

*The Most High Poverty of the Capuchins  
as Seen in their Early Legislation  
and Other Ancient Sources*

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Any reform of the Friars Minor, insofar as it implies a sincere desire to return to St. Francis, must inevitably include evangelical poverty and a renewal of life. And in fact the first generation of Capuchins took poverty as the basis, on an individual and community level, for living according to the teaching and example of St. Francis. Every emerging reform bears the imprint of the historical setting in which it was born and grew. The Capuchins arose in sixteenth century Italy at the height of the renaissance, in a society plagued by war, epidemics, poverty, the rivalries of noble families and a humanism that fostered a pagan morality. Paradoxically it was an age that was sensitive to the gospel mandates, to contemplative prayer, to great works of Christian charity, to the demand for self denial and mortification. In their own spirituality, the Capuchins were certain to reflect the anxieties of the times as well as its ambitions and goals.

Their objective of the spiritual life, marked by a rugged individualism, and reaching out to a personal experience of God was attained by a variety of means of perfection: the mastery of one's natural impulses, austerity of life, bodily mortification, a humble and retiring deportment.

Their understanding and practice of poverty reflected current spiritual trends. This does not mean that their poverty, the great liberator of the mind for the love of God and neighbor, was any the less genuinely Franciscan although it mirrored the pessimistic moods of the asceticism of the time.

### Poverty in the First Days of the Reform

Those instigators of the "rebellion" — Matthew of Bascio and Louis of Fossombrone — could not have cared less about defining their life style. They were not theoreticians. They were only interested in freedom to observe the Rule in all its purity, without being hobbled with structures that stood in their way. The bull *Religionis Zelus* which conferred canonical status on the movement makes no mention of poverty. It merely ratified certain practical choices the friars had made, such as the eremitical life as a safeguard of liberty and spontaneity, the habit with its pointed hood as a sign of their return to St. Francis, the beard as a symbol of austerity — three images of their will to be their authentic selves.<sup>1</sup>

This quest for authenticity explains why they made poverty the heart and center of their new movement. It was essential to any true return to the original Franciscan inspiration.

The Statutes of Albacina (1529) abstained from any formal statement of principles. What they do contain is very precise, even meticulous regulations concerning poverty in which we can detect a reaction to certain abuses that had crept into the Observant friaries. "The furnishings are to be sparse and mean, so that frugality, poverty and austerity may be evident in everything." They reflect the sixth chapter of the Rule which speaks of "that most high poverty which we have promised and which makes us heirs and kings of the kingdom of heaven, poor in temporal things but rich in virtue. Let this be our portion which leads to the land of the living."<sup>2</sup>

Under the tutelage of Bernardine of Asti, the teacher and mold of that first generation, the Order acquired a profound evangelical insight into poverty as taught by St. Francis. Under his leadership the reform was able to outgrow an initial overreaction to structuralism and entered a period of great spiritual creativity.

No other document so clearly reveals the position taken by the new reform on poverty as the original version of the Con-

<sup>1</sup>*Bullarium Capuccinorum*, I, 3 ff.

<sup>2</sup>*Constitutioni delli Frati Minori detti della vita heremitica*, Rome 1913, nos. 15-16.

stitutions of 1536 which was largely the work of Bernardine of Asti. Consider the motivation proposed in the various numbers: "most high and celestial poverty" (nos. 38, 69, 81) is called our "most holy and beloved mother" (nos. 23, 27, 84); "the queen and mother of all virtues, the spouse of Christ and of our Seraphic Father" (no. 27); "the most solid foundation of all religious observance" (no. 126). The first Capuchins set up as "their goal and principal basis of their thinking the perfect observance of the Rule and Testament of our Seraphic Father, especially in all that concerns the obligation to practice poverty."<sup>3</sup> "The basis of our Rule," wrote Francis of Jesi, another great leader of the Capuchin reform, "is poverty."<sup>4</sup>

But even though poverty is something very basic, it is not an end in itself. It is always a means to an end, which is religious perfection, the love of God and neighbor. For St. Francis as well as for the first Capuchins the ultimate reason for embracing a life of poverty was the example given by the Son of God "who made Himself poor in this world for our sakes" (*Rule*, VI). Poverty is a condition for imitating Christ and collaborating in His work of salvation. The sixth chapter of the 1536 Constitutions opens with a glowing appeal to the life of Christ "marked by poverty from His birth to the cross" (no. 69).

