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Franciscan Poverty: Then and Now

by

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Abstract

Poverty is one of the worst social ills and is the cause of great personal and societal suffering. St. Francis' life of impoverishment was a radical critique of the incipient capitalist economy of his day. Forced to modify the radicality of this impoverishment, Franciscans since then have sought to interpret the founder of their order in ways which meet the needs and conform to the values of the society in which they find (have found) themselves. Both Cajetan Esser and Leonardo Boff are seminal thinkers in this regard and express two of the most significant themes with which Franciscans have struggled throughout the centuries: the extent of necessary poverty and the Franciscan response to the suffering poor of society.

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INTRODUCTION

Regan. What need one?

**Lear. Oh reason not the need; our basest beggars
are in the poorest thing superfluous.**

Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady.

If only to go warm were gorgeous,

**Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
which scarcely keeps thee warm.**

***King Lear*.... Act 2, sc. 4, ln 260-267.**

Of all the problems besetting humanity, poverty is perhaps, one of the worst. Through the centuries beginning with St. Francis himself, Franciscan thinking on this subject has ranged from a 'monastic,' individualistic experience of poverty as a path of spirituality to a contemporary understanding of Franciscan thinking that understands the path of spirituality to involve the liberation of the poor from their suffering. These are obviously widely differing understandings. Yet, each claim to find their point of origin in the teachings of St. Francis. In addition, between these two poles there exists, and has existed since the time of the formation of the Franciscan order in the late Middle Ages, a more middle body of understanding. This sees the social implications of Francis' life and teaching as important, while continuing to place prime importance on the place of poverty as an identification with Christ and as the true Franciscan path of spirituality.

The thesis will examine some understandings on this subject as seen in the writings of three Franciscan writers: St. Francis of Assisi himself, Cajetan Esser a contemporary theo-

logian from Germany, and Leonardo Boff, a liberation theologian from South America who, though supported by many South American bishops, was silenced by the Vatican. Boff, in fact, has recently left the Franciscan order and the priesthood.

Compassion is a dominant characteristic of Franciscan thought and practice. However, it will be suggested that the two aspects of St. Francis' life and teaching, compassion and the imitation of Christ in the life of radical poverty, are potentially contradictory. It is from these two polarities that the various, and at times conflicting, interpretations of Franciscan practice are derived. The thesis will also show that this apparent contradiction continues to remain problematic for Franciscans who followed Francis within the restrictions of the essentially imposed Rule of the order, and who desire nevertheless, to live in the spirit of the founder. This is especially true for Leonardo Boff, one of the three thinkers whose ideas the thesis will examine. The thesis will show that St. Francis' understanding of poverty as the imitation of Christ, was the cause of both a hermeneutic openness and a dilemma with regard to practice for later Franciscans. This dilemma centres on the necessity of deciding whether the main point of emphasis should be an inner and personal spirituality or a social action that seeks to alleviate the suffering of the 'lay' poor.

Consequently, with this in mind, the thesis will present a hermeneutical analysis of Franciscan ideas regarding poverty since the time of the order's organization. It intends in Chapter One to look at St. Francis' statements and actions in relation to poverty and place these within the historical context of his time. Chapter Two will deal with the works of Cajetan Esser, a contemporary Franciscan from Germany, in order to derive differences and similarities between early Franciscan attitudes to poverty and present ones as expressed by this writer. The third chapter will examine the works of Leonardo Boff, a Latin American Franciscan, and see how his more politically oriented analysis differs in significant ways from both St. Francis and Esser. In Chapter Four the thesis will finally attempt to derive conclusions from these analyses and point to areas of further development that are believed to be consistent with these Franciscan

understandings of poverty. If St. Francis sought to identify with Christ by becoming devastatingly poor, Boff seeks to identify himself with Christ by means of identifying Christ with the poor, and also by discovering Christ *in*, and at one with, the poor.

Yet the role of actual practice in regard to the poor is not a question that has plagued Franciscan life and thinking since its inception as a religious order. The question of the Franciscans' relationship to the poor is, in fact, fairly recent and springs, I would suggest, from the ascendancy of democracy and the consequent focus on the rights and quality of life of the individual. The question that has continued to be a source of controversy is one regarding the nature and extent of poverty necessary for the Franciscan life. The controversy began during the lifetime of Francis and, though it appeared to have been solved by the *usus pauper* decisions (Burr, 1985, pp. 331-342), this question has never really gone away. This is evident in the works of Esser who seeks a novel and equally controversial solution in a contemporary reformulating of the understanding of St. Francis on the subject.

The thesis will contend that if there is a common thread connecting these three thinkers it is that of compassion. This is not to claim that the three thinkers all understand compassion and its practice identically. Compassion for Francis, for example, was to live the life of the desperately poor as completely as possible. For Boff, however, it would be to struggle for the elevation of the poor from their grinding poverty. Thus, the thesis does not claim that compassion, as such, is the *sine qua non* of Franciscan thought on poverty. Indeed it is asserted that the derivation of such a *sine qua non* varies, depending on which of the three authors one chooses to study. However, while compassion alone is not claimed to be the essential ingredient of Franciscanism, compassion tied to a varying practice of poverty is asserted to be this inner core of the order. This, of course, flies in the face of the common belief that it is indeed compassion alone which sets St. Francis and his followers apart. Yet, without an understanding and practice of poverty, in some form, Franciscanism can not be said to be present.

CHAPTER ONE

The chapter will examine the life and cultural background of St. Francis of Assisi, 1181 or 2-1226 (Engelbert, 1965, p. 46), and attempt to evaluate the influence of his religious and cultural environment in the development of his teachings. It will also analyze both his teachings on poverty and the subsequent controversy that broke out on the degree of poverty that the church believed to be acceptable in the Friars Minor (the Franciscans).

St. Francis of Assisi, baptized Giovanni di Pietro di Bernadone, was born in 1181 or 1182. It is not really known when his name was changed to Francesco, whether by his father on his return from a business trip or later, perhaps by his friends, on seeing how well he loved to speak French and sing the songs of the travelling French troubadours (ibid., p. 49). The times in which Francis was born were far from peaceful. The part of Italy in which he lived was controlled by the Holy Roman Empire. However, bloody and cruel revolts were common and in order to continue his control of the Empire, the Emperor depended on the nobility who were in a feudal relationship to him and exercised the functions of judges and consuls for the Emperor in the localities in which they resided (ibid., p. 41).

Traditional feudal society was comprised of two classes: the *majores* or *boni homines* (the great or the nobility) and the *minores* or common people (ibid., p. 42). The nobles shared with the church and monasteries the majority of the wealth of the period and were not taxed. As Engelbert notes, "The *majores* were the nobles, the knights, the lords who constituted in those times of general brigandage a permanent police force" (ibid., p. 42). Engelbert states that thanks to these people the *minores* were protected, but if the conditions

of life as existed for southern Europe at this time can be described as a state of safety, one can only wonder at the level of social anarchy that existed before this “stabilizing” of the continent under feudalism. There were two kinds of *minores*: *villeins* and serfs. The serfs belonged to the lord’s land and were little more than intelligent livestock, while the others, the *villeins* were free men with the right to own property.

By Francis’ time, however, things had begun to change, particularly in regard to peasant society and, as in the time of industrialization in the 18th century, the deep demographic and economic changes caused vast numbers of farm workers to migrate to the towns. In addition, serfs were achieving freedom from their feudal lords, though what was gained in legal freedom was, to all intents, taken away by the imposition of severe economic exploitation on the newly freed serfs. For many, then, life was the experience of grinding poverty and endless labour (Duquoc and Floristan, ed., p. 4).

With the Crusades there was a great explosion of commerce and with the extension of the known and “experienced” world into the Near East, trade routes all over the Mediterranean opened up on which raw and manufactured goods to and from Europe flowed (Engelbert, pp. 42, 43). This allowed many artisans and merchants in Europe to become, at times, immensely wealthy, and with this increase in the distribution of wealth, these merchants, while still theoretically *villeins* or *minores*, were able to exercise political power beyond their legitimate feudal rights and become, in effect, *majores*.

This economic transformation did not occur, however, only as a result of the crusades. From about the year 1000 there had been a sharp increase in the population of Europe that resulted, over the next two hundred years in a doubling of the population (Duquoc and Floristan, ed., p. 3). Also, agri-technological change took place along with vast land clearings, to meet the needs of the increased population. In addition, there were the beginnings of mechanization and an increase, as expected, in the number of mills related to agricultural activity (ibid., p. 3). Further, the increased population brought about a movement towards

urbanization and the creation of towns which were economic, political and cultural centres rather than population centres oriented to feudal and military protection.

