



The Canticle

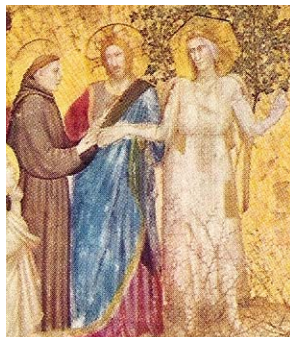
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Franciscan Poverty

St. Francis and His Lady Poverty

As part of St. Francis' journey toward a radical form of Christian discipleship, he discovered Lady Poverty. One night he organized a feast for his friends. After the party, they were going through the streets singing, somewhat intoxicated no doubt, when Francis was touched with such sweetness by God that he couldn't move or speak. His friends naturally wondered what was wrong with him, and teased him, asking if he was in love and planning to get married. "Yes, you are right," replied Francis, to their amusement. "I was thinking of wooing the noblest, richest, and most beautiful bride ever seen." Francis' first biographer, Thomas of Celano, ends his account of this incident with these words: "Looking upon poverty as especially dear to the Son of God, though it was spurned throughout the whole world, he sought to espouse [poverty] in perpetual charity. Therefore, after he had become a lover of her beauty, he not only left his father and mother, but even put aside all things, that he might cling to her more closely as his spouse and that they might be two in one spirit." (*First Life*)



Giotto's painting from the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi of Francis and his bride, Lady Poverty

If you ever saw the old Franco Zeffirelli movie from the 1970s "Brother Sun, Sister Moon," there is a scene which shows (in the film-maker's typically stunning visual style) this encounter of Francis with Lady Poverty. In the film it is not a knightly vision of a fair damsel, but rather a nightmarish journey through the backroom sweat shop where the poor people are dyeing his father's cloth. Francis stumbles from riveting face to riveting face as he brushes by hanging lengths of wet dyed cloths which mark him indelibly with their rich colors. It's a great scene.

From then on Francis exalted Lady Poverty and strove to be her champion in true knightly fashion because he was convinced

that in living a life of poverty he was imitating Jesus.

The basis of Francis' exaltation of Holy Poverty was his understanding of the poverty of Jesus: born in a stable to a homeless couple, died naked and abandoned on the cross, and in between, a poor itinerant teacher. One of the early Franciscan sources puts it this way: "Lady Poverty was waiting in the cave in Bethlehem to greet Christ when he was born. She walked with him through his life when he had nowhere to lay his head. She stayed with him through his trials when everyone else deserted him, mounted the cross with him and was buried in the tomb with him. Later when he was resurrected and ascended, Lady Poverty was left alone and an outcast in the world. Francis was grieved that Poverty was no longer wanted and resolved to take her as his bride as Christ had done." (*Sacrum Commercium*).

So it was because of his lifelong effort to imitate Christ that Francis came to exalt Poverty. Francis had few opportunities to read the scriptures — books being rare and expensive, and Bibles all in Latin, and he was a poor Latin scholar. More recent biblical scholarship and a better understanding of the culture and society of first century Palestine suggest that Francis had an exaggerated sense of the absolute poverty of Jesus and the apostles — after all they were carpenters and fishermen (who owned their own boats), not landless farm laborers. However, despite Francis' misunderstanding of the society of ancient Palestine, it is true that Jesus purposely associated with the truly poor and outcast during his life. And this is what Francis and his brothers and the many subsequent generations of Franciscans have done over the past 800 years.

For Francis, poverty was not just a penitential practice, an ascetical discipline. It was not in and of itself blessed, holy or virtuous. Poverty was a spiritual path which followed in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God.

Poverty as Virtue — Poverty as Evil

As Sisters in the Community of St. Francis, when we are professed, we vow to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. What are we talking about when we speak of poverty as a virtue, as a valued companion on the spiritual journey? Material poverty is the poverty of the Beatitudes according to Luke 6:20. (Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven). As a virtue, it involves a simplification of life. It leads to the recognition that God alone can fill us and supply our every desire. Spiritual poverty is the poverty of the Beatitudes according to Matthew 5:3. (Blessed are those who are poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God). It means relying on God's gifts and graces rather than necessarily living in material poverty.

