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The Prophetic Heart (1994) — Joseph P. Chinnici OFM



The TAU

From the time of Ezekiel the sign of the **TAU**, marked on the forehead of those turning to God in faith and repentance has long represented faithfulness and wholehearted love. It was used for healing and victory.

Pope Innocent III, evoked the sign of the **TAU** from Ezekiel when opening the Fourth Lateran Council in 1216 calling for the renewal of the Church, “*Mercy will be granted to those to bear the TAU, a mark of a life of penance and renewal in Christ.*”

And so Francis, who was present at the Council, wanted to sign himself with the **TAU**, and his brothers along with him. The **TAU** became the sign of the little Band’s mission: the preaching of faith and repentance (Rule of 1221:23).

Thomas of Celano, writing in 1252, notes, “The **TAU** symbol had, above all others, his preference. Francis used it as a signature for his letters, and he painted a drawing of it on the walls of all the cells.” One of these paintings, believed to be created by Francis, is found in the little chapel of Mary Magdalen at Fonte Columbo in the Rieti Valley where Francis wrote his Rule.

Another very precious document, housed in the Basilica of St. Francis, is Francis’ own handwritten blessing for Brother Leo — signed with the **TAU**.

Above all else, the TAU meant mission for Francis: a mission to proclaim the Goodness of God by a wholehearted following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ because of whom all life is sacred.



Franciscan Evangelical Life and the Third Order Regular Charism

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INTRODUCTION

In 1983, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (SCRIS) published the document, “Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate.” This document was designed to aid the bishops of the United States in helping religious congregations whose “Institutes are engaged in apostolic works to live their ecclesial vocation to the full” (Letter of Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the United States, 3 April 1983).

Since its publication, this document, addressing the two major forms of institutes of consecrated life — *vita monastica*, monastic life, and *vita apostolica*, apostolic life — has elicited numerous responses and has initiated much dialogue, especially among Franciscan scholars.¹ Much of this discussion centers around the distinction, unaddressed in the document, which places a different emphasis on the manner in which these institutes live out the common life. The Church, in fact, has always acknowledged the vital importance of each congregation understanding its founding charism and encouraged its faithful observance in the life of the institute (Canons 577, 578, 598:1, 673).

It is in this spirit, then, that we speak of three types of religious communities with the different accents and possibilities of the common life:

- **The Monastic Society** centered on contemplation and praise of God;
- **The Evangelical Fraternity** centered on the spirit of simplicity, of benevolence and on a radical witness to Christ and His Gospel;
- **The Apostolic Congregation** centered on the concrete mission of service to the world (Concilium 16:5).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of evangelical fraternity as Francis of Assisi understood it and to highlight its particular nuances as lived out in the Third Order Regular tradition.²



TOWARD A DEFINITION OF EVANGELICAL LIFE

Shortly before his death in October, 1226, Francis dictated his Testament. In this document, Francis reflects for himself and for his followers what it means to live the *vita evangelica*, the Gospel life. Appropriately, he begins by remembering his most profound initial conversion experience, that of embracing the leper:

The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them (Test 1-2).

Evangelical life begins in an experience of penance-conversion-metanoia: that profound, intuitive, and concrete experience of the

goodness of God that impels one “in sin” (Test 1) to turn toward him in a loving faith response to the central Gospel call to “Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15).

Evangelical life is the ongoing process of surrendering to being “led by the Lord” (Test 2) and, in a spirit of constant and overflowing gratitude, finds its expression in the showing of mercy to all, in the living out of the Shema (Dt 6:4-5; Mt 22:37) in loving God and neighbor.³

Thaddeus Horgan says that “For Francis there is only one way to live evangelical conversion, and that is by living the Gospel literally.”⁴ Francis uses two vivid expressions to explain the dynamic way of life which he and his brothers were to lead at the inspiration of the Lord:

1. to follow in the footsteps of Christ (RegNB I:1; XXII:2);
2. to live according to the form of the holy Gospel (RegNB XXII:41).⁵ This is the essence of evangelical life and it is integrally bound up in the ongoing experience of conversion.

