with the spirit of itinerancy. It is a pilgrimage of the heart that happens in each consecrated man and woman. It is a pilgrimage of faith that gives birth within us to the Kingdom of God. It is a pilgrimage, wherein partaking each day, the sweet words of the Lord will transform our hearts of stones to hearts of flesh.

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¹ The English title of this text is the *Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty*. An anonymous work dated around the year 1237-1239.

² The abbreviations for the quotation of the sources are taken from the 3-volume publication of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* of the New City Press. Indicated

likewise here after the verse number and the colon are the volume number and its corresponding page/s.

³ Francis is very concrete in speaking about the mysteries of our faith. “He never speaks of the Incarnation, but of the Son of the Father who received the flesh of our frail humanity. He never speaks of the Eucharist, but of the most Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ He never speaks of the Scriptures, but of the fragrant words of the Lord”. Quoted from Van-Khanh N. Ngyyen, *The Teacher of His Heart: Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St. Francis*, Ed Hagman trans., (NY: St. Bonaventure University, 1994), 6.

⁴ Indeed towards the end of the sermon on the mount Jesus made it clear to his listeners that whoever constructs his life on his words is like a man who builds his house on solid rock otherwise it is built on a shifting sand (Mt 7:24-27) .

⁵ The poverty of the consecrated life is first and foremost not intended to be a kind of social activism (although indispensably it shows its fruits in diverse social activities and movements) which promise to turn stone into bread thus, ending all hunger in the world. The vow is much more realistic than this. It has its solid foundation- the Word of God, his grace and his gift of salvation.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: from the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, A. Walker trans., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 32.

⁷ In the story as we all know, Martha was busy preparing the bread for the master on the one hand, while Mary partakes the life-giving words of our Lord on the other.

⁸ A. Matanic, “*Novitas Franciscana*. Francesco d’Assisi nel suo rapporto con le preesistenti forme e dottrina de vita religiosa,” in G. Cardaropoli and M. Conti, *Lettura biblioco-telogica delle fonti francescane* (Rome: Antonianum, 1979), 178.

Living Franciscan Poverty: A North American's Perspective

Sr. Mary McCarrick, OSF

I am asked to share how I understand my commitment to Franciscan poverty as a North American religious and how such a commitment to poverty might stand as a disturbing presence in our world and a challenge to the young.

I begin with the question: how do I understand a life lived in poverty in the North American context? My understanding of poverty developed and deepens as I reflect on the call to a life of poverty in the foundational sources of our Third Order life and as I reflect on my experience as one committed to poverty in my time and place in history. I will share the way some of the foundational texts of our life have woven together with experiences of my life to expand my heart and mind.

A life with and for those on the margins of society

The Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular, Paragraph 21, exhorts “And let them be happy to live among the outcast and despised, among the poor, the weak, the sick, the lepers and those who beg on the street.” It was the story of Francis and the leper (I Celano 17) that attracted me as an adolescent preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation, to take Francis as a patron. I found Francis attractive as a person and as an ideal. In secondary school, the Sisters took us students in the summer to work with them in a day camp for the children of migrant workers and that life experience gave me a glimpse of how Francis’ story might become my own.

With the support of my congregation I made professional choices to get a graduate degree in social work and to study in a post graduate program that focused on therapy with families with violence, addiction and abuse. Whenever possible I have lived in

poor neighborhoods and served people who might otherwise have had difficulty getting professional services. I have had the opportunity to work with the rural poor and in an urban housing project. I have worked to provide the hungry poor with food and to provide hospice care to people with AIDS. These life experiences among the poor have deepened my understanding of a life of poverty. Certainly it supports my living a simple lifestyle to be in relationship with people who struggle to get their basic needs met. Moreover, it is the following of Jesus, “who chose poverty in this world.” (TOR Rule, paragraph 21)

Relationships with those on the margin call me to a deeper poverty, as I am evangelized by the people I am called to serve. For example, for a decade five or six of us Sisters lived in an old, three story convent in the inner city of Buffalo, New York, a city on the US-Canadian border. We welcomed refugee families to live with us while they went through the legal process necessary to enter Canada. A family might be a mother with one child or parents with five children. The family might stay a few days or six months. It was they who taught me what it meant “to live in this world as pilgrims and strangers.” (TOR Rule, paragraph 22) Their presence with us challenged us to share our space and our goods, our hearts and our lives, asking us “neither appropriate nor defend anything as [one’s] own.” (TOR Rule, paragraph 22)

A life challenging social structures

Francis was not content to beg donations for the lepers and leave the food at the gate of the leprosarium, as society dictated. Rather, Francis broke the rules of church and commune when he served the lepers personally, moving freely between leprosarium to town. He was not willing to respect a social structure that isolated and marginalized the lepers, even though the conventional wisdom of the time held that he might be infecting his neighbors with leprosy.

When I live with the people on the margins of society, I see that this world order is not the world order Jesus desires. Involvement in movements for social change naturally follows. Working for social change has meant gathering with neighborhood groups to pressure the city to put a park in a poor neighborhood. It often means writing and speaking with those who make our laws, urging political priorities for those who are poor and vulnerable. It can mean gathering in prayerful protest at a detention center for refugees or engaging in civil disobedience to bring to light the government's support of training covert military operatives of other nations. Actions such as these upset the "way things are" and we are seen as an irritant, even a threat, to those who support the status quo.

A life lived in dependence on God

During my time in internal province ministry, I was challenged many times to embrace a poverty that called for surrendering oneself into the hands of God, as the Rule exhorts, "They should recall that they have given themselves up and handed themselves over totally to Our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, they should be prepared to expose themselves to every enemy, visible and invisible, for love of the Lord." (TOR Rule, paragraph 30)

One evening I was called to comfort an elderly sister, Sister Rose, who was weeping. When I confirmed her fear that she had Alzheimer's disease, she calmly responded, "All that matters is that nothing of this suffering is lost. I want to offer it all to God." Sister Rose began to pray "Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my entire will." As her memory of the words failed, she turned to me to lead the familiar prayer, "All things I hold and all I own are Thine; Thine was the gift, to Thee I all resign. Do Thou direct and govern all my ways. Do what Thou wilt, command and I obey. Bestow on me only thy grace and love. I ask no more for I am rich enough." Deeply centered, she added. "There, nothing will

be lost. All is given to God.” Surely, with Francis, she proclaimed, “you are all our riches and you are enough for us.” (Praises of God) This example of Sister Rose supports me in my personal surrender and in the surrender of the future of our province.

