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SAINTE FRANCIS AND
POVERTY

BY
FATHER CUTHBERT, O.S.F.C.

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TRANSFER





ST. FRANCIS AND POVERTY





Anderson]

[*Photo.*

ST. FRANCIS RENOUNCING HIS INHERITANCE

SAINT FRANCIS AND POVERTY

BY

FATHER CUTHBERT, O.S.F.C.

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SAINT BRASIS AND
POVERTY

LETTER OF THE BISHOP

WITH ECCLESIASTICAL PERMISSION

By the Rev. J. W. ...
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...
...
...

*“Povertate e nulla havere
Et nulla cosa poi volere
Et omne cosa possidere
En spirito de libertate.”*

JACOPONE DA TODI.

NOTE

THE basis of this essay was a lecture given at the Franciscan College, Cowley, Oxford, on the occasion of the Seventh Centenary of the foundation of the Franciscan Order.

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SAINT FRANCIS AND POVERTY

CHAPTER I

THE LADY POVERTY

THE mystic alliance between St. Francis and Poverty has frequently been the theme of poets and painters, apologists and historians. It was sung by Dante, and painted by Giotto¹ and Sassetta ; around it has been woven a delightful medieval allegory ;² and for long

¹ I am aware that, according to Mr. Berenson and other critics, the attribution of the famous frescoes over the tomb of St. Francis to Giotto can no longer be maintained. Still, Giotto painted the Franciscan legend in the upper church and elsewhere. Concerning Sassetta, *vide* "A Sieneſe Painter of the Franciscan Legend," by B. Berenson (London : Dent).

² "Sacrum Commercium Sti. Francisci cum Domina Paupertate," translated into English by Mr. Montgomery Carmichael (London : Burns and Oates) under the title, "The Lady Poverty."

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years it was the subject of a controversy which disturbed the Church and divided the Franciscan Order.

A subject which has been thus crowned with the glory of art on the one hand, and, on the other, has furnished a long chapter in ecclesiastical politics, cannot be without interest. But when, as in the present instance, it makes a fresh appeal to the world, not for what it has been in the past, but for its enduring influence upon men's lives, then the interest becomes truly vital.

Now it is a feature of the renewed devotion to St. Francis which has sprung up of late years that men are not content to take his legend merely as the subject of art and poetry. Those who fall under the spell of the Poverello quickly come to look to him for moral guidance and spiritual regeneration. The large quantity of literature dealing with the Franciscan legend which has appeared during the last few years is veritably a cry for light from those who have been drawn towards the light, and, as many of us think, the sign of a new moral conception of human

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life and society. This is my apology for adding still further to Franciscan literature, for when many are seeking a goal, whoever has gained some glimpse of the goal, does well to share his knowledge with his fellow-seekers.

It need hardly be said that the life of St. Francis was a revelation of that ideal poverty which he so fondly styled his Lady Poverty. She it was who made a hero of him, and gave him his place in the religious history of the world. One may say, perhaps, that St. Francis threw a halo of poetry around poverty; but poverty could never have shone with beauty even beside St. Francis if it had not the secret of beauty within itself. The special grace of the Saint's life was, in fact, just this—that he was enabled to understand the moral and spiritual value of poverty; to see a great soul-liberty where others could detect only privation and loss.

For St. Francis did not tolerate poverty as something in spite of which a man may be

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noble and spiritual ; he loved and revered poverty as a sacramental means of attaining to the higher and larger life. Poverty was to him the Life Beautiful, the mother of virtue, the entrance to eternal joy.¹ One must grasp this fact if one is to have any right comprehension of the life and mission of St. Francis. Dante, Sassetta, and the author of the medieval allegory I have referred to, did grasp this fact, and they expressed it each in his own way. And if, in the controversies which arose after St. Francis's death concerning the Rule of poverty, the discussions seem frequently to turn on legalistic forms, and to reveal little of the inspiring idealism of the Saint, yet these controversies had their origin, on one side at least, in the desire to maintain the new life which St. Francis had found.

To discover what this new life meant we must go to the Franciscan chronicles. To say that it meant a great deal more than is commonly conveyed by the word "poverty" were but a feeble statement of the truth.

¹ Cf. "Fioretti," cap. xii.

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For, as we shall see, Franciscan poverty stood for a whole world of human and spiritual experience, for wide sympathies, and a large understanding of the realities of life. When the Saint uttered his soulful praises of his Lady Poverty, he was attributing to her the freedom of soul, the consciousness of a nobler manhood, the intimacy with Nature, the quickened spiritual perception, which came to him in his intercourse with her. She was, indeed, to him a wisdom of life, with whom all good things came.

There is a chapter in the "Fioretti" which gives us the key to the right understanding of Franciscan poverty; it is the chapter which tells us "How St. Francis and Brother Masseo placed some Bread which they had begged on a Stone beside a Fountain, and how St. Francis greatly praised Poverty."¹ The story reads thus: "Coming one day to a certain town, and being very hungry, they (St. Francis and Brother Masseo) went, according to the Rule, to beg bread for the love of God, St. Francis going

¹ "Fioretti," cap. xii.

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down one street and Brother Masseo down another. But because St. Francis was a man of mean appearance and small of stature, and accounted a vile beggar by those who knew him not, he received nothing but a few mouthfuls and crumbs of dry bread ; whilst Brother Masseo, being tall and comely in person, had good pieces and large, and many, given to him, and entire loaves. When they had begged enough, they went together to a place outside the town, where there was a fair fountain, that they might eat, and beside which also was a broad and convenient stone, on which each placed all the alms which he had begged. And St. Francis, seeing that the pieces of bread which Brother Masseo had, were larger and better than his own, had great joy, and spoke thus : ‘ O Brother Masseo, we are not worthy of so great treasure.’ And as he repeated these words several times, Brother Masseo answered him : ‘ Father, how can this be called treasure, when we are in such poverty, and lack the things of which we have need—we, who have neither cloth, nor knives, nor

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plates, nor porringer, nor house, nor table, nor manservant, nor maidservant?' Then said St. Francis: 'And this is what I call great treasure that there is nothing here provided by human industry, but everything is provided by Divine Providence, as we may manifestly see in this bread we have begged, in this stone which serves so beautifully for our table, and in this so clear fountain.' "

That is the first part of the story, and it reveals to us two of the constituent qualities of the poverty loved by St. Francis: its joyous intimacy with Nature, and its habit of seeing in the visible creation the bounty of the Creator. Nowhere in any literature has real appreciation of and joy in Nature found more sincere expression than in this story of St. Francis's delight in the "fair fountain" and the "broad and convenient stone." One can feel the quivering delight in the very simplicity of the expression. But the important point is that the delight of the writer of the "Fioretti" is the delight of St. Francis himself, as we know from his history, and not only of St. Francis, but of

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all his true disciples. In fact, this delight in Nature is so consistent a mark of those who adhered to St. Francis's ideal of poverty that we cannot disconnect it from that ideal. It was an elemental fact in their life.

The other constituent quality which the story, as we have read it so far, reveals, is a trustful dependence upon Divine Providence with which this delight in Nature is so exquisitely blended. St. Francis sees the bounty of God in the fair fountain and the broad and convenient stone. But from the day that St. Francis became poor he had an ever-increasing sense of what I will call the sacramental character of created life. This sense is written large over his whole life-story from the moment of his conversion. The visible world uttered to him the mysteries of faith. The leper, to his eyes, bore the suffering of Christ ; the worm which is trodden underfoot bore in its shame the contempt to which Christ, too, was subjected ; the sun shone with the power of God ; the limpid stream had in it something of the

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virtue of purity.¹ But the first truth Francis learned in the school of poverty was that which he so fervently uttered on the day of his disinheritance: "Now I can truly say, 'Our Father who art in heaven.'"² From that day he saw the bounty of God in every service rendered him, whether by the inanimate or the animate creation; the earth became to him a bountiful heaven. We shall see further on how much this conviction entered into his teaching concerning the receiving of alms. But for the moment I want you to recognize that the delight in Nature and the sense of Nature as a sacramental revelation of God entered as constituent elements into St. Francis's life of poverty.

Now for the second part of the story. It tells us how St. Francis and Brother Masseo, after their meal, continued their journey to visit the tombs of the Apostles, to pray for a greater love of poverty, and as they set

¹ Cf. II. Celano, ii. cxxiv., "Speculum Perfectionis" (ed. Sabatier), cap. cxviii.

² II. Celano, i. vii.

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forth St. Francis thus discourses of his beloved : “ My brother, let us go to St. Peter and St. Paul, and pray them to teach us, and to give us to possess the inestimable treasure of holy poverty, inasmuch as it is a treasure so exalted and so Divine that we are not worthy to possess it in our vile bodies, seeing that this is that celestial virtue by which all earthly and transitory things are trodden underfoot, and all impediments are lifted away from the soul, so that she can freely unite herself to the Eternal God. And this is the virtue which makes the soul, while still retained on earth, converse with the angels in heaven ; and this it is which accompanied Christ to His Cross, with Christ was buried, with Christ was raised up, with Christ ascended into heaven, which, being given in this life to the souls which are enamoured of it, facilitates their flight to heaven, seeing that it guards the arms of true humility and charity, and therefore let us pray the most holy Apostles of Christ, who were perfect lovers of this pearl of the Gospel of Christ, that they will beg for us

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this grace to be true lovers, observers, and humble disciples of this most precious, most lovable, evangelical poverty.”

