



Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
The Order of Saint Francis—Its Spirit and Its Mission in the
Kinadom of God By Caietan Esser O.F. M.

M Meditation – Franciscan Poverty

Franciscan Littleness

Next to brotherliness, another essential mark of the Franciscan spirit is *minoritas*, the will ever and everywhere to be the least and lowliest. To be a “minor” is to be subject to all... Hence true *minoritas* supposes and rests on *sancta simplicitas*, which confounds the wisdom of the world and puts to shame the prudence of the self-centered man because it sees all things with the eye of God and considers self but a lowly tool in the service of God. Whoever becomes a “minor” in this sense of the word imitates the lowliness and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Humility and poverty are thus the two foundations of the Franciscan way of life. Christ left the Kingdom of the Father and made himself poor in this world; he became the minister and servant of all, the lowliest and most despised of men, and at the end submitted himself to a most shameful death. He did not cling to his divine prerogatives, but “emptied himself” (Phil. 2,6) that as our Brother he might become like the most abject and scorned of men. Whoever then follows his sacred footsteps, and lives according to his spirit, must not desire to have anything, but rather live in true inner and outward poverty, making no claims for himself of any rights or privileges.

This alone gives meaning to the Franciscan life of poverty, that Christ before us walked the way of poverty. Here once more St. Clare proves herself the truest disciple of St. Francis and his equal in a Christ-centered life. In her Testament she reveals her grasp of this basic principle: “The Son of God as long as he lived in this world wished never to desert this holy poverty. And our most blessed Father Francis, following the footsteps of Christ, never while he lived departed in example or in teaching from His holy poverty, which he had chosen for himself and his friars.”

...Nowhere did Francis more clearly lay down this fundamental law of the Franciscan life: the conquest of the self-centered man by the Spirit of the Lord. Humble poverty and unassuming humility are to be the way the Friar Minor, and every Franciscan, empties himself with Christ. Only thus does he merit the title of Minor. Only thus, at the same time, does he prove a true Friar, for such poverty and humility are the one foundation and safeguard of brotherliness, since they alone conquer most speedily and thoroughly the ego of man, the *spiritus carnis*, which is the greatest enemy of real *fraternitas*.



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Liberty and Joy

In every man who realizes in his life the poverty and humility of our Lord there grows and develops that liberty of spirit which, to a surprising degree, is characteristic of all true Franciscans. Such liberty lies in perfect freedom from all things and creatures, from all desires and attachments of self, and, positively, in that freedom for God that so characterizes Francis of Assisi. Only this kind of total detachment from self, world and men, makes one completely “empty” and receptive of God and his love. To him alone who lives purely for God and is rooted and hidden in him will Francis’ words to the sick brother hold meaning: “And I ask the friar who is sick to give thanks to the Creator for all things, and to desire to be whatever God wills for him, whether healthy or sick.”...

Liberty born of poverty and humility, the happy fruit of *minoritas*, becomes in turn the root and source of Franciscan joy. In the heart of him who lives for God and whose desires are always in accord with the Will of God there arises such joy that nothing in the world, whether men or circumstances, can destroy or lessen it. For him there can be no reason for sadness save abandonment of this attachment to God – and that is sin. The gloomy friar finds no sympathy in St. Francis: “Let the friars take care not to show themselves outwardly as gloomy and sad hypocrites, but let them show themselves joyful in the Lord, and gladsome and becomingly courteous.” Only the true “minor” possessed of the Spirit of the Lord attains the true and deepest source of perfect joy, for only to him is revealed the secret of this joy which comes down to all Friars Minor not only as the heritage but also as the challenge of St. Francis.

...One more thought must be added to clarify the essence of the Order. In his lifetime, St. Francis produced a tremendous and vital movement in the world simply by being what he was. In this he was but God’s instrument, for he himself had had no thought of such a revolution, nor any deliberate plan to “found” an Order. The brotherhood of the Friars Minor began and grew almost in spite of him, more under the influence of his example than of any action on his part. This fact, that the Order was not and is not the result of any well-laid plan or project, is not without importance. From the beginning, one must admit, the Order was poorly organized and perhaps is still so today. But it had thereby a great advantage in meeting and fulfilling a real need of that age. It cannot be denied, finally, that this very suppleness of character which almost defies too much regimentation and organization has been all to the good throughout the Order’s history to our day.