

Who Should Be Poor, How Poor, and Why?: Reflections on a Franciscan Motif

by Evan B. Howard
February, 2019

Who should be poor? How poor should they be? And why? These are the questions I wish to address in this essay. They are questions that have been asked throughout the entire history of God's people. They were given special attention during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly in the midst of ongoing discussions among those associated with St. Francis of Assisi.

They have also been relevant questions for me personally. In 1978, Cheri and I looked at each other and vowed to be faithful "for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part." We also, at the same time, took a less formal vow to live at the Federal Poverty Level. We were at the end of our undergraduate career, feeling confronted with a suffering global society, much as the Good Samaritan was confronted with the man on the road. We had explored the biblical teachings on social justice and realized that society *does* matter to God. This conviction brought us to the question of our own action. Ultimately we made a couple of commitments as we prepared to live a new life together. The first commitment was to make a regular practice of offering care to shut-ins, refugees or others in need wherever we lived. The other was our choice to live at the Federal Poverty Level. You see, we felt that it was not simply a matter of a few shut-ins or refugees that were suffering. We were convinced that our global society itself needed attention. Cheri and I felt led to respond not only to the needs of individuals, but also to the condition of the world. Furthermore, we believed then—and we still believe today—that our chosen "standard of living," the ordinary practices of ordinary people, contribute to this world's economic condition.

Let me explain a bit here. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed in his 1967 "Christmas Sermon on Peace,":

“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. . . . Did you ever stop to think that you can’t leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world? You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that’s handed to you by a Pacific Islander. You reach for a bar of soap and that’s given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that’s poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea, and that’s poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you’re desirous of having cocoa for breakfast, and that’s poured into your cup by a West African. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half of the world. This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”¹

Cheri and I realized that we could not understand poverty until we grasped this interrelated nature of the global economic-political scene. Furthermore we saw in Scripture that, just as individuals can be guilty of sin, so nations, corporations, and churches can stand before God in judgment. We are all familiar today with corporate scandals, government corruption and ecclesiastical cover-ups. There are *systems* – corporate entities, government structures, social arrangements – which cooperate with or exploit human weakness. Poverty must therefore be seen as a complex interaction of individual and systemic actions.

Cheri and I concluded that we would not focus our attention on blaming a few government officials, a political party, or a corporate marketing scheme for the world’s problems. *We ourselves*—through our demands for petroleum-dependent luxuries, for cheap food produced abroad at local farmers’ expense, for clothing at prices only sweat shops could manufacture—bear a measure of

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. “A Christmas Sermon on Peace,” in James Melvin Washington, editor, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 254.

responsibility for the suffering society. It is as if we ourselves, by our own compliant prosperity, contribute to the Samaritan victim's beating and robbery (see also James 4:1-2).

It seemed at the time that the appropriate step for us was to make a commitment to what was then called "simple living." Since then Cheri and I have chosen to live in houses in low-income neighborhoods, or in inexpensive trailers – and build the addition on to our trailer with recycled materials. We have always grown some of our own food. We create Christmas presents and have developed home-grown forms of entertainment. We usually make clothing or purchase it at thrift stores. I can go on and on. And just so you know, we have kept our marriage vows – both the formal and the informal – for over forty years. With the exception of two years our income has been less than the Federal Poverty Level (and in those years nearly half our income was given to electricians and such as we completed our addition). The aim was not to create some universal legalistic standard that we used to judge others or even ourselves. Honestly, most of the time we never really thought about it other than to stimulate us to play new creative games with the art of living.

But at the same time, the questions were always there. Who should be poor? We knew that we lived different than others: more restrained than some of our middle-class peers, far richer than some of our connections overseas. Was our commitment a naive youthful mistake? Or perhaps we should be encouraging others to follow our lead and try out this "simple living" thing. Is it even appropriate to think of voluntary simplicity as "poverty," given the brutal realities of global urban slums? Just what is poverty and who should be poor?

And, as you can see, this leads directly into the second question – How poor? Frankly, living at the US Federal poverty level has not felt real hard. Yes, we do not frequent restaurants or theaters as much as some. I live with an old truck and a broken tooth. We have been fortunate not to have medical conditions that would have stretched us to the limit of our high-deductible major medical plan. But this is very, very different from the suffering experienced in some urban barrios or in some drought-plagued farmlands. Many have no permanent home and only know food and shelter for the day. As we shall see,

there are a few in history who have chosen just that level of abandonment. Should *I* take that leap – or at least another step – and experience solidarity through abandonment? How poor?

And why? Like I said earlier, perhaps all this is just some naive, youthful mistake. Perhaps our choice to decrease economic demand is actually contributing to the poverty of the world. Couldn't I help the poor more by earning money and donating it to good causes? Perhaps this is about my own spiritual growth, some discipline of simplicity designed to remind me of my own dependency on God. Is our poverty a calculated tactic, a boycott against certain products and principles? Is it a practical way of freeing up my time from full-time work so I can be available to do other things? Questions like these have followed Cheri and I throughout our life. Who should be poor? How poor? And why?

I also think that these are relevant questions in general today. The World Bank claims on the one hand that global poverty is declining, but also documents that half the world lives on less than \$5.50 per day, struggling to meet their basic needs.² The 2016 *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) celebrates that “over the past quarter-century there has been impressive progress on many fronts in human development, with people living longer, more people rising out of extreme poverty and fewer people being malnourished.” But the report continues: “Human development has enriched human lives—but unfortunately not all to the same extent, and even worse, not every life.”³ The complex changes in global practices of production, distribution, and consumption has led some to reconsider the language we use to define “poverty.”⁴ The scholarly community, while

2 See, for example, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/09/19/decline-of-global-extreme-poverty-continues-but-has-slowed-world-bank>; and <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/17/nearly-half-the-world-lives-on-less-than-550-a-day>.

3 The United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone* (New York, NY: The United Nations Development Programme, 2016), iii, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2016-report>.

4 See, for example, Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium*, volume 3 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 2nd edition (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 69-170. Castells refers frequently to UNDP reports but expresses a less optimistic view of the state of global poverty than does, for example, the World Bank. My suspicion is that an attentive review of both the empirical designs and the primary concerns shaping representatives of poverty analysis would lead to greater clarity regarding the status of “poverty.” That review, however, is not within the scope of this essay. For more see, for example, the research of the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC) [<https://gsdrc.org>].

acknowledging the significance of poverty, struggles to define it or to account for its place in the world. Before we ask “Who should be poor?” perhaps we need to consider what it means to be poor, and to be poor today.

Within popular culture, and even within popular Christian culture, the three questions are widely discussed today. Some Christians inspire one another toward success, even a wealthier lifestyle. In Christian culture this kind of inspiration has become known as “The Prosperity Gospel.”⁵ Others, however, advocate a withdrawal from materialism or concern with wealth, promoting “simple living” or “voluntary simplicity.”⁶ Who should be poor? How poor? and Why? These are live issues facing Christians today as we seek to live in the fullness of God’s will as beacons of Gospel-light to the world.

Thus it seems worthwhile to offer some Christian reflection on the meaning of poverty. I will not, in this essay, attempt a sociological analysis of stratification. Nor will I offer a biblical-theological construction of economic theory and practice. My aim here, as a student of Christian spirituality, is merely to consider how our relationships with the resources and provisions of this earth intersect with our sense of relationship with God and with others. Furthermore, I will focus my attention, in this consideration, upon one historical movement: Franciscans of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It seems to me that by taking a closer look at the discussions among these Franciscans regarding wealth, virtue and vocation we might find new old language to explore our own spirituality of wealth and poverty today. In the first chapter I will offer a brief survey of biblical themes and historical developments that serve as a broad context to the Franciscan movement. In the next chapter I turn toward the life and teachings of Francis of Assisi himself, setting the Franciscan movement in its immediate context and summarizing the current state of research regarding the life and teachings of

5 See for example, Zig Ziglar and Tom Ziglar, *Born to Win: Find Your Success Code* (Issaquah, WA: Made for Success Publishing, 2017). For a history of the American forms of the prosperity gospel see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6 See for example, Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* 2nd edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009); Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*, revised and updated (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

Francis of Assisi, particularly with regard to the subject of poverty. In the third chapter I will review the debates on poverty which took place in the century or so following Francis's death, showing how Franciscan discussion regarding the use of wealth stimulated the development of some of the foundations of economic thinking which have endured to this day. I will then conclude by offering a few reflections linking the past to the present.

Chapter 1

Biblical Themes and Historical Developments:

I will not, in this section, provide a comprehensive survey of Scripture and history regarding to Christian economic theory and practice.⁷ My aim is rather simply to highlight a few biblical themes that served as background for Francis's own life and teachings, and then to take note of a few developments in Christian economic thought and practice in the first millennium relevant to understanding Francis in his own setting.

Biblical Themes -

⁷ For a couple of examples of the treatment of biblical economic teaching see Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016); and R. C. Sproul Jr., *Biblical Economics: A Commonsense Guide To Our Daily Bread* (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 2008). For broad reviews of history see for example, Paul Oslington, editor, *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22-150 and the article on "The Political Economy of the Medieval Church" by Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., Robert Hébert, and Robert D. Tollison in the *Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Religion* (Oxford, Uxford University Press, 2011), 305-321. For more general discussion of Christian views on economics, in addition to the Oxford Handbook, see Robert G. Clouse and William E. Diehl, editors, *Wealth & Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics* (Downers Grove Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984); Jeremy Kidwell, Sean Doherty, and Carnegie, eds. *Theology and Economics: A Christian Vision of the Common Good* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Franciscan approaches to poverty were not merely social responses to an emerging merchant economy. One cannot read the writings of Francis without being struck by the overwhelming presence of Scripture. Francis of Assisi and his followers were first and foremost Christians: followers of Jesus and members of the Church. As such, a number of biblical themes shaped their outlook on possessions, poverty, and economic relations.

One theme is the view of God as Creator/Provider. We find this theme from the very first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created . . .” (Genesis 1:1). Creation is a provision, a gift: “I give every plant . . .” (Genesis 1:29-30). Though Scripture recognizes the tendency of many to compete for what they perceive as scarce resources, the Bible’s fundamental view of economy is one of shared celebration for the abundant provision of God. We are dependent upon God for our life and being, the Psalms proclaim again and again. The Lord who made all creatures also provides for the necessities of all creatures, and especially those whose situation permits them to know that dependence.

“Who is like the Lord our God.

The One who sits enthroned on high,
who stoops down to look
on the heavens and the earth?

He raises the poor from the dust

and lifts the needy from the ash heap; (Psalm 113:6-7).

At times, the responsibilities of life in the world can distract us from appreciating God’s provision. We become servants of mammon rather than servants of God (Matthew 6:24). In light of this perception of God’s provision, some who choose voluntary poverty do so not as a denial of God’s rich provision but rather as a practical means of experiencing and acknowledging God’s care: “seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (see Matthew 6:25-34).

The other side of this coin is the biblical recognition of the ephemeral character of earthly wealth. Yes, we enjoy the things of the earth as good gifts from the hand of God. Yet on the other hand

“As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owners except to feast their eyes on them?” (Ecclesiastes 5:11). “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,” Jesus admonishes his disciples, “where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). The epistle of James echoes this theme as it warns: “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes” (James 5:1-2). Wealth is a good thing, a sign of the blessing of God. But at the same time we must beware: the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

A third theme that informs Franciscan economics is the biblical vision of mutual care. Take, for example, the Pentateuch. Within this corpus, we can identify an entire system of laws regulating production (sabbatical and jubilee years, gleaning, labor, measurements, boundaries and so on), consumption (tithes, charity, firstfruits, offerings, sacrifices, and so on), and the ownership and management of resources (land, inheritance, slavery, property, treaties, and so on). This system was carefully designed to encourage both private initiative and the public good. The Pentateuch recognizes the complexities of wealth and poverty declaring, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward those of your people who are poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). This heart of mutual care also drives the early church in Jerusalem to institute some form of common means of support (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35) and for Paul later to attend to the needs of the poor and the needs of the Jerusalem church (see Galatians 2:10; 2 Corinthians 8-9). This theme, however, takes on a unique expression in the life of Jesus and his early followers, for it is here that we find most clearly the model of an itinerant, mutually-nurturing brotherhood.

A fourth theme that flows from the three above is the theme of charity: the virtue of generous and compassionate giving and in particular a giving that reaches out to the least. In the Old Testament specific mention is made of the “poor,” the “needy,” the “sojourner,” the “stranger,” the “orphan,” and

the “widow.” These are all categories of people who were without power in their situation to advocate for themselves. Frequently, they were the victims of socio-political systems, systems that were structured by those with power which caused hardship for those without (oppression). God is spoken of repeatedly as the defender of these needy. But at the same time, the Scriptures expect that the community of God’s people will themselves acts as the hands and feet of God caring for the least among them (see for example Jeremiah 22:15-17). Jesus took this one step further, even reaching out to those outside the people of Israel to the Gentiles with healing and deliverance: using the example of the Good Samaritan as his model of neighborly love, and declaring that those who offer help to the neediest are offering help to Christ himself (Matthew 25:31-46).⁸

And with mention of Christ, we identify the final biblical theme: the humility and poverty of Jesus. The central message of the incarnation is that in Jesus, Almighty God became a simple human being. “Being in very nature God . . . he made himself nothing” (Philippians 2:6-7). Not only is this idea full of theological significance, it also became a practical model for many who followed him. Jesus was born in a manger, not in a palace. He left a secure home for a life of itinerant preaching. He and his followers chose a unique form of life unlike anything current: not an Essene community, not a band of Zealots, not a school of Pharisees. His group appeared to have used (and even stored in a small bag) money for necessities. Jesus, more than perhaps any example in the Hebrew Scriptures, lived a life of voluntary poverty.⁹ Furthermore, Jesus invites some, but not all, to imitate him in his practice of voluntary poverty. Jesus calls to wealthy Matthew sitting behind the tax collector’s booth, “Follow me.” Matthew gets up and follows him, and yet the next verse tells us about a dinner “at Matthew’s house” (see Matthew 9:9-10). We never learn what ultimately happened to Matthew’s house, although Peter proclaims to Jesus that “we have left all we had to follow you” (Luke 18:28). Jesus invites the

8 For a recent discussion of the biblical theme of charity see Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (Yale UP, 2013).

9 The only worthy examples of voluntary poverty in the Hebrew scriptures are the Rechabites who voluntarily chose to live in tents and abstain from agricultural activity (Jeremiah 35); and perhaps some of the prophets or schools of the prophets, who at times refuse payment and who may also live a somewhat itinerant life. Of course stable communities of Essenes develop during the Intertestamental period.

rich young ruler to a new life, saying, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). When another tax collector, Zaccheus, chooses to follow Jesus he donates half of his possessions to the poor and rectifies his previous financial misdeeds. Jesus declares that “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). Yet when the man possessed by “Legion” begs to follow Jesus, Jesus sends him home (and presumably to a non-poor form of life) so that he might “tell how much God has done for you” (Luke 8:39). Such is the grace of our Lord Jesus, that “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The Scripture discusses many issues related to economic life. I have not discussed justice, equity, stewardship, labor, or other important topics. My point here is simply to introduce these five (God as Provider, the ephemeral character of earthly wealth, a vision for mutual care, the value of compassionate charity, the poor Christ) which serve as background to Francis’s own approach to being poor.

Historical Developments -

Historian Helen Rhee writes, “From the very beginnings of the Christian movement, how to deal with riches formed an important aspect of Christian discipleship and was thought to express “an essential articulation of our faith in God and of our love for fellow human beings.”¹⁰ The economic teachings and practices of the Church through its first millennium, in their varied forms, contributed significantly to the identity which followers of Christ exhibited to the world and even to themselves. Once again, I can only highlight a few examples as they provide background for understanding Franciscan poverty.

¹⁰ Helen Rhee, *Wealth and Poverty in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017) kindle loc 48. The quotation from within this citation is taken from L. T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 16.

First, it is important to remember that the form of life instituted by Jesus and his immediate followers— itinerant mendicancy— never completely disappeared from the Christian community. Paul and his mission teams appeared to have adopted a similar practice. They traveled light and were often hosted by people who appreciated their cause. At times they would receive offerings from others and these offerings would serve as their income. Yet at other times (and here is where the Pauline community developed their own strategy) they would earn income through labor so as not to place a burden on a local community. The life of itinerant asceticism was a common form of life in Patristic Syria.¹¹ Influential leaders (such as Jerome, Cassian, Benedict) issued various complaints against some who took up a lifestyle of itinerant poverty. *Peregrinatio*, a form of abandonment to God through traveling (often including a ministry of proclaiming the faith), was common in early Celtic Christian life. Ian Bradley writes, "The theme of pilgrimage dominates Celtic Christianity both at the literal and the symbolic level."¹² Gert Melville similarly documents the spread of "wandering preachers" in Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹³ Though itinerant poverty was never the dominant form of Christian life in the West of the first millennium, it was certainly not unknown.

What emerges in these centuries as a dominant force within Christianity is monasticism (or more technically, institutes of "religious life"), an ecclesial-social framework within which voluntary poverty was not only permitted but honored.¹⁴ The development of monasticism was slow, emerging from collections of virgins and ascetics exploring ways to live a life of whole-hearted consecration to God. Yet by somewhere around AD 314 – 318, bishop Eusebius of Caesarea can write,

"Two ways of life were thus given by the law of Christ to His Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living; it admits not marriage, child-bearing, property nor the

11 See Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, translated by R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1985).

12 Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2000), 198. See pp. 197-244.