This socio-economic development led to an increase in and diversification of forms of labor. Perhaps inevitably, this demographic and economic transformation put the old power structure in flux. With the existence of new personal needs and the possibility of alternate material and monetary means for their satisfaction, predominantly through the increase in the use and acceptance of money as the medium of economic transaction, power began to slip away from those whose control of society had been based on non-economic variables, such as physical and military might and ecclesiastical authority. This economic revolution had the effect of radically redistributing power and causing the weakening of the feudal system. In the face of the economic and perceived political power of a rich, common class, the nobility was forced to begin a sharing of political power by granting genuine political power to this lower, but increasingly wealthy class through the creation of a new political entity, the commune.

This, however, was not so much a proto-democratic state as it was a feudal organization in which the wealthy *villeins* were, in fact, included in the ranks of the nobility, bound as vassals to the local lord and obliged, thus, to supply troops in the lords service (Engelbert, p. 43). This was to have dramatic and negative effects in terms of regional stability. However, for the serfs and the poor *villeins* whose lives did not benefit appreciably from the newly attained political rights of the merchant groups, the main result seems to have been the privilege of being sent off to fight in the ever increasing and very local battles between different communes (ibid., p. 43).

Indeed, the violence of the times was considerable. Many of the wars between the communes, either with the support of the local lord or not, seemed to revolve around the increasing of the territorial boundaries by seizing bridges or tiny pieces of land. The cruelty to the defeated was severe. Cities were burned, villages destroyed and those who had not

been massacred were often tortured and mutilated (ibid., p. 44). In this regard, Pope Innocent III wrote to the communes of the Marches: “We learn that you continue to lay waste cities, destroy castles, burn villages, oppress the poor, persecute churches and reduce men to serfdom” (ibid., p. 44). Engelbert writes that at the time of Francis’ youth such a criticism could as easily have been sent to the commune of Assisi (ibid., p. 44).

Such was the political and economic environment in which Francis lived. In terms of the religious life of the church, the violence and political instability seems to have been the cause of extreme expressions of piety, not excluding St. Francis’ own expressions. However, these expressions of piety were in great contrast to the depressingly low level of spirituality seen in the regular priestly ministry. According to Engelbert, many of the priests “were absorbed in the management of temporal affairs, to the neglect of their priestly ministry. Priests preached little, studied not at all, practised simony and lived loosely and lazily” (ibid., p. 101). It is said that Innocent III lamented that it “would take fire and sword to cure it” (ibid.).

Yet there were many who sought to reform the church and bring it to a more pure state. One group, named the “Poor Men of Lyons” was started by Peter Valdes, a wealthy merchant, who had given away his possessions to preach and practise the Gospel. The group lived in poverty, performed acts of penance and lived together in complete equality (ibid., p. 103). Their criticism of the clergy led to their excommunication by the Archbishop of Lyons. However, Pope Alexander III gave the group authority to preach wherever the bishops allowed them. The movement spread throughout Europe but unfortunately their success and their continued criticism of the clergy continued, unsurprisingly, to displease the clergy and ultimately, in 1184, two or three years after Francis’ birth, they were condemned.

Another group that prospered during this period was the *Humiliati* who had originated in Lombardy and who, by 1216 had over one hundred and fifty communities in the Milan diocese alone. They existed in three orders, much the same as the three Franciscan orders

were to be organized. The first two orders, male and female, usually satisfied their material needs by manual labor, though they engaged in begging if this was insufficient. They did not, however, reject common ownership of property and consequently sometimes wound up living quite comfortably, the very result St. Francis later feared would come from the acceptance of common property under the guise of personal poverty (ibid., p. 105).

These changes and the social instability that surrounded the change in the socio-political paradigm did not leave the church untouched. The Gregorian reforms (1073-1085) attempted to free the church from secular and lay economic influence. In fact, the reforms can be understood as a reaction of the church to new social realities and to the power of the money economy. We can see a similar reaction and rejection of money as a basis of social interaction in St. Francis' own refusal to accept money. It seems certain then, that the rapid increase in the use of money was seen, by a broad spectrum of society, as a form of unacceptable and somehow unspiritual behaviour. The degree to which this unease with a money economy was evidenced is seen starkly in the removal of *superbia* (pride) (the sin most troubling for the feudal system), from heading the list of the seven deadly sins. It was replaced by *avaritia* (avarice), and is described by Le Goff in *Francis of Assisi Today* as: "the vice that goes with a monetary economy" (Duquoc and Floristan, ed., p. 6).

The Gregorian reforms, however, were not simply reactions to a money economy but, as Le Goff points out: "a desire to return to the source, *Ecclesiae primitiva forma*," and expressed a deep feeling in the church to restore the life of apostolic Christianity. Le Goff states: "The Gregorian reform was, in a sense, the institutionalisation of the (desire for change) and the means by which it permeated all levels of society in the course of the 12th century" (ibid., p. 5). Little, in *Poverty in the Middle Ages*, comments that in the desire for a return to Apostolic Christianity, there was a heavy emphasis on the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles as sources for behaviour (David Flood, ed., 1975, p. 16). He goes on to point out that "The key point in this evangelical code was the observance of material poverty

expressed as a general disdain for all materialistic values but also specifically as a rejection of the use and the handling even of money” (ibid., p. 16). This attitude to a money economy was evidenced by a strong dislike of the greed and usury associated with such an economy, and such an attitude was common even among the highest levels of the church hierarchy (ibid., pp. 101-107). It is clear then that Francis drew upon a pool of values that had been developing from the time of the early eleventh century regarding money and material goods. The religious mood of the times strongly indicates that St. Francis’ position on money, poverty, and the need to return to the Christianity of the Gospels did not come to him ex nihilo. There already was, in fact, a tradition of wandering mendicants. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that he simply inherited and automatically adopted such a stance.

It has been seen that with the rapid increase in the population, technological and economic change and the wider sharing of power with the common class, that there was an increase in the participation of the population in the affairs of late medieval society. It appears that with the breaking up of feudal society, with the enriching of the upper levels of the common class and the psychological destabilizing that resulted from these changes, lay people, principally the common class, began to take life, both secular and spiritual, more into their own hands. We see this in the rapid growth of numbers of lay orders and in the passionate commitment of these orders to purify the church. Indeed, the growing political power of the common class finds its parallel in the increasing power of the laity. Le Goff states: “Lay society was taking an increasingly active part in religious life and despite the maintenance of the divide between clergy and laity, the latter strengthened their presence in the religious field” (Duquoc and Floristan, ed., p. 6). Little also states: “There was in these groups (of lay reformers) a deep appreciation of the spiritual worth of the laity generally and of women” (ibid., p. 16).

Le Goff goes on to say that:

Theologians ... worked out a voluntarist doctrine of sin which looked for its causes in the individual conscience ... the admission of guilt became more important than the penance involved and a pioneering element was introduced into people's consciousness examination of conscience. (Duquoc and Floristan, ed., p. 6)

This is an extremely important change in focus. If the examination of one's conscience and the confession of sin is the individual's responsibility and is of prime importance, and the subsequent penance, (i.e., the priest's responsibility and religious action), is not more important, then it is not too large a step to decide that the locus of religious authority resides predominantly within the individual and not externally in an institution. In fact, such a change of focus indicates a reduction in the influence and position of the priest in relation to the lay individual. This is potentially radical in its implications. Indeed, I would assert that the growth of lay orders and movements, including St. Francis', is characteristic of this orientation and represents just such a development.

Brenda Bolton, in her article, "The Poverty of the Humiliati," notes, in relation to their voluntary impoverishment that, "What makes their activities so interesting is their attempt to spiritualize the laity by concentrating on the *vita apostolica*" (ibid., 1975, p. 58). The spiritualizing of the laity is, in reality, the re-entering of the laity into the active life of the church and, as such, a reshaping of the dynamics of church life and the power associated with this life. This is further evidence of the growing influence of the laity and the laity's apparently growing perception that one's spiritual life was not completely dependent, if at all, on the institutional hierarchy of the church.