I could offer many more examples, but each of us is better served by recalling a personal experience: Which stories or themes of Franciscan poverty attract me, inviting me to ponder their meaning? Which life experiences of mine have illumined for me the meaning of Franciscan poverty?

Is a life lived in Franciscan poverty a disturbing presence in our world today?

I would have to answer this question in conflicting ways. In some ways, life with and for the poor stands as a comforting presence more than a disturbing presence. Each day we six Sisters finish our morning prayer and disperse to minister in ways that comfort the poor. Two Sisters go to a dining room and food pantry for the hungry that serves working poor and chronically poor as well as the mentally ill with meals and food to take home as well as with a nurse and a social worker. Another Sister directs after school education programs for children attending a public school in our poverty neighborhood. A fourth Sister assists in spiritual formation of lay leaders in four inner-city parishes. The fifth is a psychotherapist whose clients include the very poor and who quarterly runs a respite program (a combination retreat-vacation) at our motherhouse. The program welcomes, variously, poor mothers, grandmothers raising grandchildren and women with cancer. I myself am the Diocesan Director of Catholic Charities whose social workers work to alleviate pain and relieve poverty throughout the diocese.

Though in some ways a comfort, in other ways our choice of a life with and for the poor can be a source of disturbance. Some people say they want to work with us because the relationships we

have with the poor act as a bridge for them to enter into relationship. Whatever their motivation, we follow the very Franciscan directives of our General Constitution, “Francis was a prophet in the marketplace, a sign of contradiction to the forces of power, greed and hatred.” (GC 1) And “Francis served the leper and the Sultan with the same exquisite courtesy.” (GC 19)

All of our ministries rely on the work of volunteers to survive and on the donations of people whose financial means allow them to participate in our work by offering financial support. Again, we live in the spirit of our General Constitution when it says, “We do not hesitate to call the rich to sense of their responsibility for hungry, illiterate and crushed people.” (GC 21)

Some of our behaviors are definitely disturbing. One of us joins a group that stands in silent prayer for peace each week; the group is jeered by some who find it unpatriotic to say the US should withdraw from Afghanistan and Iraq. When another works with a group that houses people released from prison, neighbors are upset. When another brings as support group for people with AIDS into our house, neighbors are not anxious. Politicians can find us a disturbing presence as we come to their offices together with our neighbors to speak the truth of the reality of the poor. Whatever the reaction, we continue our efforts, “convinced that our call to be sisters minor is a call to solidarity with those who are powerless, we work with them to change situations in which the dignity of persons is violated.” (GC 21)

Rather than continue with my examples, I invite you to consider your own reality. How is my presence (our congregational presence) a disturbing presence in the world? How is my presence (our congregational presence) a consoling presence in the world?

Is this living of poverty a challenge for young men and women?

The service of the poor, the vulnerable and those on the margins of society is something that captures the imagination of

many young people in the United States. It is highly encouraged by the churches and schools. Participation in service is an essential part of the preparation for Confirmation in most parishes in the United States. Catholic secondary schools and Catholic colleges expect their students to participate in “service learning” and so they connect the students with opportunities to use the skills they are learning in service to the needy in their communities. Often these volunteer situations incorporate prayer and reflection is a part of the ministry. Many students respond enthusiastically and far exceed requirements of their schools or churches as they enter into relationships of service and support for those in need. Some young people are so inspired and involved that they give a full year of service in ministry.

Many people continue involvement in the good works of the gospel through adulthood. Volunteering to serve is a value in US society. For example, many corporations expect their administrative to serve on boards of directors of projects for the poor or to assist these organizations in raising money. Churches rely on volunteers, as do organizations that serve those in need.

This desire to serve, even when coupled with the desire to pray and reflect, rarely translates into the desire to embrace priesthood or religious life. Rarely do these young people take vows as members of the Secular Franciscan Order. In the United States, as throughout the First World, it seems that our Franciscan life does not give birth to new vowed members.

In facing that reality, we reflect on the experience of Francis of Assisi in regard to the direction of the Franciscan movement in his life time. Though he found many in the brotherhood unfaithful to the gospel life, he handed the Order to God, the one to whom all belongs. As his death approached, Francis forgave the brothers and asked for their forgiveness; he blessed them and experienced them as a blessing. Finally, Francis surrendered all and welcomed Sister Death. Whatever the new direction or lack of new direction in the

vowed Franciscan life in the US, we surrender ourselves to the one who is “Our God and our All.”

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With Emphasis on the Vow of Poverty
African Women Religious
Examine their Experience as Sister Students
in an American Franciscan Congregation

by Sister Martin Flavin, OSF

Introduction

For a religious congregation whose heritage began in 1866 in a rural pioneer settlement of poor German immigrants and whose ministry has served the Catholic Church in Midwestern United States, welcoming members of African Religious Congregations as Sister students into their lives as residents of their Motherhouse has proved a season of grace for the American Franciscan Congregation. Since 2007, seven African religious have been enrolled at Silver Lake College, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, a liberal arts college sponsored by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity.¹ Three African religious congregations are represented among the seven – the Little Sisters of Saint Francis of Uganda, the African Benedictine Sisters of Saint Agnes, Chipole, Tanzania and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ Congregation, Onitsha, Nigeria.² The length of the students' stay at Holy Family Convent varies from one to five years, with five Sisters having completed a bachelor or master degree at the college. Having such a length of stay in an American Franciscan Congregation has provided the African religious opportunity to observe the vowed life in a culture vastly different from theirs.

The purpose of this paper is limited to a study of the vow of poverty in the different cultures represented among the African religious. The Sister students graciously took time to reflect on the various ways by which the vow of poverty is taught and what aspects of the vow are emphasized in their

formation programs. They shared experiences of living the vow of poverty and reflected on the distinction between the lived vow and the poverty of destitution in their native lands. Before discussing the theme of the General Assembly of the International Franciscan Conference, Assisi, 2009³ - exploring how living the vow of poverty can be understood as a disturbing presence in today's world, both in the United States and Africa, the Sister students shared their insights of poverty as they observed the vow lived in an American Franciscan community.