Capuchin spirituality adds a unique perspective, *the relationship of poverty to prayer*. St. Bonaventure had already extolled the importance of voluntary poverty for lifting the soul to God in prayer.<sup>5</sup> Francis Tittelmans, a great Scripture scholar, called poverty: "the foundation of the Order and of every virtue." He esteemed it highly as a liberator for the practice of contemplation "which he declared to be the objective of religious life."<sup>6</sup> Not only poverty as such, but the Rule itself according to John of Fano is meant to free the heart

<sup>3</sup>Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *Historia*, in *Monumenta Historica Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum*, IV, 149.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 79.

<sup>5</sup>*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, *Opera Omnia*, V, 310-313.

<sup>6</sup>Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *Historia*, *ibid.*, III, 173.

from all earthly affections and impediments to prepare it for prayer."<sup>7</sup>

Bernardine of Asti shied away from extreme positions and taught that three virtues were essential to the Capuchin way of life: "charity, poverty and prayer." First and foremost is charity, or love, but "charity cannot survive in us without prayer and poverty." These three virtues, he added, "witness one to the other." There is no real poverty where charity and prayer are missing. There is no real prayer without charity and poverty, neither is there real charity where there is not prayer or poverty.<sup>8</sup>

### "As Pilgrims and Strangers"

As true friars minor, the Capuchins looked beyond the poverty of the individual. The fraternity as such was obliged to lead a life of complete poverty, courting insecurity, rejecting any stable source of income. The ideal was not that of monastic poverty, as practiced by the early Christians (Acts 2, 42-48), who possessed all things *in common*, but apostolic poverty as practiced by Christ and the apostles.<sup>9</sup> The entire sixth chapter of the 1536 Constitutions expounds this idea.

We are to have a sense of pilgrimage. The friars see themselves as travelers through the world, and always in the role of ambassadors. "Let every friar remember that evangelical poverty consists in the firm resolution of not becoming attached to any earthly thing, of using the things of the world most sparingly as if compelled by necessity, and for the glory of God whom we are to recognize as the true owner of all things" — a concept dear to the mind of St. Francis. "Let the friars remember that we dwell in an inn and eat the sins of the people" (no. 67).

They accepted the traditional interpretation of the command "*the friars shall appropriate to themselves nothing*" according to the declarations of the Holy See and "keeping in

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 100.

<sup>8</sup>*Litterae circulares*, June 5, 1548. *Monumenta Historica Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum*, VII, 242.

<sup>9</sup>Marius of Mercato Saraceno, *Relationes*, *ibid.*, I, 363 ff.

mind the intentions of St. Francis." "Our Seraphic Father commanded the friars in the Rule not to possess anything of their own, so that *unencumbered, like pilgrims of earth and citizens of heaven, they might run with alacrity of spirit in the way of God*. Desiring to imitate in truth the lofty example of Christ, and to put into practice the seraphic precept of celestial poverty, we wish it to be understood that we have in fact no jurisdiction, ownership, juridical possession or usufruct or legal use of any thing, even of the things we use through necessity" (no. 69).

To own nothing, *either individually or in common* was for the Capuchins as for other Franciscans the summit of perfect poverty. Today, as we read the text of the Rule in its historical context, and as Francis meant it, we know that what was uppermost in the mind of the Founder was not a legalistic concept of ownership but rather the firm will not to own anything in this world, of going about like pilgrims and strangers and shunning any fixed abodes.

For centuries the Friars Minor, with the blessing of canon law, accepted houses, churches and everything else they used as "*property of the Holy See*." The first Capuchins took another position, more heroic and more in conformity with the concept of pilgrimage, namely a real, not merely nominal dependence on the immediate *owners*. The Statutes of Albacina already stated:

"The places we receive, or which are built for us, shall always remain the property either of the individual owners or of the town. They are to be accepted on this condition: if they become an impediment to leading our life, the friars are free to leave. And if the owners are no longer willing for the friars to reside in the place, the friars must leave, without any arguments, and go to another place and do penance there with the blessing of God."