This lay activity and vitality had, however, a short flowering, for after the time of Innocent III (1198-1216) the church, in the centuries after St. Francis' death, limited the number of orders and mendicant groups to those that already existed. It thus controlled the free expression of lay piety and used the threat of death to silence any opposing thought. As

far as the Franciscan order is concerned, the decree of the Papal Bull *Solet annuere* in 1223 (Engelbert, p. 287) disallowed its socially troubling vow of absolute poverty and channeled its energies into more traditional forms of devotional expression. The church attempted to deal with the growing influence of the laity, as seen in the increasing number of orders that were associated essentially with calls for reform within the church and its clergy. Little lists the violent attacks on reformers by both the church and society and which often resulted in the reformers deaths and/or condemnation as heretics. After Francis' death, in fact, after the death of Innocent III, the church began to regain control of all lay activity which might cause the reform of the church, especially in economic terms. Little states that:

the process of adjusting the religious life came to a conscious definitive conclusion with the establishment of the friars. The conclusion was punctuated by (1) the very considerable control that the papacy decided to maintain over the orders, (2) the stern line that was taken against any who would presume to move reform beyond the friars, and (3) the prohibition of the fourth Lateran council against the establishment of any new orders. (Little, p. 19)

This suppression finally resulted in reestablishing church control over the laity, and the denouncing of the Franciscan "spirituals" (who were determined to follow the original, more austere rule of Francis), as heretics and the burning of four of their leaders in 1318 (ibid., pp. 19-21).

Previous to this, however, was the phenomenon of Saint Francis himself. When one reads the life of St. Francis one is struck by the extreme nature of his life after his conversion. His almost embarrassing stripping of himself in the piazza Santa Maria Maggiore so that he could return all his clothing to his father strikes one, not simply as excessive, but as a basically cruel act towards a parent. Francis is said to have been generous by nature even before his conversion (Engelbert, p. 52). He is also said to have been given over to pleasure, feasts and sumptuous clothing (ibid., p. 53). He was certainly free with his (father's) money. His father, on the other hand, appears to have been a passionate, if not outright

violent person for, after Francis' conversion, when once his father saw him being ridiculed by a crowd:

he became furious. Hurling himself on Francis like a fierce wolf ... he dragged him into the house, where he chained him and shoved him into a dungeon. He spared neither arguments nor blows to wear down the rebel. (Ibid., p. 76)

It is accepted that Francis was extremely sensitive and of an aesthetic nature and, given this kind of personality, one could picture this poetic and always kind person growing up in the house of the aesthetically and emotionally limited Peter Bernadone and finding the nature of his father decidedly unattractive. Further, the violence of the above quote surely indicates that Francis was not unacquainted with paternal anger of a probably disturbing nature. It is reasonable, then, to see Francis' "generosity" with his father's money as acts of disapproval and as a rejection of the father's basic nature, so at variance with Francis' own. Of course, this is conjecture. However, it seems, given the family details we do have, to be an eminently reasonable one. The sudden and extreme rejection of the materialist character of both the father's lifestyle and the general orientation of society at large is also consistent with the psychological theory of conversion. Thus, when he did experience his conversion which implied, or at least allowed a radical departure from his way of living with his family, Francis saw it in terms of a rejection of a materialistic and violent environment lacking in compassion. This was evident, not simply in his own family's life, but in all of society. The religious fervour of the day, however, reinforced a direction away from the material and towards the area of chastity and poverty. This restorative impulse towards the original apostolic lifestyle is then seen as a value paradigm, however vague, that fitted his own intensely personal needs, desires and deeply held values, even if he was only dimly conscious of these values and desires at the time of his conversion.

There appear to be three stages, roughly between 1203 and 1209 when he was the "repairer of churches" (Engelbert., pp. 60-94), in the development of St. Francis' under-

standing of poverty and its relation to being an obedient pilgrim. Not including his generous actions prior to his conversion, the first stage followed a time of intense prayer after which he began to be noticeably more generous and caring toward the poor. Engelbert, in quoting Thomas of Celano states: “The truth was that he had become one of them, thinking only of sharing their life of privations” (Engelbert, p. 71). The next stage was when, following the return of his clothing to his father, he found himself literally naked and possessing nothing. This act of renunciation forced Francis at that point to become one with the poor in reality, finding food and clothing wherever he could and depending on the generosity of others. It was also then, at the time he was rebuilding the church of San Damiano, that he began to beg as a deliberate act. The third stage in the development of Franciscan ideas on poverty is seen in the seemingly *ad hoc* theoretical positions he then articulated in this regard.

On the 24th February, 1208 while hearing Mass in the Portiuncula church that he had restored, Francis was struck by the words of the gospel where Jesus told his disciples to preach, taking nothing with them. Thomas of Celano conflates several biblical texts in his “telling” of the experience: Matt. 10:5ff, Mark 6:7-12, Luke 9:1-6, and 10:1-16. Nevertheless, the basic idea that Francis took as his main direction was that the pilgrim follower of Jesus should possess nothing save the absolutely essential. Engelbert relates that:

On that instant he threw away his staff, took off his shoes, laid aside his cloak, keeping only a tunic; replaced his leather belt with a cord, and made himself a rough garment, so poor and so badly cut that it could inspire envy in no man. (Engelbert, p. 85)

That Jesus’ words were addressed to those in a hot climate did not seem to matter to Francis and indeed he probably did not even realize this fact.

There is nothing subtle, nothing that seeks to grasp the contradictory complexities of the biblical demands in Francis. His logic was the logic of passion, the logic of austerity. Jawaharlal Nehru in his biography in describing Mahatma Gandhi states:

Gandhiji was delightfully vague on the subject and he did not encourage clear thinking on it either.... Gandhiji's stress was never on the intellectual approach to a problem but on character and piety. (Nehru, 1936, p. 76)

This is an excellent description of St. Francis' way of thinking. I think that it would probably be correct to say that in Francis' mind the theoretical and the practical were more or less harmoniously joined, and the point at which they joined was in manifesting a deep willingness to give up everything in accord with his perception of Christ. The problem with other people was that while truly admiring St. Francis and wanting to be like him, they were not so deeply willing to abandon all. They felt more of an intellectual need, therefore, to rationalize, if not reject, Francis' extreme statements so as to accommodate Franciscan ideals to their own level of commitment. Nonetheless, they simultaneously claimed that their interpretations were indeed (sufficiently) similar to those of Francis.

Certainly Francis would have interpreted the idea of moderating the hardship of his standard as an unwillingness to submit to the commands of Christ to renounce all and exist in a state of complete dependence on God's care. It did not occur to Francis that Jesus' injunction to the rich young ruler that: "If you will be perfect go sell what you have and give to the poor" from Matt. 19: 21, might have been directed solely to the rich young man to meet his particular needs, and not to all people. Further, Francis seems to have failed to be aware that Jesus was supported during his ministry not only by the gifts of the poor but also by the gifts of wealthier people (cf. Luke 8:3). Francis seems to have had a passionate response to his life, very similar, in fact, if not in kind, to that of his father whom he felt he had been forced to abandon.

I believe it can be safely assumed that the legend of Francis and Lady Poverty from circa 1260-1270 (Engelbert, p. 357) should be understood allegorically. Though there may well have been miraculous acts in the life of St. Francis, the tale does not read as history and indeed the simple presence of Lady Poverty as a member of a supposed dialogue surely

supports this assumption. Nevertheless, the tale does show clearly Francis' attitudes to, and beliefs about the nature of wealth and poverty. Early in the tale, the "sons of Adam" state:

What is this new doctrine you bring.... Let this poverty you are seeking be with you and your posterity....! As for us, let it be our good fortune to enjoy good things and to have abundant riches. (*Sacrum Commercium*, trans. Placid Hermann, 1964, p. 152)

The association of wealth with sinfulness is clearly implied. The sons of Adam reject poverty and choose instead to be associated with this world as the sons of a fallen humanity. In passing, it seems worthwhile to comment on the expression "new doctrine." As observed earlier, the doctrine of extreme poverty was not an especially new doctrine and indeed had been taught by various groups, often resulting in the death of their proponents, during the previous two centuries. Engelbert, in discussing the *Regula Primitiva*, or First Rule of 1209, of St. Francis states: "It is unlikely that Francis would not have heard of Joachim of Fiore and of Peter Valdes, since everybody was talking about them" (Engelbert, p. 111). That the followers of Francis would see their teaching as new puts this assumption in some doubt. However, in that the church had frequently decreed that the poverty movements were heretical, the apparent success of Francis' movement in its acceptance with the Church may have led Francis' followers to the belief that what they taught and practiced was novel. In its willing submission to church authority this may well have been true.

In St. Francis' philosophy, the importance of a rejection of wealth in this world is supported, according to the *Sacrum Commercium* (a posthumous account of Francis' order), by the emptying of the Son of God in the incarnation. This is not simply intended to teach *kenosis* as a historical event, but rather to claim that the state of humanity in this world should be one of individual self emptying, in the same way that the Son of God gave up his eternal "wealth" (*Sacrum Commercium*, p. 160). For, if the Son of God would choose to become poor, Francis would argue, was this not a pattern that others should follow? The radical nature of this self emptying that is then expected of Francis' followers is evident in

the tale's expounding of the Fall narrative. The *Sacrum commercium* states: "he (Adam) likewise became a transgressor. He had at first been naked ... but he felt no shame ... but once he had sinned he recognized that he was naked ... and ran to get fig leaves and made a covering for himself" (ibid., pp. 168-169).