“All the sisters and brothers zealously follow the poverty and humility of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” (TOR Rule No. 21)

The formation program of each of the three Congregations represented at Holy Family Convent this past academic semester is somewhat similar while mirroring the culture of each country. A formal study of the vows extends from one to two years. As to their understanding of their introduction to the vow of poverty, the Sisters offered a number of reflections.

To vow poverty means “accepting all things God gives us as a gift from Him with everything shared as community,” this definition from a Sister whose understanding of poverty is rooted in her Congregation's “fourth vow” of Community whose mission is to live “the Gospel Way of Life” through “Spirituality, Community and Service.”

Another Sister shared this reflection as she remembered with gratitude her years of formation:

We study the vow of poverty according to the mind of Christ, emphasizing the spirit of poverty rather than the letter. The

spirit of poverty is that humble spirit that made Jesus empty Himself for our sake. Christ is God, yet He did not hold on to His greatness, but became a slave for us. In the vow of poverty we respond to Christ's invitation to be poor, following Him as our model. The spirit of poverty disposes us to live with inner freedom, having a non-possessive attitude towards material things, positions, power, persons, talents and even one's life. Once a person understands the vow of poverty in the mind of Christ, that person can live poverty in any challenging situation.

Another confessed the difficulty she experienced in trying to grasp the explanation of poverty as vow:

To me, it was being twice poor. But now I am beginning to realize that the vow brings me blessings because I have chosen to follow the poor Christ. Understanding of the vow has deepened for me as I observe other communities practicing poverty.

Reflecting on the years of formation, this Sister shared that

Just as with any goals and values which a group sets for themselves, the individual still lives according to her level of understanding, conviction and personal commitment to Christ. Throughout formation we learned to value the spirit of poverty according to the Institute's law.

As the Sisters explained the living out of the vow of poverty, their thoughts, for the most part, turned to their community living, with such sentiments as:

Learning to follow the common life and sharing everything – time, talents, skills – as Saint Francis would have had his followers do is the objective of our community living.

The reality of fasting every Friday and then giving the food of the day to the villagers who come in the early evening makes the young religious begin to realize what living vowed poverty means.

One interviewee described this practice associated with her learning to live the vow:

When young women enter the novitiate after having received many and usually beautiful pieces of cloth, they learn that giving their treasures to the superior who will then share with those who have none is an excellent expression of lived poverty.

“The truly poor in spirit, following the example of the Lord, live in this world as pilgrims and strangers.” (TOR Rule No. 22)

It was in speaking of the difference between the poverty of destitution and the vow of poverty that the reality of the life of the African poor was articulated by the Sisters. Obviously, poverty to the extreme as lived both within and outside the walls of their convents has been experienced by each of the Sister students. As each reflected on her life as a religious in Africa, the expression of the difference between choosing to be poor and forced by circumstances to live poorly was immediately evident.

The religious whose experiences have been in their congregations’ ministries located principally in Uganda and Tanzania spoke movingly of their sharing poverty with the native village people.

We live as simply as they do in our poorest missions, going out daily to fetch our water from the common well or the river; and we pick up firewood in the bushes or tree stands. How we do this is truly a miracle; our courage comes from God.

Each Sister spoke of the difficulties they experienced in trying to explain to their own families their living according to the vow of poverty's restrictions, that is, not being able to share all things with family but with community first. When a Sister goes to visit her family, the Superior tries to give the Sister some soap or cloth or foodstuff to take along, especially if her family's home is in a poor village.

One of the Sisters pointed out that living poorly in an African setting can either foster or hinder the living of the vow, the latter action especially for that individual who does not grasp the "spirit of the vow."

Coming from an extended family, as many of us do, where we share all things, inclines our relatives, even the whole village, to view us as 'mean' because now as an individual we do not share. Acquiring the spirit of vowed poverty is difficult.

It is the practice in one of the congregations that Sisters, rather than being assigned, are permitted to volunteer to work in the very poor villages, knowing that living as the poorest does allows for a deepening sense of "Christ's having lived among us as a poor man in service to others."

For one interviewee, the difference between living poverty and the vow is clearly expressed through the dynamics of living the vow.

We bear witness to the vow of poverty in such things as our clothes, furniture, buildings, food; however, we need to practice good management and buy quality merchandise so as to make all things last.

All of the Sisters noted that security is a priority in each house, regardless of the reality of poverty; it is understood that the convents are to be built as strongly as possible, with sturdy walls around the property to protect all who reside there. Sometimes this requires extensive explanation to the surrounding villagers – a challenge for the Sisters in their practice of the vow of poverty.

***“Clinging completely to poverty, let us, for the sake of Our Lord Jesus Christ, never want anything else under heaven.”
(TOR Rule No. 22)***

While expressing their observations about the practice of vowed poverty as they have witnessed it in the United States, the Sister students all made comparisons with their Congregations’ practices in their native lands. None have heard the expression “disturbing presence” in relation to religious life as enunciated by the International Franciscan Conference but each was soon able to articulate how her own Congregation meets the challenges, both positive and negative, which confront the Sisters in their daily life. Instances regarding poverty over and beyond those already cited were quickly called to mind and expressed. The inter-tribal warfare, inner-village violence, and especially the abduction and rapacious treatment of women and children were blamed for keeping so many people in abject poverty. Helping the poor who suffer most provides motivation for the Sisters’ ministries.

Religion and education are the ways we can overcome the violence in our countries. It is by our being educated to teach the children that God wants peace for Africa not hatred for one another, that we will make the difference.

The Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity have always opened their rural Wisconsin Motherhouse to welcome Catholic women religious seeking assistance in their need. Only a short nine years after the young community had settled in its convent on Silver Lake (1875), Archbishop John Martin Henni of Milwaukee asked the American Franciscans to accept a congregation of German Franciscans forced to leave Geiboldihausen, Brixen, because of the Bismarck government's attack on German religious educators.⁴ It is the culture of the two young communities fused into one that welcomes all who have since enjoyed the hospitality of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. "Simplicity, firmly built on faith in a loving God, joyful acceptance of poverty, love for the Church, and selfless dedication to the service of others are the cornerstones on which the Congregation is built."⁵

Congregations within the United States and beyond have accepted the American Franciscans' open invitation to live with them while students, among whom have been Sisters from India, Vietnam, Africa and Japan, all of whom have witnessed the Congregation's willingness to share their gifts with others. The Sister students living at the Motherhouse this academic year of 2010-2011 are unanimous in their expression of gratitude for the example shown by their hostesses.