It is important to examine these two expressions more closely because “each term expresses an important aspect of God’s personal call to Francis and the saint’s loving response.”⁶

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTPRINTS OF THE LORD

Francis follows Christ because he realizes that Christ is the only way to the Father (Jn 1:6; Adm 1:1): that in the mystery of God’s plan brought to completion in the fullness of time — all creation would be drawn into unity in him (cf. Eph 1:10). The creation of the world and its re-creation begins and ends in Christ. Francis understands

that the most perfect expression of the Father’s goodness is the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ, who is for Francis “*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creatures so that primacy may be his in everything*” (Col 1:15 ff).

In Chapter 23 of the Rule of 1221, Francis praises the Father in the profound prayer of one who has himself become a prayer (2Cel 95): “We thank you for Yourself” (RegNB XXIII:1). Throughout this almost mystical hymn on the generosity of God, Francis celebrates Paul’s own message to the Colossians: *all is created through Christ and for Christ — he who “is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being”* (Col 1:17). Jesus Christ “*lies at the center of all life and of all activity that pulses and functions in the universe.*”⁷

Christ, then, becomes for Francis the fullest expression of the Father’s goodness and love. Because all creation comes into being in and



through Christ, it is sacred for Francis and worthy of reverence (*Canticle*). This is especially true of the human person created and formed in the image of the Son (Adm 5:1).

All this, intuited by Francis through his own spirit-life, is later formulated by **John Duns Scotus** (d. 1308) and expressed as the doctrine of the absolute primacy of Christ.⁸ It is in, with and through this Jesus, firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15), that everything gives glory to the Father. Francis' own reverence and joy in the midst of all created reality explains his remarkable grasp of this truth. Francis recognizes the sacred presence within each creature, respects its uniqueness, and appreciates the enormous diversity of all of created reality. He is incapable of appropriating anything as his own all is seen as gift from the all-good God. He sees *each* creature and *all* of them together as messengers of God through their very existence and can, therefore, welcome all as brother and sister.⁹

Through this awareness of God's goodness in Christ and in all of creation, Francis becomes a person of unceasing prayer (2Cel 165; LM 9:1). His faith reveals the Christ who lives in him, prays in him, and leads him to put aside all care and attachment so that the Spirit can make within his heart a dwelling place (II EpFid 48; RegNB XXII:27).

This profound realization makes of him a living prayer, and thus he encourages his followers:

Let all of us wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of day, every day and continuously . . . love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the most high and supreme eternal God (RegNB XXIII:11).

For Francis, then, there is no dichotomy, but rather a genuine synthesis between action and contemplation. For, those of us who live the evangelical life, live constantly in the presence of God — whether in

solitude or with others. We see and reverence God through the Christ in his word, in others, in creation, and in our own hearts. Prayer becomes adoration.¹⁰



LIFE ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL

Following in the footprints of the Lord (EpOrd 51) means for Francis that he responds completely to the Father's love in the manner of Jesus Christ. This response of faith and repentance describes his total embrace of *"life according to the form of the holy Gospel"* (Test 14; RegNB XXII:41).¹¹

This way of life is not focused on the common life of Ac 4:32, as in the monastic societies of his times; nor is it centered solely on the missionary discourse of Mt 10:5-14, as in the apostolic communities.¹² The Lord reveals to Francis that he is to live the whole Gospel, simply and plainly

(LM 3:8). For him such an observance of the Gospel centers on the great commandment of love of God and neighbor (Mt 22:37, 39; I EpFid I:1; II EpFid 81).

Evangelical life is not established around a common place as are monastic societies, nor around a common task as are apostolic congregations. It is rather formed around a common heart.

Being grasped by the person of the Gospel whose portrait is drawn in the Beatitudes, Francis can do no less than follow him with all his power and strength, with every effort, wish and desire (RegNB XXIII:8). St. Bonaventure tells us, "He received (*concepit*) the spirit of the true Gospel, in order to give birth to it" (LM 3:1).