From this discourse it is clear that the poverty of St. Francis is a condition of spiritual freedom. It enables men more easily to unite themselves to God, and to converse with the angels, since it frees the soul from the domination of merely earthly and transitory things, and arms the soul with true humility and charity. To understand this point in Francis's praise of poverty we must remember that he had in mind the world which he had known so well, and from which poverty had delivered him—the world of secular ambition and greed. In his mind's eye he was pitting the life of poverty against that other life, and as that other life was fostered in its worldliness by pride and selfishness, the life of his ideal poverty was nurtured in humility and charity. The other point to be noticed is how St. Francis considers poverty in its relation to the life of Our Lord. It is evident that his love of poverty is one with his love of Christ and

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His Gospel. In taking poverty to himself, he feels that he has drawn near to Christ, and you can feel how this conscious nearness to Our Lord is his supreme pride in poverty. Such poverty, you can see at once, is not poverty as it is known to the world at large, but something more Divine. And yet how nearly akin it is to the world's poverty, though so far above it spiritually, we shall see as we proceed.

CHAPTER II

THE ECONOMIC BASIS OF FRANCISCAN POVERTY

WE will now determine more exactly the condition of poverty as a material factor in this world's economy, which St. Francis found so spiritually helpful. For whilst we must always remember the idealism with which the Saint invested his earthly bride, we must not allow ourselves to think that it was of the sort which is divorced from hard facts—the idealism of the mere dreamer of dreams. Franciscan poverty, if it stretched out towards the heavens, had its feet firmly planted upon the earth. It was the conversion of certain earth-conditions into spiritual forces.

Now the fundamental element in Franciscan poverty on its economic side was the renunciation of property. The Franciscan was to have no claim to any kind of pro-

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prietorship over material goods. He might enjoy the use of such things as were needful for bodily life—food, raiment, lodgings, and so forth—but he 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.”¹ And this Rule 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. This Rule of corporate poverty was new even 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 property as individuals; they always kept the right to own property in common. But St. Francis would have nothing to do with property in any sense. “The Brethren,” he said, “must be pilgrims and strangers in the world.”²

¹ Rule of 1223, cap. vi.

² *Ibid.*

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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."¹ Later on, when the Order grew in numbers, this Rule was found to have its inconveniences, but Francis would not relax it, not even when urged to do so by Cardinal Ugolino.² And in like manner St. Clare for thirty years contended against those who in this matter deemed the Franciscan Rule impracticable.³ Indeed, there can be no shadow of doubt as to St. Francis's intention.⁴

¹ "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. x. Cf. I. Celano, cap. xvi., concerning the reason why St. Francis removed the brethren from the shelter at Rivo-Torto.

² *Ibid.* (ed. Sabatier), cap. lxxviii.

³ This point is dealt with at some length in a book shortly to be published, "The Legend of the Lady St. Clare," translated by Mrs. Balfour, Introduction, ii.

⁴ See what Eccleston says in his "Chronicle"

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The whole scheme of the Franciscan life was formed upon this acceptance of corporate poverty. The brethren were to be tied to no place by bonds of ownership ; they were to be in very deed vagrants upon the face of the earth.

This brings me to what I consider was the most potent factor in the evolution of St. Francis's ideal, his intercourse with, and his affection for, the beggar. It is perhaps against one of the fondest prejudices of our race and time,¹ but it is nevertheless a fact, that the condition of the beggar appealed very strongly to St. Francis, and I feel no hesitation in saying that he formed his conception of poverty upon the economic dependence—or perhaps I should say the economic freedom—of the beggar. You know how his first experience of the lot of

concerning Brother Albert of Pisa, Provincial of England from 1236 to 1239, and the title-deeds of the Friars' house at Reading. Cf. "The Chronicle of Eccleston," done into English by Father Cuthbert, O.S.F.C., p. 103, and Appendix III., p. 155.

¹ Cf. Dubois, "St. Francis of Assisi, Social Reformer," pp. 171-173.

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the poor was gained when he went on a pilgrimage to St. Peter's in Rome, and spent a day amongst the beggars at the door, dressed in a beggar's clothes, and asking alms from the passers-by. It was a day's experience, and in the evening he became once again the son of the wealthy merchant ; yet that day's experience undoubtedly formed his later life. When Francis embraced Poverty, he meant to take upon himself the condition of a beggar, dependent upon the good-will of others for his daily sustenance. Poverty to him meant beggary, and we must not shy at the fact if we would rightly understand St. Francis. Thomas of Celano tells us : " He [St. Francis] used to say that to be ashamed of begging was hostile to salvation."¹ The same biographer relates how, when the Saint was dwelling in the houses of Cardinals or Bishops, he insisted on going out to beg his bread, and once, when Cardinal Ugolino remonstrated with him for so doing, Francis replied : " I have shown you honour, since I have honoured a greater

¹ II. Celano, ii., xli.

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Lord, for God is well pleased with poverty, and especially with that poverty which is voluntary begging.”¹ Another time he said to the brethren : “ Dearest brothers, 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.”²

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 Portiuncula 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 be my brother who goes readily [for alms], seeks humbly, and returns rejoicing.”³ 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

¹ II. Celano, ii., xliii. ² *Ibid.*, ii., xliv.

³ *Ibid.*, xlvi.

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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."¹ When, then, we are told "it is not mendicancy which is the basis of the economic life of the Friars Minor, but labour,"² we must confess that the assertion states but half the truth, and hardly that. [B]egging was so essential an element in the poverty of Francis that the beggar seemed to him God's witness upon earth of the poverty of Christ, which was his Rule, and for this reason he always treated beggars with a peculiar reverence.³

And yet—and here we come to an apparent contradiction—whilst it is true that dependence upon alms was an essential character of St. Francis' poverty, nevertheless he made it a rule that the brethren should be

¹ Rule of 1223, cap. vi.

² Cf. "Les Idées de S. François sur la Pauvreté," par P. Ubald d'Alençon (Paris, 1909); P. Sabatier, "Vie de S. François," chap. viii., p. 138.

³ Cf. II. Celano, lii.; "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. xxxvii.

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always employed in honest work. Idle beggary had no part in the Saint's ideal—nay, he abhorred idleness as the very root of all evil. And not only did he insist upon work, but it is evident that he insisted upon the brethren working for their bread. In his first Rule he has this passage: "Let the brothers who know how to work labour and exercise themselves in that art which they may understand, if it be not contrary to the salvation of their soul, and they can exercise it becomingly. For the prophet says: 'For thou shalt eat the labours of thy hands, blessed art thou, and it shall be well with thee.' And the Apostle says: 'If any man will not work, neither let him eat.'"¹ The Rule goes on to say: "Let every man abide in the art or employment wherein he is called . . . and they may have the tools and implements necessary for their work."²

¹ Regula I., cap. vii. Cf. Barthol. Pisan., "De Conformitate" in "Anal. Franc.," iv., pp. 407-410; also II. Celano, ii., cxx; "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. xxiv.

² Regula I., cap. vii.

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The Rule also contemplates the brethren serving in the houses of others, for it says : " Let the brothers, in whatever places they may be among others to serve or to work, not be chamberlains, nor cellerars, nor overseers in the houses of those whom they serve."¹ We know that these passages in the Rule were not mere dead-letters. The " Vita Fratris Ægidii " tells us how Brother Giles, whilst sojourning with the monks of the Santi Quattro in Rome, used to keep the monks supplied with water from the distant fountain of San Sisto ; it tells us, too, how on his journey he earned his bread by peddling water through the city, or hawking baskets, or threshing beans, or burying the dead ; and then legend adds : " When this failed him, he returned to the table of Jesus Christ, begging alms from door to door."² The " Speculum Perfectionis " tells us how the Friars assisted the labourers in the field at harvest-time, receiving a portion of

¹ Regula I., cap. vii.

² " Chron. xxiv. Gen." in " Anal. Franc.," iii., p. 81 ; " Fioretti, Vita," cap. iii., v.

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the harvest as their wage.¹ Celano, describing the life of the Friars, says: "By day those who knew how to, worked with their hands, and they stayed in lepers' houses, or in other decent places, serving all with humility and charity."² And there is a passage in the Testament of St. Francis, which indicates that the Friars were, if possible, to earn their bread by their work before having recourse to alms. It runs thus: "When the price of our labour is not given us, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door." Evidently it is this passage of the Testament that the writer of the "*Vita Fratris Ægidii*" had in mind.

Finally, in the second Rule given by the Saint to the Friars, he says that "they may receive as the reward of their labour the things needful for the body, both for

¹ "*Speculum Perfectionis*" (ed. Sabatier), cap. lv. Jacques de Vitry, in his now famous letter, says that even the women (Poor Clares) worked with their hands.

