



Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
The Origins of the Franciscan Order
by Cajetan Esser O.F.M.

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Meditation – Franciscan History

CHAPTER II

THE “NOVELTY” OF THE ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR
Itinerant Preachers

If there was any one feature of the new Order which was particularly striking, it was the fact that it had no “cloisters” in the old sense of the word. Rather did the friars go through the world calling people everywhere to repentance and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Such an apostolate, obviously, made the stable, cloistered life unthinkable.

...This way of life, as not confined to any one place, but determined by the needs of the apostolate, James of Vitry describes even more exactly: “By day they go into the active ministry; at night, however, they return to deserted or remote places to give themselves to contemplation.” To this end, they forego everything heretofore regarded as essential to the monastic life, where it impedes their ministry: “They have no monasteries or churches, fields or vineyards or animals, houses or other property where they may lay their heads.” Here again they are clearly contrasted with the existing Orders. The monastery of the Friars Minors, if we may thus phrase it, is the wide world. For this reason James of Vitry can speak so significantly of the “spatiostia claustrum amplitudo” in which the Order lived. How necessary was this new form of life for the sake of the apostolate is *Monacensis*: “The solitary life teaches one to attend to oneself and to God; but the person who desires to edify others must of necessity live in the midst of those he wishes to benefit.

...Clearly, Francis did not consider the Franciscan life of penance as ever or in any way confined to a particular place. The Rules too confirm this fact: “Let all friars, wherever they are or wherever they go, carefully avoid unbecoming looks and the company of women. And let no friar give advice to them alone or walk alone with them in public or eat out of the same dish with them at table.” Such words take entirely for granted that the friars went about freely as preachers and workers, since it is precisely against the dangers of such a life that Francis intends this warning.

This life is supposed by yet another admonition: “Let the friars take care that, wherever they may be, whether in hermitage or in other places, they never appropriate any place to themselves, or dispute it against another.”...



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...The evidence of contemporaries and the statements from the writings of St. Francis concerning the “unattached state” of the Friars Minor, receives an early and most precious confirmation in the *Sacrum commercium*, even though, in keeping with its theme, this early Franciscan classic says little about itinerant preaching. In her long reply to Francis and the friars as she looks back on the history of the Church, Lady Poverty depicts how property and possession had brought danger and ruin to the older religious orders. In answer Francis promises her, for himself and for his friars, unswerving fidelity. A banquet with Lady Poverty is to seal this promise. The account of this banquet contrasts the Friars Minor, who have neither house nor home, with the existing orders and their practices, detail for detail, to the climax where, in response to Lady Poverty’s request to show her their cloister, the friars, with a sweeping gesture, point to the whole world, as far as the eye can see, and exclaim: “This is our cloister, dear Lady.” The contrast between the homeless friars and the other religious orders could not be more clearly presented...

Both elements, “homelessness” and itinerant preaching, are further illustrated by the reports of Thomas Celano. He draws a striking picture of that significant occasion when Francis, in imitation of the Gospel (Lk. 10:1), sent out the first friars two by two to the four corners of the earth, to proclaim to men the Kingdom of God.

...The same manner of life is described also in *Vita Aegidii*. In quite the same way as Celano, its author depicts the first friars “whom the blessed Francis sent to various provinces to exhort the people...”

...Our conclusion is that, in the first decades of the Order’s existence, the Friars Minor, as true religious and yet free from all ties to monastic stability, went through the world on apostolic journeying and that in such a “life according to the Gospel” they followed the example of Christ and the Apostles.