If one may suppose that the legend expresses Francis' teaching, then the understanding that this quote appears to be proposing is that humanity's need for anything other than simple nakedness (before God) is a result of sin. That is, that the desire for this world's goods, the desire for comfort, the desire for material possessions, comes from one's sinful nature and is the expression of one's state of separation from God. Such nakedness before the world, of course, was something that even Francis did not achieve. However, his personal 'failure' does not negate the fact that Francis rejected the acceptability of any possession.

That Francis was rather ambivalent about God's clothing of fallen humanity with skins is apparent. When Lady Poverty sees the "skins of the dead" on humanity she abandons humanity immediately (ibid., sect. 30. p. 170). The allegory states that humanity had been cast out "to multiply his labours that he might become rich" (ibid., p. 170). This is then followed with a denunciation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's wealth. Rather than being evidence of the blessing of God, their wealth is seen as a sign of the distance they were from the divine pattern of poverty. To be poor was to be in an Edenic state. Indeed, the divine promise of a land flowing with milk and honey is seen as the sinful desire of the Jewish nation for material satisfaction as opposed to the blessings of God. St. Francis' theological justification for insisting on a state of radical poverty, thus, was founded on Christological (kenotic), and New Testament (evangelical, gospel) teachings and the biblical description of the pre-fall Edenic state.

It is reasonable that Francis would interpret the Genesis accounts in this fashion. His reading of Luke 14:33 (ibid., p. 172), where Jesus says: "Everyone of you who does not renounce all that he possesses can not be my disciple" and Acts 2: 44,45 which states: "All

held everything in common and sold all their possessions and distributed them to all according to anyone's need" are certainly powerful suggestions to divest oneself of personal property. It is no wonder that the church, in attempting to resolve the poverty debate, later resorted to the seemingly inane question as to whether Jesus possessed a purse or shoes in defense of the acceptability of private property.

Yet the church's scholastic response to Francis' radical teaching of impoverishment shows the difference between Francis' willing, even joyful, embrace of poverty and its own struggle to maintain its accustomed standard of living. Whether Francis was theologically correct in his understanding of the demands of poverty or not, he did not follow such a path reluctantly, and the intellectual hair-splitting that followed his death, both by the Franciscans and by the church hierarchy, display none of the heartfelt willingness to lose all in obedience to the gospel ... as Francis interpreted it.

That not even moderate possession is acceptable to Francis is evident in section 39 of the *Sacrum commercium* which states:

This rival (to poverty) is Avarice which is said to be the immoderate desire to obtain and retain riches. Her friends are accustomed to call her by a holier name.... Discretion or Providence. (Ibid., p. 180)

The statement is heavily ironic. Avarice is SAID to be the immoderate desire for riches. The implication is clear that Francis does not simply censure the element of greed. That is, he does not see the sin in terms of immoderation but rather in the very desire for riches in the first place. Indeed, the difficulty to determine just what an immoderate desire for riches might be, illustrates Francis' difficulty with the definition of the sin. However, given that any form, even of moderate possession, is anathema to Francis, one cannot find comfort in the mistaken belief that Francis is only condemning the possession of riches.

Indeed Francis appears to reject the notion of Providential supply completely (ibid., pp. 180. 183), or at least as it could be applied to anything other than the providing of daily

requisites for life. Francis saw no problem in this. Further, the minimal level of subsistence that he felt was divinely acceptable never seemed to cause him to ask if such an experience of physical and psychological suffering was what God had in mind when (he) made the world.

However, that even the wise use of material resources in order to help the poor and live a less inconvenient life was unacceptable is clearly seen in the following words. In the *Sacrum Commercium* they are attributed by Francis to his “fierce enemy” mentioned toward the end of the conversation. Yet, though the arguments seem entirely plausible, Francis rejects them:

Would not God be pleased if you had at hand what you could give to the needy, being mindful of the poor since He said “it is more blessed to give than to receive”? Why do you not receive the goods that are offered to you and thereby avoid depriving the givers of their eternal reward? There is no reason why you should be afraid of companionship with riches since you consider them as nothing. Vice is not in the things, but in the heart, for God sees all things that He made and they are very good. Good things are for the good; all things serve them for all things were made for them. O, how many who have riches make ill use of them; if you had these things you would convert them to good use....These things and others like them, this fierce enemy of mine said to them. Some, whose conscience was already corrupt gave their consent. (Ibid., p. 184)

The subtle argument the “fierce enemy” tries to establish is that if one’s heart is changed, material goods present no problem and can be enjoyed. Nevertheless, Francis rejects this. However, though Francis saw the issue of poverty in essentially theological terms as a necessary state, is it possible that, based on the ethic of compassion, he could conceive of a system of social improvement? Even this possibility, though, seems ruled out by the totally radical extent of Francis’ position on poverty. While one could have compassion on the suffering experienced by the poor because of their poverty, this suffering, in itself, was not caused by the poverty but by one’s attitude to the experience. That this is a necessary conclusion is clear from the command, as Francis saw it, to divest oneself of worldly goods and is also evident from the simple fact of Christ’s own poverty.

If the discourse with Lady Poverty teaches anything, it surely must be that we do not understand poverty accurately, for if we did, we would “love” her as Francis did. Of course, this has deep implications for later Franciscan thinking. By this I am not suggesting that Francis, and to a lesser extent his followers, did not experience compassion towards the poor, but it seems clear that, theoretically at least, there was no place for socially oriented behaviour that would benefit the poor and dispossessed, other than for the brief moment in which some act of kindness and liberality took place.

Compassion, as Francis lived it, was seen in the respect and human value he gave to the poor – but not solely to the poor, indeed to all people, including the wealthy and powerful. Yet, there was an economic component in this compassion. However, it had few far-reaching economic impacts. If he found an individual with less than he had, he would willingly give the little he had to that one. Compassion, thus, was expressed in his treatment of others. He did this with the goal of creating bridges of human community in a world of social and economic levels which alienated one individual or group from another. Nevertheless, Francis’ poverty, necessitated by his understanding of the imitation of Christ that he felt compelled to undergo, made an economic liberation of the poor seemingly an impossibility. Iyer, in his book on the moral thought of Mahatma Gandhi states:

If men could only see themselves as pilgrims on earth, immortal spirits on their probation, they would view everything in the earthly kingdom *sub specie aeternitatis*. (Iyer, p. 25)

This view of the world is not, strictly speaking, possible, however, in Francis’ thinking. In the section of the *Sacrum Commercium* entitled “The Banquet with Lady Poverty,” the utensils used in the banquet are listed. A broken earthenware bowl was used, and it is commented that there was not a complete one in the place. The guests’ table was the grass; their food was three or four crusts of bread; they did not have a towel to wipe their hands and their meal consisted of a bowl of water (*Sacrum Commercium*, pp. 199, 200). Not only is

this a state of abject poverty, it is also an expression of, as near as possible, a rejection of anything humans could have made. Technology, beauty, comfort are all, apparently, rejected in an attempt to return to the poverty of the Garden. The world is not to be seen *sub specie aeternitatis* but is, as far as possible, rejected. There appears to be no room in St. Francis' "system" for a social program, for such a system would be an "improvement" on the essential poverty of the Age of Innocence. There is no one to economically elevate, no one to rescue from the shame of poverty, for poverty, in itself, is not a shameful state but one of Edenic dependence on God. The poor do not need to be helped because to do so would be to put their eternal souls in danger and remove them from the proximity to purity in which, though not voluntarily, they already exist.

The question needs to be asked, however, whether the *Sacrum commercium* truly represents Francis' ideas or is an exaggerated interpretation of his teachings by close associates in their struggle to remain loyal to the spirit of Francis in the face of those who were trying to moderate the poverty expectations following Francis' death. I would suggest that the tale of Lady Poverty does in fact reflect Francis' views to a great degree for at least two reasons: (1) Francis always sought to live and worship in places that had minimal human involvement. (For example, he preferred churches made of clay and pieces of wood to those of stone. This reveals a withdrawal from human "manufacture" to a state that is as near as possible to the purely natural.) (2) The entire subsequent *usus pauper* controversy among Franciscans from 1279 onwards has no meaning if the radical non-use of material goods was not an earlier Franciscan teaching that "needed" to be overcome.

By the Fall of 1208 or early 1209, Francis' group numbered twelve, and he felt the need to compose a rule by which his recruits could be guided. This was almost certainly not simply a devotional aid, but necessary if he were to survive in the troubled waters of church reform and its consequent, and sometimes violent, response by the church. Francis told his followers that he would write the rule and seek its approval by Pope Innocent III (Engelbert, p. 99).

