



Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
The Romanticism of St. Francis - Chapter 1
By Fr. Cuthbert O.S.F.C. Longmans, Green & Co. 1924

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Meditation – Franciscan Charism

CHAPTER I

The Romanticism of St. Francis

...The reader must pardon me if I have thus at once fallen into the speech of fancy and allegory. It is hardly possible otherwise to get at the Franciscan spirit which captivated the imagination of the thirteenth century, and thrilled its religious life with a sense of Christ-like liberty. The Franciscan story is itself a romance; it is woven through and through with the spirit of romance; it expressed itself in the language of romance. For all time the Franciscans have consecrated the romantic temperament and vision. They were not led on by philosophy or statesmanship, or by what is called practical common-sense. Theirs was the enthusiasm and vision which belongs to the spring-time of life, when a man's spirit soars upon the wings of adventure, and he reasons by intuition and speaks in figure. Their unique achievement was that they laid hold of this spring-time spirit and by God's grace dedicated it as a permanent possession in the tradition of Catholic life, for the comfort and joy of ages to come.

Of this spring-time spirit as it thus entered into the service of Jesus Christ and was accepted by the Catholic people, Franciscan poverty is the token. Poverty, to St. Francis and his followers, had no attraction or significance apart from that splendid possession of the spring-time life. They did not become poor from a morbid clinging to discomfort; not even in order to inflict discomfort on others. They embraced poverty because it held for them a comfort and joy in this life, and the promise of yet a greater in the next. Poverty to them was at once a promise and possession of life, not its negation. Even now, and upon the earth it brought them joy. For like the Gospel, though less universally, the poverty of the Franciscans, whilst it transcended in its aspiration and achievement the natural experience of the world, was yet closely allied to it. One cannot understand the Gospel save by reference to the universal needs of humanity; and the true explanation of Franciscanism will be found only as we keep in view the romantic spirit which is of the nature of man.



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That romanticism which reveals itself so palpably in the story of the first Franciscan days, and in such purely Franciscan literature as the *Sacrum Commercium* and the *Fioretti* is no mere accident due to individual temperament or character: it is the essence of the Franciscan spirit. One finds it, in a higher or lower intensity, in all the pages of Franciscan history, sometimes untroubled in its freedom, at other times maintaining itself painfully against the intrusion of an alien spirit; but always to the fore wherever the instinct of the world recognizes the genuine Franciscan tradition. It is that which gives to the story of Francis and his fraternity its penetrating idealism, its lyrical and dramatic situations, its comedy and tragedy, its spirit of adventure, and its unconventionalism, its wide human sympathies, and the mystical not in its religious devotion.

When, then, we speak of poverty as being the distinguishing mark of the life Franciscan, we must beware lest we take too narrowly the “*nulla havere e nulla volere*” – the having and desiring nothing – of the Jacopone’s definition. Francis, in truth, had much and desired much that makes life worth living, even from a merely secular standpoint, though much more from the standpoint of his religious faith.

...Yet it will be well to recognize that the idealism of St. Francis was not a luxury of mere aesthetic sentiment, but a faith in life itself, an apprehension of realities and responsibilities. Only as it is thus realized, can Franciscan idealism have any power to disperse the winter of our discontent...