The Constitutions of 1536 prescribe: "We ordain that in every friary an inventory be kept in which an account be given of the more valuable things bestowed on us by benefactors for our necessary and simple use. Within the octave of the feast of our Seraphic Father, each guardian shall go to the owner of the friary, thank him for the use of it during the past year, and humbly beg him to grant the friars the use of it for

another year. Should he consent, the friars may dwell there with a safe conscience. Should he refuse, then, without any sign of sadness, nay, with a joyful heart, accompanied by divine poverty, let them depart, feeling themselves indebted to their benefactor for the time they were permitted to dwell there, and not to be offended, because it is his property and he is not obliged to offer it to them. This they shall do with other valuable things, carrying the articles, such as chalices and similar objects to the benefactor when this can be done conveniently. They shall at least promise to return them should the owner so desire" (no. 70). "Let the friars guard against accepting any place with the obligation of retaining it" (no. 72).

Not surprisingly, such heroism could not be sustained after the first few decades. In fact, this entire passage was deleted in the 1552 revision of the Constitutions. Bernardine of Colpetrazzo gives the reason: "This was omitted later on because the owners found it a nuisance. Since expenses were borne by a number of individuals, it could give rise to disagreements and other problems. It was enough for the friars to declare that they exercised no jurisdiction over the places and that they were willing to leave any time they were evicted."<sup>10</sup>

The simple and provisional style of their *little dwellings* was in keeping with the spirit of pilgrimage. At first they settled in hermitages or abandoned sites. The Statutes of Albacina prescribed that their places be outside the towns, but not too distant; that they be constructed "as simply as possible, of wattle and clay, or of stones and earth, except the church, which, however, should be small...the cells, too, should be small and poor so as to resemble tombs rather than monastic cells, and let them be humble and low."

The Constitutions of 1536, which are closer to the spirit of St. Francis as expressed in his writings, mention the desire of the Founder as found in his Testament: "Let the brothers take care that they by no means receive churches or houses, however small and poor, or anything else built for them unless

these buildings are in keeping with the holy poverty we have promised in the Rule" (*Test.* 24). Once more we are reminded of the sense of pilgrimage (no. 73). All parts of the house are to be "small, humble, poor, cheap, and low, so that everything may preach humility, poverty and contempt of the world." The churches, too, are to be "small, poor and decent", conformable to minority and our service of the people of God, because "we give better example preaching in the churches of others rather than in our own especially if holy poverty is offended (no. 74). The norms of the Statutes of Albacina are retained: the buildings, as far as possible, are to be of "wattle and clay, reeds, tiles and cheap material, after the example of our Father, and as a token of humility and poverty." They should be modeled on the "simple dwellings of the poor" (no. 75).<sup>11</sup>

The spirit of pilgrimage and lack of concern for the morrow is further evidenced in the Rule against accumulating any *surpluses*. They were to live from hand to mouth, trusting in the love of their Heavenly Father (n. 81; *Albac.* 17). They were to travel in the style of the apostles, not taking along any supplies, but trusting in the generosity of the people (no. 48).

Another element of personal and communal poverty is the prohibition against the use of *money*, a point stressed very strongly in the fourth chapter of the Rule. In the earlier Rule this prescription is associated with the mission of the friars "going about the world." Wandering preachers were not likely to be tempted by the power resulting from the ownership of real estate, which could happen to a monastery of Benedictines. They could, however, succumb to greed for money. After Francis' death, the friars felt that their evolving community could not survive without the use of money. They did some hair splitting, interpreting the words of the Rule in their precise literal meaning: "They shall not 'receive' money" was not the same as saying they shall not "possess" money. So a way was found of adhering to the letter of the Rule by engaging *substitutes, procurators and syndics* who would "receive" the money in the name of the benefactors or of the

<sup>10</sup>Matthias of Salo, *Historia Capuccina, ibid.*, V, 279. cf. Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *ibid.*, IV, 22 ff.

<sup>11</sup>Melchoir of Pobladora, *La bella e santa riforma*, 54-75.

Holy See, but for the benefit of the friars and to be administered by their superiors.