13 Gert Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016), 109-121

14 On the early development of monasticism see for example, Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

possession of wealth, but wholly and permanently separate from the customary life of mankind, it devotes self to the service of God alone in its wealth of heavenly love! And they who enter on this course, appear to die to the life of mortals, to bear with them nothing earthly but their body, and in mind and spirit to have passed into heaven. Like some celestial beings they gaze upon human life, performing the duty of a priesthood to Almighty God for the whole race, not with sacrifices of bulls and blood, nor with libations and unguents, nor with smoke and consuming fire and destruction of bodily things, but with right principles of true holiness, and of a soul purified in disposition, and above all with virtuous deeds and words; with such they propitiate the Divinity, and celebrate their priestly rites for themselves and their race. Such then is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other more humble, more human, permits men to join in pure nuptials and to produce children, to undertake government, to give orders to soldiers fighting for right; it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion: and it is for them that times of retreat and instruction, and days for hearing sacred things are set apart. And a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them, giving just such help as such lives require, so that all men, whether Greeks or barbarians, have their part in the coming of salvation, and profit by the teaching of the Gospel."¹⁵

Ambrose of Milan (340-397) penned, in chapter 12 of his “Concerning Widows,” what became perhaps the classic statement of the distinction between those who followed the “commandments” of Christ and those who took the further step of choosing to follow the “counsels” such as Jesus’s invitation to the Rich young ruler to abandon all. Recognition of the value of both “religious” who chose poverty and celibacy and “seculars” who did not was maintained in many early councils of the Church.¹⁶ Most

15 Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel*, edited and translated by W. J. Ferrar (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), Book I, chapter 8 pp. 48-50.

16 See my essay “Spiritual Formation and Elitism: Reflections on Early Councils and Contemporary Practice” available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/spiritual-formation-elitism-reflections-early-councils-contemporary-practice/>; accessed 1/30, 2019.

monastic expressions prior to Francis followed Jesus's counsel of economic renunciation by disavowing personal ownership in the context of a community who managed their resources in common (following the lead of Acts 2:42-47). By the time of Francis, the institution of Christian religious life, in its varied forms of voluntary poverty, was a powerful force.

This framework of two ways of life answered the “who should be poor” question—at least to some extent. It was OK for some to be wealthy and others to choose a life of poverty. But what about those who were involuntarily poor; should *these* be poor? What *should* be done about them? And how should the wealthy (or perhaps the “middle class”) live? How poor (or rich) should they be? These are difficult questions to sort out, particularly given: (1) the vast changes in economic life that took place in Europe from the late Roman Empire, through the feudal centuries, into the early merchant economic shifts near the time of Francis, and (2) the differing points of view regarding economic and political ethics advocated by Christians during this period.¹⁷ It is actually within the discussion of general economic ethics that the life of the wealthy and the life of the involuntary poor meet. I mention only a few matters:

First, as we might imagine, the notion of God as Creator/Provider often forms an overarching framework for Christians as they speak about economic matters. Thus Tertullian (160-220) affirms the goodness of God's provision of riches even as he acknowledges Jesus's own “woe to you who are rich” (Luke 6:24; see *Against Marcion* 4:15).

More interesting is to recognize the ways in which the lives of the laity were shaped through the teachings and practices of the Church (and through the influence of the Church, the laws of the land as well). Whereas the Hebrew Scriptures promoted an atmosphere of mutual care through detailed

¹⁷ In addition to Rhee, *Wealth and Poverty in Early Christianity*, see her *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012); Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, The Fall of Rome, And the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012); Susan R. Holman, editor, *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Press / Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, 2008); Daniel Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2013); and Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, editors, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought 100-1625* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

prescriptions regarding gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10), withholding millstones as security (Deuteronomy 24:6), or managing property loss due to mismanaged bulls (Exodus 21:35-36), the Christian Church promoted a similar vision of mutual care as they gave instructions regarding, for example, luxury, usury, and equality: the economic activities appropriate to their own circumstances. Lactantius (240-320) defends a twofold understanding of Christian justice as requiring both piety and equality. Whereas secular philosophers understand economic justice as simply a matter of fair judgment the Christian sees economic life as a necessary component of treating one another as brother and sister. While some Christians may be poor and others rich, some slave and others free, these distinctions really mean nothing, for the Christian is to treat others as equals. Thus, “to be rich is not a matter of *having* but of *using* riches for the tasks of justice” (*Divine Institutes* 5.15).¹⁸ Likewise Italian monk and legal scholar Gratian (died before 1159) argued that the laity have full permission to own property and resources, but “only to the limit of what they can use.”¹⁹

The most significant practice both elevating the involuntary poor and moderating the rich was the practice of charity or alms. The Christian Gospels often affirm the practice of almsgiving (Matthew 6:1-4; 25:35; Luke 11:41; 12:33; 18:22; 19:8). Rhee writes regarding the Patristic period, “If renunciation of avarice and luxury constituted a negative boundary marker for Christian identity, almsgiving and sharing constituted Christians’ positive boundary marker.”²⁰ While charity was encouraged as a matter of personal practice, as the structures of the Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century the Roman Church ultimately took over the responsibility for wide ranging welfare distributions (the *annona*). I quote Peter Brown at length:

Thus, a double development took place in the last half of the fifth century. The church of Rome grew richer. The senatorial aristocracy grew poorer, mainly as a result of the loss of their overseas estates in Africa and the Balkans. These losses could not be compensated for by the

18 Lactantius’s ideas are more fully developed in Augustine’s influential *City of God*.

19 Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), 38.

20 Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 171.

development of Italian agriculture alone. As the nobility got poorer and the church got richer, the incomes of the two groups (which had previously admitted no comparison) began to level up. At the same time, an imaginative leveling up occurred. Through the preaching of Leo, the Christian congregations were actively encouraged to view the poor as fellow members of the same urban community. Entitlement to protection and to supplies of food that had once been associated exclusively with the civic rights of the Roman People to share in the *annona* came to be offered to all distressed Romans by the pope and his clergy.”²¹

“The poor you have with you always. Therefore be open-handed.” This ideal, along with the sense that our generous gifts to the poor are investments in a heavenly treasure, stimulated the development of both private and institutional practices of poverty relief. How poor should one be? The rich should not be so wealthy that they have no place for generosity and the involuntary poor should not remain in misery, but should rather be assisted through the generosity of others.

This idea of giving with an eye to heavenly reward leads us to consider the “Why” question. What are the reasons given in sermons and treatises for living a life of equity, compassion, and generosity – or for those who choose it, a life of voluntary poverty?²² As we have already seen, writers often appealed to their readers sense of the value of good works, either their compassion for the suffering of others or their sense of the inherent spiritual value of the works themselves. Thus, for example, Lactantius writes, “This is the greatest and truest fruit of riches: not to use wealth for one’s own personal pleasure, but for the welfare of many; and not for one’s own immediate enjoyment, but for justice, which alone endures (*Divine Institutes* 6.12). Drawing from Jesus’s own teachings in Matthew 25, the medieval Church developed a particular regard for what ultimately became known (at least by the time of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* in 1265-74) as the “corporal works of mercy: feeding

21 Brown, *Eye of a Needle*, 467-68.

22 I am here summarizing my findings presented in Evan B. Howard, “A Descriptive Analysis of the Motivational Exhortations of the Ante-Nicene Fathers Concerning the Value and Use of Property and Wealth,” 1980. This essay is available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/a-descriptive-analysis-of-the-motivational-exhortations-of-the-ante-nicene-fathers-concerning-the-value-and-use-of-property-and-wealth/>.

the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing those who have none, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, ransoming the captive, and burying the dead. The loving performance of these works was considered meritorious and increased the likelihood of eternal salvation.

Indeed, avoiding judgment or fostering salvation was a itself a focus of appeal regarding the redistribution of wealth. The Scripture itself claimed, in Tobit 12:8-9 that, “Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. . . . It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin.” Peter Brown, in his *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550*, shows the development of this appeal both with regard to donations for the poor and contributions for the building of the church. He writes, linking his reading of sixth-century wills and charters to the writings of Augustine of Hippo and Salvian of Gaul, “In these formulae, Augustine’s somber sense of daily giving for the expiation of sins and Salvian’s dramatic close-up of judgment beyond the grave were brought together.”²³ People throughout the history of the church made significant donations of wealth for the sake of securing more surely their eternal destiny.

Christian writers in the first millennium also spoke of the dangers of wealth and consequently people made economic choices based on their sense of this danger. Some simply condemned wealth, referring to riches as “sins,” a “weight,” “like a serpent,” a “burden,” a “chain,” an “idol,” and more. Carthage bishop Cyprian (200-258), for example, castigates the rich investor, arguing that “nor does he perceive, poor wretch, that these things are merely gilded torments, that he is held in bondage by his gold, and that he is the slave of his luxury and wealth rather than their master.” “What a marvelous perversion of names!” Cyprian concludes, “They call those things *goods* which they absolutely put to none but *bad* uses” (Epistle 1.12). Others did not condemn wealth as such but took a more moderate approach, emphasizing one’s attitude toward and use of wealth. Thus bishop of Carrhae (@ 278)

Archelaus argues, in his “Disputation with Manes”:

²³ Brown, *Eye of a Needle*, 315. Martin Hengel calls this appeal the “motive of exchange”; see Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974), 75.

But some one may now reason with us thus: It is not a good thing, consequently, to give up riches. Well, I reply that it is a good thing for those who are capable of it; but, at the, same time, to employ riches for the work of righteousness and mercy, is a thing as acceptable as though one were to give up the whole at once. (Acts of the Disputation with the Heresiarch Manes, #42).

Clement of Alexandria's (150-215) "Who is the Rich Man That Will Be Saved?" is precisely a moderate argument to rich men (who were becoming increasingly part of the church), comforting them that they do not have to abandon all their riches in order to join the church provided they maintain a Christian attitude toward their wealth. The aim is to flee the passion for wealth, not necessarily the wealth itself (though Clement is clear—if they can't flee the passions without fleeing the money, the money must go). Warning about the dangers of wealth (of both the moderate and the hard-line varieties) were repeated throughout the medieval period.²⁴

Finally, people managed their wealth with a view to the supreme value of Christ. Appeals of this kind are prominent in the early Christian writings. Drawing on the teachings of Scripture, writers frequently mentioned the contrast between earthly and heavenly treasures. Part of this is a sense of eschatological distance. A Christian's concern is not toward the things of this temporal world but rather is directed toward those things which will last.²⁵ But, along with the eschatological dimension one can also observe what I call a "carefree" or "contentment" sense of the value of Christ. Christians need not be anxious about their economic condition, for wealth or poverty are both provided by the hand of God, through whom all things work together for good. Often this was communicated through a language of exchange: a riches to shun and a riches to seek. The use of money for the betterment of the poor or for the advancement of the church, the patient endurance of hardship, were all investments in the greatest treasure of all.

²⁴ See for example, Little, *Religious Poverty*, 35-41.

²⁵ On this see Hengel, *Property and Riches*, 39-41.

I should also make one note about another reason why people chose voluntary poverty. Ancient and medieval people saw those who renounced wealth and gave themselves to a life of prayer and spiritual practice as mediators of life and health to their communities. The author of the late fourth-century *History of the Monks of Egypt* proclaims, regarding the early monks, that “through them the world is kept in being, and that through them too human life is preserved and honoured by God.”²⁶ Similarly Medievalist Giles Constable describes, regarding the medieval perception of monastic ministry,

"For most contemporaries, however, especially between the eighth and twelfth centuries, the 'raison d'être' of monks and nuns was their work for the spiritual welfare of mankind. 'The greatest hope of salvation for all Christians' lay in the life and chastity of monks, according to Charlemagne, and in his letter *De litteris colendis*, which was addressed to the abbot, community, and 'our faithful *oratores*' of Fulda, he remarked on the letters sent him by many monasteries signifying 'that the monks living there were fighting for us in pious and sacred prayers.'²⁷

Monastic poverty was not just about personal salvation but also was understood to be a significant contribution to the welfare of society.

Why would one abandon their wealth and choose a life of voluntary poverty? Why would another choose not to abandon wealth, but rather to manage their resources with careful frugality? They perceive the need for and the value of good works; they sense the dangers of wealth; they want to offer their own contribution in prayer or in generosity for the betterment of the world; or they long for a supremely worthy treasure, the value of which will endure forever.

Conclusions -

26 Norman Russell, translator, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (London: Mowbray, 1980), Prologue #9, p. 50.

27 Giles Constable, *The Abbey of Cluny: A Collection of Essays to Mark the Eleven-Hundredth Anniversary of its Foundation* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010), 126.

Francis of Assisi was born into a Christian society saturated with a sense of the value of economic order. For the most part, people in medieval Europe inhabited a world which (when viewed ideally) was rooted in the Gospel message itself.²⁸ It was a world where humankind received God's provision as a mysterious gift. It was a world where God assigned people to their respective stations: some to be princes or kings, others to be priests or nuns, still others to be laborers. Of course there would also be [involuntary] poor; the poor we would always have with us. The social world was a network of mutual care as each station contributed to the health of the whole. Those who chose to be poor—a segment of the population that was both permitted and honored—had the responsibility to model the life of Christ and to pray. The involuntary poor had the responsibility to work as they can and to trust God for their provision. Those who had access to wealth were responsible not to accumulate it (avarice was considered a deadly sin), but rather to use it for the sake of the church and the needy.

Some of this may seem unfamiliar to us today. To understand the “whys” of medieval economic life—the various reasons for the use or abandonment of wealth—involves the sometimes difficult task of sympathizing with the social imaginary of medieval European culture.²⁹ Nowadays we think of economic life not in terms of mutual cooperation within a world of God's abundant provision, but rather in terms of the competition of independent forces within a world of limited resources. Today we think of appropriate economic motivation not in terms of restraint and generosity for the sake of an otherworldly reward but rather through encouraging private initiative for the sake of both private and public advancement here on earth.

28 Of course, we must realize the problems surrounding any summary of “medieval Europe.” The notion of “medieval” itself is a composite of a number of independent features each of which were present in different regions to different measures at different times. Likewise the idea of “Europe” as a single entity belies the independence and diversity of what we think of as Europe today. Yet, with these problems in mind, I still find it appropriate to speak of *medieval* and *Europe* in order to identify general trends in society, religion, and economic life.

29 On “social imaginaries” see Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003).

The beginnings of the transformation from the medieval imagination of a harmonious social order into something else began precisely during the centuries surrounding the life of Francis of Assisi, and (as we shall see), particularly in Italy. One can sense both the dominance of the medieval Christian perspective—and consequently the audacious challenge to this dominance given by later renaissance humanists—in a statement by historian Diana Wood, writing of the changes (she uses the phrase a “spectacular transformation”) in economic attitudes which took place in fifteenth-century Europe. She states, “Poggio Bracciolini turned ecclesiastical values on their head by predicting that without avarice civilized life would be destroyed.”³⁰ We shall see the significance of these changes as they began to take place within the context of Francis and the Franciscans.

30 Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52.

Chapter 2

The Poverty of St. Francis of Assisi

I have long been taken with the person of St. Francis of Assisi. Cheri and I (before we were married) watched Franco Zeffirelli's biographical film of Francis, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972) when we were in high school and were deeply touched. In 1983, we named our first daughter Claire, after Clare of Assisi. During Cheri's pregnancy we were exploring the possibility of becoming members of the Secular Order of Franciscans. We did not join the order but have always had a soft spot in our hearts for things Franciscan. As an instructor in Christian spirituality, I have had many opportunities to teach about different aspects of Franciscan life and spirituality, most significantly in 2011 when Cheri and I traveled to Assisi where I gave a number of presentations on Franciscan themes for the 25th Anniversary celebration of a missionary order among the poor. Needless to say, I have found myself getting to know Francis again and again.

Recently it has gotten complicated. For a variety of reasons (my own shallow scholarship, being occupied with other topics at the wrong time, key research only recently translated into English . . .) it was not until 2017 that I became aware of the ferment surrounding the study of Francis of Assisi for the past fifty years. Scholars now summarize this academic ferment with language borrowed from a century of Jesus scholarship: "the search for the historical Francis."³¹ As with historical Jesus studies, a number of important questions have been raised simultaneously:

31 There is now a wealth of sources in English documenting this search. In addition to the superbly edited volumes of early sources on Francis and Clare recently published by New City Press (and also generously made available to all at <https://www.franciscantradition.org/> - abbreviated in the text FA:ED volume, page), I have consulted for this essay the following works published since 2000: Jacques, Dalarun, *The Misadventure of Francis of Assisi: Toward a Historical Use of the Franciscan Legends* (St. Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute, 2002); David Flood, "Franciscans at Work," *Franciscan Studies* 59 (2001): 21-62; David Flood, *The Daily Labor of the Early Franciscans* (St. Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute, 2010); Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

- Textual questions – What documents (or fragments) are most likely to have been written by Francis or to have been written within the context of Francis’s life? Behind this question is the complex question of the dating of various manuscripts.
- Interpretive questions – It is clear that people were “putting a spin” on Francis even during his lifetime. Soon after his death, people were telling (and retelling) stories of Francis’s life – and for various reasons. Some documents written later may record early and authentic stories that were not mentioned in earlier documents. How do we separate the “reasons” from the “facts” of Francis’s life?
- Context questions – Our understanding of thirteenth-century Umbrian Italy has improved in the past fifty years. We are more aware of important developments in politics, economics, church, monasticism, lay religious movements and more. The challenge now is how to weigh each of the contextual influences surrounding Francis while also giving appropriate regard to the unique personality of Francis (and the work of God’s Spirit).
- Portrait questions – Francis is not a simple character but (perhaps like all of us) exhibits many facets. Yet it is common to summarize the portrait of historical figures (and particularly a saint) with simple stereotypes. People have, through different periods of history, imagined a different Francis: miracle worker, missionary preacher, misunderstood social reformer, simple friend of nature. Scholars are currently re-assessing and re-imagining our portrait of Francis. Consequently, while our understanding is improving, I think we still await a solid consensus regarding our portrait of Francis.³²

Needless to say, I cannot possibly adjudicate the debates in recent scholarship here, and especially to integrate their insights with the standard works on Francis from previous generations of study.³³ My

³² One need only compare the works of Flood, Vauchez, Thompson, and Wolf to see the diversity.

