



***Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
The Romanticism of St. Francis
Father Cuthbert, O.S.F.C.***

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**Meditation – Community
The Romanticism of St. Francis
II**

How closely the idealism of St. Francis was allied with a practical conduct of life, will be seen if we consider Franciscan poverty in what we will call its economic aspect.

Three fundamental notions stand out quite clearly in the Franciscan conception of poverty, economically considered. In the first place, the friars were to have no kind of proprietorship over material goods, neither individually nor corporately; next, they were to labour and serve others, and for this they might receive a wage like other poor men; thirdly, in case of necessity they were to go begging for alms: and in the eyes of St. Francis, living by alms was the highest poverty.

In the matter of proprietorship there can be no question as to the saint's intention. The brethren might enjoy the use of such things as were needful for bodily life—food, raiment, lodging, and so forth—but they must have no proprietorship even in the things needful. This principle is expressed thus in the Rule of the Friars Minor: "The brothers shall appropriate nothing to themselves, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all." And this law applied to the friars corporately as well as individually. The fraternity as such were to have no possessions, even as its individual members had none. The idea of corporate poverty was new amongst religious orders in the Church, and even amongst the penitential congregations of the Middle Ages, with which the Franciscan Order had a close affinity.

The members of these orders and congregations might renounce poverty as individuals; they always kept the right to own property in common. But Francis would have nothing to do with property in any sense. "The Brethren," he said, "must be pilgrims and strangers in the world." The *Speculum Perfectionis* tells us: "He was minded the Brethren should in no wise, neither in houses, nor churches, nor gardens, nor in ought else whereof they had the use, trespass beyond the bounds of poverty, nor hold any places whatsoever by right of ownership, but should sojourn therein as pilgrims and strangers." Celano says: "He [Francis] would not let the Brethren live in any dwelling, even a small one, unless it were sure that there was some owner to whom the property belonged; for he always aimed at his sons observing the laws of pilgrims—namely, to be gathered under another's roof, to pass onward peaceably, and to thirst after their native land."

Later on, when the Order grew in numbers, this Rule was found to have inconveniences, but Francis would not relax it, not even when urged to do so by Cardinal Ugolino. And in like manner St. Clare for thirty years contended against those who in this matter deemed the Franciscan Rule impracticable.



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Indeed the whole scheme of the Franciscan Rule was formed upon this acceptance of corporate poverty in the sense of non-proprietorship. The brethren were not to be tied to any place by bond of ownership; there were to be free from the responsibilities and temptations of property in order that they might follow their own special vocation. What that vocation was we shall see farther on: it is hinted at in the passage quoted above, where it is said that St. Francis wished his brethren to be as “pilgrims and strangers” wherever they came.

But even pilgrims upon the road must live; and lacking possessions of their own, they have but two honest means of subsistence before them: the alms which others might give them, or their own labour. Francis declared for both labour and alms. And here we come upon a certain difficulty to our modern way of thinking. The saint had a strong affection for the beggar and his dependence upon alms; and there can be no doubt that he regarded the beggar’s dependence upon alms as something sacred in the eyes of God. Let us hear his own words:—

“Dearest brothers,” he exclaimed on one occasion, “the Son of God, Who for our sakes made Himself poor in this world, was nobler than we. For His sake we have chosen the way of poverty, and ought not to be ashamed to go for alms.” And there is a touching story told of a Brother, perhaps one of those who at first were bashful in begging returning from Assisi with alms, and as he came near the Porziuncola, he broke forth into song, singing with a loud voice. St Francis hearing him, suddenly jumped up, and ran out and kissed the brother’s shoulder; and, taking the wallet on his own shoulders, he exclaimed: “Blessed by my brother who goes readily [for alms], seeks humbly, and returns rejoicing.” In his Rule, after ordaining that the brethren shall have no proprietorship, the Saint continues: “And as pilgrims and strangers in this world serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go confidently in quest of alms...this, my dearest brothers, is the height of the most sublime poverty: poor in goods but exalted in virtue.”

...When, then, we are told that labour and not mendicancy is the basis of the economical life of the Friars Minor, the inference is apt to run counter the explicit words and conduct of St. Francis and his first following. The whole story of the first Franciscan days proves that mendicancy was not regarded merely as an occasional expedient in times of distress “when the wages of our work are not given us”: mendicancy was to Francis the nobler poverty.