For Francis poverty was "living without grasping." This went beyond money and riches to touch every part of life. Francis taught his brothers not to seek after positions of authority, not to seek to do their own will, not to hang on to anger. Poverty means "letting go" or practicing "a relaxed grip." This refers to more than our material possessions, it also could mean our good looks, our gifts, our knowledge, our reputation, our will, our identity, so that we come to stand before God in simplicity.

For Francis poverty was more about *possession* than about *possessions* per se. In other words, our attitude toward our possessions along the lines of the question of "Do we possess our possessions or do they possess us?" Why this kind of radical non-possessing? Because everything is gift. To Francis everything was gift rather than property. Possessing nothing, he received everything as gift. Poverty takes pleasure in a thing because it is, not because it can be possessed. Not owning things allowed Francis to enjoy the world without being anxious about losing a bit of it or acquiring a bit of it. For us to pretend that anything we have or are belongs to us as "property" is an affront to God from whom all good things come. As we come to acknowledge everything as gift, we see that all good things belong to God alone and to appropriate to ourselves anything is to attribute to ourselves what belongs to God. When Francis looked at Jesus he saw the good God who gives generously, even of divine life itself.

Paradoxically this way of stripping and dispossession is also a way of immense richness. We are left empty, with space to receive in abundance all that God gives. "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or field, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life." (Matt. 19:29)

Poverty doesn't always have a positive connotation. Poverty as an evil means hunger, oppression, desperation, lost opportunities, debt slavery, human trafficking, death. This kind of poverty is not living simply, but rather involuntary poverty.

St. Bonaventure, the leader of the second generation of Franciscans, wrote that "Francis saw Christ's image in every poor person he met and he was prepared to give them everything he had, even if he himself had urgent need of it. He even believed that they had a right to such alms, as if they belonged to them." Anything that Francis was given, he thought of as his only until he met someone poorer. It was a gift from God, and remained a gift, to be passed on again as a gift. Francis said, "God the great Almsgiver will regard it as theft on my part, if I do not give what I have to one who needs it more." There is no concept here of deserving and undeserving poor, only of need.

Francis could see Christ in a poor person, but could not tolerate leaving that person poorer than himself. Francis' efforts to relieve the suffering of the poor took a special form in his work among the lepers.

Compassionate ministry with the sick, the suffering and the outcast has continued to be a strong part of the Franciscan life. Francis and his brothers lived and worked among the poor and Franciscans around the world in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church still can be found among the poor. Later generations of Franciscans built hospitals and schools, ran soup kitchens and rehab programs to provide needed services for the poor. Franciscans not only have provided compassionate service, but also advocacy. At the United Nations you will find Franciscans International (which represents both Roman and Anglican Franciscans) an NGO (Nongovernmental Organization) which works and advocates for social justice around the world. Within our own country today, Franciscans are among those pressing for moral budgets on the national, state and city levels, budgets which do not put an unfair burden on the most vulnerable members of our society.

The Franciscan vow of poverty addresses both poverty as a virtue and as an evil. As a virtue, poverty is there to guide us into a life of simplicity and generosity. As an evil, poverty is there for us to struggle against as we minister to the needs of those suffering from it and as we advocate for changes in society.

MDGs—United Nations Millennium Development Goals — 8 ways to end extreme poverty by 2015. www.episcopalchurch.org/ONE

Episcopal Public Policy Network — working for the end of domestic poverty and other social policy issues in the US and the world. www.episcopalchurch.org/eppn

Franciscans International at the UN — www.franciscansinternational.org

Contemporary Poverty

How do we read the story of Francis and poverty in today's context of global impoverishment? Lots of fodder here for contemplating poverty as evil. The contemporary world is marked by stark contrasts between the affluence of a few and the misery of most. Half the world's population live on less than \$2 a day, most in squalor and abject poverty without the simple necessities of life: food, clean water, decent shelter, health care. Here in America, we are facing an unprecedented financial crisis. In the San Francisco Bay Area, unemployment is over 12.5%.