Though we do not have the actual text of the *Regula Primitiva* (circa 1209) it is generally believed that it was predominantly a collection of Gospel texts and some admonitions. Brethren were to be received only after they had abandoned all their goods and, if possible, distributed them to the poor (Engelbert, p. 109). Their clothing was to be simple and easily repaired and they were to keep nothing except their tools so that they could work (ibid., p. 110).

As austere as this seems, it does not appear to be as austere as the *Sacrum commercium*, (the posthumous legend previously mentioned), particularly in regard to the use of tools. The condoned use of tools both negates the simplicity of the *Sacrum commercium* in that it allows the possibility of human creations in technology and manufacture. However, as we have only a scholarly reconstruction of the *Regula Primitiva*, one cannot argue strongly that the first rule does in fact allow material use, etc.

The Rule of 1209 did not ultimately prove sufficient. Engelbert states that “the Brotherhood ... was rife with every kind of dissension and dispute” (ibid., p. 242). Oddly, the problem with some of those who wanted change was that the Rule of 1209 was both too free and not free enough. These reformers of the order had little love of independent action and were troubled, thus, by an order in which “independence and vagabondage were [highly] esteemed” (ibid., p. 243). On the other hand, some wanted more freedom to study, or the right to larger, more solid convents (ibid., pp. 272, 273, 288, 289). This then was the environment in which Francis was compelled to compose the Rule of 1221.

The Rule of 1221, written by Francis and Caesar of Speyer in response to desires for change in the existing Rule, did not in any way change the orientation of the *Regula Primitiva* of 1209 (ibid., pp. 251-256). It declared that:

neither in common nor as individuals are the friars to own anything....They are not to claim or defend their tiny hermitages against anyone whatever.... As for money it is not only forbidden them to possess it but even to make use of it in any way.... They are to travel on foot, carrying nothing with them, neither sack nor wallet, nor bread nor silver, nor staff ... [and they are] to let

themselves be despoiled without protest.... Let them rejoice to find themselves in the company of those whom men despise, the poor, the weak, the infirm ... [and] in the Divine Office he forbade clerics to have any books except those needed to recite their hours. (Ibid., pp. 252, 253)

As such, the Rule of 1221 is an expansion of the basic statements in the Rule of 1209.

Engelbert states:

Far from mitigating the text of 1209 the Rule of 1221 merely reproduced, developed and commented on it in the sense of a perfect and literal observation of the Gospel. (Ibid., p. 251)

The Rule, thus, reflected a life of extreme and voluntary poverty and, as such, did not appear in any way to encourage material use or acquisition. Rather, by its very limitations it encouraged their minimal use. This Rule was discussed by 3000 friars. No one expected that it would be accepted. It was really a challenge to those who wanted a moderation of the severe original Rule. Cardinal Hugolin (a supporter of Francis) absented himself and the ministers, along with Brother Elias, the current Minister General of the order, decided to close discussions rather than irrevocably split the order or necessitate the involvement of Cardinal Hugolin to resolve the conflict (ibid., p. 257). Hugolin, the Cardinal Protector, did, in fact, resolve the controversy by asking Francis to write a new text. The implication, of course, was that the thrust of the first two Rules would not be so rigorously maintained (ibid., p. 284).

Unfortunately, however, the final version of the rule of St. Francis, the Rule of 1223, cannot be truly said to reflect the views of Francis. Engelbert states:

If fundamentally there is no glaring contradiction between the two documents, still we cannot affirm that the rule of 1223 perfectly expresses the intentions of the founder. (Ibid., p. 288)

This is almost an understatement. Francis' primitive order presented the church with two radically and potentially explosive theoretical challenges. The first was the call to extreme poverty and the second was the complete rejection of authority figures in the order. This latter point goes even to the semantic-political level of calling the temporary leader a mother.

Francis, I believe, viewed all hierarchical levels as productive of sin and not expressive of or conducive to the creation of a compassionate society. Engelbert notes:

It was doubtless (Hugolin) that struck out the dangerous and anarchistic article [in Francis' rule] authorizing the friars to judge the conduct of their superiors and to disobey any who would prevent them from observing the gospel literally [and] equally suppressed [were] reference to the care of leprosy patients [and the rule that] when they shall go through the world they shall take nothing with them.... In short almost everything was done away with that commanded the Friars Minor to remain in the ranks of the truly poor. (Ibid., p. 288)

One wonders then, how Engelbert can claim that the 1223 rule that was the product of this revision, contains no glaring contradiction. Much could be said on Cardinal Hugolin's (later Pope Gregory IX, 1227-1241) role in the dismantling of Francis' 'creation.' Nevertheless, however much he may be guilty of such, he was also the one who, along with Innocent III, protected Francis from those in the Papal court and ensured that at least some of the Franciscan ideal was preserved for history and the future (*Poverty in the Middle Ages*, Lester Little (ed. David Flood), p. 21 and Engelbert, p. 289). As Engelbert justly states: "Hugolin always defended Francis against those prelates who desired to put a speedy end to the Franciscan adventure" (ibid., p. 289).

Following the death of St. Francis in 1226 and the imposition, or approval by Pope Honorius in 1223, of the Rule of 1223, the Franciscan order, and the church in general, were plunged into a controversy regarding the level of poverty that one could be permitted while still following the Franciscan rule of poverty. The *usus pauper* debate revolved around the idea of the necessity of poverty in order to follow Christ. It had, however, a particular importance for the Franciscan order, splitting the order into the ranks of those who wished to follow the vow of poverty and live according to the austerity of Francis (the Spirituals), and those who desired to follow the more liberal possibilities of the Rule of 1223. Though the debate occurred in the late thirteenth century, after the death of Francis, its nature necessarily has bearing on Franciscan attitudes to material goods and the nature of poverty as

Francis understood it. Burr, in his paper *The Correctorium controversy and the Origins of the Usus Pauper Controversy* states:

By *usus pauper* men of that time meant restricted use of goods and the question being debated by Franciscans from around 1279 was whether such restricted use should be seen as imposed upon members by their vow....those who held it acknowledged that restricted use was so central to the avoidance of sin that a vow to own nothing was of little value if *usus pauper* was not observed along with it. (Burr, 1985, p. 332)

By this time, as allowed by the Rule of 1223, restrictions on the use of money in foreign lands had been relaxed and the rule not allowing travelling friars to carry anything had been suppressed. Scholars had been allowed the use of books. The debate, thus, must surely be seen as an attempt by the Spirituals within the brotherhood to regain practices usual at the time of Francis, practices that had been proscribed by Honorius in 1223 (Engelbert, p. 287, and essentially restated by Pope Gregory (1227-1241) in his declaration that the last Testament of Francis, written after the promulgation of the Rule of 1223, was not binding on the brothers (Engelbert, p. 337, Little, p. 21, Burr, p. 73). Burr claims that the controversy was not about whether Franciscans ought to practice restricted use or even about the degree of such restricted use, but rather centred around the spiritual and legal obligations of the Franciscan vow (ibid., p. 332). This explanation however, while possible, does not seem convincing. There still existed a strong difference within Franciscanism between those who sought to more fully imitate St. Francis and those who found the new relaxed rules more convenient. Burr notes that various of these Spirituals went to the stake rather than obey the more lenient papal interpretation of the rule. Now while it is plausible that the obligation to obey the vow of poverty had implications with regard to the soul's eternal felicity (ibid., p. 335), it would not seem sufficiently critical on the social level to cause such extreme reactions. However, if restricted use was the essential point of the debate, then one can more easily appreciate the intensity of the debate that centred on this

principle. There is a decidedly scholastic bent to the argument against use, especially by Olivi, (1248-1298), a philosopher who played an important role in the Franciscan history of the late thirteenth century. However, though the debate appears to be centred on the interpretation of the vow's implications, given the low spiritual level and, at times, the less than modest living style of certain of the Franciscans during the period in which the debate occurred, and the desire of many to reform the Franciscan order, surely there is a more reasonable conclusion. This would be that the debate was essentially about restricted use and not simply the interpretation of the vow (Burr, 1985, pp. 331, 332; Burr, 1975, pp. 72-75).

After all, despite the difficulty of determination of use, as Olivi admitted, (Burr, 1985, pp. 340, 341) which was of more importance: the fulfilling of the Gospel which had necessitated the vow, or, the vow itself which would have no necessity were there not a more prior claim to behaviour, including restricted use, in the commands of Christ, as Francis and the Spirituals saw them?