² I. Celano, i., xv. 39.

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themselves and their brothers, excepting coin or money.”¹ Upon these facts has been built the theory that the basis of the economic life of the Friars Minor was labour, and not mendicancy, and that begging was contemplated only as a resource in cases of need. But this is to look at things from a different point of view from that of St. Francis. The Saint did indeed regard it as essential to true poverty that men should work for their living. At the same time, he undoubtedly considered the dependence of the beggar upon the generosity of others as the fundamental element in the poverty he loved. The explanation of this apparent contradiction is, however, not difficult to find ; it is written large over the life of the Saint. Poverty, as St. Francis understood it, was an entire dependence upon the bounty of God, and he looked for the manifestation of this Divine bounty partly in the involuntary bounty of Mother Earth, partly in the good-will of man. To him this dependence was the very corner-

¹ Rule of 1223, cap. v.

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stone of his religion, and the first principle of his social or domestic economy. It was the special form at once of his faith in God, and of his relationship with creatures. God to him was the Great Father, the Infinite Love encompassing the creation with watchful solicitude. That was the truth that came to him in the moment of his renunciation, flooding his soul with a happy certitude after long months of spiritual groping in the dark. And in the recognition of this supreme truth came the conviction that the creature's life is fulfilled in a trustful dependence upon the Divine solicitude, for so will the creature be brought into accord with the love of the Creator. As a religious principle, therefore, absolute poverty—the poverty of the beggar—is man's response to God's solicitude. But the creature, whilst it is the recipient of the bounty of God, is also the channel of that bounty: the creation itself is God's Providence in action, except when the Divine Law is frustrated by the sin of man. Hence, as on the one hand the Divine solicitude demands our entire trust

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and dependence, on the other it calls for the fulfilment in ourselves of the act of Providence, so that in us the Divine bounty be not impeded; and this fulfilment happens when we give to others of our good-will what it is in us to give them. Then God's Providence is fulfilled in us, and we are in truth the children of the all-bountiful Creator. Wherefore, according to their need, we must serve our neighbours, sharing with them what we have, and that out of our good-will. Such was the philosophy of St. Francis deduced from his faith; and you must bear in mind that with St. Francis poverty was a faith, not a theory.

To labour, and to labour in the service of others, was therefore a primary element in his conception of the life of poverty. Hence, in summing up his own life in his Last Testament, he declared: "I worked with my hands, and I wish to work always, and I wish firmly that all the other brothers should work at some labour which is compatible with honesty, and let those who do not know how to work, learn, not

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from desire to receive the price of their labour, but for example's sake, and to repel idleness." The concluding sentence deserves notice. Labour and service were of obligation to St. Francis, quite apart from any consideration of wages. The Friars were not to work from a desire of wage, though they might receive such wage if it were offered them. They were to work and serve others as fulfilling in themselves the providence of God, which it is everyone's duty to fulfil. Hence, without any thought of remuneration, St. Francis nursed the lepers, restored abandoned churches, and cleaned dirty ones, and carried on his apostolate. If any remuneration was given him, he accepted it ; if not, he went out and begged. But this is to be noticed : whether the bread he ate came as a direct reward of his labour, or whether it came to him in the course of begging, it bore in his eyes the same character, it was an alms—that is to say, a free gift of another's good-will to him in his necessity. For—and here we have another detail essential to a right appreciation of Franciscan poverty—

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Francis would never receive anything but of what he stood in need, since to accept more than one needed he considered a species of robbery, "a defrauding of other poor."

Strictly speaking, therefore, the social economy of St. Francis consisted essentially in alms-giving and alms-receiving. For his own labour was in the nature of an alms given to the world, whilst in his necessity he accepted what the world gave him. In a word, his social economy was the apotheosis, not of justice, but of charity. One thing he detested with all his mind and heart, and that was the commercial spirit. The story of his dealings with the priest Sylvester, who afterwards became one of his disciples, is typical of his attitude in this matter. In the first days of his renunciation, when he was repairing the Church of San Damiano, he went begging in the city for stone, and amongst others who gave to him was the priest Sylvester. Some time later, when Peter da Quintavalle had determined to join Francis, and was distributing his wealth to

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the poor in the Piazza of Santa Maria Maggiore in Assisi, Sylvester came and demanded payment for the stones ; if money was going, he thought he had a right to it. Francis, who was assisting Peter, put his hands into the money-bags, and offered a heap of gold to Sylvester, saying he could have more if he wanted it. Sylvester was shamed, being, after all, himself not ungenerous. Anything in the nature of bargaining for one's due was repugnant to the feeling and the faith of Francis ; it was a contradiction of the spirit of Divine Providence, and a practical denial of that free neighbourly charity upon which St. Francis based his whole conception of human society. It is not too much to say that Francis would have rejoiced if counting-houses and all the other paraphernalia of the commercial spirit could have been banished from the world. Amongst his own disciples he strictly forbade the use of money, because to him it represented that selfish solicitude for the things of the earth which the commercial spirit peculiarly fostered, and which he re-

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garded as the root of all evil. "Freely give and freely receive" was his accepted law,¹ limited only by those moral considerations which affect the well-being of one's soul, and in this "freely give and freely receive" we get very near to the soul of Lady Poverty.

¹ "Leg. Trium. Soc.," xi. 43.

CHAPTER III

SOME SPIRITUAL VALUES OF POVERTY

WITH this understanding of the economic basis of Franciscan poverty we can now make an effort to arrive at its moral and spiritual values, for without these, as I have already indicated, poverty is not Franciscan poverty.

Now the first effect which poverty had upon St. Francis was this : it revealed to him a new ideal of the perfect man. If you carefully consider the story of St. Francis before his conversion, you will find that in all the apparent vagaries of his youth he was consistently attempting to play the hero, and that not in mere self-conceit, but because the heroic had a real attraction for his soul. He seems to have had a habit of picturing himself mentally in the characters of heroic romance, and it was a habit which clung to

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him all his life.¹ His great preoccupation, both before his conversion and after, was to realize himself after some heroic example. But before his conversion wealth and social position were very essential elements in his conception of the perfect life; they might not constitute the joy of life, but they were necessary to its realization. And I think that the instinctive pity he felt for the poor in those days sprang partly from his consciousness that they were debarred by their lack of wealth and position from entering into the land of his dreams. To him their poverty meant nothing less than being banished from that mystic paradise where men are the compeers of heroes. It is the same conviction that stirs the pity of many generous minds, though they may express themselves in different language and imagery—namely, that poverty necessarily

¹ Take, for example, his reply to the robbers: "I am the herald of the great King" (I. Celano, i., vii.); and the title he gave his Friars: "My Knights of the Round Table" ("Speculum Perfectionis," cap. lxxii.). Again, he styled them "Minstrels of the Lord" ("Speculum Perfectionis," cap. c.).

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implies human, as well as social, inferiority; that it is an enslavement of man's soul, a bar to the perfect possession of oneself.

To St. Francis, on the day of his conversion, this appraisal of poverty figured as the world's great lie, born of a false estimate of the world's purpose, and fostered by the unholy lust of wealth and social pre-eminence. For in his wooing of poverty there had come to him a vision of the perfect man—the “knight of God's Round Table” (to use the Saint's own speech)—whose heart was set upon the possession of Truth and Charity, and all the glories of the reign of God amongst men, and whose weapons were the virtues of the Beatitudes; and the vision, as it became clearer to him, revealed the God-Man Jesus Christ, who “being nobler than we, made Himself poor in this world”;¹ Who was poor, and a stranger, and lived on alms;² Who came “not to be ministered unto, but to minister.”³

¹ II. Celano, ii., xliv.

² Regula Prima, cap. ix.

³ *Ibid.*, cap. iv.

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Thereupon St. Francis took Jesus Christ in His poverty and suffering as "his peerless Captain," "the most gentle Knight" and leader of men, in following Whom he would find himself; in Whom poverty and suffering were revealed as the badge of a perfect nobility. [Thus was born that devotion to Jesus Christ in His poverty and suffering which became the predominant note in the religion of the Franciscan Order.] But it is to be noticed that St. Francis took the poverty and suffering of Jesus Christ as the symbol of the manhood of Christ. It was the vision of the Perfect Manhood enshrined in poverty and suffering that he worshipped with all his heart's devotion, and not merely the poverty and suffering. At the same time he cherished the poverty and suffering as the conditions in which this Perfect Manhood was formed and revealed. For this reason the poor and the sick bore in his eyes a sacred character. Instead of reminding him of the evil in the world, they figured forth to him the Lord and the Life he worshipped; in his

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own words, they were "the mirror of the Lord."¹

Exactly how the Sacred Manhood of our Lord impressed itself upon the soul of St. Francis we learn from the Saint's own story ; it is vividly depicted in the pages of the "Fioretti" and in the other primitive Franciscan legends. These show us Francis and his disciples rejoicing in a great spiritual liberty ; they have no care for wealth or the world's honours, but they have an ennobling sense that they are the children of God, and all their care is cast upon Him. To them the created world is a manifest delight, though the shadow of sorrow runs athwart it, for after all the world is God's, the work of His hands and the object of His love. A deep pity is theirs for those who are marked with the world's sorrow, even be they robbers and men of ill repute ; they do not consider that they are sent to judge the world, but to bear the world's burden even to the uttermost hardship ; they are not the rulers of men, but their fellow-workers, and

¹ Cf. II. Celano, ii., lii.