In the earliest legislation the Capuchins looked upon such a solution as a subterfuge to water down the heroism demanded by the Rule. They accepted the declarations of the Holy See but resolutely refused to admit procurators or syndics since they judged such concessions hostile to the pure observance of the Rule: "We will not even make mention of procurators and syndics...Hence we ordain that there be no other procurator or syndic except the blessed Christ. Let our chief protector be the Blessed Mother of God, our substitute our Holy Father Saint Francis" (*Albac.* 36). "Desiring therefore to carry out entirely and fully the pious desire of our Father, who was inspired by the Holy Spirit, we ordain that the friars shall in no way have a procurator, or any other person on earth, by whatever name he may be called, to receive or hold money for them, either at their instigation, request or in their name, for whatever interest or cause. But our procurator and advocate shall be Jesus Christ, and all the angels and saints shall be our spiritual friends" (*Const.* 1536, n. 57). "Money must be valued no more than dust" (no. 58). An authentic evangelic spirit breathes in all the motivation of the articles on poverty, especially in the concept of voluntary insecurity based on the providence of God and the teaching of Jesus.

#### Interior Poverty — Minority

Saint Francis attached greater importance to interior poverty, poverty of the spirit, than to mere privation of material things. According to him "to live without property" is the same as to keep the heart detached from all things, truly "despoiled" even of internal goods and free from all ambition, greed, self serving and envy over the advantages others may enjoy. The friar who is poor in spirit has no thought for himself, places all that he has at the disposal of others and recognizes that every good gift comes from God and belongs to Him. This thought is expressed in the Constitutions of 1536, no. 67.

Hence interior poverty is expected of the brothers. "External poverty is concerned with three things: housing,

clothing and food...If external poverty is so important, how much more excellent is spiritual poverty which consists in the renunciation of all temporal things? I venture to say, let a man be ever so abstemious, given to prayer, let him seek out the strictest religious order, even flee to the desert...as long as there remains within him an ounce of self love or attachment to worldly things, he will never attain to real spirituality. This is true spiritual poverty: to keep the heart free from all attachments except to God. And this is what our Seraphic Father called the highest wisdom."<sup>12</sup>

"Poverty and humility" constitute "*minority*" according to Francis. Minority is an evangelical disposition not to seek the first place, not to wish to be above or more powerful than others; it means being at the service of all, being ready to do a favor without looking for any reward, or thanks or praise.

The first Capuchins mastered it. In their desire to return to St. Francis they adopted a heroic decision, one founded on the saint's own example and expressed in the Testament: complete submission to the authority of the bishops, *renouncing any and all exemptions*.

The evangelical and Franciscan motivation for this choice is found in the first chapter of the Constitutions of 1536: "And because our Holy Father, being wholly divine, contemplated God in every creature, especially in man and more so in the Christian, but above all in the priest and in a very singular manner in the Pope, he therefore wished his friars, in accordance with apostolic teaching to be subject to the divine majesty in every creature out of love for Him who humbled Himself so much for us. Wherefore he called them *friars minor* in order that they should not only in their hearts deem themselves inferior to all, but being called in the church militant to the marriage feast of the most holy spouse Jesus Christ, they should always take the lowest place, in accordance with His counsel and example" (no. 7).

Thereupon follows the renunciation of all exemptions: "Considering that to be free from subjection to the Ordinaries by means of privileges and exemptions is not only proximate

<sup>12</sup>Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *ibid.*, III, 77.

to pride, but the enemy of the humble subjection belonging to a friar minor, and because such liberty very often disturbs peace and begets scandal in the Church of God, and in order to conform ourselves to our humble, crucified Saviour, who came to minister to us, becoming obedient even to the bitter death of the cross, and to avoid scandal, *the general chapter renounces the privilege of exemption from the authority of the Ordinaries*. Like our Seraphic Father, our highest privilege is to be subject to all" (no. 8). The next chapter once more exhorts them to be submissive to the Pope, the prelates, priests, and to every creature that shows us the way to God" (no. 9).

We can well imagine the reaction of other mendicant Orders to this decision of the Capuchins. How could they think of renouncing gains won at the cost of so much struggle, rights which affected not only the internal life of the community but the exercise of their apostolic ministry to the people of God? Besides there was question not so much of this or that privilege won by the religious but the prerogatives of the Holy Father, as supreme shepherd, as appears in the first concession granted to the Friars Minor and Dominicans by Pope Gregory IX. These considerations, as well as a reluctance on the part of many friars to be subject to the Ordinaries, was the reason why the whole article was suppressed in the Constitutions of 1552, only the beautiful preamble remaining intact. Another sign that the heroic age was gone.