OBEDIENCE

For Francis, giving birth means completely surrendering to the will of the Father as he allows himself to be led by the Spirit in a life of continuous conversion (Mt 1:15). Jesus Christ's self-emptying modeled the one and only response needed by Francis in discerning his way to the Father. It is the foundation of all he ever teaches in the shaping and preserving of his brotherhood.¹³

Essential to this obedience in its unique form is Francis' call to himself and his followers to *"promise obedience to one another"* (RegNB V:14). Beyond this original insight into Gospel life, Francis prescribes the traditional understanding of obedience understood by those of his times. Even in this directive, however, it is necessary to understand that, for Francis, obedience deals not with law but with revelation.¹⁴ Its goal is not common life, but the facilitating of the Gospel life of love. Obedience helps us to overcome selfishness, to free our hearts from all that is not of God so that the Spirit of God might dwell

within, be inspiration, and act in us in absolute freedom (SalVirt 14-18).¹⁵

In Francis' view, then, "obedience begins before authority enters."¹⁶ However, for us to live the "*true and holy obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (RegNB V:14), Francis believes that what is inspired by the Spirit must be confirmed by the Church (RegB I:12). To act without confirmation is to separate ourselves from the Church and from the community/fraternity and to reappropriate our will. This confirmation from the Church is mediated for Francis through the minister (RegB I:8; RegNB VI:6). In evangelical life, the minister wields no power (II EpFid 42). According to **Wayne Hellmann**, "*The ministers do*



not make obedience, but rather they serve and assist the friars in their obedience to the Spirit of the Lord."¹⁷ Such obedience presupposes that both the minister and the members are free of selfishness and reverence the presence and revelation of the Spirit in one another. Then there can be true obedience.

Such relational obedience exists not only between ministers and members however. Since the Spirit of God dwells in each one, the members obey one another and not just the minister (RegB VI:8). It is the Spirit that unites us in mutual charity (RegNB V:14). For this reason, obedience becomes the *structure* of evangelical life and Francis can speak of the novices as being received into the "*realm of obedience*" (RegNB II:9; RegB II:11). Evangelical life is not established around a common place as are monastic societies, nor around a common task as are apostolic congregations. It is rather formed around a common heart: "the firm will to accept one another in our differences, to respect one another and to walk together" united in love.¹⁸

From this perspective, *chapters* become essential as the means by which we come together to build up one another in mutual love and encourage one another to live the Gospel and the Rule which each of us has promised the Lord (Test 40). As **Michael Crosby**, says, "*The core of Francis' theology of obedience . . . is the bond of mutual fraternal love, which is the means of achieving the highest Christian charity.*"¹⁹

FRATERNITY

It is this bond of mutual love that forms the center of Franciscan evangelical life. To live the whole Gospel and to follow in the footprints of the Lord Jesus Christ means, at its deepest level, to build up the kingdom by living in loving relationships (RegNB 11:10-13). Francis

uses the word "*fraternity*" to identify this relationship that each of us has with Jesus Christ our brother.²⁰ From the outset, then, it is important that we understand the significance of this term and why Francis uses it.

The truth of our love is realized first in our life with one another, a life of essential equality. **Thaddee Matura** emphasizes that "*the strongest and most demanding love is that which is required of me with regard to those to whom I have committed my life.*"²¹ Such love presupposes an essential poverty, that active self-emptying love that frees our hearts from self-interest: that ongoing conversion by which we live without appropriating anything to ourselves. This kind of poverty facilitates the building up of the bonds of community/fraternity (RegNB VI:10). Its absence undermines and breaks the genuine bond. **Eloi Leclerc** explains how important this kind of poverty is for Francis:

*Francis rightly saw that at the base of the rupture between persons there is always a shrinking back on oneself, a secret desire for appropriation that makes us see everything in terms of ourselves: our personality, our ideas, our project, or our interests When the secret desire for appropriation is thwarted, agitation, irritation, anger, and rupture are the result.*²²

Because Francis recognizes that such "ruptures" will occur despite the best of intentions, reconciliation becomes essential to living in community/fraternity (EpMin 9-12). Realizing that Christ redeemed each of us to reconcile us with the Father by drawing all together in unity in himself, we are ready to forgive one another: to ask for forgiveness and to receive forgiveness. We make



peace with one another in a spirit of kindness and humility. Since this relationship is the “circumstance in which we realize our living of conversion, or Gospel life, together,”²³ it is here especially that each of us begins to work toward reconciliation and unity in mutual love.