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even their servants. The cross is their device ; to bear pain and shame for the love of Christ is their perfect joy.¹ [And as the cross is their device, so is love their compelling motive ; it is love which gives them their liberty of soul, making pain joyous and servitude honourable.] They follow Christ because they love Him and all His ways ; they are willing to bear the burden of the world because in their souls is a vast love for all created things. So do they come forth into the arena of history bearing the marks of poverty and humility and an all-embracing charity ; and to these three marks they add another, truly evangelical—that optimism which is the foundation of joy. They have a confirmed conviction of the latent goodness in the world ; hence it is that they will not judge the world, but set themselves persistently to call forth the good which they always assume to lie beneath vice in the heart of the sinner, as is so well illustrated in the story of the robbers of

¹ *Vide* the parable of Perfect Joy in the "Fioretti," cap. vii.

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Monte Casale.¹ And as with men, so with the whole visible world: an assurance of its fundamental goodness is in their souls, even as it is in the Gospel; they are in truth *joyous* "heralds of the King."

[Characteristic, too, is this: having taken Jesus Christ as their leader and liege lord, they give Him in the spirit of the purest chivalry an unquestioning loyalty and blind devotion.] The literalness with which those early Franciscans took the Gospel might well seem to those of another spirit a sort of foolishness. Having read that Our Lord had "nowhere to lay His head," they vowed never to have house or place of their own. Since Our Lord had said, "Be not solicitous for to-morrow what ye shall eat," etc., they would not lay in a store of food beyond the needs of the day; hearing the Gospel read, which says, "Take neither scrip," etc., they put away shoes and staff, and go barefoot and staffless; because Our Lord said, "Whosoever will be the greater amongst you, let him be your

¹ "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. lxvi.; "Fiorretti," cap. xxv.

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minister, and he that will be first among you shall be your servant," they would never assume personal pre-eminence or lordship over others ; even the Superior in the fraternity must not take any title which denotes personal superiority : he is to be, and to be called, simply the " minister." And so in everything the Gospel was taken in its immediate significance, without questioning or gloss. Foolishness, indeed, this literalness would have been but for the spirit and purpose which was its good reason.

Enamoured of Jesus Christ in His earthly figurement, the immediate and single purpose of St. Francis and his companions was to achieve this figurement in themselves, and they took the way of unquestioning devotion. And, in fact, this was the only way consistent with that simplicity of mind and heart which was as the very soul of the poverty they loved.

Of this simplicity we must now speak, as it was so intimately a part of Franciscan poverty. Thomas of Celano tells us that in the beginning of the Order St. Francis

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was careful to train the brethren "in the way of holy poverty and blessed simplicity."¹ This linking up of simplicity with poverty is found in all the Franciscan legends and writings. Nor is this to be wondered at when we remember that simplicity is in the moral and intellectual orders just what poverty, as understood by St. Francis, is in the material order—namely, freedom from the lust of personal dominion. For all conscious deceptions and conceits, all wanderings from the truth as we see it, and all affectations, are an unlawful personal property, not the less real because intangible. Of little spiritual effect would be the Franciscan's freedom from material possessions if his soul were weighed down with these other more subtle properties.

But in fact St. Francis was as much in love with simplicity of mind and purpose as he was with the beggar's destitution. Hence he taught his brethren to be most scrupulously truthful both in words and actions. "So jealous were they for the truth," says Thomas of Eccleston, "that

¹ I. Celano, i., xi. 26. Cf. II. Celano, ii., cxlii.

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they would hardly permit themselves to speak in hyperbole, nor would they conceal their faults even when they knew that they would be punished did they confess."¹

And as they were truthful in words, so did they endeavour to be truthful in conduct. Thus, on one occasion St. Francis forbade the legend of the first martyred Friars to be read, lest they who read should plume themselves upon this glory of the Order, and think themselves personally better than they were, for, as he remarked, the glory of each man is in his own suffering, not in the suffering of others.² Nevertheless the Saint was unfeignedly exultant at the martyrdom of his brethren, saying that there were now five true Friars Minor. Of the Friars' desire "not to appear outwardly other than they were inwardly" many quaint instances might be given.

Thus, one winter when St. Francis was sick his guardian besought him to have his

¹ "De Adventu FF. Min.," coll. iv.

² "Chron. Jordani a Jano," No. 8 in "Anal. Franc.," tome i., p. 3.

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habit partly lined with fox-skin. The Saint would not consent to this bodily comfort except on condition that a patch of fox-skin be sewn on the outside of the habit as well as inside, so that he might not appear more austere than he really was.¹ And who does not know the delightful story of Brother Juniper's visit to Rome? Some citizens, hearing of his approach, came out of the city "to accompany him with all honour to the convent," for the fame of his holiness had gone before him. Juniper, perceiving their intention, joined two children in a game of see-saw, and continued in the game till the citizens had turned away and gone home. Then, says the legend, Brother Juniper entered Rome in all meekness and humility as became a Friar Minor.²

It is notable that when a Friar began to lose the proper Franciscan regard for poverty, simplicity also became lacking to him. It was Elias who rebuked St. Francis when the Saint on a bed of sickness bade the brethren

¹ II. Celano, ii., xciii. 130.

² "Fioretti," "Life of Brother Juniper," ix.

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sing "for the comforting of his spirit," for Elias thought that sounds of cheerfulness coming from the sick chamber would not edify the people!¹ It was the brethren who objected to the Rule of absolute poverty who sought to introduce observances "contrary to the liberty of the Gospel" and foreign to the Franciscan ideal.² So intimately interwoven is the simplicity of the Franciscans with their poverty!

Perhaps in nothing is this simplicity more marked than in their preaching, whether we consider the spirit of their preaching or its style. It is a notable feature of their apostolate that they went forth to preach as by inward constraint rather than by their own will. Gladly would they have remained hidden from the world in their poverty, and, indeed, it seemed to them at times as though this were their true vocation. But that

¹ "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. cxxi. See also the story "of the angelic lute" in II. Celano, ii., lxxxix.

² "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. lxviii.; "Fioretti," cap. iii. Cf. "Chron. Jordani," No. 11, *ut supra*.

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charity which, as we have seen, was inherent in their conception of poverty demanded that they share with others the grace which they themselves had received. This alone drove them forth to preach the Gospel of Christ's redeeming love, which was to them so clear a joy. Hence in their preaching there was an absence of the aggressiveness with which preachers sometimes set forth the truth; they delivered their message in the spirit of fellowship. "Heralds of the great King" they were, yet also brothers and fellow-sinners to those who listened. The humility and sincerity which in other ways marked their lives thus marked their preaching also. They spoke out of their experience, and with an anxiety only to set forth the message of their Lord, and not their own judgments and opinions.

Hence in their preaching they shunned the tricks of oratory, which work upon the fancy, but leave the heart unmoved: that to them was an illegitimate use of the power of words, a mere personal domination over men's minds. According to their Rule, they were

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to preach "with brevity of speech," with words "fire-trying and pure."¹

The ambition to preach was regarded by them with suspicion as leading to a subtle insincerity of mind and conduct. The true Friar Minor was solicitous rather to do the works of the Lord than to preach them to others.²

¹ "Regula II.," cap. ix. The words "fire-trying and pure" are evidently a reference to Ps. xi. 7—"Eloquia Domini, eloquia casta, argentum igne examinatum." Cf. "The Writings of St. Francis," by Father Paschal Robinson, O.F.M., p. 71. Cf. II. Celano, ii., cxxii. 163.

² See the story in "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. lxxix., of the brother who was over-intent upon the study of preaching, and whom the Saint warned to abide in humility and simplicity. The repugnance of the early Franciscans to oratorical preaching is well exemplified in the "Vita F. Ægidii" ("Anal. Franc.," tome iii., p. 74). On one occasion Brother Giles suggested this text to a preacher: "Bo, bo; molto dico e poco fo." On another occasion, hearing the master of a vineyard chiding his labourers, and exclaiming, "Work, work!" Brother Giles called to some preachers: "Hear, ye brothers, the word that ought to be: Work, work, and talk not!" Cf. "The Golden Sayings of Brother Giles," by Father Paschal Robinson, O.F.M., p. 91.

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And so in everything the beauty of sincerity and truth falls upon the story of St. Francis and his companions as the sunlight falls upon the plains of Umbria, giving even to the commonplace a mystic intensity and attractiveness. These knights of poverty mean just what they say. As they share their labour freely with others, so do they share their souls ; they give what is in them to give, and they give it in simple and honest companionship. Only they are anxious not to pass off spurious coin. They will have men take them as they are.