³³ For example, Paul Sabatier, *The Road to Assisi: The Essential Biography of Francis of Assisi*, 120th Anniversary edition, edited by Jon M. Sweeney (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2014); John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From Its Origins to the Year 1517* (Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1968). See also Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, translated by John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1988).

aim in this chapter is first to draw attention to the factors which are most important for situating Francis's life and teachings on poverty and second to humbly offer my own summary of Francis's life and then his teachings on poverty as they are relevant for grasping both Franciscan discussion about poverty in the century or so after Francis's death and our consideration today.

Ecclesiastical Changes

Italy was changing as the thirteenth century began. The region was tasting the fruit of what has been called the "twelfth-century renaissance."³⁴ Historians note changes taking place in towns, monarchies, social classes, sources of patronage, intellectual centers, law, and more during the twelfth century. A new sense of individualism and rational order emerge during this period. The crusades facilitated safer travel, initiated a new flow of goods, and promoted a sense of a unified European Christendom. Society was shifting from what has been named "feudalism" to something else. Earlier I quoted Martin Luther King Jr. stating that "all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." King identified the "network of mutuality" in his time with the interdependent contributors in the global trade necessary for us to eat an ordinary breakfast. In thirteenth-century Italy, the networks of mutuality were in transition. As we shall see, political structures, economic habits, social expectations were all in the midst of shifts and these shifts together stimulated new patterns of interrelatedness. This, in turn, forced people to reconsider how they understood wealth and poverty. The fruit of that reconsideration is what this essay is all about.

Perhaps some of the most significant early changes were changes in the church. What has been dubbed "The Gregorian Reform" (1073-1085) served to consolidate power within the ecclesiastical institutions. Bishops and Abbots functioned as quasi-nobility within the sphere of their own regions. Some, such as Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) were among the most powerful persons of their time. Diana Wood asserts that "The Church dominated all aspects of medieval life. . . . The Church was

³⁴ See for example, Robert Benson, Giles Constable, Carol D Lanham, editors, *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

the largest landowner in Europe, much of this land being concentrated in the hands of bishops and abbots.”³⁵ It is important to understand, as we reflect on the consolidation of power in the hands of the church, that the Gregorian reforms were not motivated merely by greed or ambition. Behind the consolidation of power burned—for many supporters of reform—a sincere desire for the church to be a people of God independent of secular management. The early twelfth-century reformers argued that only worthy priests should oversee the ministries of churches, convents, and monasteries, an admirable aim. By the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, however, as we shall see, this very idea of the worthiness of the priest itself “began to be turned against the concept of ecclesiastical ordination itself,”³⁶ a matter which will have bearing on discussions regarding who should be poor and how poor.

By the thirteenth century Europe was permeated with the presence of monasticism. The voluntary—and holy—poor were everywhere. André Vauchez reports that in Assisi alone at the time of Francis, “there were eleven monastic establishments for men and seven for women within the city and its immediate environs.”³⁷ Francis was not unfamiliar with the institutions of religious life. Furthermore, these centers of holiness and prayer often became targets of giving to the “poor” in medieval society, as donors perceived that the investment from gifts to these groups would merit more of an eternal reward than would distributions to the indigent. As a result, many monastic estates became the wealthiest properties of their districts.

At the same time that church and monastery were experiencing unprecedented success, a few surrounding developments unfolded such that this very success came under scrutiny. One matter was the rediscovery of Jesus and the re-exploration of the apostolic life. European Christians were re-exposed to the homeland of Jesus through the Crusades; they were re-introduced to the life of Jesus through translations of the Gospels in their own languages. People became interested in what a

35 Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, Kindle loc 74, 88. For a review of the medieval church as a political and economic entity see Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., Robert F. Hébert, and Robert D. Tollison, “The Political Economy of the Medieval Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 305-322.

36 Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, tr. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995; original German work published first in 1935 and expanded in 1955/1961), 7.

37 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 4.

Christian (Jesus) life was all about. Gregorian reformers introduced an ideal which was meant to inspire priests and religious toward a life which transcended petty secular interests: the ideal of the *vita apostolica* (apostolic life). Over time, however, this concept became the center of a discussion between different forms of religious life and was even used to critique the success of monastery and church itself. Thus historian Christopher Brooke summarizes in his *Monastic World*, “No dispute is more characteristic of the age than the debate about the apostolic life, the *vita apostolica*. . . . It seemed to many who meditated on the apostolic life that Jesus had laid emphasis in his instructions to his disciples on poverty, simplicity, and practical good works; and these three elements were emphasized, in varying proportions, by most monastic reformers of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.”³⁸ Renewed appreciation for poverty and simplicity characterized accusations the Cistercian “new monasticism” hurled at the well-established Clunaic monasteries and influenced the shape of many fresh experiments in religious life, some employing the practice of begging, or mendicancy.³⁹ Accompanying the interest in poverty was a renewed interest in itinerant preaching.⁴⁰ This form of apostolic life—combining itinerant preaching, mendicancy, voluntary poverty, along with a critique of the wealth and negligence of the establishment—characterized a number of expressions which Ellen Davison calls “forerunners” of Francis.⁴¹ For some the apostolic life, and authentic Christianity, simply was poverty.

A final development within the church of this period was the rise of the laity.⁴² It was precisely during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that laity were recognized as saints, and in a fashion that

38 Christopher Brooke, *The Monastic World: 1000-1300* (New York: Random House, 1974), 125, 126.

39 For the Cistercian critique of Cluny see for example, Michael Casey, translator, *Cistercians and Clunaics: Bernard's Apologia to Abbot William* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1970). For the poverty among the Grandmontine hermits, see C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, third edition (Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 155. For the Premonstratensians see Ellen Scott Davison, *Forerunners of Saint Francis* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), 88.

40 Gert Melville treats the emergence of this movement in *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 109-121.

41 Davison, *Forerunners*. Some of these expressions ended up being identified as heresies: Cathars, Waldensians, and others. The history is complex, as the appropriate sections of Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* and Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism* show. On the Cathars see Malcom Barber, *The Cathars: Dualist Heresies in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages* (Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000). On the Waldensians see Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival, c. 1170-1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

42 See André Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices*, translated by Margery J. Schneider (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

highlighted their identity as laity. It was in this period that laity were able to create autonomous forms of piety such as the confraternities of penitents. Davison writes of her forerunners of Francis: “It was inevitable, then, that when new reform movements arose they should be eminently laic and should be organized independently from the Church.”⁴³ Independent, Davison claims; yet not entirely independent in fact. The shifting tensions between emerging movements “from below” and structures “from above” become an important motif that winds its way throughout the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries – and beyond. Perhaps the best example of this motif is found in the story of the Humiliati, a profoundly lay-centered movement in Italy during the transition from the twelfth to the thirteenth century (during Francis’s lifetime).⁴⁴ Members of this movement were condemned as heretics in 1184, but after appeal (and a change of papacy) were restored and affirmed in 1201 as a three-fold religious order, one segment of which was a community of married laity. This lay segment of the Humiliati are an early and critical example of what was later identified (and developed through association with the Franciscans) as a “Third Order.”⁴⁵

The church in 1200 was not what it was in 1050. It was stronger and wealthier. And yet at the same time the presence of voluntary poverty was everywhere: both in the diverse forms of monastic life formally affiliated with the church as well as among many hermits, wandering preachers, and lay associations seeking, on the edges of the church, to experiment with new ways of embodying the poverty of Christ.

Socio-Political and Economic Changes

This era was a season, not only of ecclesiastical change, but also of significant socio-political and economic changes. Francis was not ignorant of these changes. It would have been impossible,

43 Davison, *Forerunners*, 169.

44 For the history of this movement see especially, Frances Andrews, *The Early Humiliati* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

45 Davison also mentions the establishment of a Third Order among Theobald, a friend of the Norbertines. See *Forerunners*, 91.

within Assisi with its mere 3-4,000 inhabitants, to be ignorant of the forces thrusting this city into a new stage of its history.⁴⁶ Francis the teenager would have witnessed the transformation of Assisi after the popular uprising and removal of the duke of Spoleto following the death of Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. A new communal government of Assisi was formed, and the power of Assisi was held by the *popolo*, a rising bourgeoisie—and the social class of Francis’s birth. Tensions between the *popolo* and the previously established aristocracy led to a series of civil wars between neighboring cities. Francis himself likely fought in (and was imprisoned after) a battle with Perugia which Assisi lost. The commune of Assisi was forced to reintegrate members of the aristocracy into the town and to look to a papal legate for support in order to secure independence. It was not until 1210 that peace between factions was finally established: a peace between the aristocracy (labeled *maiores*) and the popular leaders (called *minores*). The two upper classes forged a somewhat democratic commune—input from the poorest citizens was disallowed—marked by an atmosphere of emancipation. Only the bishop had, in some sense, any “outside” power over the town. Yet, the new political freedoms for the citizens of Assisi did not translate into better conditions for the poorest classes. One by one Assisi annexed small neighboring towns, depriving the inhabitants in these towns of their freedoms and ultimately leading them into war against Assisi. Furthermore, the new bourgeoisie, as they acquired lands and dependencies, were just as harsh toward the peasants as had been the aristocracy. No one could have missed these developments. Thus, while it may be incorrect to identify the Franciscan movement as a mere response to political tensions, I think it is reasonable to assume that Francis was keenly aware of the social visions surrounding him and that he chose his form of life intentionally.

These socio-political changes cannot be separated from the economic changes taking place during this period. The form of exchange between parties rooted in a mutual understanding of gifts and obligations (sometimes called a “gift economy”) was giving way to a form of exchange by means of

46 For the background of Assisi during this time see Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 3-19; David Flood, “Franciscans at Work,” in *Franciscan Studies* Vol. 59 (2001), 21-23 and the sources referenced in these works.

currency.⁴⁷ At the same time, new vehicles of production and consumption were developing: forest clearing, cloth merchants, fairs or festivals, credit instruments and more. Some call it the emergence of a “profit economy,” an economy that gave birth to new rich and new poor alike. The new rich were the merchants, the rising *popolo*, who were able to link producers and processes of production with consumers. Francis’s own father, Pietro di Bernadone, was precisely one of these new rich. I have already mentioned the rising wealth of the church. The new poor were of two types: the first were the village peasants who were at the mercy of landowners; the second were the urban laborers whose employment was uncertain and who were forced to travel or to beg when circumstances became unbearable. As we shall see, Francis’s life and message is most clearly understood when comprehended within the matrix of the changing socio-political and economic conditions.

The Poverty of Francis and His Followers

The stage is now set to examine Francis’s own poverty and poverty relief. My aim in this section is not to survey the life of Francis but rather to reflect on critical moments in his life which, especially when understood within the context I have presented above, display the most important features of Francis’s own vision of economic life. Then, once we have glanced at a few critical moments of Francis’s life, we will turn to his writings.⁴⁸

The first moment to mention is Francis’s generosity and poverty relief, particularly as experienced through his encounter with lepers. Though the precise chronology of the events of Francis’s early life are uncertain, we can be confident that after Francis returned from war he

47 In this section I am drawing from Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Giacomo Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth: From Voluntary Poverty to Market Society*, translated by Donatella Melucci (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2009); and Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*. Though I would have liked, I was not able to explore Peter Spufford, *Money and Its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) or Odd Langholm, *Economics in the Medieval Schools* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

48 As mentioned above, “historical Francis” research is not currently in a state of easy consensus. The textual and interpretive issues are extremely complex. Thus my choice has been to read widely from diverse perspectives, to evaluate to the best of my ability the criteria used to make decisions about portraits and historical events, and then to highlight events and aspects of Francis’s life that seem to have reasonable support from scholarship and reason.

experienced a time of distraction, perhaps even a personality crisis. One component of this season was Francis's generosity. Throughout his youth Francis had given freely of his means to pay for the social engagements of his circle of friends. But after the summer of 1205 his liberality took on a different character, less of the aspiring knight and more of the seeking penitent. He was lavish in his almsgiving. And somewhere in this season Francis began to have contact with lepers. To quote Francis at the end of his life as he recounted his own testimony:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and *I showed mercy to them*. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.⁴⁹

A couple of things should be noticed. First, Francis tells the story of a change of heart. For Francis, generosity became not merely a means of securing eternal salvation or rectifying a problem of the social order, but rather was practiced within an aesthetic perception of the relationship between privileged and outcast. Second, care for lepers became an integral part of Franciscan life, but in a distinctive way. Augustine Thompson summarizes Francis's work after his initial conversion: "Francis continued to live and work among the lepers."⁵⁰ We know that around 1213 one of his followers was given the charge of a leper hospice at San Lazzaro. Still later (1220) Francis reversed the act of a Brother John who attempted to organize a group of friars into a religious order devoted to care for lepers. Francis would have been familiar with the Hospitaller orders of his time. Perhaps he knew of the lay Italian saints such as Omobono of Cremona (d. 1197) or Raimondo of Palmerio (d. 1200) who were recognized for their charitable activities.⁵¹ Francis, however, chose not to establish a professional charity, but rather to foster an incarnational brotherhood who "rejoice when they live among people

49 Francis, *Testament #1-2*, FA:ED, 1.124. On showing mercy see Sirach 35:4 and the footnote in FA:ED documenting the tradition behind this phrase; one which we have already seen above.

50 Thompson, *Francis of Assisi*, 19.

51 On the place of charitable activity in the canonization of twelfth- and early thirteenth-century lay saints, see Vauchez, *Laity in the Middle Ages*, 51-72.

considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside.”⁵²

A second moment to mention is Francis’s renunciation. Just as Francis’s change of heart through compassion for lepers is sometimes collapsed into a single encounter, so Francis’s renunciation is sometimes collapsed into the single incident of Francis stripping his clothes and handing them to his father. Though the symbol is powerful, there is much more to Francis’s renunciation than the abandonment of family and possessions. And once again, the key is to notice what Francis did and did not choose in this process.

It is a drama—portrayed so famously by painters and movie-makers—enacted in front of the bishop’s palace. The cast includes four types of characters and a fifth watches silently in the wings. There is Francis’s father Pietro di Bernadone, symbol of family and all that family meant in the thirteenth century. True, there was an immediate concern about some money that Pietro believed was due him. But more deeply Francis’s father was losing his own son: the heir to his business and family inheritance, an heir into whom he had invested heart and soul. Whatever the complex of motives, Pietro moves to have Francis formally disowned and expelled from the commune of Assisi. The consuls, however, deemed this a religious issue and sent Francis and his father to bishop Guido I. It is before the bishop that Francis removes his clothing. The bishop covers him not simply to hide his nakedness, but perhaps more as an act of welcoming Francis under the care of the church.⁵³ His father watches as Francis willingly renounces all rights to family resources and mother’s dowry, for the sake of serving his heavenly father. Townspeople watch as Francis willingly breaks with the commune of Assisi within which he as citizen would have naturally served and been able to contribute to the unique experiment in democracy developing at that time. From this time on, Francis lived outside the walls (and the legal protection) of the city. André Vauchez describes Francis’s risks: “By placing himself outside the

52 Francis, “The Earlier Rule” (The Rule without a Papal Seal - 1221) #IX.2; FA:ED 1.70.

53 On this event see Thompson, *Francis of Assisi*, 14-16, 184-85; Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 25-29.

protection of the institutions of the city, he became a wild man, a kind of savage closer to nature than to civilization.”⁵⁴

Francis abandoned the security of family and town and placed himself within the jurisdiction of the church. Yet he did not choose the route that would have seemed most obvious to his contemporaries. Francis did not join one of the nearby monasteries. Nor did he volunteer to enter the ranks of the Crusades. For whatever reason—perhaps the Spirit of God was leading him elsewhere—Francis chose the life of a lay penitent, but a penitent outside the city walls.⁵⁵ As a penitent he devoted himself to prayer, to attendance at religious services, and to good works (care for lepers, rebuilding sanctuaries). His practice of poverty was more severe than the simplicity generally characteristic of lay penitential expressions, yet as we noted earlier this phrase, “began to do penance” was exactly how Francis chose to describe his own movement toward Christ. If anything, Francis, at this stage of his life, would most likely have been perceived as some kind of penitential religious hermit. Yet he would not remain a hermit for long.

The third moment in Francis’s life I want to mention is the birth of the brotherhood as it emerged during 1208-1209. We must remember that the formal name of the Franciscan order is the “Order of the *Friars Minor*” (little brothers), though at the earliest times they identified themselves as “penitents from Assisi.” Francis and his early followers saw themselves more as a loose penitential brotherhood and less as a formal religious order. Francis describes the key elements of this period in the following words:

And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me.⁵⁶

54 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 28.

55 On the confraternities of penitents see Thompson, *Cities of God*, 69-102; Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 107-127.

56 Francis, *Testament* #14-15; FA:ED, 1.125.

Although the group was a loose brotherhood, the events of this period gave birth to a recognized community with a distinctive vision.

This meant the inclusion of followers. While it is difficult to identify the social status of Francis's early followers, it is fair to say that nearly all of them made significant sacrifices to follow Francis.⁵⁷ But what kind of life were they to follow? Francis himself relates that "no one showed [him] what [he] had to do." He had no model of monastic or penitential life to imitate. Yet "the Most High Himself" revealed to Francis the way. The oft-repeated narrative of this revelation is the story of the opening of the Gospels and hearing the call. The details of this event differ in the various early accounts of Francis's life. Nevertheless, the primary point remains: Francis (or Francis and a few followers) heard Jesus's call to renunciation and itinerant ministry given in passages like Matthew 10:17-21; 16:24-28 and Luke 9:1-6 and found therein "the pattern of the Holy Gospel."