Your Sisters are so willing to share everything with us – not only the good food and beautiful living spaces but more so your time and yourselves in helping us in every way.

It is expected that all who live at the Motherhouse offer prayers together, joining at choir to make the liturgies meaningful to each Sister. You truly make each one part of the Family.

One Sister spoke thus:

When I saw all the cars on the drives around your large home, I was sure that you did not understand what the vow of poverty meant – at least not as I understood it! But soon I saw the unselfish ways you all do everything, even taking another's turn at dishwashing when asked. And the cars, they are just another way you show of not owning anything but of having things which are necessary to serve the people who themselves are accustomed to material things in such a different way than we are.

As the Sisters reflected on their insights about the vow of poverty as lived at Holy Family Convent, one spoke of her appreciation for the “spirit of poverty being actualized by such a large group.” Because all the community members gather before Evening Praise to listen to the reading of the Rule, the Constitutions and the Directory, this made an impact on another of the students. “I came to the realization that these norms (yours and ours) have everything stated that will bring about salvation if we live them.” Another shared this: “I had been told that collective witness to the vow of poverty really is meant to be redemptive; truly this is made visible by this group of religious.”

For their part, the American Franciscan Sisters, who have become accustomed to the students' queries about their way of life, find themselves in that state of mind reflected in “The Canticle of Disturbing Presence:”

Peace by to You, O God
for the “little ones” whose disturbing presence
calls into question the warrants for accumulating
all measure of power, privilege and prestige
to which the world attaches such importance...⁶

Seeing the little luggage with which the African students arrived at our door, witnessing the wide-eyed amazement at the brightly illuminated, highly polished corridors of our residence and listening to their description of life in their homelands have indeed caused some among us to be shaken “from our complacency” and willing “to become a disturbing presence in the world today as Francis and Clare were in their day.”⁷ The challenges presented each day that students reside with us are calling us personally to a deeper contemplation of the true meaning of the vow of poverty but even more to fraternally responding to the needs of God’s people, caring for them “to the best of our ability.”

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¹ Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, Manitowoc, Wisconsin; <http://www.fsccl-edto be.org>

² The African Benedictine Sisters of Saint Agnes of Chipole, Tanzania; <http://www.chipolestagnes.org>
The Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ Congregation, Odoakpu, Onitsha, Nigeria; <http://www.ihmmc.org> The Little Sisters of Saint Francis, Jinja; <http://www.lsof.org>

³ Propositum; <http://www.ifc-tor.org/pub>; <http://ifc-tor.org/en-generalassembly>

⁴ Sister Teresita Kittell, OSF, *Refining His Silver* (Manitowoc, Wisconsin: Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, 1979).

⁵ *Rule and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity* (Manitowoc, Wisconsin, 1985), 7.

⁶ Margaret Eletta Guilder, OSF, “The Canticle of Disturbing Presence,” *cf.* End Note 3.

⁷ International Franciscan Conference (2009) Final Assembly Statement, *cf.* End Note 3.

Life in Poverty

James F. Puglisi, SA

Introduction

In the 21st century, the abundance of material goods and the economic system of contemporary Europe almost militates against a ‘life in poverty.’ However, one would need to consider this factor as important in contextualizing a consideration of the meaning of the evangelical counsel that TOR Franciscans profess. We need to ask, therefore, what is different from the medieval times of those first Franciscans and from our contemporary period? If the religious life *today* involves the profession of the counsel of poverty, then it is necessary to understand the different context between the medieval form of religious life and the contemporary form of religious life. Can we simply overlay that medieval model and make sense of the religious profession of poverty today? Will young women and men be capable of understanding the originality of Francis’ intuition of the importance of this ‘virtue’ for the form of life that he invited his brothers to accept? Moreover, will they have the capacity to make this choice in the face of the other options that stand before them? In this reflection, I would like us to consider how poverty may be lived in a rapidly changing global context of Europe that may be different from other parts of our world and how we may challenge others to find a freeing and meaningful option for their lives in the service of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A first consideration

One would almost be tempted to say there was a mistake in the title of this sixth chapter of the TOR rule. We might have expected it to be a ‘life of poverty’. What is the difference between the two expressions? In the latter expression there is no choice. It states a fact that one is poor because of circumstances outside of

one's own choosing. In the title of the chapter "Life in poverty," it is clear that one chooses to live in poverty and humility as the Rule exhorts us. Here is what makes it all the more difficult. We need to *choose* this life style in the face of many more options because of the materialistic world within which we live today.

It is at this point that we need to understand the relationship of our choice namely that we fully actualize the gift of filial freedom that we have received in our baptism. In baptism we accept the Lord Jesus and become a member of the people of God. In so doing we have exercised our freedom for no one can force us to become Christian just as no one can force us to take a vow of poverty. It is something that we freely choose and this has implications for everything else that we do.

So our first consideration is that by freely choosing to profess a life in poverty, we witness something to the world in which we live, precisely a set of values which are those of the world. It means that we are dedicated not to living a common life but to live in *a communion of life*. It is an option for those who are poor not by choice but by circumstance or prejudice. This indicates that what we hold above all things is our communion with the Lord who lived in the simplicity and absence of material goods and in solidarity with the poor. The second Person of the Trinity in assuming our human nature in time and space brought with him the value of living in communion with the inner life of the Trinity. Jesus revealed to us life within the mystery of the Trinity by the way he lived in our world, in our time, in our human and geographic space. However, he invites each to come into the life of the Trinity. Some will be able to realize this in this world but other men and women will move toward its realization in the world to come when they come to full communion with the Beatific vision. Francis of Assisi understood this and radically opted for living in a communion of life by freely opting for solidarity with the poor in imitation of Christ.