It is from this standpoint of simplicity that we get the right significance of St. Francis's attitude towards book-learning. That St. Francis regarded the learning of the schools with suspicion and distrust is beyond controversy. The words which he inscribed in his final Rule, "Let the brethren who are ignorant of letters not seek to learn letters,"¹ are but a temperate expression of his life-long suspicion, and this suspicion gathered only more point during the later

¹ Rule of 1223, cap. x.

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years of his life, when the desire for learning had become manifest amongst his brethren.

Celano relates how once, "when a great clerk joined the Order, St. Francis said that he ought in some sort to resign even his learning, in order that, having stripped himself of such a possession, he might offer himself naked to the arms of the Crucified. For, said the Saint, learning makes many men indocile, not suffering a certain stiffness of theirs to be bent by the discipline of humility; wherefore I would have a lettered man first of all make this petition to me: 'See, brother, I have lived long in the world, and have never truly known my God. Give me, I pray thee, a place removed from the turmoil of the world, where I may grieve over my past years, and where, gathering together the scattered energies of my heart, I may reform my soul for better things.'"¹ The same biographer records also this saying of the Saint: "My brethren who are being led by curiosity after learning will find their hands

¹ II. Celano, ii., cxlvi. 194.

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empty in the day of retribution. I would fain rather have them strengthened in the virtues . . . for tribulation is indeed coming wherein books shall be thrown into cupboards and hiding-places as useless.”¹ Indeed, he seems to have had much the same aversion towards books as he had towards money. Once when a novice came to him asking to be allowed to have a psalter, the Saint refused, saying: “Pay not heed to books and knowledge, but unto godly works, for knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.” But the novice reiterating his request, St. Francis bade him go and seek leave of the minister. The brother therefore went, but before he was out of sight Francis was struck with remorse, and called him back, and confessed that he had done wrong in thus shirking his own responsibility, and again he forbade him the use of a psalter.²

Instances of the Saint’s aversion to book-

¹ II. Celano, ii., cxlvii. 195.

² “Speculum Perfectionis,” cap. iv. ; II. Celano, *ut supra*. The novice was a lay-brother, and therefore did not require the psalter for the purpose of reciting the Divine office.

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knowledge and books might be multiplied, and it is to be noted that he distrusted such learning as harmful to simplicity.

Knowledge acquired merely from books he took to be a bastard property of the mind, leading men to insincerity, and putting them out of touch with the realities of life itself. He would have men learned in action, not in reading. "Charles the Emperor, Roland and Oliver, and all the paladins and puissant men that were mighty in war . . . did achieve a victory worthy of all remembrance . . . yet now there be many who would fain receive honour and the praise of men for only telling the tale of the deeds they did." So he replied to the novice who was thirsty for books,¹ and the words reveal the true inwardness of his attitude towards book-knowledge. He would have his Friars above all else be true to themselves, and in his love of this essential truthfulness his eye fell upon the pedantry and conceit and unreality which is so frequently found in the

¹ "Speculum Perfectionis," cap. iv. Cf. *ibid.*, cap. ii.

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schools, and which was abundantly found amongst the learned of his own day, and so book-learning became to him one of the abominations of the world. [Doubtless some of the strongest expressions of this aversion belong to his latter years, when the leaders of the brethren who were departing from the original simplicity of the Order, were chiefly men who had come into the Order from the schools, and who had been unable to free themselves from that intellectual worldliness which purely academic training is apt to beget.] This explains the impassioned vehemence with which he denounced books, just as the actual industrial conditions of his day explain his abhorrence of money. Yet behind the impassioned utterance relative to the occasion there is this absolute conviction, absolute to the life he thirsted for—namely, that there is a snare in knowledge which has no direct relation to one's spiritual experience and need. It is useless, he would say, to sing of heroes unless the song stir the singer to heroism, or at least to the desire for it ; it were more than useless

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to spend precious hours seeking for a fine conceit, or framing a logical conclusion whilst the innermost soul is starved. Yet St. Francis himself sang the songs of Roland and Oliver, and found inspiration therein, and he appointed St. Anthony of Padua to teach theology, addressing his letter of appointment in this handsome fashion : “ To Brother Anthony, my Bishop.”¹ Had St. Francis been an out-and-out opponent of learning, he would never have sanctioned the teaching of theology. Moreover, we have the statement of Thomas of Celano that the Saint “ would have as ministers of God’s Word men who should apply themselves to spiritual studies, and not be shackled by other duties.”² And there is certainly the fact that he held theologians in high respect, for in his Testament he wrote : “ And all theologians, and those who minister to us the most holy words of

¹ II. Celano, ii., cxxii. 163. There is some doubt whether this superscription was actually in the letter of St. Anthony’s appointment, but Celano quotes it as an evidence of St. Francis’s respect for theologians.

² *Ibid.*

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God, we must honour and revere as those who minister to us spirit and life." But one does not revere the theologian if one contemns theology.

The truth is, of course, that there is a book-learning in keeping with the simplicity of the Franciscan life, as well as a book-learning which is opposed to it, as, indeed, became evident afterwards. [For if from the schools came the first and direst enemies within the gate of the Franciscan Order—men who, wearing the Franciscan habit, forgot the Franciscan ideal of the poor and suffering Redeemer, and took to themselves other and more worldly ideals—it is also true that from the schools came some of the staunchest defenders of the pure Franciscan life.] St. Bonaventure, Adam Marsh, and, to some extent, St. Anthony of Padua, were from the schools, and they were true Franciscans. And if the Friars of the University of Paris drew from Brother Giles the bitter cry, "Paris, Paris, thou destroyest the Order of St. Francis," yet from Oxford came the antidote. Perhaps it was that at Oxford the

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Friars were not so much schoolmen, but first and foremost disciples of the Lady Poverty. Certainly for many years after their coming to England the English Friars kept in a high degree the marks of the early Franciscan spirit, so that the Chronicle of Eccleston stands well beside the " Fioretti " in a close kinship of spirit. Perhaps it was that the English Friars, even those at the Universities, felt keenly their vocation as messengers of Christ, sent for the healing of the contrite of heart and evangelizing the poor. Whatever the reason, Oxford for many years sent forth brethren of whom St. Francis would not have been ashamed, men who to learning united that zeal for poverty, that simplicity of mind, that love of souls, and that intense devotion to the Person of our Lord,¹ which was what St.

¹ Readers of Eccleston's Chronicle cannot fail to remark this devotion as revealed in a constantly recurring phrase. The English chronicler always refers to Our Divine Lord as " Dulcis Jesus " — " the sweet Jesus. " It is a phrase redolent of that medieval devotion to the Sacred Humanity which was so highly developed amongst the Franciscans.

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Francis contended for in his opposition to scholastic learning.

With men of this type we may be sure St. Francis would have no quarrel, knowing as we do how he revered learning when united with the true Franciscan character. For amongst his own companions was such a one, Brother Peter Cataneo, and him the Saint would always address, not as "Brother Peter," but in more honourable style as "Domine Petre" (Master Peter), because, says the chronicler, Brother Peter was learned and noble.¹

This brings me to what I deem was the root-principle of St. Francis's opposition to the learning of the schools. It was the inherent antagonism felt by all simple and loving natures to the cold abstractions and heartless theorizing of the academic mind in face of the great realities of life. Francis would have had the world move by love, not by intellectual theories, and he resented the tyranny which the logical faculty is apt

¹ "Chron. of Jordani a Jano," in "Anal. Franc.," tome i., p. 5.

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to exercise over the generous impulse of the heart in the service of God and man. It was only when he found the devotion of the heart united with and predominating scholastic learning, as in the case of St. Anthony, that he was reconciled to book-study ; in the presence of such union of heart and brain he did not fail to pay due honour to the schools, even exulting in his reverence, as we have seen.

CHAPTER IV

THE FREEDOM OF POVERTY

BUT if St. Francis felt himself and his Lady Poverty strangers in the schools, he surrendered himself a willing scholar to Nature. For Nature seemed to him in some sort the dower of Poverty, the world which God Himself had given her. In this world, therefore, he felt himself free, and as his soul grew in the understanding and love of his ideal poverty, Nature revealed to him the mysteries of her own soul, and gave him understanding and power, such as she alone can give, concerning the hearts of men and of beasts, concerning the earth and the sky and all that belongs to her. His first intimate sympathy with the suffering world came to St. Francis in the first stages of his conversion, as he himself tells us in his Testament: "The Lord gave to me, Brother

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Francis, thus to begin to do penance, for when I was in sin it seemed too bitter a thing to see lepers, and the Lord Himself led me amongst them, and I showed compassion to them¹ . . . after that I tarried awhile, and then forsook the world." Up to that time he had felt pity for the lepers, but it had been a stranger's pity for what does not concern him ; now it became a brother's pity for the suffering of his own flesh and blood. But it was not until he had been some time a disciple of the Lady Poverty that he discovered his power over the speechless creation, and entered into that communion of understanding with them which is so marvellous an incident in his history. His sudden awakening to this new power is thus recorded by Thomas of Celano : " About the time when, as has been said, many had joined themselves unto the brethren, the most blessed Father Francis

¹ Some texts read, " And I dwelt awhile amongst them " (" Feci moram cum illis "). Cf. " Miscellanea Francescana," tome iii., p. 70 ; " The Writings of St. Francis," by Father Paschal Robinson, O.F.M., p. 81, note 3.