The pattern or form of life of the early brotherhood included a few key elements. One was joining with and caring for lepers and others in need. A second was their relationship with priests, churches, and liturgy. Though Francis has always been seen as a churchman and is often distinguished from itinerant expressions which were highly critical of the church, it has only been recently that Francis's liturgical devotion has been given the attention it deserves. A third was manual labor. We are usually aware of Francis's efforts at rebuilding churches. Yet, the primacy of work is declared in chapter seven of his Earlier Rule (the *Regula non-Bullata* of 1221, which did not receive papal approval). Francis re-emphasized its place in his final *Testament*. Manual labor was, for the early Franciscans, much more than just the offer of a helping hand. Simple work was an integral part of Francis's vision of life as a brotherhood.⁵⁸ Then, "when it is necessary" (*Early Rule* VII.8; IX.3) the friars were permitted to seek alms, though of course not in money but in food for the day. Begging, working, sharing life with and caring for the outcasts, having no home: this was all part of Francis's

57 Compare for example, Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 46 with the approach of Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches*.

58 On this see Flood, "Franciscans at Work," and Flood, *Daily Labor*.

vision of a brotherhood characterized by whole-hearted abandonment to God. Yet this was certainly not a monastic flight from the world, at least as most perceived monasticism. Vauchez writes,

Francis does not flee the world. On the contrary, he rushes to plunge himself into it in order, like his Lord, to conquer it and to reintegrate back into society the poor and all those whom power and money have excluded from it.⁵⁹

A final element of Franciscan life was preaching. Scholars disagree on how early Francis began to see preaching as a constituent part of his ministry and on how important preaching was for the early Franciscans. Debates aside, this much can be affirmed: sometime after their verbal papal approval as a community they took active steps to proclaim a message of repentance to those who might listen. In 1209, Francis and his followers went to Rome to seek the approval of the pope for their community. Whether their quest was the result of their sense of the need for official recognition in order to pursue their preaching or whether it was in Rome that they received the mandate to preach, the result was that pope Innocent III gave them verbal confirmation as a community and along with this the right to preach penance.⁶⁰

Thus by 1210 or so Francis had a vision, a few followers, a pattern of life to pursue, and formal approval for the community and the work he was to do. A unique brotherhood was born.

In describing Francis's own life of poverty I have drawn attention to three early moments in Francis's life. I have done so because I believe these three moments together to unveil the distinctive character of Francis's own vision of life with God in poverty, particularly when understood within the context of the various options which surrounded him.

Yet one final moment of Francis's life deserves mention, particularly because of how it shows Francis's approach to the voluntary poverty he wished to foster. This was his resignation from leadership in September of 1220. Francis had returned from a mission in North Africa to find his

⁵⁹ Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 32.

⁶⁰ Scholars are united in their regard for Innocent at this moment as being the right man at the right time. Both Davison, *Forerunners*, and Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, make this point, and later scholars affirm this conclusion.

community in disarray. Those he had left in charge were seeking privileges from the Holy See for the women's order, were requiring greater dietary restrictions, were establishing a formal group to provide service to lepers. His brotherhood—now a large movement—was becoming something unlike what he had originally dreamed. And perhaps Francis realized that he was personally unable to navigate the movement through its next stage of growth. And so he retired, leaving the judicial authority of the Franciscans in the hands of others. Yet, in doing so Francis perhaps gave himself to the leadership of his movement in a different form. André Vauchez writes:

Aware of the changes which had become inevitable, the Poor Man of Assisi was going henceforth to limit their extent by proposing himself as a model: certainly not to put himself forward but in order to provide the friars a living illustration of the way to live as a Friar Minor.⁶¹

The tales of Francis's behavior during this period show him reproving the laxity of his own followers through modeling the kind of identification with the least which Francis had promoted from the start.⁶² I think these tales should not be simply understood simply as statements of the interests of a later generation of "spiritual" Franciscans. Rather I suspect that Francis himself used his own life practice in this period as a way of trying to lead his movement to recover the Franciscan vision.

Scholars disagree with regard to how early or how central poverty was for the historical Francis. Some also question the benefit of Francis's choice of life for the sake of the involuntary poor. I cannot resolve all these questions. My point here is simply to say that Francis of Assisi, in a manner unique to his time, pursued abandonment to God expressed through an equal abandonment in identification with the least. There were other groups at this same period who practiced begging, or who were itinerant preachers, or who desired poverty. None, however, did all of them together quite like Francis.

61 Vauchez, 99.

62 See for example the story of Francis dressing up as a beggar to eat dinner with his fellow brothers (2 Celano 61; FA:ED 2.287).

Francis on Poverty

Having explored examples of Francis’s practice from a few key moments in his life, we now turn to examine the writings of Francis to see what Francis himself communicated to others about poverty. This task is itself beset with difficulties first, because Francis seldom wrote and when he did so he used secretaries. It is difficult to prove that the manuscripts we now possess reflect the breadth and the weight of Francis’s own concerns. Furthermore some of the key writings—namely the Franciscan Rules of 1221 and 1223—were the works not merely of Francis’s hand, but also incorporate both clerical assistants and papal interests. For this reason I will restrict myself to a few comments on Francis’s writings that best illustrate the Franciscan approach to the questions of who should be poor, how poor, and why. At the close of this section I will link this chapter’s discussion on Francis to our previous chapter’s presentation of Francis’s biblical and historical background. My conviction is that one of Francis’s particular contributions to the history of Christian economic life was his recovery of a few biblical themes.

One of Francis’s earliest poverty-related themes is the theme of the dangers or the ephemeral character of wealth. We find this in three of Francis’s early writings: in the first and second versions of his “Letter to the Faithful” (the first written somewhere between 1209-1215, the second perhaps 1220), and in his “Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples” (also perhaps 1220). He warns those who do not do pursue God that “you think that you will possess this world’s vanities for a long time, but you are deceived because a day and an hour will come of which you give no thought, which you do not know, . . . And they leave their wealth to their relatives and friends who take and divide it and afterwards say: “May his soul be cursed because he could have given us more and acquired more than what he distributed to us.””⁶³ Likewise he calls on the Rulers of his time to remember their time of death when,

63 Francis of Assisi, “Earlier Exhortation” II.14,17; FA:ED 1.43. This is repeated with slight variations in “Later Admonition and Exhortation” #72-85; FA:ED 1. 50-51.

everything they think they have shall be taken from them. The wiser and more powerful they may have been in this world, the greater will be the punishment they will endure in hell. Therefore I strongly advise you, my Lords, to put aside all care and preoccupation and receive the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with fervor in holy remembrance of Him. May you foster such honor to the Lord among the people entrusted to you that every evening an announcement may be made by a messenger or some other sign that praise and thanksgiving may be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God.⁶⁴

This last reference clearly mixes the theme of the ephemeral character of wealth with Francis's own sense of the value of the powerful using their position to nurture positive relationships among the population in general. In the later version of the "Letter to the Faithful" he urges his audience, after proclaiming the glories of the Gospel, to love God and to "produce worthy fruits of penance," echoing Luke 3:8-14 where John the Baptist instructs his own hearers to reorder their economic habits in a spirit of mutual care.⁶⁵ A few sentences further Francis urges his readers to "have charity and humility and give alms because it washes the stains of our sins from our souls. For, although people lose everything they leave behind in this world, they, nevertheless, carry with them the rewards of charity and the alms they have given for which they will receive a reward and a fitting repayment from the Lord."⁶⁶

Whereas Francis appears to be addressing Christians more generally in the first part of the letter, once he comes to #36 (and I think through #47) he speaks to "religious," those who have taken vows. He mentions that the religious "are bound to do more and greater things, but not to overlook these (that he has mentioned above). He speaks of hating our bodies with their vices, loving our enemies, and then Francis states, "We must observe the commands and counsels of our Lord Jesus Christ" (#38). He cannot be speaking to "all the faithful" with this sentence, but must be exhorting

64 Francis of Assisi "A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples," #4; FA:ED 1. 58.

65 Francis of Assisi, "Later Admonition and Exhortation" #25; FA:ED 1. 47. See also his reference in "Earlier Exhortation" I.4; FA:ED 1.41.

66 Francis of Assisi, "Later Admonition and Exhortation" #30-31; FA:ED 1. 47.

those who have joined orders to be honor their call to the counsels of poverty and chastity (at least).

Francis moves in the next sentences to speak of obedience.

At the beginning of this same document Francis offers praise to God who brought the Word to earth through his incarnation by the virgin Mary. In an uncharacteristic reference to Paul, Francis mentions 2 Corinthians 8:9, proclaiming that “*Though He was rich, He wished, together with the most Blessed Virgin, His mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else.*” Francis here expresses a deep sense of the humble poverty of Christ, a poverty he desired to imitate in in his own life.⁶⁷

There is also a suggestion in his later “Letter to the Faithful”--in a prayer--of a theme that Francis would later express more fully in his “Canticle.” As he closes his comments to those who do penance he pleads to God, saying, “Let every creature in heaven, on earth, in the sea and in the depths, give praise, glory, honor and blessing: To Him Who suffered so much, Who has given and will give in the future every good . . .”⁶⁸ Here Francis calls upon all creatures to give praise to God, the Creator and provider of every good.

Francis’s earliest writings, letters and exhortations, communicate an approach to our questions that is not that far removed from others of his time. Francis recognizes the distinction between “religious” and “seculars,” and consequently assumes that some will make commitments to poverty and others will not. Indeed, most of what is written in the early “Letters” was aimed rulers and faithful, hopefully penitent, Christians. He acknowledges God the Provider. He warns of the dangers of wealth. He encourages charity and equitable uses of resources. Francis’s mention of the poverty of Christ echos the discussion of apostolic life that developed in the twelfth century. Unless we regard his care for the liturgical accessories as a comment on worthy expense, Francis’s letters to the clergy and to the provincial leaders make no mention of wealth or poverty.

67 Francis of Assisi, “Later Admonition and Exhortation” #5; FA:ED 1. 46. The themes of the humility of the incarnation and of the poverty and humility of Christ are developed more fully in William J. Short, *Poverty and Joy: The Franciscan Tradition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 37-71.

68 Francis of Assisi, “Later Admonition and Exhortation” #61-62; FA:ED 1. 49.

The “Rule for Hermitages” and the “Earlier Rule” express Francis’s approach to poverty as directed toward the members of the order. The “Rule for Hermitages” may have been written between 1217 and 1221. The “Earlier Rule” was a document that gradually developed from the brief statement approved by Innocent III in 1209 and the final draft completed in 1221. While scholars disagree on the nature of the Earlier Rule (*Regula non-Bullata* – ultimately not approved by the Papacy) and its precise relationship to the later Rule of 1223 (*Regula Bullata* – approved by the Papacy), I will here assume that whether a “working paper,” or a “foundational document” the Earlier Rule is the best text from which “one can attempt to reconstitute the project of Francis.”⁶⁹

Not all Franciscans traveled as itinerant preachers and virtually all the early Franciscans had seasons of “lent,” seeking God as a penitent within hermitages. In his instructions for hermit dwellers, Francis mentions two themes which are relevant to his understanding of poverty. The first is his dividing the hermitages into mothers or “Marthas” who is obliged serve and sons or “Marys” who devote themselves to prayer. After a time, they may switch roles so that the servant may have opportunity to pray and the other to serve. The spirit of fraternal and mutual care pervades this document. Even in the environment of a private hermitage, Francis saw his order as a brotherhood of mutual care. It is also here that Francis first mentions the practice of begging alms as “poor little ones,” a practice which is further described in the Rules.

The first chapter of the Earlier Rule begins: “The rule and life of these brothers is this, namely: “to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own.”⁷⁰ It is Francis’s first reference to poverty in this Rule and is also one of the Church’s earliest identifications of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as the three primary commitments of the religious life.⁷¹ Innocent III had

69 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 105. Compare for example, Thompson, *Francis of Assisi*, 92-100, 249-52.

70 Francis of Assisi, “The Earlier Rule (The Rule Without a Papal Seal” Chapter 1.1; FA:ED 1. 63. References to this document will henceforth be made in the text by referring to chapter and verse, as (1.1).

71 Thus John Van Engen summarizes development nicely: “The three Benedictine vows (stability, obedience, conversion of *mores*) gave way to “poverty, chastity, and obedience,” a shift so successful that the latter became known simply as the “three essential marks” (*substantialia*) of religious life.” *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

recently used this same language in 1198 to confirm the Rule of the Trinitarians, a small order dedicated to rescuing captives. Records suggest that communities of Humiliati identified the same commitments around this time.⁷² We have seen that poverty has been associated with the evangelical counsels of religious life for centuries. Yet, as late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century groups began to identify their lives not by stability within a local community but rather within the context of a more fluid group of consecrated individuals, the language of obedience, chastity, and poverty made the commitments of new friars more explicit.

What is more significant for our purposes here is the mention of poverty: “without anything of their own” (*sine proprio*). While—as mentioned—this language was used for the Trinitarians, the phrase bore special meaning among the Franciscans. Monastic houses usually saw their commitment to poverty in terms of an individual renunciation of ownership in the context of a community which possessed all things in common. Those who joined a monastic community would, upon entrance, divest themselves of their properties and possessions, giving them either to the poor, a church, or to the monastic community itself. A representative of the monastery would then distribute tools, books, clothing and such as needed.⁷³ The kind of poverty advocated by Francis, however, was not merely *individual* poverty, but *conventual* poverty. What this means is that their communities (convents) themselves were not allowed to own possessions. It is important to remember that estates and houses donated to religious communities required administration. Renouncing the ownership of common properties was in part a practical decision. Conventual poverty released the friars from the burden of managing estates and resources and freed them to travel wherever ministry was most appropriate. A sister movement to the Franciscans—the followers of Dominic de Guzmán, who would become the

72 On the Trinitarians see Francis of Assisi, “The Earlier Rule (The Rule Without a Papal Seal” Chapter 1.1; FA:ED 1. 63fn c. For vows in the early Humiliati see, Andrews, *Early Humiliati*, 172-201.

73 A good example of this may be found in the *Rule of Benedict*, chapters 33-34. See Timothy Fry, editor. *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict In Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 231. For an example from the twelfth century see Rudolph of Camaldoli, “The Eremitical Rule” #31, in Peter-Damian Belisle, *Camaldolese Spirituality: Essential Sources* (Bloomington, Ohio: Ercam Editions, Holy Family Hermitage, 2007), 245-46.

Order of Preachers—were also developing their own approach to conventual poverty with the same kinds of concerns in mind between 1206 and 1220.⁷⁴ The practice of conventual poverty was also similar to the approach of Vaudés and his followers (the Waldensians), who “renounced all personal possessions in the name of poverty, believing that a preacher who was dedicated to his mission did not have the time to concern himself with his own belongings.”⁷⁵ Yet particularly for Francis, the choice of conventual poverty was less a matter of ministry expedience and more an expression of identification with the absolute poverty of Christ, his earliest disciples, and the involuntary poor.

Francis identifies the Gospel concern that motivates him in the next sentences of the Earlier Rule. Francis instructs them to live without anything of their own, “and to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ, who says . . .” (1.1-2). The point of Franciscan commitment is to follow Jesus: both his teaching and his way of life. Francis specifies what this means by recounting what our Lord Jesus Christ says. Francis goes on to reference a number of Gospel passages: indeed the very passages that he likely heard in the “opening the Gospels” story mentioned above and other similar passages (Matthew 16:24; 19:21, 29; Mark 10:29; Luke 14:26; 18:22-30 – Earlier Rule 1.2-5). It is a call to follow Christ’s invitation to earthly renunciation and heavenly reward. The next chapter of the Rule specifies the details of this renunciation: how a prospective friar is to be received into the order. The person who wishes to join the order, insofar as he is willing and capable, is to sell everything they own and give it all to the poor (2.4). Notice the offering is to be given—following the instructions of the Gospel passages—to the *poor*: not the community, the order, or a church. Francis instructs those arranging for the entry of the new brother not to interfere in the handling of the financial arrangements, and especially not to accept money. He then offers an encouragement: “Nevertheless, if the brothers are

74 For a nice comparison of the Franciscan and the Dominican approaches to poverty and the apostolic life see Simon Tugwell, “Introduction” to *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1982), 16-18. On the evolution of the Dominican approach to poverty see Guy Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic: The Grace of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 138-54; Donald Goergan, *St. Dominic: The Story of a Preaching Friar* (NY: Paulist Press, 2016), 80-82.

75 Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c.1170-c.1570*, translated by Claire Davison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Kindle loc. 252.

in need, they can accept, like other poor people, whatever is needed for the body excepting money” (2.7).

The phrase “like other poor people” is important, for having already introduced our identification with Christ and the earliest disciples Francis, in the remainder of chapter 2, introduces the idea of identification with the voluntary poor. Francis identifies the clothing of the brothers. At the end of this chapter he states:

All the other brothers who have already promised obedience may have one tunic with a hood and, if it is necessary, another without a hood and a cord and trousers. Let all the brothers wear poor clothes and, with the blessing of God, they can patch them with sackcloth and other pieces, for the Lord says in the Gospel: *Those who wear expensive clothing and live in luxury and who dress in fine garments are in the houses of kings.* Even though they may be called hypocrites, let them nevertheless not cease doing good nor seek expensive clothing in this world, so that they may have a garment in the kingdom of heaven. (2.13-15, italics original).

Francis, here in the first chapters of his Rule, is presenting a vision of what André Vauchez calls “an upside-down world.” “For the less a human being possesses, the more he or she belongs to God: the sovereign Good who is at the origin of all goods, . . . To live in poverty is to thus return to the perfection of the beginning—that of Adam and Eve before the Fall—and to rediscover the only true wealth, which is that of shared love.”⁷⁶ Francis echos this theme again and again as he provides instructions concerning property, money, books and so on. Indeed, though the friars must periodically reside in dwellings, they are not to “make any place their own” or “contend with anyone for it” but rather “whoever comes to them, friend or foe, thief or robber, let him be received with kindness” (7.13-14). This openhandedness even with regards to one’s temporary homeless encampment communicates the degree of both trust in God and identification with the voluntary poor that characterizes Francis’s Earlier Rule.