This is not to claim that there were not other reasons, for example, the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), that prompted Olivi's questions, or even that the debate did not focus on the mortal implications of disobedience to vows. Rather, it is claimed that the basic issue of restricted use is far from secondary, but indeed crucial to the debate. Yet it could not have been introduced into the debate in its own right because the issue of radical poverty as practised by Francis had been denied to the Franciscans by Papal decree in the reigns of Pope Honorius and Pope Gregory IX (formerly Cardinal Hugolin) and thus was not open to discussion in its own right. This then being the case, it was necessary to get to the goal of radical poverty by means of the mortal implications of the vow that each friar took. Thus, though the argument appears to revolve around these mortal implications, it was actually the issue of "use" which was the central thrust of the argument. It seems reasonable then to claim that the vigor of the debate indicates a genuine and continuing Franciscan belief limiting the use of material goods in an extremely radical fashion.

Conclusion

St. Francis viewed voluntary impoverishment from a dual perspective. One side was its salvific effect in imitation of Christ, and the other was essentially as an identification with the poorest of the poor. Both sides were ultimately an identification with “the poor Christ,” for Francis viewed the poor as the embodiment of Christ and, as such, to be so respected and treated.

Simply from the fact that Francis did not propose a process whereby the existence of poverty would be alleviated, it can be said that he did not view the “Franciscan” goal as the eradication of poverty, and, in fact, the same could be said of Christ. Indeed, not even personal liberation from poverty could be said to be the goal of Franciscan giving, given the level of “dispossession” that Francis was willing to accept. The focus of intention in the giving to the poor seems, in fact, to have been on the divesting of the goods and a deep identification with the dispossessed and marginalized of the world, rather than the economic improvement of the recipient’s life.

In fact, it could possibly be claimed that Francis’ way of voluntary impoverishment was a tacit admission on his part that there was no method whereby poverty could be eliminated. Thus, there was no way the poor could be universally ‘enriched.’ The only, and incomplete, solution was that the followers of Christ should become totally poor.

The creation of the Third Order in 1221 is, perhaps, the most radical undertakings St. Francis initiated during his lifetime. With the creation of the Third Order not only could members of either the First (male) or Second (female) orders be identified with Francis and practise his liberality to the poor, the ordinary members of society could also do so. Members of this Third Order were expected to make do with as little money as possible, to give the rest to the poor, to avoid ‘society,’ to refuse to fight in wars, to refuse to take feudal oaths of service and finally, to refrain from using the law courts to settle their problems.

As one author has noted, this sounded the death knell of feudalism in Italy. The Third Order is extremely important in the discussion of whether Francis had a vision of a societal

eradication of poverty for the order had wide ranging societal implications. In this regard, one should , perhaps, question whether the existence of a theory for societal reform is identical with implicit intentions of personal behavioural reform which may be evidenced in the actions of St. Francis. Particularly with regard to Francis, one also should also not ignore a seeming inconsistency between his attitudes regarding poverty and his lack of condemnation of the possessions and wealth on the part of the church.

However, it is true that Francis regarded material possessions of almost every kind as a source of spiritual bondage that one could be freed from only by dispossession. Thus, if radical impoverishment was actually his ideal human state, then the levels of possession that the Third Order were allowed were, in fact, a toleration for those who were unable to fully participate in the highest ideal. These alterations in the levels of possession thus can not be interpreted as a tacit acceptance of the general acceptability of material possession. Likewise, the creation of the Third Order cannot necessarily be held to express, on Francis' part, a conscious or unconscious determination to eradicate poverty from social life.

St. Francis, I would suggest, had roughly two orientations on the issue of poverty that appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, his liberality towards the poor was motivated by the compassion he felt for the poor. On the other hand, he understood this extreme poverty to be an imitation of the extreme poverty of Christ and, as such, was to be undergone in a willing surrender to the Poor Christ. This attitude, rather than suggesting that poverty is an evil, suggests the contrary - that wealth and possession itself are the evil that should be eliminated. However, his complete willingness to give to the poor whatever he had also suggests that, paradoxically, he nevertheless saw poverty as evil. This, however, is only apparent, I believe, for Francis lived on the edge of complete non-possession and whatever he had to give was given because Francis judged that what he then possessed was felt to be sufficient to maintain human dignity. If, then someone had less than he, Francis would have judged that person as possessing less than what was humanly essential. Never-

theless, that he saw some form or level of possession as necessary implies the existence of a state of possession which was allowable. That is, that possession, in itself is not spiritually or morally excluded from the human experience before God. This, I would claim, weakens Francis' position on "possession theology." These two positions certainly appear to be inconsistent, if not contradictory.

Was St. Francis a revolutionary? One is tempted to suggest that he was not, given his complete willingness to submit to Papal control. It was this very willingness which probably saved both him and his order from being proscribed. However, in a twisting of the metaphor, he was really a "wolf in sheep's clothing." In Francis' last Rule he wanted to insert the statement that: "If the friars find the Blessed Sacrament reserved in unseemly vessels they shall urge the priests to remedy the matter and if they refuse they shall do so in their stead" (Engelbert, p. 288). This is not an innocent proposal of alternative behaviour but the suggestion to reduce priestly prerogatives. Engelbert goes on to write:

It was doubtless the same hand [Pope Gregory's] that struck out the dangerous and anarchistic article authorizing the friars to judge the conduct of their superiors and to disobey any who would prevent them from observing the Gospel literally. (Ibid., p. 288)

Whether Francis' desire was "dangerous and anarchistic" is beside the point. What it certainly suggested was a radical rethinking of authority which the church obviously saw as threatening.

Francis saw himself from the beginning of his ministry as being the catalyst in the rebuilding of the broken church. While he did not force poverty on the wealthy hierarchy of the church, his example of poverty was a continual reminder to them of both their opulent lifestyle and the claims of the Gospel to renounce all. It has already been noted earlier that Francis had to be protected by Cardinal Hugolin (later Gregory IX) from some in the papal court. Given the fact that Francis also wanted a total equality of persons, regardless of social background, included in his Rule, and the strong dislike that some in the Curia had

for him, it must be concluded that Francis was, in the totally unusual way of those who refuse to promote violence, truly revolutionary. The church, thus, correctly understood him to be just that. Francis did not wish to reform society or the church by forcing it to change its laws regarding wealth but by changing the hearts and activities of those who would listen to him. And while he saw this in spiritual terms, I would suggest that to interpret this in any other than revolutionary terms would be to misunderstand the radically different vision of society and the church that Francis envisaged.

Francis was not a theologian and one should not seek to find complete consistency in his statements from a theological point of view. He saw the following of Christ in poverty in salvific terms. It may seem, when one reads of his non-confrontational encounters with the church hierarchy, that he did not insist that the hierarchy should follow him in the poverty as he practised it. However, given his admiration for beggars, his belief that possession put one in bondage to the creation and hindered one's spiritual relationship with God, and that the practice of poverty was an imitation of Christ and the early church's way of life, it seems logical to conclude, despite his refusal to criticize the church's opulent lifestyle, that he felt that his life of poverty should be lived by all.

Though Francis himself was in little doubt as to how the life of poverty should be lived, towards the end of his life, and following it, many interpretations of the life of poverty began to surface. In addition, in terms of the modern perspective on the importance of social justice, Francis left a certain problem when it comes to such a practice. The thesis will examine the thoughts and concerns of two contemporary Franciscans as they sought to deal with these issues. Chapter Two will deal with the ideas of Cajetan Esser who appears more concerned with the inner spirituality of the idea of poverty and the third chapter will look at the ideas of Leonard Boff, a South American theologian very concerned with the implications of the Franciscan tradition as this concerns the area of social justice and liberation from poverty.

CHAPTER TWO

In the twentieth century the most important European Franciscan scholar is almost certainly Cajetan Esser (1913-1978), a Medievalist whose use of text critical tools to analyze early Franciscan manuscripts initiated a renaissance in Franciscan studies. With this relatively contemporary German Franciscan scholar and apologist we discern a change in focus, not simply in terms of traditional understandings of Franciscan thought but also with regard to most contemporary interpretations.

A change in focus is not simply a restating of the same in different words but a change in the interpretive paradigm. As such, it can signal a significantly, if not radically, new way of perceiving a body of tradition. In this case, given the change in the rule and behaviour that followed Francis' death, Esser's refocussing represents the potential for an even greater rethinking of traditional Franciscan values beyond those changes that occurred after the death of Francis in the thirteenth century.

Esser seeks to take our attention away from external behaviour to the inner spiritual motivations of such behaviour. In doing so, he certainly deals with a valid contemporary issue. In today's secular world, a world in which spiritual qualities are not a valued and intrinsic part of one's thinking, it may well be salutary to focus, as he does, on the inner motivations rather than on the outer actions which may, admittedly be of doubtful causation. While Francis could take for granted certain spiritual attitudes and assumptions in the people following him, one could certainly not take for granted these attitudes in the people of today.