Poverty does not mean destitution or divestment

The Apostle says, "Provide enough food and sufficient clothing; with these we are content" (1 Tim. 6:8). The basics of human living are the ideal of this understanding of poverty. Destitution means that the minimal for sustaining a dignified life are missing. This type of poverty was refused by Francis and certainly is not encouraged by the gospel mandate to live simply in the world. It is when we begin to amass material things that our concentration begins to move away from the essential to the distractions of life. In Europe we are caught up with those things without which we "cannot live." We deceive ourselves into believing in a world in which we are the creators and not the God who brought out of chaos order and out of an empty void, life. The temptation is for us to begin to replace the Creator and Author of life with our own self worth. God did not want to live alone in his splendid creation which is why God created man and woman to enjoy his presence. A life in poverty puts the accent on keeping our attention focused on the one who is the Creator and the realization that we remain his creatures, the object of his love. Our response is to return his love and appreciate our rightful position in this relationship as is indicated in the prophet Micah: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).

Poverty does not mean divestment. In our post-modern European world it is too easy to deal with "virtual" money and economic realities. Therefore, it may be easy for the religious conscience to believe that it is opting for poverty when it divests from this virtual, unreal realities. Actions on the stock market, investment in financial schemes are all easy ways for Religious Congregations to believe that they live a responsible life of poverty when in point of fact they are buying to economic systems that render others poor. Collectively we may believe that we are in fact living poverty by divesting ourselves in these arenas when in fact we are not responsibly investigating the implications of our actions with

these virtual realities. The warning in the Rule: “Let them beware of money” is easily dealt with by deceiving ourselves into believing that we are not dealing with money. Anything that touches the economic system of peoples is actually dealing with the currencies of people’s survival. Hence in this sense we are not actually aware of what we are doing with money either collectively or personally.

Pilgrims in the world

“They neither appropriate nor defend anything as their own.” This is what pilgrims do since they are simply ‘passing through’ on the way to another, more permanent, home. The Beatitudes encourage us to live the spirit of poverty so that we may be heirs of the world to come. In other words, Francis exhorts us to keep our eyes on the real prize of the race that we are running and not to become distracted. To appropriate and to defend are actions, are distractions for us since they both demand time and attention to detail. When a pilgrim travels he or she needs to pay attention to the goal of the pilgrimage and not to all of the baggage that needs to come along. Rather along the way we need to be shedding baggage to attain the desired after goal. Why would one go on pilgrimage, if not to obtain some spiritual benefit? This is why Francis encourages his followers to cling to that which is of value, that which leads us to ‘the land of the living.’ The pilgrim will only take that which is necessary so as not to be distracted from the goal. This reality encourages us today since we need to discern what are the real necessities. The fragility of the human race helps put into proper perspective what really matters, what we really need and what really impedes us from achieving the goal that we set out for.

Renewing our commitment

As Franciscans, we realize that our form of life comes from a different age. That age was one in which an economic system was

coming to birth and that Franciscan values were called into play. Can we simply extrapolate this form and overlay it on life in the twenty-first century? We are in fact a far distance from the medieval society. This does not absolve us from taking a stance on the issues of money and material things. Because of the complexity of life styles and of the society in which we live we have to renew and re-imagine the way in which we live a life in poverty today.

One way of fulfilling the vow in the world today, is to use an adage of minimum for self and the maximum for the Lord. This style of living will enable us to renew our commitment as sons and daughters of Francis and Clare in the living of a simply life style so that we can dedicate ourselves to the mission of bringing the Gospel to the world. Christ invites us to conquer the spirit of the world through the spirit of the beatitudes. This is the most effective way for us to live evangelical poverty today. What hasn't changed since medieval times is the need to create a space for the other in our lives and relationship, namely, to develop wholesome, live-giving possibilities for those who ordinarily live on the depersonalized margins of society. In Europe today, these are the 'outsiders', the immigrants and foreigners, those within our European societies who do not have a meaningful employment, the abandoned aged and those living with HIV. By the creation of spaces for the other we realize a right relationship with others and so establish a communion of life with the Other. This is really what Francis wanted of his followers, to become these "lesser brothers" in a fraternity, a communion of life in poverty.

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The Search for an Authentic Evangelical Poverty

By Sister Sônia de Fátima Marani Lunardelli

Meditating on the declaration of the IFC-TOR which invites us to be a disturbing presence in the post-modern and globalized society in the XXI century, we can ask ourselves: in what concerns the Evangelical Counsel of Poverty, how we can allow ourselves to be influenced and influence our society in the following of the poor Christ? We are called to live our consecrated life in the midst of the world, of our culture, in post-modernity and in globalization. We do not want to flee from the world, but we want to be in the heart of the world and be ferment and leaven in the masses. But we do not want to allow ourselves to be contaminated by the evils that afflict our society, because we aspire to a quality of integral human life, because we aspire to sanctity. In this sense, and in order that this may happen, post-modernity and Consecrated Religious Life cannot turn their back to one another. It is urgent to live our form of life passionately and in a radical way and in constant discernment.

Therefore, it is necessary to recreate our charismatic culture simultaneously in two levels: personal and institutional. The processes of restructuring, of re-founding, of reorganization of the Institutes of Consecrated Life, without a serious and profound conversion of consecrated persons, are destined to fail and to generate frustration and lack of effectiveness. And this is so because the Charism or Charisma of Consecrated Life is not found in the works, or in the buildings and much less, in the first place, in structures. It is the Charism that incarnates itself in persons who accept it and identify themselves with it.

Therefore, it is always more necessary to take care of the individual consecrated person, because in each one of them there is a disciple-missionary. If we truly believe that in each consecrated

person of a given Institute is incarnated the Charism of the Institute, we shall try to contemplate the fundamental facts on which their life rests and where the Charism is incarnated in a concrete way.

According to the order chosen by Saint Francis of Assisi, the Evangelical Counsels, obedience, poverty and chastity, express the identity of Consecrated Religious Life in the service of the Kingdom of God. They are then the expression of our essential belonging to God. This is a belonging which, lived with courage, becomes a breath of eternity, in a culture of relative belonging.

The continuous growth of the fraternal Charism of the Third Order Regular is of the utmost importance. Fraternity is not only a gift that we share together; it is our privileged way of announcing the Kingdom of God! This demands from us to question ourselves constantly concerning the quality of our prayer in common, on how we progress in the reciprocal understanding, on how much we are able to read the signs of the times, on our apostolic activity, on our way of living fraternal life without possessing anything, on our presence among the poor and on our commitment with them, and also on the other values of our evangelical life.