### Poverty — Austerity

The young reform, like other such movements of the time, Franciscan and non-Franciscan, took up and cultivated *austerity* as its hallmark. It represented a strong reaction to the anti-Christian, or "worldly" aspect of renaissance society. Sixteenth century men, whether noble or wealthy commoner, enjoyed the good things of life especially expensive clothing and footwear. Their vanity showed in expensive homes, with lofty entrances and windows, splendidly furnished parlors and salons, luxurious carriages, magnificent country villas and sumptuous banquets.

For the Capuchins poverty represented not only the op-

tion of living as poor men; it was a prophetic witness to the "world." The Statutes of Albacina ordain that "simplicity, poverty and *austerity* be resplendent" in all things (no. 15). The sources speak of the natural accompaniments of poverty — *holy austerity, lowliness, simplicity and privation*. Visitors were "terrified by the friars' austerity, touched by their poverty and simplicity and moved to repentance by their devotion."<sup>13</sup>

Their little dwellings were to be poor, more like tombs than human habitations. Their clothing was to be woven of "cheap cloth, indeed the cheapest that could be found in the area, of the simplest and meanest cut and color" (*Albac.* no. 24). The material must be "the more common, abject, austere, coarse and despised" (*Const.* of 1536, no. 21). The habit must be simple and poor; the cincture "common rope, rough and ordinary, with simple knots...so that *despised by the world, we may have occasion to practice greater mortification*" (no. 23). Only the weaker friars were allowed to wear sandals. The rest were to go *barefoot* (no. 26). The same austerity was to be observed in their sleeping quarters, "that we may be more watchful and solicitous in prayer and be more like our father St. Francis whose bed was often the bare ground, even like Christ Himself...." They were to take their rest on bare boards, rush mats or upon a little straw (no. 25).

"Their austerity carried with it something of self-annihilation."<sup>14</sup> Their way of life served as an excellent screen for vocations, as Bernardine of Asti said. Only candidates of set purpose, strong in mind and body could survive this kind of asceticism. "An austere life makes for a good novitiate."<sup>15</sup> As Eusebius of Ancona wrote: "Only men led by a desire to suffer come to our congregation; and this good desire sanctifies them..."<sup>16</sup>

Aware that the world of that "pre-baroque" time was fond of flamboyant and dramatic *contrasts*, the Capuchins carefully cultivated an austere, mortified and recollected

<sup>13</sup>Paul of Foligno, *Origo et progressus, ibid.*, VII, 179.

<sup>14</sup>Matthias of Salo, *ibid.*, VI, 273.

<sup>15</sup>Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *ibid.*, III, 186.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, IV, 188.

presence. The barefoot friar in his rough habit, with shaven head and unkempt beard was a familiar sight. The beard was worn by the first Capuchins not as a sign of a return to St. Francis but as a witness to the times. Wearing the beard, approved by Clement VII in 1528, was "manly and natural, despised and austere" (no. 29).

Not only the simple folk loved such an image. The well-to-do likewise, and perhaps even more so, welcomed it as a delightful novelty amidst their rich trappings and tapestries, their silk robes and expensive homes. As St. Francis de Sales wrote, the Capuchins preached a silent but very efficacious sermon.

### Brothers of the Poor

One biblical scholar pointed out that the Gospel never speaks of poverty, but speaks of the poor ninety-five times. For those who must endure it, poverty is not some philosophical theory or ascetical option but a tragic reality. On his road of penance Francis first embraced the poor man as his brother and then discovered the poor and suffering Christ. For him poverty meant simply being poor, the condition of those who must suffer privation, marginal subsistence and oppression. It meant above all imitating the poor life of the Son of God "who for our sakes became poor in this world," and who said that we could find Him as often as we encountered any of our brothers in need.