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made a journey through the Valley of Spoleto. And he came unto a place near Bevagna, in which were assembled a multitude of birds of various kinds—doves, rooks, and those others which in the vulgar tongue are called *monade*. These when he had seen, being a man of most fervent temper, and having a great tenderness and affection for all the lower and irrational creatures, the most blessed servant of God, Francis, left his companions in the way, and ran eagerly towards the birds. And when he was sufficiently close to them, seeing that they awaited him, he saluted them in his accustomed way. But, not a little astonished that they did not rise and take to flight, as they are wont, he was filled with a great joy, and humbly besought them to hear the Word of God. . . . At this (as he himself and those who were with him used to say) those little birds, rejoicing in wondrous fashion according to their nature, began to stretch out their necks, to spread their wings, to open their mouths, and to gaze on him. And he went to and fro, passing through the

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midst of them, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic. At last he blessed them, and having made over them the sign of the cross, he gave them leave to fly away to another place. . . . *Being now simple by grace (he was not so by nature), he began to accuse himself of negligence for that he had not hitherto preached to the birds, since they had listened so reverently to the Word of God.* And so it happened that from that day he diligently exhorted all winged creatures, all beasts, and all reptiles, and even the insensible creatures, to praise and love the Creator, since daily, on invoking the name of the Saviour, he knew by his own experience their obedience.”¹ From this it is evident that St. Francis had never before been conscious of his power over the brute creatures. That he had been kind and compassionate towards them we may well believe, but now the same thing happens in regard to them as happened in the early days of his conversion with the lepers: he suddenly finds himself no longer a benevo-

¹ I. Celano, i., xxi. Cf. “Fioretti,” cap. xv.

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lent stranger to them as he had been ; his very soul had passed over to them, and, passing over to them, had called forth their companionship and tamed their ferocity. And how did he do it but by the same understanding sympathy which gained him the hearts of men. There is a story enshrined in the " Fioretti " ¹ which reveals the secret. It is the story of the wolf of Gubbio, and tells us how St. Francis, coming once upon a time to the city of Gubbio, was met by the people of that district, who bewailed to him the presence of a wolf in the neighbourhood,

¹ Cap. xx. That this story of the " Fioretti " is substantially historical, notwithstanding certain poetical embellishments of detail, is, to my mind, confirmed both by internal and external witness. The internal witness is the truthfulness of the recital to all we know of St. Francis's methods of dealing with both men and beasts. Note also how closely it bears out the words of Celano quoted above. The external witness is a passage in the " Chronicle " of the monastery of San Vercondo, near Gubbio, written by a contemporary of St. Francis, and lately published in " Miscellanea Franciscana," tome x., pp. 6, 7. Cf. " Archivum Franc. Historicum," Fasc., vol. i., p. 69.

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whose depredations were the cause of much consternation and grief to the people of the country-side. The Saint, sharing at once their concern, sets out to find the wolf, and to restore peace. The citizens, anxious to witness a miracle, accompany him part of the way, but draw back when they come near the haunts of the wolf, so St. Francis proceeds further alone. The wolf, seeing the Saint, at once makes for him, but St. Francis signs the beast with the sign of the cross, and calls to him, saying : “ Come along, Brother Wolf ; I command thee on the part of Christ that thou do no harm, neither to me nor to anyone.” And the wolf comes gently as a lamb, and rests at the Saint’s feet. And the Saint speaks to the wolf thus : “ Brother Wolf, thou hast done much damage in these parts, and many evil deeds, ravaging and killing the creatures of God . . . and all the people cry out against thee. But I would make peace between them and thee, so that thou offend no more, and they on their part shall pardon past offences, and neither men nor dogs shall persecute thee

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more." And the wolf showing his pleasure at these words, St. Francis continues: "Brother Wolf, since it pleases thee to make and to keep this peace, I promise thee that I shall have thy food given thee continually by the men of this place, so that thou shalt suffer no more hunger, for I know well that it is hunger which made thee do all this evil." The story then relates how St. Francis led the tamed wolf back with him to the city, where he made one of his characteristic sermons to the people, and, the sermon being ended, St. Francis told the people of his pact with the wolf, to which the citizens assented. From that day till his death the wolf was fed by the people, and he did no more harm to man or beast. Now the value of this story lies in its illustration of the moral attitude of the Saint towards the wolf, whom he regards as coming within the law of neighbourly good-will or charity, just as men do. Much as he sympathizes with the people in their distress, his sympathy also takes in the wolf's side of the quarrel, and he recognizes that the beast is

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driven to his depredations by hunger, and that if the people would have him cease harrying the country-side, they must see that he is fed. In other words, they must acknowledge a certain responsibility for his welfare if they would have him submit to their law. Thus we find St. Francis demanding a sense of justice and charity in the relations of men with the brute creation, even as he demanded it in the relations of men with each other. And this demand came quite simply and spontaneously out of his sense of kinship with all nature.

But perhaps nothing more finely witnesses to the sublime freedom of the Franciscan spirit in the visible world than does the "Canticle of the Sun," composed by the Saint as he lay sick one time in the peaceful faith-lit shadow of San Damiano. The Canticle, notwithstanding its deficiencies of form, is one of the great poems of Nature, and the secret of its beauty is the revelation of a man's heart piercing the silence and breaking through the aloofness of sun, and moon, and stars, and the elemental forces of

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the earth, and gathering them to himself in confessed bond of kinship. They are to St. Francis not mere symbols of human life, but witnesses of an extended common life, which man shares with them in the Fatherhood of God, and as he considers them his soul voices their life in this extensive sympathy, and their life becomes his life. "Sister Water, the which is greatly helpful, and humble, and precious, and pure"; "Brother Wind," with his boon companions, "the air and clouds, and every kind of weather, by the which God gives to His creatures every kind of nourishment"; "Mother Fire," who is "fair, and gay, and mighty, and strong," and all the other members of that world of song—how blithely the Saint brings them with him into the judgment of God as sharing in the burden of man!¹

But it was to the Lady Poverty that St.

¹ Cf. "The Writings of St. Francis," translated by Father Paschal Robinson, O.F.M., pp. 152, 153. Amongst other translations, that by Matthew Arnold is perhaps best known. *Vide* "Essays on Criticism," pp. 243-248.

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Francis owed this splendid companionship, for she had released him from self-centred ambition to make his own material world, and had set him free to become a citizen of the vaster world which comes from the Hand of God. She had taken from him a house of his own, and set him in the great house which is the Divine Creator's—the earth and the sky encircling it—and had given him the freedom thereof. It was a generous liberty which brought St. Francis the promised hundredfold of those who renounce the lusts of the world for Christ's sake.

And yet this was not the whole of the freedom of Poverty.

As Poverty made him free of the created world, so also did she give him a singular freedom in the world of Divine faith. Untaught by the wisdom of the schools, St. Francis approached the mysteries of faith with the heart rather than with the brain, but it was with a heart at once *exigeant* and docile. Such hearts have a faculty of intuitive knowledge very nearly akin to vision, and so with an open heart searching

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for the strength and beauty of life, those early Franciscans walked in the ways of the Catholic Faith, gathering with true instinct what their souls needed. What they asked for in their religion was guidance and grace to establish themselves in the figure of that Christ-life which they worshipped, and the guidance and grace came to them in their simple faith. They brought to the gates of Faith a nature very elementally human in affections and experience, and the Faith did not fail them. In their devotions the dogmas of religion became incarnate in the sentiments and experiences of mankind, and in their worship human nature itself was sublimated; thus they bridged over the distance which men are apt to imagine between religion and actual life. For example, the Franciscan gazing upon the cross of Christ felt there the consummation of all the world's sorrow. He realized as an experience of his own soul that upon the cross Our Lord was bearing the suffering of the world, even of the inanimate creation. Hence the sight of a lamb being led to the

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slaughter filled St. Francis with worshipping grief. Nor was it merely that the led lamb recalled to his mind Christ in the hands of His executioners; instinctively he felt the relation of the lamb's tragedy to that of Calvary.¹

Always there was a hunger for vision at the root of Franciscan piety, and a passionate desire for nearness, as we see, for instance, in the story of the crib at Greccio. "I would make a memorial," said St. Francis to John of Greccio, "of that Child Who was born in Bethlehem, and in some sort behold with my bodily eyes His infant hardships—how He lay in the manger on the hay, with the ox and the ass standing by." So was built the first-recorded crib of the Christmas festival.²

In a very special sense it may be said they worshipped the Incarnate God, since they so closely sought the vestiges of His mystery in

¹ Cf. II. Celano, ii., lxxvii; I. Celano, i., xxviii.

² Cf. I. Celano, i., xxx. Celano himself relates the story as characteristic of the Franciscan form of piety.