76 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 105.

Francis's sense of identification with the "lesser" appears again in his outline of the Franciscan manner of serving and working (chapter 7). He begins by prohibiting the brothers from serving as "treasurers or overseers" wherever they are. Rather "let them instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house" (7.1-2). Francis then identifies the first of the occupations of the friars: work. "Let the brothers who know how to work do so and exercise their trade they have learned, provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly" (7.3-4). While scholars interpret Francis's instructions regarding work variously, I am persuaded that these instructions, when placed alongside comments regarding manual labor elsewhere in Francis's writings and in the lives of Francis,⁷⁷ function to demonstrate further the "upside-down world" vision of Francis.

Once again we must interpret Francis in the context of his surrounding options. He has already renounced his Assisi citizenship and his association with both the aristocracy and the rising merchant class. Though he affirms the value of work, this is not some quasi-capitalist vision of profit for the sake of reinvestment. Nor is Francis making the choice for specifically monastic labor. As we mentioned, Francis's vision is a plunge *into* the world rather than a rhythm of work and prayer within a cloister. Neither is Francis merely making the choice of the preaching movements wherein the life of the members is about mendicant proclamation. Times of prayer and preaching are included, but work is mentioned first. And indeed, Francis even permits the ownership of the tools suitable for plying one's trade (7.9). Something unique is going on here.

I think it is reasonable to interpret Francis's choice of the ways of life of the friars (a loose mix of manual work, care for lepers, preaching, begging) as a conscious social statement. Francis longs for an economic brotherhood of simple mutual aid. Work is performed not for the sake of social or economic advancement, but to meet one's needs and to contribute to the common good wherever most appropriate to the person and the situation at hand. When necessary they may seek alms "like other poor people" (7.8). They are to make their needs known to one another (9.10-11). Francis does not see

⁷⁷ Compare Thompson, *Francis of Assisi*, 93; Dalarun, *Misadventure*, 240; Flood, *The Daily Labor*. Flood treats all the key mentions of manual labor in the early sources.

his community as a monastic order, a preaching movement, or profitable venture. Rather he sees the little brothers as just that: a band of those who work as they can whether from work or from begging, spending time caring for and living among the neediest of society, not owning or managing estates, wholeheartedly abandoned to the sovereign provision of God (see 17.17ff).

And it is just this vision, I think, that lies behind Francis's distaste for money. When one compares the Rules and Constitutions of the religious communities surrounding Francis—Augustinian, Benedictine, Camaldolese, Carthusian, Hospitallers, Premonstratensian, Dominican, even Waldensian—one discovers that Francis expresses a unique rejection of money.⁷⁸ He devotes an entire chapter to this topic (chapter 8) in the Earlier Rule urging his brothers to “not think of coin or money having any greater usefulness than stone” (8.3). And again, “If we find coins anywhere, let us pay no more attention to them than to the dust we trample underfoot” (8.6). Francis allows for the use of money to provide for the manifest needs of the sick or of lepers, but these are extreme exceptions. Francis bookends this chapter with biblical warnings regarding greed and the desire for gain. What does Francis dislike about money? This is a question that Vauchez explores explicitly in his biography of Francis.⁷⁹ It stirs up an evil desire that distorts relationships. Money produces an illusory sense of security for those who possess it. Hoarding money also prevented the circulation of resources toward the development of the common good. Money reduced objects to an exchange value. Francis simply wanted out of this system. Similarly, historian of economics Giacomo Todeschini states that for Francis, “Money is represented as an object that is not able to satisfy needs and necessities and, basically, as a superfluous entity for those who can identify the correct measure of needs and necessities and can enter into a network of relationships which allows for their adequate satisfaction.”⁸⁰

With Vauchez, I see the project of Francis, expressed in his rejection of money, as a desire “to give

78 Extreme stories about money can be found in the Lives and Sayings of the desert tradition. See for example the chapter on “Poverty” in John Wortley, translator, *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Systematic Collection* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2012), 89-97.

79 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 107-110.

80 Giacomo Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth: From Voluntary Poverty to Market Society*, translated by Donatella Melucci (Saint Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute, 2009), 69.

birth in the heart of the world a society without money and without goods, where an “economy of poverty would prevail, characterized by liberality and the redistribution to disadvantaged persons of all that was not strictly indispensable to the survival of the community. At the base of this kind of life were primarily work and secondly, begging.”⁸¹

I could go on to develop Francis’s teaching in other literature, but I believe what has been presented is sufficient to provide a glimpse into Francis’s heart. I believe Francis of Assisi sought to recover, however consciously or unconsciously in both his life and writings, a number of fundamental Christian economic values rooted in the Christian Scriptures. Radical dependence on God, imitation of the poverty and freedom of Christ, community life as a simple lay brotherhood of mutual care, the ephemeral character of earthly wealth in light of the incomparable riches of Christ, compassion for (and solidarity with) the least: these are all values which characterize both Christian Scripture and Francis’s own life and teachings. We are now prepared to see how Francis’s vision was transformed in the ensuing generations of his interpreters.

81 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 107.

Chapter 3 After Francis: The Poverty Debate in Franciscan Circles and Beyond

Introduction -

The Franciscan ideal was re-presented and reinterpreted even within Francis's lifetime. After his death in 1226, discussion about this ideal became well-nigh obsessive. And while scholars may dispute the centrality of the theme of poverty in Francis's own life and writings, no one doubts that the century following was marked by controversies surrounding the ideal of "poverty," often involving Franciscan friars. Furthermore, these very discussions about poverty led to significant developments within economic theory more generally. Thus Diana Wood, for example, in her introduction to medieval economic thought, draws her research particularly from "the late medieval period, that is, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the period when the friars were active."⁸²

I think it is fair to say that coming to grips with poverty was one significant vehicle through which thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe navigated its own identity. Poverty-related issues were discussed within a number of different spheres: between factions of the Franciscan community itself, between Franciscans and Dominicans, between mendicants and "seculars" (Franciscans and Dominicans, on the one hand and scholars and priests with no attachment to vowed religious life, on the other), in the context of the rise and establishment of "Third Orders," and as part of the development of economic thought and practice more generally. What is most relevant about all this for the present essay is that in virtually every case, discussion hovered around our three questions: "Who should be poor? How poor? and Why?" The century between 1226 and 1326 marks a moment in Western history when these very questions were considered both widely and deeply. Consequently we

82 Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, loc 121. This is the central thesis of Giacomo Todeschini's landmark *Franciscan Wealth*.

would do well to re-listen to the century's conversation as we ponder the nature of our own relationship with wealth and poverty today.

Developments Before Francis's Death

In 1217 Dominic de Guzman, founder of the Order of Preachers (a kindred mendicant order to the Franciscans) sent seven of his followers to Paris to receive training so that they might become better equipped to refute heresy and to serve the church as ordained clergy. Since the Dominican friars made a vow of poverty they, were not able to purchase a house in which to live and study. The university gave them use of a student dormitory and permission to be instructed by professor and diocesan priest John of St. Albans. The arrangement worked well and the cadre of Dominican friars in training grew. Professor John of St. Giles filled the instructor role for the preachers in 1226 after John of St. Albans retired. As we shall see, mendicant involvement in the University of Paris triggered a controversy with the diocesan university faculty in which voluntary poverty featured significantly.

The important matter to notice here at 1217 is the commitment of Dominic and his followers to preaching, for it reveals an early distinction between the Dominicans (the Order of Preachers) and the Franciscans (the Friars Minor) with regard to poverty, and particularly with regard to the question of why one would choose poverty. The Dominicans saw their ministry fundamentally as one of preaching, particularly in regions where heresy was spreading. Early on they recognized that two factors were especially valuable for the success of this preaching ministry: first, quality training in theology to enable the Dominican friars to refute heretical teaching and second, a practice of voluntary poverty to demonstrate the Christian life in an attractive manner among the people they wished to reach. Although the distinction can be overdrawn—and Dominicans and Franciscans influenced each other in the decades which followed—I think it is fair to say that while early Franciscans tended to emphasize the vision of poverty, early Dominicans tended to emphasize the function of poverty. Dominican historian Simon Tugwell summarizes this as a Dominican interest in the *apostolic* life and a Franciscan interest

in the apostolic *life*.⁸³ Thus even within Francis's lifetime we see the development of mendicant orders motivated by slightly different views of the purpose of voluntary poverty.

A second development within Francis's lifetime that must be acknowledged is the establishment of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. Associations of penitents had existed for centuries, flowering in the Middle Ages particularly through the convergence of both an awakening of lay spirituality and interest in the apostolic life.⁸⁴ There is a growing consensus that the versions of Francis's *Letter to the Faithful* were more than likely exhortations given to lay penitents, many of whom were interested in his life and message. In 1221 Cardinal Hugolino or some jurists surrounding him summarized and approved the life (the *Memoriale propositi*) of a group called "The Brothers and Sisters of Penance." While scholars differ regarding Francis's influence in the formation and development of what later became called the Franciscan "Third Order," it is significant for our purposes simply to notice the burgeoning interest among laity—who did not renounce possessions—in a form of life which at least reflects an admiration for Francis and aspires to a life of intentional simplicity. With the approval of the *Memoriale propositi*, we recognize a new "who" that chooses to be poor, and yet their "how poor" is not the radical abandonment that Francis himself lived. As we shall see, this association plays a role in developments later in the century.

In 1223 a Rule of the Friars Minor was formally approved by Pope Honorius III. This Rule of Life has been, since that time, the official document for the Franciscan Orders. This Rule was a more properly statutory document and was the fruit of a collaboration between Francis, the leaders of the Order, Cardinal Hugolino, and perhaps other officials. While this Later Rule (the Rule of 1223 is often identified as either the "Later Rule" or the *Regula Bullata*) conveys essentially the same content as the Earlier (1221) Rule, there are significant differences and some of these regard the life of poverty.

Manual labor is presented not as an obligation upon all the brothers but an appropriate activity for "the

83 See Simon Tugwell, "Introduction," 19.

84 See M. Stewart, "De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam" *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Roma: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991), 90-134; André Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 119-127; and Thompson, *Cities of God*, 69-102, 273-308.

friars to whom God has given the grace of working.”⁸⁵ The friars are more strictly charged not to “make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all” (6.1). The Later Rule continues:

As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made Himself poor in this world. This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue (6.2-4).

The theme is the same—live in the world as poor strangers. Yet the details are not the same. Begging has supplanted working.

A final poverty-related difference between the Earlier and the Later Rules is the stipulation in the Later Rule regarding “spiritual friends.” The chapter in the Later Rule on money removes the exception clause which permitted use of money for necessary situations. In its place the Later Rule states that designated friars “may take special care through their spiritual friends to provide for the needs of the sick and the clothing of the others according to places, seasons and cold climates, as they judge necessary, saving always that, as stated above, they do not receive coins or money.” Franciscans soon felt the necessity for basic elements of stable living and ministry: housing, clothing, books. This phrase regarding “spiritual friends” in the approved Rule enabled them to make arrangements such that items could be bought by someone else and donated to the Franciscans. But just what this meant was unclear.

I have mentioned above how, as the Franciscan Order grew and in the process became more clerical and perhaps more “soft” than Francis had desired, Francis retired from official leadership and chose to model the ideal form of life by living it publicly. In his final Testament, Francis re-iterated the value of manual labor. He also included an important qualification regarding how they receive those

⁸⁵ Francis of Assisi, “The Later Rule (Chapter 5.1; FA:ED 1. 102. References to this document will henceforth be made in the text by referring to chapter and verse, as (1.1).

things others (the “spiritual friends”) provide for them. Francis declares, “Let the brothers be careful not to receive in any way churches or poor dwellings or anything else built for them unless they are according to the holy poverty we have promised in the *Rule. As pilgrims and strangers*, let them always be guests there.”⁸⁶ What is important to note here is that Francis is not merely speaking about the *ownership* of property (all were in agreement that the Franciscans were not to own churches and such) but rather about the *use* of property. Not owning churches or dwellings or anything else, did not give friars freedom to use facilities and such that were not “according to the holy poverty we have promised.” Francis is reminding his followers of the “how poor” he expected in the context of an Order that was already beginning to divide on this issue. Some friars saw the order as a missionary army, reaching people for Christ with a fresh message and a simple life. But if they were to travel and minister in towns they would need dwellings, supplies and a mode of life that would befit this ministry. This kind of arrangement was permitted in the Later Rule. Three years later, the Francis of the Testament, however, responded to these voices with a warning. The Friars Minor were to use those things they needed only insofar as a poor person would use them.

Already within Francis’s lifetime we find hints of the issues which will be discussed more centrally after his death. Who should be poor? Is this the preserve of vowed religious or is it appropriate for laity to join in some kind of commitment to voluntary poverty? How poor should they be? Is voluntary poverty a measure of appropriate penitential simplicity in light of the tasks or ministry or lay occupations we lead? Or is voluntary poverty a radical identification with the least, a modeling of a new social arrangement that abandons all privileges? Is it possible to welcome various expressions of voluntary (and involuntary) poverty within a single Christian culture or Order? Why choose poverty? Is poverty a means by which we gain favor among the lower class, toward whom we aim our mission? Or perhaps we choose poverty as both a means and an ideal of relationship with God: a

86 Francis of Assisi, “The Testament,” #24. FA:ED 1.126.

wholehearted vulnerability before the One who provides? These are the questions that pervade the religious and economic history of the century following Francis's death.

1226-1230

In 1228 Hugolino, now Pope Gregory IX, pronounced Francis a saint highlighting the role the Franciscans served as mendicant preachers. Gregory called Francis "a beacon whom the rich viewed with contempt, but whom God had prepared for the appointed time, sending him into his vineyard to root out the thorns and brambles after having put the attacking Philistines to flight, to light up the path to our homeland, and to reconcile people to God by his zealous admonition and encouragement."⁸⁷ Only two years later pope Gregory issued another bull, *quo elongati*, which effectively nullified the validity of Francis' final Testament, in part due to complaints by friars that they were not able to maintain its severity with respect to the issue of poverty. John Moorman, in his *A History of the Franciscan Order* describes Gregory's dilemma of this time well:

"On the one hand, he had to face the extremists who would hear of no departure from the strictest poverty and were content that the Order should continue as a band of itinerant evangelists, working in the fields, begging their food from door to door, On the other hand, he had to face those who frankly believed that the days of begging-bowls might now be regarded as past and who hoped and intended that the Order would develop on more monastic lines with its own convents and with the growth of scholarship."⁸⁸

The Testament had not been drawn up with the collaboration of the ministers (the leaders) of the order, and was therefore difficult to apply the example of Francis's own life in individual cases. Furthermore, the Later Rule made clear specifications for Franciscans to make use of "spiritual friends" who could

87 Papal Bull "Mira Circa nos," *Bullarium Franciscanum Romanum Pontificum*, ed. Giovanni Gaicinto Sbaraglia (Rome: Edizioni Porziuncula, 1759), cited in Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 222.

88 John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From Its Origins to the Year 1517* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 89-90.

themselves own things that they might allow friars to use when needed. *Quo elongati* defined the arrangements for the management of these goods and services, making careful distinctions between property, momentary possession, and use of goods. Thus in Canterbury, for example, someone donated a piece of land and built a chapel which could house the friars serving in the hospital there. Since the friars were not allowed to own property, the deed was simply transferred to the city, who were glad to have the friars ministering in the community. The irony of this kind of legislation is that it set up a necessary and ongoing political-economic relationship between Franciscan friars and generous (and wealthy) owners. Needless to say, it was not always easy to determine what was “need” and what was “superfluous,” particularly when the generous owners saw they were simply glad to be associated with the friars work. Thus, as Giacomo Todeschini observes, “It is this subtle sensitivity to the distance between necessary and superfluous, this comprehension of the impossibility of quantifying the exact measure of subjective needs, that induces and perhaps forces Franciscans to study, in the decades after the founder’s death in 1226, the meanings of words such as using, utilizing, property, and possession.”⁸⁹

Two other events deserve brief mention as they influence the development particularly of the relationships between seculars and mendicants in the university environment. In 1229, due to some violent actions on the part of city officials in Paris, the university faculty chose to strike, nearly closing the university for two years. In this process, one of the professors left his post entirely. St. John of Giles, the instructor of the Dominican friars remained in his post and a Dominican (Roland) took Boniface’s place. In 1230 John of Giles himself converted and joined the Dominican order. This meant that the university now had two faculty who were mendicants. Furthermore these mendicants did not follow the lead of the other university faculty in choosing to strike and were therefore regarded by the rest of the faculty as “strike breakers.” Tensions between mendicant and secular faculty were building and these tensions would only heighten as, after 1236, Franciscans began to enter the faculty.

89 Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 72-73.

1230-1270

In the forty years following Francis's canonization, reflection on poverty took a step forward, stimulated by events associated with the various relationship-circles mentioned above. I can only provide the briefest sketch of these events here. Nevertheless, it is important to see that our three questions appear prominently in all of these developments.