The first Capuchins discovered the poor before they set about defining what poverty meant. Matthew of Bascio had an impressive experience in January 1525: "On his way back to the monastery he found a poor man lying on the ground naked and nearly frozen to death. Seeing the man in such a miserable condition, he took pity on him, divested himself of a large woolen garment of good quality and gave it to him. As he continued toward the monastery, the poor man vanished from his sight. He never saw him again. But, as Matthew told me afterwards, his heart was filled with great compassion for him and all other poor people. And the more he witnessed how well provided the friars were with food, heated dwellings,

good clothes and other comforts, the more he mourned for the poverty he had professed..."<sup>17</sup>

Matthew had already, in 1523, distinguished himself for his service to the sick during the plague at Camerino.<sup>18</sup> His fellow Capuchins did the same during the great epidemic and depression that swept the Marches in 1528-1529. They went among the victims as if going to martyrdom. Their ministry of charity did much to gain the good will of the people, and especially of the Duchess of Camerino.<sup>19</sup>

In those first years, just as in the days of St. Francis, "they dedicated themselves to evangelizing and helping the poor; they spent the nights whenever they could in some abandoned church, a hospital, or a religious house."<sup>20</sup> Later on, "so as to observe the Testament to the letter, they spent their time in the hospitals caring for the lepers." Their presence in the Roman hospital for the incurables brought about such a change in that institution that with an increase in alms and better care of the sick it became a model hospital. Many friars volunteered their services for the care of the sick.<sup>21</sup>

Outstanding among the others in that first generation of Capuchins was the learned Francis Tittelmans who lived in the hospital and performed the lowliest tasks with the greatest care and fervor. To those who criticized him for having abandoned his books, he replied: "I have taken up a discipline taught me by our Seraphic Father, and you must know that I have exchanged Augustine, Jerome and Chrysostom for these people. They are my library..."<sup>22</sup>

Again we encounter the note of heroism, 'institutionalized' so to speak, all the more astounding since it presupposed an ongoing readiness on the part of the friars for self-immolation.

The sixth chapter of the Constitutions of 1536 contains two prescriptions concerning life among the poor and pover-

<sup>17</sup>Marius of Mercato Saraceno, *ibid.*, I, 4 ff.

<sup>18</sup>Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *ibid.*, II, 102.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 222.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 189.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, IV, 196.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 281.

ty. It is difficult to find anything like them in any body of laws: "We further ordain that *during a famine* the friars appointed to this task by their superiors shall go about in quest of food for the poor, after the example of our most holy Father who showed great compassion for the poor" (no. 85). "And since they who are detached from this world will find it sweet, just and charitable to die for the love of Him who died for us on the cross, we ordain that *during a plague* the friars shall succor the afflicted according to the directions of their vicars. The vicars, however, shall always be prudently alert to such situations" (no. 89).

As we might expect, the Constitutions of 1552 suppressed, along with other articles entailing heroism, the two prescriptions about begging alms for the poor in times of famine and assisting the sick during plagues, two evils which afflicted the people of the time. Nevertheless the Order has always retained its consciousness of this concern which frequently elicited the charity of the friars. Time and time again the Capuchins volunteered their services and laid down their lives in various epidemics.<sup>23</sup>

But these occasions were exceptional. Habitually they shared their meager provisions with the poor. Their legislation frequently reminded them of this duty. While they forbid the friars to accept funerals and obsequies, they make an exception for one who "because of his poverty has no one to bury him" (no. 38; *Albac.* no. 50). If the benefactors donate superfluous food, it may be, with their consent, distributed to the poor (no. 54). The same is ordered for all superfluous items. Hoarding is forbidden (no. 67). Things that are no longer of any use to the friars as well as the produce of the vineyards and orchards on the land loaned by the benefactors are to be given to the poor (no. 80).

The chronicles mention numerous friars outstanding for their charity to the poor, among them, Brother Louis of Stronccone, who performed the humblest duties in the Roman hospital for the incurables; Brother Vincent of Fioano, who had such deep feeling for the poor and who said that "God

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Lazaro de Aspuz, *Manual de Historia Franciscana*, Madrid 1954, 379 ff.

had no use for a friar who, while living off the charity of the benefactors, shut his heart to the needs of others," Brother Bernard of Offida, and so many others.<sup>24</sup>

### What Modern Renewal Can Learn From the Early Capuchins

The theme of poverty surfaces repeatedly in all the reform movements of the Franciscan order. Today, in this time of renewal, it is a major concern. Nowadays, however, the quest for the gospel of poverty is not limited to Franciscans. The entire Church is keenly aware that it is being pressured by the people, especially after the declarations of Vatican II, to follow in the way of the poor and humble Christ, who singled out the evangelization of the poor as a sign of His kingdom. The Council calls the Church the "Church of the poor."