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the world they knew and saw. And as they sought, so they found. The earth became to them a vast sacrament of the creative and redemptive love of God. The sight of a leper or even a worm brought them nearer to the suffering Redeemer; the rain and the sunshine encompassed them with the provident care of the Creator.¹

For the sacraments of the Church they had a peculiar veneration. It was not astonishing to them that Christ, the God-Man, should still work upon the world by means of common sensible signs; they had too great a reverence for the sense-world to see in such a manner of working anything derogatory to the spiritual action of Divine Grace, and too great a feeling of the unity of all life—whether visible or invisible—to find any difficulty in the sacramental system. The Church they accepted, as they accepted our Lord Himself, in pure faith and love; it was to them the pledge of Christ's abiding presence amongst the just and the unjust, and though the sin of man might mar the

¹ Cf. II., Celano, ii., cxxiv.

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beauty of this mystical presence of Christ on earth, love kept their Faith clear as to the reality of that presence. The neglect or positive irreverence of men might soil the altar ; Francis was only stirred to a greater sense of reverence, as with his brush and pail he went and cleansed the altar. No evil in the Church ever made him feel a stranger there, since his own conscious imperfection had not shut him out from the Fatherhood of God : in himself the mystery of God's glorious presence amid human weakness was too real a thing to allow of any doubt concerning the Divine mission of the Church because of its imperfect human members. And so the Franciscan movement was saved from the schismatical and heretical despondencies of so many reform movements within the Church, may we not truly say, by its profound human sympathy ? At least, this sympathy was no inconsiderable element in its orthodoxy, and when we remember that the Church is founded upon the fact of the Incarnation, wherein all created life is crowned with the Sacred Humanity of our

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Lord, may we not believe that the nearer a man stands to the mother-heart of the world, the nearer he is to the Heart of Christ? For it is in the heart that religious truth must ultimately come home to rest; in the brain it is upon its wanderings. And so once again we come back to the abundant spiritual possession which St. Francis divined in his ideal poverty.

Little do they know of the Lady Poverty who know not the treasure of spiritual liberty which she holds for those who understand and worship her. And little do they know of St. Francis who see only his renunciation, but are blind to the life into which his renunciation was but the stepping-stone. Poverty to St. Francis was life, and life abundant, only it was a life other than that which the world commonly appreciates.

CHAPTER V

POVERTY IN CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

AND now this question presents itself : Has Franciscan poverty a message for the world at large, or is it merely a gospel for the few ? That it was not meant merely for Friars and nuns is evident from the fact that from the beginning the proposed followers of St. Francis included large numbers of men and women living in the world, and engaged in its ordinary avocations. These Tertiaries of St. Francis (as they were afterwards called) were essentially votaries of the Lady Poverty, even as were the Friars and Poor Clares, and it is instructive to note in what way their worship translated itself into practical action. In the case of those who followed the narrower path of the First and Second Franciscan Orders, the immediate practical outcome of poverty was the abso-

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lute renunciation of wealth and ownership. But with the Tertiaries this absolute renunciation was impracticable, for they were most of them bound to the responsibilities of family life and civic position. But though they retained the rights and duties of property, their worship of poverty showed itself in their moral attitude towards ownership. In the first place, they regarded wealth as an unfortunate necessity of their condition rather than a desirable good. Hence those of them who could do so, would divest themselves of all property save what they must retain for the support of themselves and their families in the position in which they were placed. Thus Luchesio, who first made formal profession of the Tertiary Rule, distributed his goods to the poor, keeping for himself and his wife only a farm sufficient for their sustenance. A more frequent practice still was that, whilst continuing to hold property, they personally lived as simply and frugally as though they were poor, taking to themselves in their private life coarse garments and common

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fare, and only assuming the ordinary badges and luxuries of social rank when duty demanded their mingling in the society of the world. Thus, as far as they could, they actually entered into the condition of the poor. But there were two ways in which the teaching of poverty universally affected them. In so far as they had wealth they considered themselves bound to minister to the needs of those in want ; their wealth they held as a trust, upon which all men had a claim according to their need, and to distribute their goods to the poor became their privilege. It was the practical result of the Franciscan conception of the Fatherhood of God as the bond of Christian society. Who does not remember the legend of St. Elizabeth of Hungary—how she took the food of her own table to feed the poor ; how in the midst of luxuries she herself would only take the simplest dishes ; and how, such was the simplicity of her compassion, she brought the helpless leper into the castle, and nursed him there ! Her action was but a heroic illustration of the general spirit of kinship

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with the poor which animated the Franciscan, whether Friar or Tertiary.

The other way in which the Lady Poverty affected the lives of the Tertiaries was in the change of attitude she wrought in them towards manual labour. That which was generally regarded as the badge of social inferiority became to these disciples of St. Francis the symbol of a blessed freedom. Thus Luchesio, "the first Tertiary" of whom we have already spoken, took to tilling his own farm ; St. Elizabeth of Hungary, as soon as she was free from the cares of State, worked with her spindle for the earning of her daily bread, so highly was poverty honoured amongst them. And it is when we remember these things that we come to understand the marvellous social revolution effected by the first Tertiaries. They were living exponents of the gospel of poverty, even as were the Friars at the Portiuncula and the sisters at San Damiano ;¹ but they

¹ It may be objected that in the Rule of the Third Order no mention is made of the obligation of manual work, nor of the renunciation of super-

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brought the Franciscan teaching into more direct relations with the ordinary life of the world than were possible to the Friar and nun.

An adequate history of the Tertiaries in the thirteenth century has yet to be written, and when it is it should afford an instructive chapter in the story of Catholic social life.

Here we can but briefly touch upon some of the main points in the gospel of Franciscan poverty in its relations to the general life of the world.

fluuous wealth. The answer to this is that, in the circumstances of the case, a written Rule to this effect would have been difficult to frame, considering that the Third Order was for people of all ranks and conditions. The Rule does speak of the duty of living according to simplicity and frugality ; but behind the written Rule there is the unwritten tradition of which the evidence is in the histories of the early Tertiaries. It is to be noted, also, that there is no existing record of the original Rule of the Tertiaries. The earliest Rules we have are rather constitutions for the corporate welfare of the Tertiary communities than rules of life in the stricter sense of the term. The soul of the Third Order is, in fact, in the unwritten tradition—a truth, I think, which Tertiaries themselves do not sufficiently recognize.

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Now, I would say that the first claim St. Francis makes upon the world's conscience is that poverty should be held as an honourable condition amongst men. It is this claim which makes St. Francis one of the world's great social reformers, for it goes to the very root of our conception of a right Christian social life. The general assumption upon which the world's life is built is that poverty is a dishonour, a condition of social inferiority and personal servitude, and, dealt with upon this assumption, poverty has in fact come to wear the marks of degradation. The poor man walks the earth with a consciousness of being something less than the rich man—a consciousness not the less real when masked with rebellion against his lot. Nor is the case of the wealthy less demoralizing than that of the poor, when, as mostly happens, the possession of wealth induces a sense of personal superiority.

In either case man is dehumanized, since his human value is assessed upon the basis of merely material acquisition. I do not say

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that wealth does not give power, or that it may not be an instrument for the development of human life. Such an assertion were mere foolishness. But the habit of regarding wealth and material possession as the test of personal and social value is radically unspiritual, and hence in its nature demoralizing.

Against this common habit of the world Franciscan poverty is an established protest. It renounces material possessions, not as though wealth in itself is an evil thing—St. Francis would never admit this, being too Catholic-minded—but to escape from the moral tyranny which wealth commonly exercises over the judgments of men in regard to the spiritual and moral values of life. But it is more than a mere protest; it is itself an establishment of personal and social life upon another basis than that of wealth, the creation of a new personal rule and social economy, and it is upon the validity of its own creation that the value of its protest ultimately rests.

Now, as we have seen, the ultimate ideal

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of human life was summed up to St. Francis in the figure of Our Lord; his ultimate ambition was to people the earth with living images of the God-made-Man. We must bear this ultimate ambition in mind if we are rightly to understand the Franciscan Rule, for it at once sets St. Francis apart from the mere social economist, and from the mere moralist. To him, as we have seen, the supreme good was the realization in oneself of the Divine human life revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ, and this supreme good he would share with all his fellows. His purpose, therefore, whilst most heavenly, was nevertheless most human; he dealt directly not with systems and institutions, but with human life; the effect of his teaching upon systems, social, intellectual, or ecclesiastical, was an inevitable consequence, not an immediate purpose. His immediate purpose was to establish men, individually and collectively, in the mind and conduct of Christ, as made known to us in the Gospel. As he himself so frequently said, he had nothing to do with the world

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and its ways, but only with the Gospel of Our Lord. To make this effective amongst men was his sole thought. The apex, then, of his whole ideal was the Christian man. Apart from this the Franciscan structure has no purpose or end.