A word of background first, however. Let me reiterate that these were times of general economic transition. It was a time when money was increasingly used both as an artificial measure of value, authorized by the State, and also—in the form of precious metal coins—as a commodity itself. It is hard to underestimate the significance of this shift in economic practice. Political and legal forces were established to regulate weights, measures, and coinage. Merchants who previously were vilified gradually became accepted, and even praised. The population at large—and the religious and civic leaders who spoke for the people—had to re-evaluate their sense of the limits and uses of wealth. New approaches to old questions were explored: How were matters like fair wages, appropriate prices, usury, or a godly “standard of living” to be determined? How do we assess “frozen” wealth (wealth contained in physical objects remaining in single locations) as opposed to “distributed” wealth (circulating through merchants, churches, or the poor)?⁹⁰ These developments were all navigated with a keen sense of the presence of the (voluntary and involuntary) poor. Wood summarizes, “The result is that medieval economic ideas are concerned not merely with the market-place, with trade, and with industry, but also with less easily definable matters such as poverty and charity.”⁹¹ As we shall see, different segments of medieval society did not always see eye-to-eye on these issues.

And Franciscans friars played a vital role in these discussions. As we saw, the very structure of Franciscan life put them in relationship with people power, and wealth. Franciscans supported the

90 The story and evaluation presented in Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 78-79 serves as an illustration of the developing concerns of this period.

91 Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, loc 258.

development of lay orders. They became masters in the universities. Thus as both scholars and shepherds of the people, to quote Todeschini,

the Franciscans, as confessors and directors of conscience, started to outline, . . . a sharper and sharper attention to the logic by which laymen use economic goods. The objective of franciscan masters in the second half of the 1200s was to establish the economically functional criteria of use for the creation of a common good.⁹²

In 1230 Pope Gregory IX declared (in *Quo elongati*) that in keeping with the 1223 Rule, friars would not "own" or "possess" the items they might need, but they might have case to "use" them. Another would own and the friar would use. The distinction between "possession" and "use" was identified in this statement. Furthermore, Someone might hold money for use in a future time when the Franciscans might need something. Nevertheless the friars were at times confused on just what this meant. Gregory made it clear that such 'use' was to be restricted to the necessities of life, mentioning especially utensils, books, and furniture. The functional consequence of the bull was that this vocabulary "made a concrete technique of the realization of voluntary poverty out of a distinction between property, momentary possession and the use of economic goods." Franciscans knew they were poor because they did not own possessions. Franciscan poverty was now a "strategy of use," as Franciscans refused to touch money, but had no difficulties managing all kinds of estates.⁹³

In 1241 four Franciscan scholars wrote the first *Exposition of the Franciscan Rule*. It was the first expression of what was to become an important genre for Franciscan reflection on their life. In this document the masters also articulated an important distinction between "rule" and "form of life." Whereas one might need a dispensation from the rule to wear shoes in inclement weather, the Franciscan "form of life," the meaningful pattern of living expressed through habits of eating, housing and such, is "not wearing shoes."⁹⁴

92 Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 86.

93 Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 71.

94 Here see especially Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 107-08.

In 1245, Pope Innocent IV took matters within the Franciscan community one step further. He issued another bull, *Ordinem vestrum*, which gave “spiritual friends” of the Franciscans authority to hold money not only for necessities, but also for items of convenience. Moorman writes of this bull, “This, of course, opened the door to all kinds of relaxations, for, whereas it was comparatively easy to define the *necessitates* of life, there was really no limit to what might be regarded as *commoda*.”⁹⁵ *Ordinem vestrum* transferred formal ownership of Franciscan goods to the Holy See and in 1247 Innocent IV gave permission to Provincial Ministers to see that 'suitable men' were chosen with power to buy and sell on the friar's behalf. How poor was poor? And why would one choose to wear or not wear shoes? Was it a matter of a rule or a “form of life”?

Shortly after this, conflicts between university masters in Paris stimulated a lively conversation regarding the poverty (or corruption) of mendicant scholars.⁹⁶ Franciscanism had by now spread rapidly and broadly, particularly among the circles of educated and prestigious (and wealthy) churchmen. Both Franciscans and Dominicans held chairs at the university which itself was seen as a threat to secular masters. In 1253 the Dominicans and Franciscans again refused to participate in a strike and the secular masters excommunicated the mendicants until they agreed to a previous limitation of the chairs held by mendicants in the university.

The years following saw a flurry of papal decrees, pamphlets and essays, either critiquing or defending the life and work of the mendicants. In this debate the value of the mendicant form of voluntary poverty itself came under scrutiny, some denouncing and others supporting the practice of begging. Another theme debated in this controversy was the relationship between poverty and perfection. On the one hand the invitation of Jesus to the Rich Young Ruler was (according to Matthew 19:21) was “if you wish to be perfect . . . go, sell your possessions.” Yet does it mean that members of religious orders have a corner on perfection? Thus the questions regarding who should be poor and why

95 Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 117.

96 This history is summarized nicely in Thomas Aquinas, *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Mendicant Controversies: Three Translations* John Proctor, trans. (Leesburg, Virginia: Alethes Press, 2007), xv-xx.

were front and center. This controversy dragged on until after 1272, after Thomas Aquinas published his “Against Those Who Would Deter Men From Entering Religion.”⁹⁷ Gert Melville concludes his review of the controversies by stating that “the Dominicans emerged from this struggle for existence in a stronger position.”⁹⁸

But then Melville continues, “The situation for the Franciscans, in contrast, was much more precarious.”⁹⁹ and this brings us to explore further developments within the Franciscan Order. In 1260 the Franciscans held a General Chapter at Narbonne. This meeting attempted to bring some formal codification to the Franciscan life. As historian David Burr describes, the constitutions produced by this Chapter “represented a serious effort to set forth a pattern of life that would respect the rule yet leave Franciscans free to accomplish those tasks the church had ordained for them”¹⁰⁰ Yet the friars did not necessarily follow the guidance of the constitutions and thus minister general Bonaventure and others castigated these friars for their laxity. But how were the Franciscans—and especially the strict or “spiritual Franciscans—to understand Bonaventure’s pleas in light of their own understanding of Francis? Bonaventure argued that for those taking vows, evangelical poverty meant both renouncing possession and limiting use to what is necessary. “Necessary for what, though?” Burr asks. “For Bonaventure, it involves using what is necessary to do what needs to be done—and for the Franciscans, that means teaching and pastoral duties. Thus poverty is not so much an absolute that prevents friars from performing such duties as it is a flexible standard defined by the role one is called on to play.”¹⁰¹

In the midst of these controversies both within and without the Franciscan Order Monaldo of Capodistria, whom Todeschini names “the first Franciscan economist,” analyzed the interactions of

97 See, for example, William of St. Amour’s *A Brief Tract on the Dangers of the Last Days* translated by Jonathan Robinson, pp. 54-61. Available at http://individual.utoronto.ca/jwrobinson/translations/wsa_de-periculis.pdf; St. Bonaventure, “Defense of the Mendicants” chapter XII, #12-41 *St. Bonaventure: Works*, Volume XV, translated by José de Vinck and Robert J. Karris (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2010), 334-366; and Thomas Aquinas, *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Mendicant Controversies*.

98 Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 292.

99 Ibid.

100 David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 34-35.

101 Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 36.

ordinary merchants in a *Summa* of economic knowledge. It is those who manage instruments of trade (money, work, livestock and so on) and who, consequently have a measure of professional competence in their use who are best suited to assess the social merit of various transactions. It is the consensus of godly merchants that most appropriately discerns the distinction between worthy and selfish economic practice. Thus, as Todeschini concludes, economic reality appears “as a range of actions, where laymen or those people who did not choose poverty operate, whose moral and civil legitimacy depends on the definition of its appropriate, shared, and respected rules.”¹⁰² What can be noticed in all this is how the discussions—regarding the Franciscan order, regarding mendicancy and the place of religious life, regarding economic ethics of merchant practice—pose our three questions from various angles. Bonaventure scolds friars who make commitments to poverty but do not live it enough. Other Franciscans criticize Bonaventure for not promoting Francis’s own standard of poverty. Or is this truly what Francis would have thought? How poor should one be? And why? Likewise we have seen the question of who should be poor appear. Secular masters argue that poverty is not crucial for perfection. Franciscan Monaldo of Capodistria develops an economic manual which suggests that merchants themselves are the people best suited to determine appropriate use of wealth for those who do not choose voluntary poverty. These are not frivolous matters but rather are at the center of developing medieval identity.

1273-1300

The next key event was Pope Nicholas III’s bull *Exiit qui seminat* in 1279. The background to this bull was an attempt by Franciscans and Dominicans to ease pressure between mendicants and secular clergy. Complications led to Franciscan Minister General Bonagrazia looking to pope Nicholas for a new authoritative interpretation of the 1223 Rule. The pope called together a diverse committee and based on their material produced *Exiit qui seminat*. To quote Moorman, “This bull, which did so much to determine the future of the Franciscan Order, owes a great deal to the teaching of S.

¹⁰² Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 89.

Bonaventura. It was Bonaventura who had put before the Order the ideal of simplicity rather than poverty, or austerity rather than asceticism, and of wisdom rather than humility; and it was this same ideal which the bull *Exiit* now tried to enforce."¹⁰³

As Moorman notes regarding their confusions, “the greatest problem all along had been that of poverty.” And underneath this question of poverty was not only the distinction between ownership and use, identified by Lactantius and Gratian and clarified in *Quo elongati* (1230), but also—and perhaps even more profoundly—the understanding of “use” itself. In *Exiit qui seminat* Nicholas III makes the key distinction between *ius juris* (“use of right”) and *ius facti* (“use of fact”). Franciscans have renounced their use of right and cannot exercise such a right as Franciscans. They do, however, exercise use in fact: eating food, wearing clothes and so on. The pope is the owner of these goods, the Franciscan leaders exercise administration of these goods. When materials were needed for pastoral ministry, these materials should be made available. But the friar’s use must be moderate. The warning in *Exiit* cannot be missed. But just what is *moderate* use? Just how poor should we [Franciscan friars] be?

And with this question we are led to the discussion of *usus pauper* and the work of Petrus Joannis Olivi (1248-1298). Olivi was involved at some level in the committee that produced *Exiit qui seminat*, but he also separately published both a work on Christian perfection that addressed the place of poverty as well as an essay dedicated specifically to the meaning of *usus pauper* (*De usu pauper: The Quaestio and the Tractatus*). He became a leader of what we now call the “spiritual Franciscans.”¹⁰⁴ The term literally means the “poor,” “minimal” or “restricted” use of goods. Franciscan friars were not only not to possess property, but they were only to use things as a matter of necessity, to use only what is absolutely necessary. We have seen this above in Francis’s own comments, in his *Testament*, regarding the use of goods. Olivi’s contention was that a commitment to *usus pauper* was an

103 Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 180.

104 The nature and history of this group is documented in Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*.

essential part of the Franciscan vow. To make a vow to Franciscan poverty was thus to bind oneself under mortal sin if one should fail to keep this vow. This is a poverty defined not merely by lack of ownership, but also through one's kind of use. Yet how do we measure such a vague notion as "restricted" use? Ownership is clear and easy to determine, *usus pauper* is not. And so the debate begins.

Within the next decade, and in the midst of complex arguments, the Franciscans themselves divided into various positions regarding *usus pauper*:¹⁰⁵

- Nicholas III (*Exiit qui seminat*) saw the Franciscan Rule as a collection of specific precepts and counsels which could and should be definitively identified. Yet I also see in *Exiit*'s use of "equivalent words" regarding elements of the Rule, a place for *usus pauper*, both moderating Franciscan economic practice yet not preventing Franciscan use of whatever was necessary.
- Olivi himself argued that the Franciscan indeed vowed *usus pauper*, but indeterminately. Franciscans make the commitment to follow the way of Francis and this requires a renunciation of money, the right of use, and even the use of goods other than what is absolutely necessary. Yet, the Rule does not provide specific guidance for practice. Consequently, every violation of the vow does not entail mortal sin.
- Olivi's opponents viewed restricted use as valuable, but not essential to the vow. They considered, along with Nicholas that *usus pauper* was unspecified and dangerous because vague. Some of these took a held to a more moderate view of what this restricted use might entail in practice.

Olivi was censured in 1283 (for more than just his views on *usus pauper*) and his censure was used again and again to check later Spiritual Franciscan influence. Indeed the period of 1290-1309 fared poorly for the "spirituals." The Franciscan Order itself grew increasingly polarized. Attacks on the

105 See Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 57-58.

spirituals would come from ministers general and the papacy. There was a growing alliance between Franciscan zealots and pious laity. The intermingling of groups in this period is exceedingly complex, but the mingling also served to galvanize the hierarchy against all forms of unrest. Thus the divisions within the Franciscan order became not only a private squabble, but also a matter of official action.

For Olivi and his followers, following the way of Francis was not conforming to a measurable rule, but expressing a form of life. Giorgio Agamben perceives this shift in the distinction between law and fact. The Franciscan friars *minor* took the bold step of renouncing their rights to law for the sake of living a life in simple relationship with natural law.¹⁰⁶ David Burr summarizes, "it is difficult not to see Olivi's view as simultaneously more realistic, more adventurous, and more faithful to the original Franciscan spirit. For Olivi (as for Francis), the vow is not so much a contract concerning specific behavior as the beginning of a spiritual quest."¹⁰⁷ And at the center of this quest, economically speaking, was a proper understanding of *use* and *need*.¹⁰⁸

Peter Olivi was not only in conflict with his fellow Franciscans. He also disputed some of the some of the ideas of Dominican Thomas Aquinas. As biographer of Thomas Aquinas Jean-Pierre Torrell recounts,

To conclude this glimpse of the frictions between the Franciscans and Dominicans, it is not useless to recall that they did not confine themselves to a strictly intellectual plane. The most prominent of these apples of discord, the understanding of the vow of poverty, remained at the heart of the debate. It was in this regard that the leader of the spiritual Franciscans, Peter Olivi, is found several years later (around 1290) among the most resolute of Thomas's adversaries, as his commentary on Matthew 10:9-10 bears witness. . . . The new fact here is that the Franciscans, though divided between Augustinian followers of Bonaventure and partisans of

106 See Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 109-122.

107 Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 53.

108 On need, see also Todeschini, 91-103.

total poverty, nevertheless gathered in “a formidable anti-Thomist front which, until the last moment, tried to block the penetration of Thomist doctrine and the canonization of the Common Doctor.”¹⁰⁹

Another development which took place during this period was the consolidation of “third orders” under the oversight of the Franciscans. This development was finalized in the bull *Supra montem*, issued by Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan pope. I have mentioned the third orders above and it is time to return to their story. David Burr has written an excellent summary of this development and thus I will simply quote Burr’s words at length:

The story of the third order is itself a complex one. Francis did not found the first lay order of penitents, since the penitent status had been canonically recognized (for example, in the Humiliati). Nevertheless, by the 1230s and 1240s we have Franciscan sources like Julian of Speyer, *The Perugian Anonymous*, and the *Letter of the Three Companions* connecting Francis—or at least his order—with the formation of a third order of laity. Prior to 1289, some groups of lay penitents were associated in various ways and to various degrees with the Franciscans; some were instead associated with the Dominicans; and some merely operated under the authority of their bishop without any obvious relationship to either order. Nor was the activity of such groups uniform. Some sought a higher level of religious discipline while living at home with their families; others entered into communal living arrangements and still others became hermits. In 1289 a strong relationship with the Franciscans was not only recognized but required by the bull *Supra montem*, in which Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan pope, depicted Francis as the institutor of the third order and placed penitent fraternities under Franciscan guidance. Even the nature of the third order was not closely defined. For the laity the bull

109 Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 1: His Person and His Work*, revised edition (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 308. The distinguishing points of difference between Olivi and Aquinas are reviewed in Jan G.J. Van den Eijnden, *Poverty on the Way to God: Thomas Aquinas on Evangelical Poverty* (Leuven, Peters, 1994), 18-19, 199-242.

represented, in the words of Giovanna Casagrande, “a big, protective umbrella in the shade of which varied and diverse forms of religious life found shelter and refuge in the form of a canonical-juridical-ecclesiastical regular status.”¹¹⁰

A few points need to be noted concerning the development of third orders for our purposes in this essay. First, as Burr observes, these groups of penitents were not all of a single form. Indeed, a wide range of forms of life—and *embodiments of the ideal of poverty*—were welcomed into these new Franciscan “third orders.” This brings us to the second point, namely that by bringing penitential orders under the “umbrella” of the Franciscans, *Supra montem* brought a segment of laity into the midst of the unresolved Franciscan discussion of poverty. The newly aligned members of the—now Franciscan—third order, could scarcely have avoided reexamining their own approach to poverty, especially as some were transferring their alignment from other arrangements. Finally, it is important to recognize that it is these very lay people, often merchants themselves who received pastoral care from the friars and who are eager to follow the ways of Francis even in the midst of their married and merchant existence, who joined the ranks of third order Franciscans in this era. Thus Todeschini writes, “It is not by chance that in the ranks of the Third Order of Franciscans or in the civic confraternities connected to Friars Minor, the representatives of mercantile and entrepreneurial civic classes will be more and more numerous from the 1200s to the 1400s.”¹¹¹

The final matter to discuss within this period is the development of economics more generally. And once again, Peter Olivi, along with other Franciscan economists, played a significant role. Willem Marie Speelman describes how, “Peter of John Olivi played a prominent role in this process, for he translated and elaborated Franciscan life according to the perfection of the holy Gospel into the situation of the thirteenth century monetary economy. Francis had put all his creativity into discovering

110 Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 361, n. 66. See also especially M. Stewart “De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam” *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Roma: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991).