Jim Wall of *Sojourners Magazine* says that we are asking, "When will this crisis be over?" but a more important question is: "How will this crisis change us? How will it change the way we think, act, and decide things, how we live, and how we do business?" This crisis could become our opportunity to change, to learn new habits of the heart. Selfishness, greed, and loss of a sense of the common good—these have characterized American society in the late 20th and early years of the 21st centuries. The Franciscan value of Poverty has something important to say about this.

During this past summer 14 of us (including Sr. Pamela Clare from San Francisco) from the Society of St. Francis (USA, UK, Australia, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Zimbabwe) gathered to learn more about formation of new members. We spent three weeks at the task, mostly at Little Portion Friary on Long Island. However, the middle week was spent on the road, talking to people about poverty, the environment and ecumenism in New York and Boston.

Our first stop was St. Mary's Manhattenville, East Harlem with The Rev. Earl and Elizabeth Kooperkamp. On Sunday afternoon we joined them at Marcus Garvey Park for their new Ecclesia Ministry outdoor Eucharist for the homeless.

In New York we listened to a presentation by WEACT, an environmental activism group focusing on the health impact of environment and economic disparities in Harlem. They led us on a "Toxic Tour" of Harlem showing us the bus depot which they are fighting for green redesign, the garbage transfer station they were instrumental in closing, and the waste treatment plant now covered with a huge roof top park.

Lunch by the Hudson River during the Toxic Tour of Harlem with WEACT.



Desmond, Jenny Tee, Philip Etobae and Samson Siho on the way to Marcus Garvey Park with bread and wine and sandwiches.

Another highlight was a visit with the Poverty Initiative Project at Union Seminary where we met with Liz Theoharis and Willy Baptist. This program raises up religious and social leaders from among the poor community who will organize to end poverty. Their approach is based on the premise that the most effective social movements are led by the people most affected. African Proverb: Nothing about us without us is for us.

Later in the week we drove to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we experienced the generous hospitality of the Society of St. John the Evangelist. Dr. Kwok Pui-Lan at Episcopal Divinity School helped us articulate and organize what we know about formation and shared her insights into the context of our post-colonial reality. In Boston we connected with the original Ecclesia Ministries group where we spoke with Executive Director Kathy McAdams, and attended their Eucharist on Boston Common. Ecclesia Ministries focuses on the core values of ministry of presence, being there reliably, promoting self-worth, radical welcome, establishing relationships and shared leadership.





The Brothers and Sisters attending the *Formators Conference* in July with Br. Jim Gardner, Society of the Atonement, at Graymore in the Hudson Valley, Garrison, NY. The early history of the Graymore Friars and Sisters of the Society of the Atonement is intertwined with that of the Society of St. Francis and we were pleased to join them for their centennial celebration. Fr. Joseph started the Franciscan friars (Order of the Poor Brethren of St. Francis which merged with SSF in the 1960s) as a result of the Society of the Atonement going to Rome. Mo. Lurana, founder of the Sisters of the Atonement was a friend of Mo. Rosina Mary who founded the Community of St. Francis in England in 1905. In 1910 Mo. Rosina, under the influence of Mo. Lurana

and with her financial help, traveled to America with six of the CSF Sisters to become Roman Catholic. She ended up joining the Franciscan Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Peekskill. In addition to visiting the Graymore Friars and Sisters, we visited with the Franciscan Sisters in Peekskill and saw the grave of Mo. Rosina, who was known as Sr. Mary Magdalene in that community.

OTHER TRAVELS

In addition to the Formators Conference, other events lured the Sisters into traveling over the past few months. In July *Srs. Jean and Lynne* spent a week in Anaheim, CA, attending the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and helping to spread the word about Religious Orders in the exhibit hall at the booth sponsored by CAROA (Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas)

In September *Sr. Pamela Clare* went to Korea to witness the Life Profession of Vows of the two CSF Sisters in Korea: Sr. Frances and Sr. Jemma.

In November, *Srs. Lynne and Maggie* joined other CAROA members at a conference led by The Rev. Barbara Crafton at St. John the Baptist convent in New Jersey.

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