The Foundation and the Model of Our Evangelical Poverty

“All the brothers and sisters commit themselves to follow the humility and the poverty of the Lord Jesus Christ who, being incomparably rich, wished to choose in the world, together with the Blessed Virgin, his Mother, poverty and he emptied himself”¹

The sixth chapter of our Rule tries to identify a life lived in poverty in the following of Christ poor and humble as the normative criterion for our life in poverty. Therefore, we choose evangelical poverty to follow Jesus poor and committed with the poor.

Saint Paul affirms that: “Jesus Christ, although he was rich, he became poor for our sake, so that you should become rich

through his poverty” (2 Co 8:9). Jesus, the Word of God, who “emptied himself (*kenosis*), taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are, and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Ph 2:7). He is **the foundation and model of our evangelical poverty.**²

And Jesus is also the model of our austerity. His austerity leads him to sit at table with the excluded: “Now while he was at table in Matthew’s house, it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to the disciples: Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mt 9:10).

During his time, Jesus found a situation of injustice and of idolatry similar to ours and he openly denounced it: “You cannot be the slave both of God and of money” (Mt 6:24). “For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too” (Mt 6:21). “It is hard for someone rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Mt 19:23). “Blessed are the poor” (Mt 5:3). And he also denounces the desire for power, for prestige and for greatness that accompanies the human condition and constitutes it: “Anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave...” (Mt 20:27).

This discovery lived in joy, fascinates us and urges us to live celibacy. It is the mystical foundation of poverty. It is only beginning from this discovery that it is possible “to sell everything,” to share with the poor and to follow Jesus, since it opposes the divine thought to the human thought. Humanly speaking, it is possible to survive by accumulating material goods only, even if the result is misery for many. In God’s perspective, what is important is sharing and solidarity. Those who choose poverty like a way of life will never lack what is necessary to live. The disciples of the Kingdom should have faith in Providence.

Evangelical Poverty and 'Minority' in Our Time

The fundamental intention of Saint Francis of Assisi is "to observe the holy Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ."³ He discovers the model of his radical attitude in the Incarnation and in the cross: "Do not keep anything for oneself." In the first place that signifies, to acknowledge that everything which is good in us and the good carried out by us is a gift from God and, then, we must give it back to Him, with praise and thanksgiving.

The contemplation of the birth, life and death of Jesus revealed to Francis the poverty and humility of God. He was admired by the fact that in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word of God became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, "Behold, every day he humbles himself, like when from the royal throne he descends into the womb of the Virgin-."⁴

In addition Francis affirms that Jesus did not choose poverty only at the moment of his birth, but also during his whole life: "Being incomparably rich" (2 Co 8:9) he wished to choose poverty in the world, together with the Blessed Virgin, his Mother." This point however, has been described better in the *Non Bullata* Rule: "Our Lord Jesus Christ... was poor and host, and lived from alms, he and the Blessed Virgin and his disciples."⁵ Francis sees on the cross, the fulfillment of a life of total dedication lived in poverty and humility: "And the will of his Father was this one, that his Blessed and glorious Son, whom he has given to us and who was born for us, should offer himself, through his own blood, like a sacrifice and victim on the altar of the cross."⁶ And in the mystery of the Eucharist, Francis discovers this same poverty and humility of Jesus: "Oh sublime humility! Oh humble sublimity, that the Lord of the universe, God and Son of God, humbled himself so much as to hide himself, for our salvation, under the appearance of a small piece of bread!"⁷ The Rule summarizes the Franciscan following of Christ in this way: "We observe poverty, humility and the holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ."⁸

From this contemplation on the humility of Jesus springs the wonderful vision described by Francis with the expression “the sublimity of the highest poverty.”⁹ “Then, do not keep anything of yourself for self, in order that the One who offers himself totally to you may receive you.”¹⁰ This conclusion has its foundation in the three-fold conviction that constitutes the fundamental attitude of his poverty.¹¹

All good comes from God and it has to be given back to Him: “And we return to the most High Supreme Lord God all goods and acknowledge that all goods are his and for all we render thanks, because all come from Him.”¹² In the Admonitions all that is affirmed with greater insistence: “Blessed the servant who gives back all his goods to God the Lord, because anyone who keeps something for himself hides within himself the money of the Lord” (Mt 25:18).¹³

We can correctly make our own only our sin: “And we are firmly convinced that only the vices and sins belong to us.”¹⁴

We must joyfully accept the sufferings of life, by means of which we will participate in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ: “...but we can glory in this, in our infirmity and in carrying on our back, every day, the holy cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

A Fraternity which is Materially Poor: An Economy Divinely Inspired

“And remember that nothing else is necessary that we have in this world, but only, as the Apostle says, having food and dress, to be happy with these; and to guard ourselves very much from money.”¹⁶

“Compassion toward the Crucifix” is what has given life to the vision of Brother Francis on the “Sublimity of the highest poverty”. But his convinced insistence concerning poverty, embraced as a community, was born when this vision of faith encountered the reality of the world in which he lived.

Francis and his brothers abandoned avidity, avarice or greed and the yearning for power which in the XIII century in Italy frequently led to war and violence. When the Bishop of Assisi commented to Francis: saying “your life seems to me to be hard and harsh because you possess nothing in this world”. Francis answered: “Sir, if we had goods, we would also have to have arms to defend ourselves. It is from richness that questions and quarrels and arguments arise, and with this the love of God as well as the love for neighbor is hindered in many ways. This is the reason why we do not want to possess any material good in this world.”¹⁷ The choice of community poverty transformed in a radical way human relationships, first among the friars and then with their brothers and sisters. .