111 Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 130.

and showing his *vivere sine proprio* [living without anything of one's own], preaching it by gesture in *exempla*. But he failed to develop it into a juridical conceptuality, which left living without property somehow indeterminate and strange in the new reality. Confronted with the daily reality in the cities and attacked by secular and Dominican masters, Olivi searched for ways to defend their sharing way of life following Francis."¹¹²

Olivi explored the character of necessity and the way things are used, noting that one's *need* for things is dependent upon the style of existence (I would use the phrase "form of life") that people choose. This, in turn, led to an analysis of the valuation of work and workers: the place of esteem, skill and the other factors that shape the way the labor market functions. The value of goods and services, according to Olivi, are determined by society itself:

Since the price of things and services must be evaluated in relation to the common good, as a consequence it is fundamentally important to consider the definition of prices that usually occurs and the evaluation criterion normally established by civic communities.¹¹³

The good merchant was then the expert, who through both moral reliability and experience with wealth was capable of helping navigate a community toward the common good. Thus, "there is in the merchant something highly virtuous, if not heroically civic, which makes him a privileged interlocutor of the poor in Christ. His indefatigable commitment, along with his habit of risk, even physical endurance and evaluative attitude, make him, in the eyes of the Friars Minor, a lay protagonist of transitory wealth or daring investment, a promoter of the circulation of useful wealth to Christian society as a whole."¹¹⁴ Needless to say, we have come a long way from Francis's separation from his merchant father. The focus in all of this is on the community, on the mutual aid of the local body. Olivi, the Franciscan, recognized the importance of "the sharing of gifts and needs in the practice of exchange

112 Willem Marie Speelman, "The Franciscan *usus pauper* As The Gateway Towards An Aesthetic Economy" *Franciscan Studies* 74 (2016) 189. In what follows I am largely summarizing Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 92-149.

113 Peter Olivi, *De emptionibus et venditionibus*, 56, cited in Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 114.

114 Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 129.

in the monetary economy.”¹¹⁵ Economy is not for the sake of individual profit, though this happens. It is much more about the common wealth and the common good.

After 1300

By the start of the fourteenth century, an important shift was beginning in public attitude toward wealth and poverty more generally, and particularly toward the involuntary poor. As Diana Wood describes, “for some poverty was transformed from a blessing to an evil, and riches from an evil to a positive good.”¹¹⁶ On the one hand there were, reduced to misery, the victims of the economic crisis of the 1300s. Franciscans saw these as the responsibility of civic society. On the other hand Franciscan Francis Eiximenis can bewail the increase of both false merchants and idlers who beg even if they are able to work.¹¹⁷ Complaints against the “idle poor” increase from this period on—and in time the Franciscans themselves would be the receivers of these very complaints. Yet at the same time we notice the devout charity of some merchants, particularly those who were members of third orders. Todeschini writes:

It is not surprising that in fourteenth-century Italian or French cities Franciscan tertiary laymen, those laymen who while continuing to live with their family and to do business made vows of personal poverty and obedience, were given important and delicate public functions by government powers: Political and economic abilities, personal disinterest, and belonging to the civic community made them the most suitable people for being responsible for those parts of the social patrimony that formerly belonged to the civic community as a political subject.”¹¹⁸

115 Speelman, *The Franciscan usus pauper*, 189.

116 Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, loc. 598. She addresses this issue in greater detail through chapter two of this book. See also Michael Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

117 See Todeschini, *Franciscan Poverty*, 154, 157-58.

118 Todeschini, *Franciscan Poverty*, 130-31.

The fourteenth century was a time of change, and this change brought out some of the best and the worst in people.

The next key event, in terms of the conflicts within the Franciscan Order, was the Council of Vienna (1309-1312).¹¹⁹ This council, convened by Pope Clement V documented the laxity of the Franciscans in detail. Central to the discussions during this period was a question of Franciscan hermeneutics. Who interprets the Rule? The pope? Francis' own *Testament*? What authority do the works of people like Francis's intimate friend brother Leo have to indicate Francis' own intentions? The spirituals at the council offered various programs of reform. Significant scholarly discussions were developed. The council was ultimately brought to a conclusion with Clement V's *Exivi de paradiso* on May 6, 1312. Clement encouraged the Franciscan order to curb abuses. He declared that to see *usus pauper* in the vow is not heretical (setting the spirituals free from a charge of heresy - at least on this count). He described the Franciscan way as a "form of life." But he also defined a list of "precepts" that should be considered essential to the vow, as indicated in the Rule. However, "the ultimate sanction of Clement's list," writes Burr, "lay not in the fact that it was an accurate mirror of the rule, but in the fact that it was Clement's list. . . . In practical terms, Clement's solution means that the average friar's obligation is to obey the rule as interpreted by those in authority."¹²⁰ This turns the tables from a question of poverty to a question of obedience. Moorman summarizes,

"It was easy enough to say that the friars must be content with a simpler standard of living and with the *usus pauper*, but this did little towards a solution of the real problem which divided the Order. So long as there was one party among the friars who wanted to go back to the poverty and insecurity of the early days, and another party which wanted the Order to play its part in the life of the Church by having large convents and learned friars supported by papal privileges and the security which came from endowments and rents, there was little hope of unity. . . . and the

119 This Council, and the various viewpoints surrounding it, are treated in Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 111-178.

120 Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 150.

struggle for perfection, which had begun in the lifetime of S. Francis himself and had caused so much suffering and division among his followers, was destined to go on yet for many years."¹²¹

Also at the time of this council Olivi's work was further condemned (without using his name). Spiritual rebels in Tuscany were also causing trouble. Other difficulties were present in Southern France. All of this set the Catholic hierarchy into a repressive trend. Pope John XXII acted. He supported the Franciscan moderates and called spirituals to account. In spite of pleas for mercy and hearing, the pope issued a set of bulls (*Quorundam exigit* [1317], *Sancta romana* [1317], *Gloriosam ecclesiam* [1318]), which targeted not only the spiritual Franciscans, but also other kindred groups. Thus, in these bulls, "John implores all and sundry, ecclesiastics and laymen alike, to give the rebels no aid, but rather to hunt them down like the rapacious wolves they are and turn them over to their Franciscan superiors."¹²² Thus, by now, it is clearly not simply a matter of the interpretation of Francis' view of poverty, but of the suppression of movements of non-regular monasticism, anti-clericalism, and doctrinal concerns. Rather than being resolved, the complex divisions simply get more complex and more divided.

Part of this complexity had to do with a dispute regarding the poverty of Christ. The immediate trigger for this questioning was the preaching of a tertiary (with connections to the spirituals) which "stated that Christ and his apostles had been absolutely poor, without possessions of any kind either severally or in common."¹²³ The preacher was brought before the inquisition and questioned. But this was not so easy. Franciscans as a whole had believed in the absolute poverty of Christ since their beginning. Even when some Franciscans were living in luxury they would still claim that their models (Christ and Francis) both lived in absolute poverty. Other religious groups knew the Franciscans believed this -- and were offended. It made other groups feel like the Franciscans perceived themselves as the only true followers of Christ. Pope John XXII wanted to settle this dispute once and for all. "In March of 1322 he commissioned all the prelates and masters of theology at the curia to submit a written

121 Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 204.

122 Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 200.

123 Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 313.

opinion on the question of the poverty of Christ and the apostolic band."¹²⁴ The friars appealed to *Exiit qui seminat*. In response to this appeal John issued the bull *Quia nonnunquam* which claimed that it was perfectly legal for one pope to make alterations in decrees which have been made by predecessors. The Order as a whole replied with a careful statement of their support of Christ's absolute poverty.

In the end John concluded with two bulls. *Ad conditorem canonum* (1322) was a long and carefully worded treatise on the legal problems of use and ownership. John distinguishes various kinds of use, dominion, and ownership. The main thrust of the matter in the end was to first, to declare that in matter of fact the Franciscans had some level of possession all along. But more significantly, John withdrew the framework of papal ownership and procuratorship over Franciscan goods. John "concludes that in future no right or *dominium* over things given to the friars . . . shall belong to the Church, and no proctor shall in future be appointed to look after them on his behalf." In *Cum inter nonnullos* he declared, based on the diversity of opinion, that "in future to deny to our Saviour and his apostles the lawful right of possession and the right use of those things for which there is Biblical evidence, either direct or indirect, is heretical."¹²⁵ Needless to say this act was a blow to the entire Franciscan Order, causing much drama, a secret escape of Franciscan leaders, including a "Franciscan government in exile."¹²⁶

It is impossible to document all the developments within the Franciscan Order from here to 1518, when the divisions in the Franciscan order were finally forcibly resolved.¹²⁷ But one more aspect of fourteenth-century mendicant life needs to be described. As the fourteenth century progressed many friars did not appear to live the values of Francis. Thus, historian John Van Engen writes that "by the later fourteenth century, five generations along, friars were wearing their welcome thin: a pretense of poverty while constantly begging for money and investing in city bonds, intellectual arrogance,

124 Ibid., 314.

125 For these quotes, see Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 317.

126 Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 277. For further reflections on *Ad conditorem canonum*, see Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 129-31.

127 See for example, Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 191-313; Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 307-588.

international connections, inquisitorial interference."¹²⁸ Similarly, historian Ernest W. McDonnell declares that "By the middle of the fourteenth century criticism of the mendicants tended to be excessive and bitterly hostile in northern Europe. . . ."¹²⁹ The popular criticism of mendicant friars we see so vividly painted in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (written between 1387 and 1400) was beginning to develop in this very period.

Summary and Looking Forward

Even before Francis's death the interpretation of poverty was a matter of discussion. In one sense the "poverty question" emerged from earlier disagreements regarding the *vita apostolica*. But after Francis, discussion about the truly apostolic life was more often folded into what became the more dominant topic of concern: the nature and practice of poverty. As we have seen, this topic was thrashed about on many fronts: between Franciscans, between different mendicant orders, between mendicants and seculars, and within general reflection on the developing merchant economy itself. Other important questions were introduced in the midst of this thrashing (for example, Christian perfection, vows), but I cannot develop them here. What appears from a review of the poverty discussions in the century after Francis is the presence of one or another of our three questions: Who should be poor? How poor? Why?

Perhaps we would do well to remind ourselves at this point who actually was poor, and how poor, and why, at the end of our period in question (shortly after 1330). Here my aim is not so much to give a complete picture, but rather to name those groups of people who defined themselves or were defined to some extent by the discussion I have outlined above. Of course, as in any age, there were greedy princes, corrupt bishops, self-serving mendicants, lazy paupers and so on. These are not my

128 John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), kindle loc. 525.

129 Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (NY: Octago Books, 1969), 424-25.

concern. My interest here is in identifying those who sincerely understood themselves to be following the Christian faith in their economic practice. I think at least five groupings can be named.

First, were the godly involuntary poor: women or men of low-birth, victims of sickness or failed harvest or war, and powerless to change their plight. As I mentioned above, attitudes toward the involuntary poor were just beginning to shift. Nevertheless, around 1330 those who suffered need with a spirit of trusting God and prayerful gratitude for those who contribute to their need could consider their poverty to be part of a divine vocation, and that faithful performance within their station would bear fruit both for the almsgivers for whom they prayed and for their own eternal salvation. Then, the strict Franciscans: those who desired to live in absolute poverty, choosing to own nothing as individuals or as a religious institution. These were the “spiritual” Franciscans, who interpreted *usus pauper* as essential to their vow and understood it to mean a life of using goods, services, and credentials only as the least in society would be able to use them.

Then, third, there were the moderate Franciscans (and Dominicans . . .) who lived simply but used (or even owned) possessions as they deemed appropriate for the work at hand. A fourth group—which would have significant influence in the following century—was composed of the members of Third Order communities. Third order members had families, jobs, and money, and yet made an effort to use these in keeping with a sense of the values of poverty inspired by the life and teachings of Francis or others. And finally, we must acknowledge the merchants and city officials who owned property and used money and who saw their involvement in the circulation of wealth, even as they made profit in doing so, as a gift to humankind: shaping civic life as best they could in keeping with the values of the common good, inspired by the careful economic analysis of mendicant masters.¹³⁰

Thus, by the mid-fourteenth century we can see a spectrum of “who,” “how poor,” and “why”: a spectrum that remained in the midst of the changing assessments and changing circumstances of the

130 See Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 150-196.

centuries that followed. With spectrum in mind, we are now prepared to reflect more broadly on the meaning of these questions for us today.

Chapter 4 Conclusions: Who Should Be Poor, How Poor, and Why?

The Franciscan Ideal

On the one hand, this essay is an exploration of economic ethics, or perhaps economic spirituality: the ways in which our relationship with God and our relationship with wealth intersect. But it is also a set of reflections on a *Franciscan* motif. And for this reason, it seems best to begin our final chapter by a brief review of what might be called the “Franciscan economic ideal” as presented in the works of a few contemporary interpreters of Francis and Franciscan life. What do the specialists in Franciscan history and life “take home” from their studies?¹³¹

Leonardo Boff subtitles his 1988 book on saint Francis, *A Model for Human Liberation*. Boff, himself a prominent Brazilian liberation theologian, suggests that Francis moves beyond mere politics or charity to exhibit a different—and more profound—approach to what the Catholic Church calls the “preferential option for the poor.” He reviews different views of poverty, for “poverty, on the one hand appears as a manifestation of sin, while on the other hand, it may be one of the highest expressions of love and solidarity. Poverty is cured with poverty, freely accepted as identification with the poor and as a denouncement of their iniquitous situation.”¹³² Boff sees the Franciscan ideal as a movement of solidarity with the poor for the poor against their poverty, a “utopia of a fraternity of equal values.”¹³³

131 What I present here is only a summary of others’ summaries of Francis with regard to economics. I am keenly aware that other areas that might be discussed: for example Francis’s devotion to church liturgy, to nature. I think these areas actually do have bearing on a Franciscan way of life, but I have here tried to make a selection of matters that seem to come up most often by most interpreters when economic issues are discussed. I assume here that no single portrait of Francis or the Franciscan discussions on poverty in the century following will adequately grasp either the actual history or its relevance to today. I also assume that Francis and Franciscans periodically exhibited apparent contradictions in thought and action that are difficult to reconcile or understand at our distance today. My point here is simply to observe the wisdom available from those who have invested the most in this field of study.

132 Boff, *Saint Francis*, 59-60.

133 See Boff, *Saint Francis*, 63, 157

Dutch Franciscan Jan G. J. Van den Eijnden explores the writings of Thomas Aquinas on poverty, illuminating the nuances of Dominican and Franciscan thought. As he draws his 1994 study to a close, Van den Eijnden reflects on the common value of poverty for both mendicant orders. He steers his readers (presumably active friars) away from excessive attention to the social or economic effectiveness of evangelical poverty and their work. Instead, Van den Eijnden wants to emphasize an aspect of voluntary poverty that he finds to be central to the mendicants throughout their history: “how their Poverty is Poverty for God and leads them to God.” His point is especially that voluntary poverty is both a means of grace and an exhibition of the credibility of the Gospel that mendicants proclaim. Van den Eijnden declares that “the Mendicants’ Poverty is the demonstration of the strength of their faith and their unification with God, enabling them to be good religious teachers and preachers and to be trustworthy witnesses.”¹³⁴

Italian economic historian Giacomo Todeschini, whose exploration of *Franciscan Wealth* (originally published in 2004) documented the development of economic thought from thirteenth-century Franciscan voluntary poverty to fourteenth-century (and later) Franciscan analysis of market society, concludes by perceiving a kind of faithfulness to Francis in the very affirmation of merchant economy a century and more after Francis’s death. The core of this faithfulness is the sense of the common good, present in Francis’s own practice and the measuring rod of later economic ethics. Thus, Todeschini concludes:

By performing a close analysis of the dynamics of enrichment, the Franciscan intellectual community had progressively identified, in the market’s impossibility of defining an exact equivalence between money and the value of things and in the resulting social anxiety, that moment of contact, of dialogue, of continuity between the religious and the secular world.

Poverty and wealth could appear contiguous and complementary in building the common good,

134 Van den Eijnden, *Poverty on the Way to God*, 236.

if they gave substance to the choice of acting, every day, in sight of a definition of common welfare.¹³⁵

André Vauchez, whose French biography of Francis appeared in 2009, draws us back to the complex portrait of Francis himself and to the relevance of the person of Francis as a prophet for his time and for ours. Vauchez sees Francis as a man who rose in the context of a Church unable to deal with its own wealth. “Faced with this “established disorder” and the rise of the power of money within the society of his day,” Vauchez writes, “Francis affirmed the fundamental value of poverty and humility, understood not as forms of asceticism but as symbols of a rejection of feudal arrogance and the greed of a new world, . . .”¹³⁶ He praises Francis’s combination of “poverty and prophetic gift: the ancient biblical connection.” Vauchez sees Francis as one who sought to express in his life, and in the lives of his followers, a fresh way of being Christian:

Rereading the Gospel in the light of his own personal experience and that of civic and knightly culture, Francis chose to follow a poor and begging Christ, always on the road and sharing with the marginalized the precariousness of their conditions of life, and to worship a God full of mercy who made the sun shine and the rain to fall on the good and bad alike. In doing this, he was not replicating a model: he was creating one by virtue of his own personal sensibility, which was keen and which made for its originality.¹³⁷

Canadian Franciscan David Flood summarized and applied his extensive research on early Franciscan history in a brief book on *The Daily Labor of the Early Franciscans*. In this work (published in 2010), Flood describes the import of Francis’s approach to manual labor in light of that which Flood sees as an essential element of the Franciscan ideal. For Flood, Franciscan life and labor is part of a consciously chosen social movement. In describing the longer version of the “Letter to the

135 Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth*, 194.

136 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 327.

137 Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 335.

