

Rebuilding Christ's Church

Our Catholic Heritage

New Communities Fill a Need in the Church

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS
"Take nothing for your journey neither staff nor bag, nor bread, nor money, neither have two coats." (Luke 9,3)

The beginning of the 13th century saw the rise of the Mendicant Friars, the begging orders, dedicated to preaching in evangelical poverty.

The Church was confronted with heresy once again. St. Francis and St. Dominic rose up to fight her battles. Within a year of each other, the Order of Friars Minor (1215) and the Order of Preachers (1216) received the approval of the Pope.

Italy was struggling with Waldensianism, a lay movement for reform of the Church. The Waldensians stressed poverty and lay-preaching,

but with unfortunate tendencies toward schism and anti-clericalism. It was against this background that Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) entered the harvest and garnered the ripe Italian grain.

Francis represented a new and exciting thing in the monastic life — an urban ministry, a deliberate return from the cloister to the city streets.

"Francis, the most valiant knight of Christ, went about the towns and villages announcing the Kingdom of God, preaching peace, teaching salvation and penance for the remission of sins." (Thomas of Celano, Life of St. Francis)

Francis was always concerned with the unity of the Church. The papacy found in him and his order the ideal instrument for the work of reform. The "Little Brothers" formed a trained corps of preachers and confessors dedicated to the Church and the papacy.

The situation in the south of France had also reached critical proportions. The Albigensian heretics controlled whole provinces and towns. They denied virtually all of Catholic teaching. The Church itself in the area was in very poor intellectual condition, while the local clergy and hierarchy lived most unedifying lives. This was the vineyard into which the great Spanish saint Dominic Guzman (1170-1221) was sent by God, "a husbandman chosen by Christ to tend His garden and be His helper there, messenger and familiar of Christ..." (Dante, Paradiso)

He formed a community of dedicated men committed to a life of poverty and skilled preaching to go among the heretics of France.

"They cast aside the burdens of riches that they may hasten the more freely through the fields of the world... They go about in the lowliness of voluntary poverty, and

weeping they sow the seed." (Pope Honorius IV)

The Friars Minor and the Order of Preachers grew with astonishing speed. Hundreds of these poor men and simple preachers became bishops, even popes. Each of the orders produced female branches. Each produced Third Orders for the laity. They effected an intellectual revolution in the universities what the work of geniuses like the Dominican, Thomas Aquinas, and the Franciscan, Bonaventure.

Rulers like Louis IX of France and Elizabeth of Hungary, poets like Dante, would be buried in the Franciscan habit.

The mendicants would continue to be allies of the popes in the struggle with the temporal powers and the heretics in the generations to come: "Sons of obedience, ready to brave all perils in defense of justice." (Pope Innocent IV)

The Common Labor of Two Sainly Friends

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS
"No man was ever so conscious that he was a son of God." (Ernest Renan, d. 1892)

Thus even an unbeliever was forced to salute the memory of St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). Francis was born and died in the Tuscan town of Assisi. After a frivolous and aimless youth, he tried military life. Experience of sickness and incarceration as a prisoner of war brought him to his senses.

At prayer one day, in the Church of San Damiano, he heard the image of the crucified Christ tell him: "Francis, repair my falling house!"

He took the words literally, and began a personal campaign of church restoration in the vicinity of Assisi.

Francis' father disowned him, and Francis went off, in his own expression, to marry Lady Poverty. In 1210, Pope Innocent III gave him and his companions permission to be itinerant preachers. Thus began the Friars Minor, the "Little Brothers."

Their rule was a simple one: "The brothers shall possess nothing, neither a house nor a place, nor anything, but as pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving God in poverty and humility, they shall confidently seek alms, and not be ashamed..." (Rule of the Order of Friars Minor)

Francis' love affair with poverty turned into one of the great epics of Christendom. Up and down the length of Italy and beyond he and his men begged their bread, and announced the Good News of the Kingdom. Few of them were in Holy Orders. Francis himself never rose higher than a deacon.

In 1212 he met his noble and saintly friend Clare of Assisi. Together they founded the Order of the Poor Clares. Clare struggled all her life with the authorities of the Church for the "privilege of pov-



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

St. Francis and St. Clare

erty." Women were considered too weak to support the full rigors of the evangelical life. Clare and her ladies proved otherwise. She became the most authentic expression of evangelical perfection as understood by Francis. Together Francis and Clare form an excellent example of a consistent phenomenon in Church history — the common labor of a saintly man and a saintly woman.

In 1219, Francis attempted, unsuccessfully, to convert the Moslems in Egypt. Soon after his return to Italy he felt the approach of death, and withdrew to the mountains of Alverna where he received the gift of the Stigmata. In 1226 he was carried to Assisi for the last time. In the chapel of Portiuncula Francis met "Sister Death" with characteristic joy.

Francis was a man so poor that he could enter into a communion with the universe so rich that all the world was his. Only Francis could speak of "Brother Sun," Sister Moon, Brother Fire, and "Sister Water."

"He elevated the idea of courtly chivalry to the higher plane of Christian life, and gave it cosmic significance." (Christopher Dawson, Religion and the Rise of Western Culture)

Francis was the Herald of the King, the loyal knight of Lady Poverty. Even the birds and the fish hear the Good News from the courtly lips of Francis. In him we catch a glimpse of how the world was, and may yet be again, for the man who is truly the instrument of God's peace.

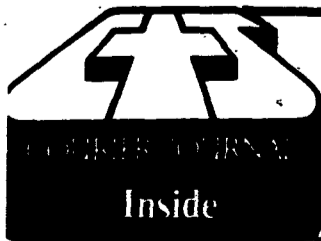


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