The writings of Francis and of Clare are the proof of the cohesion that existed in the community due to the depth of human relationships, strengthened by the exercise of community poverty: “And any place where the friars are or meet, they will act, reciprocally, in a familiar way among themselves. And each one manifests with confidence to the other one his needs, because if a mother feeds and loves her son of flesh, (*cf.* 1 Thes 2:7) how much more solicitous one must love and feed his spiritual brother?”¹⁸

The fact that community poverty led to the discovery of the attention and of the care given with love and tenderness toward neighbor, emerges more evidently in what Francis says in the Rule *non Bullata* concerning the use of money in behalf of the sick friars “No friar... in any way take with him or receive from another or allow that money be received... but only for a clear need of the sick friars.”¹⁹ In the Rule of Saint Clare we find a similar attitude to this one: “Those who are sick may use a straw mattress and have a pillow of feathers under the head.” “And those who need stockings and a wool mattress may use it.”²⁰

Union and the profound joy that sprang from this experience of the friars and of the Poor Clares are quite eloquent for their

contemporaries. Their life was an evident proof of how fraternal and equal sharing was capable to give cohesion to the group. The depth of the peace which united them was in counter position to the conflicts and rivalry and divisions caused by economic powers that distributed in an unequal way privileges and rights. The quick development of the Order was a clear demonstration of its cohesion, of which fraternal solidarity was an essential element: "And anywhere that the friars are or meet, let each one manifest to the other, with trust, his needs."²¹ The friars reaffirm their belonging to the fraternity and simultaneously their adherence to the life of evangelical poverty, by expressing to one another their own needs. This is the fraternity that has no hierarchic levels, a fraternity in which only the sick and elderly friars can demand material privileges! The exercise of solidarity ad intra guaranteed the union among the friars themselves. But the true purpose of this commitment was that of proposing to the world an economy divinely inspired capable of giving peace to all.

"The meaning of money and the new perception of private property substantially transform the economic Franciscan choices of the beginning, which prohibited the use of money and rejected any type of possession. One of the principal objectives of our reflection consists in discerning the actual economic choices which make of us authentic disciples of Jesus Christ, safeguarding our identity of Sisters, of Friars Minor and separating us from the more obvious and scandalous injustices of the actual global economy."²²

There is no Shame in Reciprocal Dependence

"And they should rejoice when they stop to speak with humble and despised persons, among the poor and the weak, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars on the street."²³

The last paragraph of Article 21, taken from the Rule *non Bullata*,²⁴ constitutes a whole with a normative criterion on how the

friars should live poverty and humility. If Christ in the mystery of the Incarnation, being rich became poor to enrich us with his poverty (2 Co 8:9)²⁵ and if by the response to the call of God (= nuptial alliance) the destiny of the brothers is intimately bound to that of Christ poor and humble, they attain that their life also, lived in poverty and humility, following the example of Christ, is all dedicated to the service of man and of humanity and is intimately linked to his (= principle of solidarity).²⁶ Community poverty lived by the friars radically transformed their relationships with their neighbor. Their poverty created strong bonds of communion and of solidarity with the poor: “And they should rejoice when they stop to speak... with the poor and the weak, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars on the street.”²⁷ And they also shared with the poor: “And the alms are the inheritance and the justice due to the poor; the Lord Jesus Christ has gained it for us.”²⁸ It is interesting to note that if his attention toward the sick and elderly friars urges him to decide some exceptions to the strict prohibitions relative to the use of money, tenderness and the love that he nourished for the weak, urges him to determine something similar toward the poor: “Nevertheless, the friars can ask for alms for them.”²⁹ The choice of poverty urges Francis to change his relationship with God, Providence of all men who are in need and of the neighbor who no longer was his enemy, but rather brother and sister for him.

Francis declares that to depend on our neighbor does not constitute either shame or a weakness

The ninth chapter of the Rule *non Bullata* presents and develops a “Theology of mutual dependence”, the expression of a new form of life in which persons can interact economically. Before an economy that proposes an arrogant autonomy and control on all the aspects of personal and economic life, Francis declares that to depend on the neighbor is not a weakness, nor a shame: “And when men make of it their shame and would not want to give their

alms, they thank God, because of such a humiliation they will receive great honor before the tribunal of the Our Lord Jesus Christ. And we know that humiliation is attributed not to those who receive it, but to those who cause it.”³⁰ In fact, Francis clearly affirms that such dependence is a consequence of being human beings and redeemed, and therefore, constitutes a right. To embrace interdependence means that the theological gift of love, and therefore, alms, enriches both the one who gives and the one who receives. “And the friars who work to obtain it will have a great reward and will make those who give it win and acquire it.”³¹ And Francis concludes: “And with trust let one manifest to the other his own needs, so that the other one may find the necessary things and give them to him.”³²

The economic choices which gave firmness and criteria to the behavior toward the poverty of Francis and of his first companions were made to respond to a real and critical evaluation of the social conditions of that time. Once that “gain and avarice break the relationship with God...” and that ambition and competition undermine or weaken the sense of fraternity among persons, the first Franciscans made those economic choices which would have saved the identity of the Friars Minor and would have allowed them to live fraternally among them and with the neighbor. It was a question also of cutting down, being aware of the more obvious injustices of the growing market at that time, and based on taking hold of power and of riches on the part of some thus causing harm to the majority. “The goal of the choice of poverty by the first Franciscans was to follow Jesus: the objective consisted in entering into relationship with one another and with the neighbor, as He did. It was a question of a choice being aware of the need for a more fraternal world, for a more human world. It is important to remember that their choice was nourished by the mystery of the Eucharist, from which they received strength, and in which they felt united in the Body of Christ. In making such choices, the first

Franciscan Fraternities did not embrace insecurity, but on the contrary through it, the friars established new bases toward liberty and human security. Assisi was constructing its own security founded on the property and on the power of some, in prejudice of others. Francis and his companions constructed a new security based on reciprocal dependence and in fraternal liberty, an alternative economy which paradoxically constituted a more solid basis for human security than the one offered by the emerging economy of the market of the time.”³³

The True Poor in Spirit

“Those who are truly poor in spirit, following the example of the Lord, do not appropriate themselves of anything nor contest anyone, but live in this world as pilgrims and strangers.”³⁴

When he speaks about a theme which for him is fundamental: “The true poor in spirit”, Francis has in his heart an evangelical motivation. He comments the Beatitudes, and concretely Matthew 5:1-12. The words of Jesus reflect the hope of the poor. Jesus overturns the social order of the world and tends toward a new order wished by God. Those who are victims of marginalization, of oppression, who are defenseless and do not know how to defend their rights, have precedence in the Kingdom. He uses as an example those brothers who, frequently, one would say that they are penitent, full of fervor, almost exemplary in a life of austerity and contemplation, who direct, but who do not succeed to control the truth of their inordinate affections: all mortifications and abstinence are only simple masks.³⁵

In the attempt to silence their own truth, they are not able to bear contradictions, injuries or being deprived of something which they think belongs to them. And in this way they do not live in peace, they are scandalized or allow themselves to be disturbed

because, in last instance, they always have within their heart a worry and a disturbance and find a vent to manifest themselves.