Faithful,” Flood writes, “Francis was not probing the mystery of the Trinity; he was organizing the working population. . . . In their numbers lay the support for turning the world into a home for all.”¹³⁸ For Flood, early Franciscan life and work was aimed at turning the world “into our common home . . . what we call today distributive justice.”¹³⁹

Italian philosopher and political theorist Giorgio Agamben in his *The Highest Poverty* (originally published in 2011) emphasizes the Franciscan vision of *minores* (Friars *Minor* – *little* brothers). The term “minor” was understood to mean one who was ineligible to appeal within the framework of law. Agamben’s point is that Francis, and later interpreters of Francis, understood themselves as voluntarily opting out of legal rights. To cite Hugh of Digne, an early commentator on the Franciscan Rule, Franciscans “have only this right, not to have any rights.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, with regard to property, “In the normal state, in which positive law applies to human beings, they have no right, but only a license to use. In the state of extreme necessity, they recover a relationship with the law (natural, not positive).”¹⁴¹ Agamben sees the Franciscan ideal as a unique invention of a form of life: *form* in that it has structure and aim, *life* in that it is not dependent on rules or officials. Yet not so much life that it provokes conflict with the Church, nor so much form that it kills any vitality. And this has for Agamben, as for many spiritual Franciscans, eschatological significance:

The specific eschatological character of the Franciscan message is not expressed in a new doctrine, but in a form of life through which the very life of Christ is made newly present in the world . . .¹⁴²

Finally, we take a glimpse at another Dutch scholar, Willem Marie Speelman, whose “The Franciscan *usus pauper* As the Gateway Towards and Aesthetic Economy” (2016) explores the

138 Flood, *Daily Labor*, 17

139 Flood *Daily Labor*, 4.

140 Hugh of Digne, *De finibus paupertatis* 1, cited in Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 113.

141 Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 115.

142 Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 143.

Franciscan idea of poor use in light of contemporary reflection on “gift economies.” From this perspective, Francis’s sense of a free sharing community, that expands from brothers to include sisters and then marrieds, is central. Two tendencies struggle within the Franciscan ethos: (1) the impulse toward this “divine free market” described above and (2) the impulse toward religious order.¹⁴³ He finds in Peter Olivi a Franciscan interpreter who translated the Franciscan ideal for the new circumstances and lay population of merchants and others. Speelman interprets Olivi’s *usus pauper* as a Certeau-ian tactic which shapes those who act accordingly both in terms of their sense of self and of relationship with the surrounding culture.¹⁴⁴ “Fraternal poverty,” he writes, “is not a wall around a monastery – crossing its boundary meaning entering into the realm of mortal sin – but it is a discipline of the brotherhood, and therefore relational, a way to tune into a form of life.”¹⁴⁵ Ultimately he develops a taxonomy of economies of scarcity and plenitude and interprets *usus pauper* in light of this schematic. He thus argues that *usus pauper* functions as “a penitential practice, which makes our body sensitive to good proportions.”¹⁴⁶

So then, what is the Franciscan economic ideal, not only as it was embodied in Francis and his early followers and interpreters, but also for our world today? A few words stand out as I review the summaries of the Franciscan interpreters of today. *Abandonment* is the first. Franciscans joyously abandon not only clothing and money, but also privilege and even rights. This is what it means to be a friar *minor*. Yet *solidarity* is the second. Francis spent times alone, but he was no hermit. The Franciscans were a brotherhood, *friars minor*. The Franciscans root their solidarity in an identification with the poor Christ, and with each other: a brotherhood, a sharing community. Yet Franciscan solidarity expands beyond their own inner circle to include the involuntary poor. There was an intentional identification with the poor, for the poor. *Model* is the third word. The Franciscan ideal was

143 Speelman, “*usus pauper* As The Gateway,” 188.

144 On tactics, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

145 Speelman, “*usus pauper* As The Gateway,” 196.

146 Speelman, “*usus pauper* As The Gateway,” 204.

a re-presentation of the Gospel, a prefiguration of the life that we could potentially live as Christ followers in contrast to the inadequate forms of society that surrounded him.¹⁴⁷ Franciscan poverty was a visible demonstration of living the Gospel which gave the proclaimers a degree of credibility in their message. Finally, *common good* is my final word. I do not believe that the Franciscan ideal—either in the mind of Francis or in his later interpreters—was merely a vision of individual piety (although some tried to make it that). The Franciscan ideal had a necessary social component: a sense of gift, distributive justice, and mutual sharing. Abandonment, solidarity, model, common good: these are words that summarize the Franciscan economic ideal as presented by some of Francis’s most highly regarded interpreters.

This ideal was not only pursued by the vowed members of the Franciscan orders, but also by devout laity insofar as they could express abandonment, solidarity, model and common good in their own circumstances. Merchants and laborers alike joined with the Franciscan ideal in their own walks of life. Devout and wealthy housewives could not perhaps have the freedom to abandon their estates, but they could abandon their sense of entitlement to display expensive jewelry. Landowners might not have the inclination to express solidarity with the poor by sharing their fires, but they might express some measure of solidarity by granting their workers a reasonable location for sleeping. And lay and vowed alike could strive together to live as models of the poor Christ insofar as their station of life would allow and to use their own particular gifts as merchants or monks for the sake of the common good.

In chapter two I presented the life of Francis in terms of a few key moments: his relationship with the lepers, his renunciation, the birth of the brotherhood, his resignation from leadership in order to serve as a visible model of the Franciscan form of life. These four moments correspond with at least three of the four words which summarize the interpreters of the Franciscan ideal: solidarity (with one

147 On prefiguration, see for example Carl Boggs, “Marxism, prefigurative communism, and the problem of workers’ control.” available at <https://libcom.org/library/marxism-prefigurative-communism-problem-workers-control-carl-boggs>. While Francis or Franciscans were not generally involved in formal political protests, I think it is fair to see, in the life of Francis and the Franciscans a prefigurative element of modeling an alternative possible life.

the poor and with one another), abandonment, and model.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, I find that those who were involved in the discussions about poverty in the century that followed Francis—when they were at their best—were also trying to promote these same kinds of values. Conventual Franciscans were concerned to give the best possible communication in word and in life to their audience. Thus they felt that they needed books, education, and modest accommodations so that they might give the greatest possible glory to God with their ministry. Their ministry might not have actually been identical to Francis’s original vision for the early friars. Yet these Conventuals sought to embody the central values of Francis in the midst of their own service. And in this sense these moderates sought to live an authentically “Franciscan” economic spirituality. We can imagine how a similar approach would guide merchants who were under the guidance of Franciscan spiritual directors or housewives who were members of a Franciscan Third Order confraternity. All of this, as I mentioned in the earlier chapters, functions as a re-appropriation of some of the Scripture themes I outlined in the first chapter: God’s provision, the ephemeral value of wealth, the poverty of Christ, and so on. In this way in the century after Francis, fundamental biblical economic themes were scattered throughout Europe like so many seeds, well beyond a few celibate friars to uniquely influence the development of both church and market.

Franciscan Economic Theology

After asking various people what they thought about who should be poor, how poor, and why, I got to thinking: what if Francis was a theologian? What would Francis have to say about the Gospel story and about our relationship to that story? Here is a brief summary of what I imagined.

If Francis were a theologian I don’t think he would see poverty as a result of sin, whether an individual’s sin or a consequence of the fall of humankind more generally. I think that Francis would

¹⁴⁸ I did not present a moment in Francis’s life which demonstrated common good, but from my account of his life and teachings it is clear that I think that the value of common good was present throughout Francis’s life from his renunciation forward.

describe Creation, following Gratian and later expressed by Bonaventure,¹⁴⁹ as a state of blessed poverty. In creation there is no ownership, no possessions. There is only a joyful dependence on and appropriate use of God's sovereign provision. It is only when Eve reached to take the apple for herself that sin began. Greed, pride, unbelief, possession all blended together in the moment of turning away from God. Again and again in scripture we see a story of God bringing people back to a state of blessed dependent poverty: Noah and the Ark, Abraham's journey (and sacrifice), Moses in the wilderness, the return from exile. Interesting to note, by the way: all of these stories have an itinerant element to them.

I think that Francis would see the law with mixed perspective. On the one hand it pushes God's people toward a life of mutuality and in this sense the law is good. But, I think that Francis would also follow Gratian who saw the development of property and human law beginning with the construction of a city by Cain.¹⁵⁰ Even more, perhaps, I think that Francis would see human laws as emerging from our unwillingness to remain *minores* with each other. It is our tendency to exert power of various kinds over one another that brings forth human laws.

The incarnate Christ comes to reintroduce us to blessed poverty once again. Jesus comes as a human infant lying in a manger surrounded by "the least," just as Francis demonstrated when he introduced the creche to the world. Jesus became poor so that we might become rich. And it was through the eyes of Jesus's ministry that he saw his own form of life. I think Francis saw, in the portrait of the itinerant Jesus and his disciples, a model for a society of self-denying and mutual self-offering community, joyfully dependent upon the provision of God. "Sell your possessions and give to the poor," Jesus proclaims to his followers, "Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail" (Luke 12:33). I can see Francis proclaiming this right along with Jesus, urging us on toward an eschatological fulfillment of that blessed poverty we were intended to enjoy from the start. Yet at the same time, this is not a vision of some spiritualized poverty. As Leonardo Boff

149 See Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 112-113.

150 *Ibid.*

writes, “The real poor and the poor Christ are the criteria of true poverty. Francis never speaks abstractly about poverty.”¹⁵¹

If Francis himself were alive today, I do not think he would start a shelter or an employment program. Rather Francis would have simply moved into homeless encampments to enjoy life with them. Francis did not choose to identify with any model of social transformation. Franciscan spirituality, at least as Francis saw it, was not just a reactionary response to the development of a merchant economy. He was not trying vainly to hang onto the previous feudal arrangement either. He (like Jesus) wanted to transcend those forms. Again, Boff writes,

He did not build hospitals, leper colonies, or other assistance works because he did not see the poor primarily as objects of aid. To be poor like the poor is superseded by being with the poor in deep solidarity. Francis voluntarily becomes poor to be able to live together with the poor and to form a community of life with them.¹⁵²

If Francis were a theologian these, I think, would be the themes that would drive his work—at least with regards to economic life. I think Francis would see his theology lived out differently for different people. Francis wrote to rulers, to penitents and to vowed Franciscans. His recommendations to all are driven by the same biblical themes: the providence of God, the ephemeral character of wealth, the community of God’s people and so on. And yet he knew that princes would not be able to live among the poor. He knew that members of penitent confraternities would remain married. Yet all, according to their own abilities, could live the Franciscan dream.

Who Should Be Poor? How Poor? Why?

This brings us, finally, to the questions we began with, questions that have as much relevance now as they did in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Who should be poor? How poor? Why?

151 Boff, *Saint Francis*, 73.

152 Boff, *Saint Francis*, 95.

If you hadn't noticed, we have been playing with an ambiguity all along in this essay. It is one thing to ask who *is* poor, how poor, and why. There are many excellent analyses—old and new—of these questions. From the multiple causes of poverty reflected in the book of Proverbs to contemporary sociological research, wise people have observed and described the interplay of factors that contribute to an individual or a group having access to less of the world's goods and services than others. But it is another thing to talk about who *should* be poor. Often the word “should” communicates a moral quality: people should not steal, innocent people should not suffer from war, victims of economic setback should not have to remain without basic necessities. Or perhaps we might say that lazy and irresponsible people should experience the negative consequences of their behavior. In these examples, the term “should” bears some measure of moral weight. But we can also use the word “should” to communicate wisdom or strategy. With your background and skills, you should become an architect. You should try using your knight to create forks when you play chess. You should meet with your co-worker just for fun sometime.

We have already discovered the nuances of “poverty” in earlier chapters. Shifts in public sentiment were taking place even during the fourteenth century that would shape assessment of the relationship between cognitive, circumstantial, and structural elements of poverty. These issues are still discussed today and I cannot begin to evaluate them here.¹⁵³ My point here is simply to note that when we talk about who *should* or *should not* be poor, we often employ different nuances of our understandings of poverty.

So, *who should be poor?* On the one hand, it is obvious that some should definitely *not* be poor. There are many people who are victims of oppressive systems, natural disasters, or personal dysfunctions that contribute heavily to their suffering from a lack of basic necessities. It is vital that we exercise the solidarity, love, and wisdom necessary to help these people gain as much freedom as

¹⁵³ For poverty in the USA from various viewpoints see for example, Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (Crown, 2016); Jeff Manza and Michael Sauder, editors, *Inequality and Society: Social Science Perspectives on Social Stratification* (Norton, 2009); Ruby K. Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach*, sixth edition (aha! Process, 2018).

possible. But at the same time, I think that some people *should* be poor. The very solidarity, love, and wisdom necessary to help often comes from an intentional, incarnational “identification with” born of voluntarily sharing life with those who suffer. Our depth of relationship with God may be nourished best through a life freed from concerns about material possessions. More fundamentally, I think that God invites some (as Jesus did the Rich Young Ruler) to sell all and follow. Walter Capps, for example, describes a “monastic impulse” that seems to draw some to live life on the edges.¹⁵⁴ I do not take this *should* in a moral or “this is the only way to perfection” sense. I suspect that Jesus’s invitation to the man possessed by Legion—who begged to follow Jesus—to stay home with family and possessions and share the faith in this environment was his path to perfection. Some of us serve God better and find life more fully in poverty and others in riches.

There are also others where it is not so much a matter of life vocation but ongoing sanctification (and perhaps this was the Rich Young Ruler’s situation). Just as there are some who need to avoid alcohol to maintain a healthy life, so there are some who need to avoid wealth. The dangers and ephemeral nature of wealth is a prominent theme in Scripture and we would do well to heed it. This does not mean that all Christians must sell all our possessions. But it might mean that our voice as Christians might be stronger in this world if we were not so captive to worldly wealth. Perhaps some, in order to flee avarice, would decide to take vows of voluntary poverty. Perhaps others would simply pay careful attention to their life as merchants.

Some—having mentioned merchants—should rather be rich. There are some people who are gifted with the ability to sense the needs and the movements of the markets and to help arrange economic circumstances that can best serve the common good. And this often requires the capital necessary to invest. For the sake of society, some should be wealthy, perhaps even for personal sanctification as well. Yet wealth should not be managed such that the basic Biblical values of compassion, justice, and so on are ignored. Indeed, it is the godly wealthy, with experience in using the

154 Walter Capps, *The Monastic Impulse* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

tools of the market, who are best to help us discern what appropriate price, unfair loan practice, wise investment are all about: not for the sake of personal gain, but rather for the sake of improving the quality of life for all. Just as the poor need to learn to trust and to labor diligently, so the wealthy need to learn to be openhanded and to use their wealth within the framework of God's community of mutual aid. It is God who owns: we are the stewards of God's provision for the sake of God's purposes. Thus we see the way God works with the "who" question. God instructs the many and invites the few.

Which brings us to the question of *how poor*? It is clear that all Christians should be just, compassionate, not wasteful of God's creation. We should exhibit these values even if it affects our standard of living. And yet it is not always clear what actions, to what degree best express these values or other economic values. The complexities of the nature of poverty along with the unique circumstances of our lives make impossible a precise designation of moral income or expense standards. Yet the ambiguity of determining appropriate action does not remove us from responsibility for appropriate action. For the wealthy to do nothing, claiming that the issues are too complex, reminds me of too much of the "irresponsible poor," claiming that they are victims of society and cannot figure out how to improve their life.

I believe some, like Francis himself, should rid themselves of everything and join the poorest of the poor. Some should joyfully abandon themselves to the moment-by-moment provision of God, sharing life with the least and proclaiming the Gospel in their midst. There is a freedom in absolute poverty that can be experienced in no other environment. Voluntary poverty has functional, spiritual, communal benefits and more. I think that Francis was right to call people to a life of abandoning rights and possessions and that the spiritual Franciscans saw in this something authentic and important to follow. We need those who choose to leave education, property, income, and credibility behind. But I also think that the conventual or moderate Franciscans (along with the Dominicans and others) had a point as well. Can't we just be careful about our ownership and use in the context of ongoing ministry?

Isn't there wisdom in nurturing a simplicity that employs a form of *usus pauper* within the context of what is appropriate for diverse ministerial contexts? I think so.

Furthermore I think there are wealthy or "middle class" Christians who can employ a measure of voluntary poverty in the way they restrict their own ownership and use of goods and services for the sake of the kingdom. There are also involuntary poor who should strive to become more wealthy and others who please God by graciously receiving help from others. As should be clear by now, the possibilities of serving God well with our economic practice are nearly endless.

And this is my point. We have for too long approached the questions of "Who should be poor?" and "How poor?" with narrow and shallow options. Either make a good living and be generous or become a nun or missionary or something similar. Yet there is so much more available. I say this not only out of reflection on Francis, but also from my own personal experience and my relationships with many people who are exploring creative forms of life today. We are in desperate need, I think, of fresh experiments in what I call a "radical middle": a life between the default American Dream and an almost impossible renunciation of marriage, possessions in formal monastic institutions. Few people, in the United States at least, make a conscious choice to become wealthier. It is just what we do naturally. But to lower our standard of living—our housing, travel, social arrangements—this requires a conscious choice.

But why? Why should some choose to be poor, or at least poorer than we are now? It is clear from what I have written above that there are actually a wide variety of reasons for choosing poverty (or wealth for that matter). Some simply follow a vocation, a call from God. Others confront the weakness of avarice with the strength of poverty. Some use poverty as a way of joining in life and ministry with others. Some use wealth as a way of making the world a better place. Some of just just find God best in one or the other circumstance.

In conclusion, I simply want to highlight three motivations that we have seen to be central to a Franciscan approach to poverty, motivations which seem to me to be especially relevant today. First, in

choosing a measure of voluntary poverty—through our own renunciation—we place ourselves more directly into the state of blessed dependence in which we were intended to live from the beginning of Creation and in which Jesus begs us to rediscover. “Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Second, through becoming poor we enter into the fellowship of solidarity: solidarity with the poor Christ, with one another as we share needs with the community, and with those who are involuntarily poor. This solidarity of powerlessness actually bears fruit in the exercise of a wisdom and even a power that can be exercised from no other place. Just ask Mother Theresa of Calcutta. And finally, we choose voluntary poverty to model Christ for the world. A life of simplicity has always communicated the message of Christ to others. It frees us up to be generous with time or money. A community of joyful dependency and mutual love demonstrates to the world just what heaven might be like.