



Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
The Romanticism of St. Francis
Fr. Cuthbert, OSFC (1924) London, Longmans, Green and co.

M Meditation – Francis Charism

The Story of the Friars

...Rightly then, to read the story of the friars, we must read it with an eye to the bigger issues, as we read the history of a nation or a people: and we must fix our attention upon the persistence not so much of this or that external detail, as upon the great elemental truths out of which the fraternity issued. What we ask ourselves is: Did the Franciscans as a body in the course of their development maintain that note of personal freedom conjoined with and governed by devotion to the Person of Christ, which was the dominant characteristic of St. Francis and the original fraternity? for that is the fundamental principle which determines the Franciscan genius and ideal. At the same time the persistence of external forms in the life of the fraternity has its own particular value as witnessing to the identity of the spiritual ideal; for every community which maintains as individual corporate existence there will be found a continuity of form as well as spirit. Institutions may grow and expand and in many ways change; and they must do so if they are to live and flourish; but they cannot contradict their origins without a break in the spiritual life of the people: and so a continuity of form is rightly taken as evidence within limits of the persistence of the spirit; only it must be an organic continuity and not as some seem to assume, a mere stolid adherence to form.

From what has already been said, it will be evident that to set down the Franciscan life in any merely external programme would be altogether misleading. Just because it was the spontaneous expression of elemental truths and ideals, it escapes words and can be adequately uttered only in a living tradition. If, as is frequently done, the ideal of the order is summed up in the word “poverty,” we must give the word the full significance it had in the mind of St. Francis, otherwise we leave out of count such essential aspects of the ideal as simplicity of soul, the love of one’s neighbor, the special devotion to the earthly life of Our Lord; all which enter into the Franciscan life. In truth, as we have seen elsewhere, Franciscan poverty is but the symbol or sacramental sign of that may-sided life which St. Francis understood as the following of Christ in His redemptive mission on earth. And in this the poverty of St. Francis differed from the poverty preached by the sectaries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. With these it was a gospel of protest; and like all gospels of protest, it was narrow and depressing and a terror to peace-loving men.



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Nothing could be more unlike the message brought by St. Francis. He was the very antithesis of a “protestant”; he believed good of all men; he honored the Church, and wherever his message was received it left men light-hearted and glad to live. ***That is because his gospel was a true revelation; it opened men’s eyes to a new value in life and set their souls free as in a new day; and every man could get his freedom for the taking of it. His salvation did not depend upon his reforming the world but upon his reforming himself. If the Franciscans eventually became social reformers, it was a consequence of their vocation, not as a primary motive.***

When he made his vow of poverty, the friar was not thinking of his neighbor’s worldliness, but of his own; he renounced himself only to find himself in a nobler life, and his sole ambition was to walk personally in the footsteps of the Lord Whom he had undertaken to follow. There was therefore a certain radical inwardness about the Franciscan vocation; it gave men a new life in themselves and a new vision. Perhaps at no other time did the purely evangelical life take more complete possession of man’s heart and imagination than it did amongst those early Franciscans; with them it was not so much a profession as a felt joy of faith; they were possessed by the Christ-spirit and yet they were in a most intimate sense themselves. That was the great difference between them and the sectaries of the time to whom the Gospel was never anything more sublime than “a legal prescription of the external conduct of life”. But with the Franciscans the Gospel was an inner light revealing new value in all the world about them. It was one of the notable traits of the Franciscans that wherever their influence was felt, the common things of life received a sort of religious consecration.

The preached the sanctity of marriage and of human relationships, they brought the Christian ideal to bear upon politics and the social order; they gave a dignity to the poor and instilled a sense of responsibility into the rich man’s use of wealth. They did much to humanize religious art; and entered into the spirit of popular song. Common human life was, so to speak, the field of their spiritual operation. They were apostles of a Christian humanity. But this was because in the Franciscan ideal of life they had found a real harmony between the Gospel and men’s nature.