Esser did not live in a historical vacuum, and his comments must be understood in the light of contemporary possibilities. The poorest Franciscan today is immeasurably more wealthy than the average traditional Bushman or Aboriginal, with whom St. Francis could be economically compared. Today's Franciscans are, though it seems strangely obvious to say such a thing, more wealthy, if only in terms of the availability of the use of goods, than was St. Francis. This is not of negligible consequence, considering the fact that Francis spent so much time speaking against the dangers of material possession. Consequently, from a hermeneutical point of view, an evaluation of the work of Esser must be seen, not as an exposition of original Franciscan manuscripts but as a creatively interpretive act that seeks to maintain a tradition while existing within a set of realities not conducive to a living of the original Franciscan model. Thus, it goes without saying, Esser's understanding of poverty will necessarily differ from Francis' own view.

According to Esser, much interpretation since Francis' time has emphasized external poverty to the neglect of inner poverty such that the emphasis has been too much on freedom from material goods. He states:

What has often gone unnoticed, even in the early days of the order, is the basis or spiritual root of all these counsels [to poverty].... we shall come to realize that for Francis poverty was by no means restricted to the external aspect, as the majority of studies thus far published might lead us to suppose. (1963, pp. 74-76)

Esser is referring here to the traditional emphasis in writings on Francis on external poverty. What he intends to do is present a refocussing of these polarities of inner and outer poverty so that more attention is paid to the experience of inner poverty, and to show that this emphasis is consistent with understandings which Francis also had.

It is important to discuss Esser's intended audience before proceeding further. I would claim that Esser intended the readers of his work to understand poverty to be an experience necessary to all in order to truly follow in the footsteps of Christ. Esser's subtle and pastorally

sympathetic understanding of poverty needs to be clearly understood in context. Though the Franciscan rule to which friars vow obedience is directed only to members of the Friars Minor, Francis, however, certainly saw the divesting of material possessions as obedience to the command of Christ (cf., Matt. 19:21 and Luke 9:23) and the vow of poverty made by those who joined the order as submission to a universally applicable command by Christ. Esser's contemporary comment that: "Poverty is the norm and model of all human life" (ibid., p. 86) seems a comment directed to all in general rather than to the few who are Franciscans. It appears, then, that both Francis' and Esser's comments are directed to all and not simply those who call themselves Franciscans. This understanding is supported, moreover by David Flood who, in a conversation with the author, agreed that though Esser's work was directed primarily to Franciscans, it was applicable to all, *vis-à-vis* its theoretical positions on poverty.

A certain 'defining' needs to be undertaken in order to understand Esser's position and the statements he makes regarding this position. St. Francis based his behaviour on a poverty model of Christ. The basis of this interpretation was the experience (that is to say, not simply the idea) of renunciation. Francis went on to describe the sanctifying activity that resulted from the renouncing of material goods as an experience of inner poverty. This means that taking the model of actual poverty as the basis, Francis extended this understanding to the experience of inner renunciation. In other words, he extended the literal understanding of poverty into the realm of a spiritual metaphor. Poverty became the model, the paradigmatic metaphor for the process of sanctification which Francis understood as involving acts of personal renunciation and which could be used to describe all experience of renunciation. What Esser has done, I would claim, is to take the metaphor and elevate it in relation to the literal conceptual understanding of poverty and its underlying experience. Implied in Esser's initial statement above (cf. pp. 74-76), is the understanding that the development of inner poverty is the true basis and ultimate reason for Francis' choice of poverty.

Esser goes on to state:

What characterized Francis' way of following Christ was that it was wholly a matter of love.... This complete emphasis on love is truly the characteristic mark of the way Francis followed Christ. (Ibid., p. 26)

With such statements, Esser is leading us to see a point of emphasis. In fact "emphasis," and "characterized," along with the "wholly" and "complete" are the words used. The change in focus is subtle, for historically, what did characterize Francis' life was actually the deep, deep poverty of his material life and not simply his inner personal and spiritual motivation. Whether love was the inner motivating force behind this poverty is completely another issue. Esser's use of the terms "wholly" and "complete," on the other hand, change the focus from the historical, existential life of Francis, which included the social and perceived life of the Saint, to only that involving the invisible and the spiritual. This, in fact, leads, minimally to a distinction between the inner and the outer life and maximally to a conceptual divorce of the two.

In the section, "Life Without Property" from his work, *Repair My House*, Esser comments that:

This spiritual outlook realizes the Franciscan ideal of a "life without property" *vivere sine proprio*, through which the Friar Minor voluntarily becomes a poor man before God. For it was precisely poverty ... interior as well as exterior ... that Francis considered the essential form ... of the whole religious attitude ... [and could be achieved] only by going out of ourselves, by making ourselves poor, [for then] can we create in ourselves the void into which God's love will be able to flow freely. (Ibid., p. 56)

This statement clearly advocates certain spiritual behaviours. However, it can be understood, in any consistent fashion, in three ways. Either it is advocating radical obedience to both inner and outer poverty equally, or advocating outer poverty as of greater importance than inner poverty, or advocating the spiritual as of more importance than the outer. Yet the two latter interpretations are not logical, as the outer is clearly emphasized as of

equal importance to the inner, and *vice versa*. Therefore, Esser must also be advocating radical and literal poverty, for he states that Francis “considered [both] the essential form.” However, in the historical context, this is impossible, and nowhere does Esser suggest that Franciscans disobey the current Franciscan Rule which severely limits poverty. Therefore, if he is not advocating radical poverty, the only conclusions can be that either the quote is, to a great degree, meaningless or that, if he is advocating anything, it must be that inner spiritual poverty is essential and outer poverty, all claims by him to the contrary, is not essential.

It is granted that Esser’s refocussing on the spiritual dimension of Francis’ spirituality may be seen simply as a re-valuing of the spiritual dimension and that this does not necessarily entail a de-valuing of the dimension of literal poverty. However, Esser, being located in a historical context, must be understood from within the strictures of this historical context. This is not to state the obvious. If, for Francis, literal and inner poverty were equal or of complementary value, for Esser this cannot be the case. Literal poverty was, and has been severely restricted since Francis’ death. That is to say, literal poverty has been, in truth, devalued and continues to be so. So it is necessarily true that within a situation in which literal poverty is already devalued, a re-valuing of inner poverty to give it greater emphasis must necessarily result in, and be seen as, a further devaluation. This occurs, not from the logical possibilities of a simple refocussing, or a restoring of the original importance of inner poverty, but from within the framework of the social and historical situation that presently exists. This observation must be stated, despite Esser’s repeated comments on the value of literal poverty. Surely the existential situation correctly expresses the value and understanding that inner and outer poverty truly has for the people practising poverty. In fact, the existential situation is, I would claim, the deciding factor in understanding the effect that a refocussing on one of these polarities would have. This is not to evaluate Esser negatively. Nor is it to deny the power of his repeated statements as to the positive value of literal poverty. Neither is this understanding based, solely on an interpretation of texts,

either by Francis or by Esser, but on an understanding which includes the historical situation in which these texts must be interpreted. That is to say, an understanding of Esser's interpretation of Francis must include the contemporary historical situation. As a hermeneutic of accommodation, i.e., an accommodation with the social and historical realities, Esser's interpretation of Francis is a valuable refocussing that seeks to maintain the Franciscan essence in a quite radical way, while modifying that radicality to fit the limitations of the present. Nevertheless, as an interpretation, its points of discontinuity as well as continuity should be noted in order to see it as a contemporary hermeneutic on Franciscan poverty.