As **Matura** summarizes,

*“This profound acceptance of the other without preconditions, realistic and merciful, and exercised in fraternal equality, is together with our love of God the central value of our Franciscan existence.”*²⁴

When we live in loving relationships the Kingdom of God is realized. It is to this that we witness. It is in this that we render our most important service to the Church and to the world.

WORKS OF MERCY

In his Sermon on the Mount, especially in the Beatitudes, Christ simultaneously draws a portrait of himself and of the kingdom which he inaugurates.²⁵

Francis grasps the importance of living the Beatitudes, the values of Jesus Christ. He understands that

attitude is all: we must become like a little child — lesser, *minor to enter the kingdom. We identify with and become brother/sister* to the least (Mt 25:40) because these are the ones with whom Christ identified and for whom he is brother (RegNB 9:2; ICel 76; 2Cel 84-85). **Leclerc** expands on this point:

*Living the Gospel means accepting to live with one’s brothers and sisters, with all of them; not only with the holy and healthy ones, but also with the lame, the crippled, the mediocre and the sinful. In the midst of all such people it means bearing witness to God’s infinite patience, his inexhaustible forgiveness, his constantly renewed grace for that is what God’s heart is like. When this kind of witness is given, then, and at that very point the Kingdom of God comes. The light of the Gospel begins to shine in a murky world.*²⁶

Assimilating the values of Jesus as outlined in the Beatitudes means, for Francis, ongoing conversion, that is, changing his own attitudes and concretizing these changed attitudes in deeds, in *“fruits worthy of repentance”* (I EpFid I:3; II EpFid 25). For Francis, however, the task in itself is unimportant. Evangelical life, therefore, has historically, in response to human need, addressed itself to a diversity of ministries. This is especially true of TOR congregations.²⁷ What is paramount for Francis is the manner in which the deeds of mercy are accomplished: in a spirit of minority (RegNB VII:15-16). The lesser brothers and sisters, aware of their own need for God, minister to the least of God’s people, those identified in the judgment

scene presented in *Matthew 25*. This ministry is characterized by mutuality and interdependence: we are sent to give and to receive.

Building this kind of kingdom where needs are filled and all live in essential equality as brother and sister is not an option for Francis but a Gospel imperative.²⁸ The sign that such a kingdom has begun is the presence of a “peace which the world cannot give” (Jn 14:27). When we profess evangelical life, we are committed to this kind of peacemaking, to building this kind of new world order that truly reflects God’s goodness in Christ through whom all things were made (L3S 58).

COSMIC FRATERNITY

This movement toward unity in the Kingdom of Christ our brother, is a journey not restricted to humankind alone. All creation moves toward fulfillment and, to all of creation, Jesus Christ is also brother. It is through, in, and for Christ that the world was created and so it bears his footprints, an understanding that Francis intuitively and Bonaventure theologizes in his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. Francis experiences God’s transcendent goodness in the gifts of creation (2Cel 165; LM 9:1).

Joseph Chinnici writes that, from the perspective of evangelical spirituality, *“it is clear that the world, at the root of its existence is good; it is made through Christ and bears the marks of its Creator.”*²⁹ **Thaddeus Horgan** adds that, in such a world



view, “There is nothing that is not holy, nothing that is not meant to be united and reconciled. The cosmic Christ is brother to everything.”³⁰ **Leclerc** emphasizes that Francis is “*not content only with praising God for his creatures, he fraternizes with them all. And this is new.*”³¹ They are brothers and sisters to him and deserve his reverence because they share with him the same good and loving Father and the same redeeming brother, Jesus Christ.