But in the ideal of St. Francis the Incarnate Word was supremely human as well as Divine, and the Sacred Humanity was supremely human, not merely in intensive quality, but in its extensive sympathy, and this extensive sympathy drove the Saint into the arms of poverty. In poverty he found, so to speak, the material platform where all men can find a place. Whilst wealth, by some inherent tendency, drives men apart, poverty draws them together. In truth poverty is in the nature of things; at two moments in life—at birth and at death—every man is poor, however we may disguise the fact by legal fictions, and at these two moments all men are akin. Poverty is thus a common heritage, though few care to confess it. But to St. Francis this truth was as the open day, and

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so to him poverty represented the fundamental human estate, estrangement from which means a loss of human quality ! Far, then, from seeking to remove poverty from this world, St. Francis would have it retained and set in honour, as something intimately bound up with the truth of Nature and with spiritual progress.

Hence the Franciscan can have no part in any social endeavour which tends to cast poverty out of the world, since to him poverty is sacred, a holy thing. To him social betterment can never mean the substitution of wealth in the place where poverty now is, but rather the setting of poverty in that dignity and spiritual freedom which transfuses the poverty of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Franciscan does not wish to banish the poor from society, but to make poverty rather than wealth the estate of honour amongst men. For to him it is the estate of honour, inasmuch as Jesus Christ, the Supreme Exemplar, lived His life and wrought His redemptive mission in poverty. Hence the special Franciscan ideal of social

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reform is to grace poverty with the lineaments and dignity of the Christ-life.

Yet when it is said that the Franciscan would have poverty rather than wealth to be the estate of honour, there is one reservation to be made. Much as the Franciscan delights to honour poverty, it would be totally opposed to his spirit to deny a sanctity to the use of wealth. In the right use of property as a trust for the common welfare—a use so admirably consecrated by the great Benedictine Order—he sees a spirit kindred to the spirit of his own Lady Poverty, and, taking the world as it is, he recognizes that Christian society needs the co-operation of both spirits. He does not plead for the consecration of poverty in antagonism to other consecrated rules of life, but in co-operation. This explanation is necessary because of the tendency of most minds to view facts only in opposition to other facts, to use one system as a foil to another. The Franciscan holds no brief against the right use of wealth, nor does he deem it wrong that men should acquire property so long

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as they bear in mind the claims of Christian fellowship. But what he does demand of Christian society is that men shall be at liberty to be poor, and to be free from the trammels of material property, without thereby suffering through the action of society, a loss of their proper human dignity and spiritual freedom. For the degradation of the poor was to the mind of St. Francis an insult to our Divine Lord Himself; and the banning of poverty, a banning of Christ.¹

The Franciscan pleads, then, for the conservation of poverty in fact and in spirit.

But, as we have seen, Franciscan poverty stands rooted in two essential principles: the obligation of labour and service, and the acceptance of neighbourly charity² as the

¹ Cf. II. Celano, lii.

² I have hesitated to use the word "charity," because of the unhappy and unchristian flavour the word now has in our English language, implying, as it does, patronage and condescension. Here I use the word in its proper Catholic sense, signifying that good-will which has its origin in a sense of our common kinship in the Fatherhood of God. There is no equivalent English word to

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basis of industrial or economic intercourse. Upon these two principles mainly depends the honour of poverty.

That poverty is honourable only when it implies the will to work will be readily conceded, as also the logical consequence that they who would reinstate poverty in honour must induce amongst the poor the desire of honest labour, and strive that in the community at large the opportunity and inducement to labour be present.

Much as St. Francis loved the beggar, he yet loved not idle beggary. The beggary he revered was indissolubly linked with labour and service. And, as we have also seen, his love of the beggar was the expression of his lively conviction that Christian society needs for its spiritual motive-power the interaction of Christian charity; in alms he saw the working of the law of mutual good-will. Thus he instinctively grasped the principle that honourable poverty postulates an eco-

express this. It would be well if a word so sacred in Catholic teaching could be rescued from its debasement.

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conomic system based not upon the law of justice, which secures each man in the possession of his own property, but upon the broader law of Christian charity, which secures each man in the good-will of his neighbour. Now it is this principle and this principle alone that can secure even justice to poverty. For unless the good-will of the individual or of the community gives the poor their due, to enable them to live a human and Christian life, they must inevitably sink in the scale of humanity, or be spurred on to cast off their poverty, and establish themselves in some possession of wealth. In either case poverty is betrayed ; it is either displaced by squalor, moral and physical, or by the ambition of wealth. Hence, if we are to secure poverty its proper place in Christian society, we must necessarily work to shift the moral basis of economics from mere justice to the law of Christian charity, of which this is a primary principle : that every man has a right to eat and live so long as he is willing to work, and that in his necessity the duty to provide for him

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honourably falls upon his neighbours. Only the idler who deliberately shirks work stands outside this law, and even for him there is a certain exercise of pity in the compassion of the Franciscan spirit.

The objection frequently stated against the principle of charity is that it fails to supply an impetus to that personal activity which is a quality of true manhood. But Franciscan poverty does supply that impetus; firstly, by its insistence upon every man giving labour and service for the welfare of others, and again by its ideal of the manhood of Jesus Christ as the type and exemplar of all human life. I do not hesitate to confess that without a religious ideal the Franciscan economy would not merely be a failure, but a disastrous failure, leading to as gross a materialism as any secular worship of wealth. But Franciscan poverty without its ideal of the poor Christ would not be Franciscan poverty, but merely a nut without a kernel. In the Franciscan ideal of life there can be no separation of the religious interest from the secular, as is frequently the case with

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social reforms, but the religious ideal and the social economy are essentially interwoven.

From its religious ideal comes all the beauty of the Franciscan legend: its intensity of human feeling, its spirit of sacrifice, its love of the visible creation, its truthfulness and simplicity of mind and heart—for all these things enter into the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord. To make poverty resplendent with these Christ-like traits is essential to the realization of the Franciscan ideal; without them the economic freedom of poverty were but an empty bubble, or as a picture without light or colour.

Such, then, in brief, is what we may call the Franciscan programme. It has one certain merit in that it is not a mere abstract theory untried in actual life; for seven centuries it has been the Rule of life and conduct in the Order that bears St. Francis's name. Thence it has been set as a witness to that evangelical poverty without which Christian society is disloyal to Him "Who for our sakes was poor in this world." And,

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I repeat, the Franciscan Order is a witness to the sacredness of poverty, not merely of the poor. It is not sufficient to pity and comfort the poor if society would be true to Christ ; it must also cherish poverty, and set it in honour as a condition of spiritual freedom, and the poor must be honoured because of poverty, and not, as some honour them, in spite of poverty. So would St. Francis have it, for he had looked upon poverty in the earthly life of the Lord Christ, and had seen how beautiful poverty can be.

THE END

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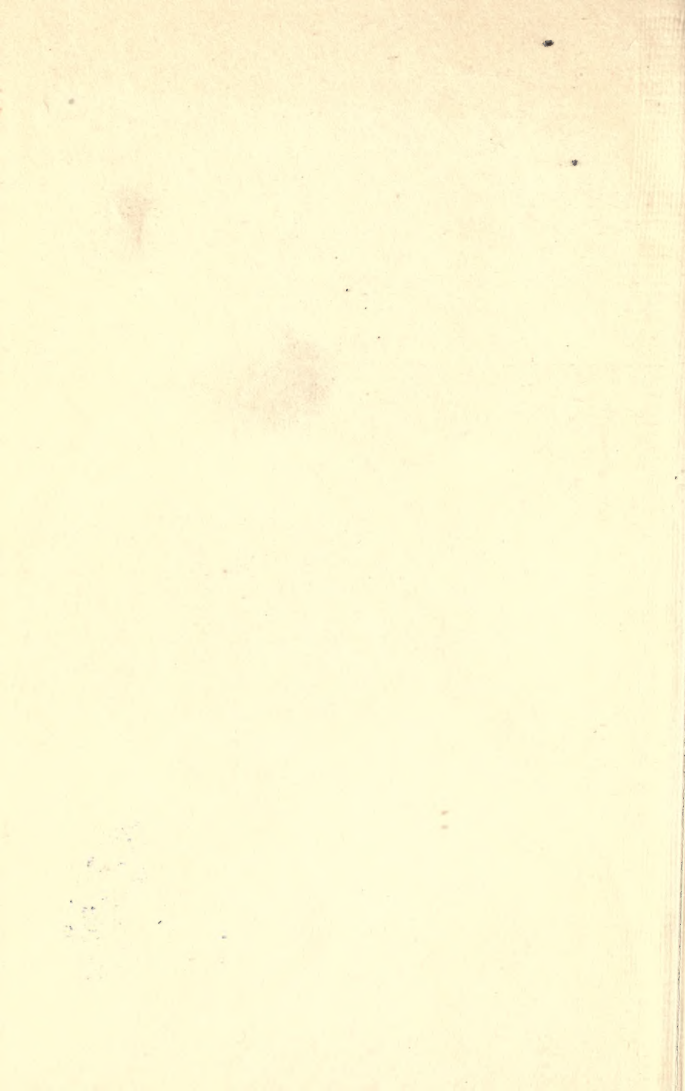
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