It is interesting to become aware that Francis does not judge them when he says that they are not poor in spirit, on the contrary, in proclaiming the truth itself, he invites them to consider who is truly poor in spirit.

The parameter is not placed in external ascetical practices, but in the simultaneous motions of the heart: contempt toward oneself, before God and others, and love toward those who offend us, that is, to have the same attitude of Jesus along the way of the cross.

Through the Admonitions, Francis wants to propose to the interlocutor the same experience that he has with the Word of God: configuration with the protagonist Jesus, Son of God, sent to show us the Father.³⁶

When Francis says: starting from an ethical program, these are not poor in spirit he is not expressing a judgment of value on the brothers, he is not judging them, but rather he is ascertaining or verifying a reality. If they act like that it is because they are not existentially poor in spirit, nothing more. He does not express a judgment of value. In fact Francis will never make a judgment of his brothers, of the world or of others. He simply verifies and affirms what he sees.

Therefore, evangelical poverty is not a discourse or an ethical position. Evangelical poverty is a person who is poor: Jesus of Nazareth who has called us to follow him.

Fraternal Choices

"I send you to the whole world in order that you may give witness to his voice by your word and your actions."³⁷

In the economy of the market of his time, Francis perceived the destructive effects, both at human and social levels, which still exist today and even in a more evident way: "Gain and avarice

break relationship with God and with the environment and competitiveness weakens the sense of fraternity among persons.”³⁸

Global economy today is very different from the economy of the existing market in Assisi in the XIII century. Consequently, the daily economic choices through which we incarnate or embody evangelical poverty and follow Christ will obviously be different from those of the first Franciscans. The idea is the same, but the realization will be different. *“Today we are no longer bound or linked to the economic decisions of Francis and of his first companions. But we are still linked or bound by the fidelity before the profound intentions of Francis. Therefore, we suggest some fraternal choices which will help us to deepen the meaning of ‘our evangelical poverty at community, institutional and structural level.”*³⁹

- ❖ To deepen the significance or meaning of our “evangelical poverty in fraternity.”
- ❖ Austerity of life rooted in the experience of the people, particularly of the poor.
- ❖ Commitment in our work.
- ❖ Solidarity and reciprocal dependence through the sharing of gifts.
- ❖ The right and just use and administration of the goods and of the property.
- ❖ Commitment in favor of “sustainable” development.

Today, our global economy differs in a radical way from the fraternal economic choices that have been presented. The principal objective of global economy is that of increasing wealth and that of fraternal economy is the communion among persons. Among the means used by global economy to achieve its objectives are competitiveness without pity and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, with dominion and control of the

financial world, of production and of trade. The means to achieve the objective and the purpose of fraternal economy are solidarity and mutual dependence, the participation and the protection of the weakest. If we lived the principles of fraternal economy our attitude would change profoundly regarding the goods of earth, material good, the poor, work and also administration. And that, in turn would transform relationships among us and with the peoples of the earth. Fraternal economy will never occupy the place of global economy, and will neither eliminate it, but will make of our Religious Consecrated Life, of our Congregations and of our Institutes “the home and the school of communion” in this world of the new emerging economy.

Imitating the austerity of Jesus, we Franciscans, men and women, are called to identify ourselves with the marginalized and with the poor, and to live in communion with them to assume what is valid in their form of believing, of loving and of hoping.”

May poverty as well as ‘minority’ be founded on *kenosis*. We, following Christ, voluntarily choose poverty. If we allow ourselves to be led by Francis along the way of the “Most High Poverty” a poverty for the sake of the Kingdom, we will be in a condition to find the light, liberty and happiness: “And we give back to the Most High and Supreme Lord God, all the goods and we acknowledge that all goods are his and for all we thank him, because all of them come from Him.”⁴⁰ Poverty is not an end in itself, but according to everything that happened to Jesus, it renders us available to God and to the brothers.

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¹ TOR 6,21 – Rule and Life of the Brothers and of the Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis.

² *Cfr. Rnb, 9,1 Non Bullata Rule* (Beginning with this quotation all the others are taken from the writings of Saint Francis and of Saint Clare: Franciscan Sources).

³ Rb 1,2 Rule *Bullata*

⁴ Ad 1,16-18

⁵ RnB 9, 4-5

⁶ 2 Ct 11 (Letter to the Faithful (2nd revision)

⁷ Letter to the whole Order 27

⁸ Rb 12, 4

⁹ Rb 6, 5

¹⁰ Letter to the whole Order 29

¹¹ *Cfr. Thaddée Matura OFM, Francisco, um outro rosto. A mensagem de seus escritos*, 144

¹² Rnb 17, 17

¹³ Ad 18, 1-2 Admonitions

¹⁴ Rnb 17, 8

¹⁵ Ad 5, 8

¹⁶ TOR 6,21 b

¹⁷ LTC 35, 5.7 (The Legend of three companions)

¹⁸ RB 6, 7-8

¹⁹ Rnb 8, 3

²⁰ RSC 8, 17 (Rule of Saint Clare)

²¹ Rb 6, 7-8

²² Propositions VI CPO, Plenary Council of the Order - To live poverty in the Fraternity – Assisi 1998.

²³ TOR VI, 21c

²⁴ Rnb 9, 3

²⁵ All Bible quotations are taken from the Holy Bible (In English from the *New Jerusalem Bible*)

²⁶ Conti, Martino “Identidade dos irmãos e irmãs da TOR”, Comment to the Rule, Ed. Vozes em co-edição com.

²⁷ Rnb 9, 2

²⁸ Rnb 9, 8

²⁹ Rnb 9, 3

³⁰ Rnb 9, 6-7

³¹ Rnb 9, 9

³² Rnb 9, 10

³³ Propositions VI CP, Plenary Council of the Order - To live poverty in fraternity – Assisi 1998.

³⁴ TOR VI, 22a

³⁵ Ad 14

³⁶ Ad 1

³⁷ Letter to the whole Order 9

³⁸ Propositions VI CFO, Plenary Council of the Order – To live poverty in the fraternity – Assisi 1998

³⁹ *ibidem*

⁴⁰ RnB 17,17