What role have the sons of St. Francis to play in this "Church of the poor"? Are we ready to make honest decisions and take on commitments like the first generation of Capuchins, even though it means giving up our present life style and its so-called "conventionalism," first and foremost that security which cripples our progress, and once more pursuing our Franciscan goals among the people of God?

The following objectives of the early Capuchins would seem to have the greatest relevance for our contemporaries:

1. The importance of *poverty as a prerequisite* for prayer and works of charity. When the heart is detached not only from material things, but especially from one's own comfort and pet projects, even in professional matters, it is more open to dialogue with God and sensitive to the needs of others.
2. We must recover that sense of *temporariness* which the first Capuchins sensed and which we breathe everywhere in today's atmosphere of search and experimentation. It implies an attitude which puts all the realities of the world and its history in proper perspective. It includes an eschatological

<sup>24</sup>Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *ibid.*, III, 264; Paul of Foligno, *ibid.*, VII, 442, 501.

outreach for the kingdom, toward the "land of the living" to use St. Francis' expression.<sup>25</sup>

3. The first Capuchins found a way of *divesting themselves of all ownership* and rights to buildings, gardens, fields and anything else destined for their use by living in complete dependence on the owners. They thus fulfilled one of those "rules for pilgrims" proposed by St. Francis: "To be gathered together under the roof of another" (2 *Cel.*, 59). We might come up with another solution adapted to our own circumstances with respect to our institutions, works and ministry by carrying out our apostolates as "minors" in the local parish church.
4. The prohibition to use *money*, so important for St. Francis, has not lost its relevance. Even though it cannot be observed to the letter it still obliges in the spirit, that is, according to the mind of Francis. Money was never meant to be a means of security for the life of the fraternity nor a source of power and influence.
5. *Minority* has any number of valid applications in our times, above all in the life and ministries of the Church. There are still ways of emulating the heroic example given us by the first Capuchins in the area of submission to the bishops and in humble cooperation with all who are laboring for the spread of the gospel. Embracing minority on the part of a province, or of the Order as a whole, presupposes growth in interior poverty — "poverty, humility, availability."
6. The choice of voluntary poverty according to the gospel means *being one of the poor*. There is not a question of the age-old division of rich and poor, but an option of life and fraternity. Pius XII and later, Paul VI, reminded the Capuchins a number of times about this option — to be found among the poor, to mingle our apostolic sweat with the sweat of the workingman, to labor for human and Christian progress, to be the bearers of love, joy and hope. This is the language of our 1974 constitutions.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Roger, Prior of Taizé, *Dynamique du provisoire*, Les Presses de Taizé, 1965.

## 450 Years of Service and Witness

Melchior of Pobladura, O.F.M. Cap.

I have the agreeable task of writing about the history of the works of mercy performed by the friars, especially those concerned with the relief of the human mind and body or which touch on various aspects of family and social life. The field is enormous, almost limitless. There are so many and varied things to be said that it is difficult even to mention all of them, let alone to treat them in the detail they merit. We must perforce limit ourselves to the more outstanding achievements.

A brief preamble will help understand what follows.

This kind of Capuchin apostolate flows from a pure and authentic Franciscan tradition. As sons and heirs of St. Francis, his first followers shared his love and concern for the poor and lowly. In the ebb and flow of life they shared their joys and sorrows, heeding the words of the Apostle of the gentiles: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."<sup>1</sup> This witness and service to their fellow men, practiced from the very beginning, was one of the basic reasons for the universal esteem, almost amounting to veneration, in which the Capuchins were held by the common people. It also accounts for the amazing spread of the Order and its fruitful labors among all peoples and nations.

In this article it will not be possible to enter into the progressive development of this apostolate, the many forms it assumed, its philosophy or spiritual significance, the difficulties encountered and results achieved. We will limit ourselves to a simple presentation, albeit incomplete, of some of their works or mercy. It should make us aware of the great

<sup>1</sup>Rom. 12, 15.