Such a view does not imply that Francis fails to recognize the sin and darkness in the world. But “sin is related to what people do in the world and to it. Sin for Francis is, above all, appropriation, taking to oneself what belongs to God.”³² In fact, Francis equates conversion with leaving the world (Test 1-4), an image which means that, after his conversion, “he lives within the reality of God’s gift; he sees the intrinsic structure and reality of the world, nature, people and himself to *be gift*. His task and that of his followers is *to receive, give thanks, bear witness* to this reality.”³³ There



is no place for the domination or exploitation of nature; we are stewards of the gifts of creation. Sharing, not consuming, is the mode of being in the world. Interdependence is the way to witness fraternity. Those who participate in political, economic, or social structures that foster appropriation and thus rupture cosmic fraternity need conversion and reconciliation because, as **Leclerc** notes, “*To refuse fraternity with nature*

is also, to be sure, to render oneself incapable of fraternity between all persons.”³⁴

In our working to create genuine relationships with one another and with all of creation, the Kingdom of God, already begun by Christ, will be built up toward completion; the world will be renewed in the life of the Gospel, in the life of ongoing conversion — in peace, in justice, and in love.

END NOTES

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- ² Since the Third Order Regular Rule is written in the words of St. Francis, references in this paper are only to the writings of Francis.
- ³ Margaret Carney, O.S.F., "De Vita Apostolica," Commentary on Chapter 9 of *TOR Rule*, [Originally written as a position paper to the Rome Assembly for approval of TOR Rule, March, 1982], 71.
- ⁴ Thaddeus Horgan, S.A., "Life According to the Holy Gospel," in *The Cord* 32 (1982): 273.
- ⁵ Duane Lapsanski, *Evangelical Perfection: On the Historical Examination of the Concept in the Early Franciscan Sources* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1977): 66.
- ⁶ Lapsanski, 258.
- ⁷ Efreem Bettoni, O.F.M., *Nothing for Your Journey* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1959): 99.
- ⁸ Michael Meilach, *The Primacy of Christ* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1964): 9-10.
- ⁹ Joseph Kiernan, O.F.M., "The Franciscan Charism and World Order," in *Grassroots* [publication of The Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, Aston, PA, 1982], 128.
- ¹⁰ Damien Vorreaux, O.F.M., *First Encounter with Francis of Assisi* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979): 56-57.
- ¹¹ Helpful references on this theme from the *Omnibus of the Sources: 1Cel 22, 30, 32, 84, 209, 216, 2Cel 62, 105, 115, 216; L3S 25, 29; II EpFid 11-13; OffPass 7.8; 15.13; EpOrd 51-51; EpLeo 3.*
- ¹² Chinnici, 6-7.
- ¹³ Cajetan Esser, O.F.M., *The Rule and Testament of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977): 65-66.
- ¹⁴ Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., "Obedience: The Vision of St. Francis," in *The Cord* 26 (1976): 342.
- ¹⁵ Vorreaux, 68.
- ¹⁶ Hellmann, "Obedience," 343.
- ¹⁷ Hellmann, "Obedience," 346.
- ¹⁸ Thaddeus Matura, O.F.M., "Fraternity: Human Reality and Gospel Sign," in *The Cord* 30 (1980): 116.
- ¹⁹ Michael Crosby, O.F.M. Cap., "Obedience: The Fraternal Bond of Charity," in *The Cord* 31 (1981): 294.
- ²⁰ Vorreaux, 69-72.
- ²¹ Matura, "Fraternity," 112.
- ²² Eloi Leclerc, O.F.M., *The Song of the Dawn* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977): 46.
- ²³ Horgan, "Life," 276.
- ²⁴ Matura, "Fraternity," 115.
- ²⁵ Segundo Galilea, *The Beatitudes: To Evangelize as Jesus Did* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984): 5-11.
- ²⁶ Eloi Leclerc, O.F.M., *Francis of Assisi: Return to the Gospel* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983): 116.
- ²⁷ Carney, 72.
- ²⁸ Thaddeus Horgan, S.A., "Prophetically Living Franciscan Penance" in *The Cord* 27 (1977): 89.
- ²⁹ Joseph Chinnici, 16.
- ³⁰ *TOR Rule Commentary*.
- ³¹ Leclerc, *The Song*, 16.
- ³² Chinnici, 18.
- ³³ Chinnici, 18.
- ³⁴ Leclerc, *The Song*, 19.

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ART: Page 5, Legenda Maior di S.Bonaventura: miniature dal codice pergameneo del 1457, Roma Museo Francese, inv.nr 1266. Page 6, Francis takes Rule to Pope Innocent III, Bardi Dossal, Santa Croce Church, Florence, Italy. All the rest is public domain.

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