In referring to a "life without property" Esser alludes to Francis' metaphor for the spiritual life. This metaphor involved the concept of poverty. For Francis, poverty was the giving up of the self in its entirety to God. Further, as Esser states, Francis believed that the "space" this giving up of the self created in the human heart allowed the self to experience the love and holiness of God (ibid., p. 77). In this sense, Esser's understanding of poverty as a spiritual state seems to reflect Francis' own view. Esser goes on to state: "This teaching of St. Francis clearly shows us that "a life without property" is a necessary condition for knowledge of God and for union with him through love" (ibid., p. 58). Esser's interpretation of the expression "a life without property," *given the present limitations on Franciscan poverty*, must therefore mean either (a) a life without legal possession of property or (b) the spiritualization of the experience of poverty such that the literal experience is not an absolute necessity. Indeed, it is impossible for Franciscans to comply with Francis' radical understanding and this puts any employment of Francis' "words" in an interesting and challenging hermeneutical light. Esser states:

The ideal of highest poverty, as Francis conceived it and lived it with unprecedented logic, implies the renunciation of all the goods of this world, i.e., of everything which might in any way at all furnish security and protection for human life. (Ibid., p. 81)

Esser then actually admits to a problem in the original Franciscan position on poverty which Francis espoused. He states:

It is certain that Francis is solidly in the apostolic tradition.... Yet, on the other hand, the question arises, can this strict minimum suffice for a man to meet the needs of his existence. ... is there not ... some minimum of material goods indispensable to the Friar Minor [beyond food and clothing]. (Ibid., pp. 81, 82)

The answer to the question almost certainly seems to be for Esser that there is. Esser remarks that:

As [Francis] saw it, God had placed things at his disposal that he might use them, but since they were only lent to him he lost all right to keep them as soon as he met someone poorer than himself. (Ibid., p. 83)

One is immediately startled at the expression "God had placed *things* at his disposal." Does this imply all things, some things or particular things? Esser's interpretation seems very generous. Francis spent his life shedding himself of material goods and encouraging others to do the same. Rather than asking what he could keep, Francis lived with the desire "what can I give away?" Esser's interpretation of St. Francis' 'use' of things in this passage and the degree to which material things are allowed is, according to Esser, that use is allowed until one finds someone poorer than oneself. Though it might appear that this is an interpretation of Francis which is at heart legal and superficial, one needs to be aware that Esser was quite involved in the worker-priest movement and it is more likely that his interpretation is motivated by a sympathy for the poor. Esser is admittedly interpreting this usage from within the post-Francis world of the last Rule. However, I would assert that the implication of the above quote that the right to use is determined by the "presence" of an other more needy than oneself potentially goes beyond, nor was implied in, the resolution of the *usus pauper* debate which still left the Franciscans with a modest lifestyle. Esser, in this interpretation, seems to admit that Francis' level of poverty was an impossible level,

that there is a minimum beyond Francis' level which humans need in order to function as humans. If one accepts this premise, Esser then returns to Francis and explains that Francis' "rule" was that one could use "things" providing one did not encounter another worse off than oneself. Ignoring the discrepancy between Esser's and Francis' positions on "degree of poverty," it seems clear that what is one person's "minimum may well be another person's privation." Theoretically this understanding on use could permit almost anything as long as one did not meet another who had less. Furthermore, if justifiable use is determined by the need of the other, the fiction of non-possession that is part of the Franciscan vow of poverty could be an irrelevant legality, for my need may impinge on anything the Franciscans "use" for, theoretically, my needs may cause the Franciscan to be reduced to a radical state of poverty and activate in the Franciscan the psychological experience of ownership.

This, nevertheless, raises both historical and contemporary problems. Esser is interpreting Francis' teaching on use. However, one wonders whether Francis, who seemed to resist the use of almost anything not totally essential, would have ever made the kind of statement expressed by Esser. In interpreting the behaviour of Francis, is Esser's behavioural interpretation consistent with other teachings and other practices of Francis? Whereas Francis was continually fighting for a minimal use of material goods and only grudgingly allowed some form of *quasi*-possession, Esser, by taking the position he does regarding use, goes potentially beyond the allowance of even the post-Francis practice and rule. It appears that Esser is seeking to show that the "non-use" side of Francis has, to some extent, been misunderstood. He does this, in fact, not by directing our attention to the post-Francis understanding but by using Francis' own statements and asserting that they actually teach a use limited by the need of the other.

Nevertheless, Esser's interpretation is not without its merit. Francis certainly did allow some degree of use and these limits were never spelled out. Also, in Francis' giving away of his clothes to those who were poorer than he, there can be seen a form of use which is

dependent on the need of an other. Despite this however, I would claim that this represents, in its potential application, a new direction in Franciscan thinking in that, in the environment of non-radical poverty, it is extremely vague as to its limits, its boundaries.

In an interesting paragraph on the Latin of the Franciscan Rules, Esser informs us that:

Francis wrote ... that the friars should ‘have’ (*habeant*) a tunic with a cowl, drawers and a cord [and that] the first Rule allowed them to ‘have’ (*possint habere*) the books needed ... [and] allowed friars who were able to read to ‘have’ a psalter (*liceat habere illud*). (Ibid., p. 82)

This willingness by Francis to “have and use” is referred to “in connection with liturgical objects needed for the celebration of the mass [in which] these objects might even be ‘precious’ (*pretiosa*)” (ibid., p. 83). However, Francis’ exceptions to non-possession should be taken in context: (a) Francis sought to divest himself of all material goods beyond what was reasonable, even in his own time; (b) The exceptions are specific and related only to two areas: (1) clothing and (2) use in the worship of the order. It did not extend to a variety of other objects which individual friars might feel would be useful. Francis’ almost unwilling acceptance of these objects did not constitute a tolerant attitude to use in the manner Esser seeks to assert. Esser states that “As [Francis] saw it, God had placed things at his disposal that he might use them” (ibid., p. 93). This, however, would seem to be contrary to Francis’ continual quest to reduce his dependence on all things in the light of their insidious potential to seduce the saint away from total dependence on and faith in God. This is so because Francis believed that *continued* possession of anything too easily led away from faith in the providence of God and to the feeling that the “possessor” had the right to that thing. These understandings by Francis do not suggest a willing acceptance of “things,” even temporarily.

Indeed, Esser’s reference to the Latin relating to “having” (cf. pp. 82, 83) appears to be intended to show that possession and use, while not including permanent and legal possession, is acceptable. This liberal interpretation of the material poverty teaching is consistent

with Esser's refocussing of poverty as an inner experience, for if poverty is essentially something of the spirit, then its outward manifestation is of lesser importance.

Despite the apparent inconsistency, this above interpretation of Esser is quite compatible with Esser's statements on wealth. Though he states that Francis was "more than sceptical with regard to wealth" (ibid., p. 84), according to Esser, this rejection of wealth seems to have been based on the effect wealth had on human covetousness (ibid., p. 84). While not suggesting that Esser does not see danger in wealth, his liberal understanding of use changes material goods from being sources of temptation in themselves to being such only because of relative lack.

Yet this is not to imply that Esser is recommending self indulgence or extravagant living. Nor is he attempting to extend the limits of "use" in some legalistic fashion. Rather, I would suggest that he is attempting to delineate a condition in which, within the limits of economic modesty, use is allowed, and that external poverty is not the criteria whereby inner sanctity is measured. Esser's desire to redirect our attention away from material poverty to its spiritual dimension is further evidenced in his comment that:

But all this [the evil of wealth] is still not the essential driving force of Francis' love for poverty. If the saint willed to live in "highest poverty" he did so mainly because he wished to follow Christ whole-heartedly. (Ibid., p. 85)

It is also supported by his statement that: "Just as Christ was poor on earth ... so Francis and his friars would be poor and live on alms" (ibid., p. 86). Yet, while it is admitted that the motivation of Francis for the life of poverty may well have been spiritual, i.e., an inner motivation, it is equally true that this poverty was overtly expressed in dire levels of material and external poverty. Esser, in continually focussing on the spiritual dimension, indeed raising it to that of primary importance, could be said to introduce a *de facto* devaluation of the external experience of poverty as Francis lived it. Esser states that:

[Franciscan poverty] is above all interior poverty which revealed itself to Francis in the mystery of the Word made man ... this mystery of Christ who though infinitely rich chose poverty as his way of life. (Ibid., p. 87)

In this passage, Esser is interpreting Christ's *kenosis* as spiritual. However, from a theological perspective this *kenosis* would not be seen as contained simply in Christ's willingness to submit to the Father, but in a giving up of all prerogatives attributes, qualities, "possessions" of Godhead in order to become human.

Esser states that "the deepest roots of Franciscan poverty ... cannot be reduced to an imitation of Christ's external poverty" (ibid., p. 87). However, without external behaviour, inner attitude has little intrinsic value, for inner character which does not result in action cannot be shown to truly exist. Once again, in the face of such mutual interdependence, is it possible to speak meaningfully in terms of inner and outer and be said to be describing any independently existing state of being? And if this is so, what is the value in implying a priority to the inner poverty? Indeed, such an evaluation echoes a Platonist hierarchy in which mind is held to be of greater value than matter. However, such a hierarchy, in giving primacy to inner attitudes, almost inevitably alienates behaviour from the source of the behaviour. The mind-body dichotomy which the West has inherited from Platonic or Neo-Platonic thought surely underpins our predisposition to value more highly those things of the mind-spirit. Further, as I have hopefully shown, while a re-emphasizing does not necessarily imply a devaluing, in Esser's attempt to make the inner the qualifying criterion for acceptable Franciscan poverty, outer poverty becomes a Platonic accident. This must surely be seen as a lowering of the value of the behaviour when, in truth, it is behaviour, good and evil, that creates the human world in which we live.

In fact, in attempting to understand Esser's perception of poverty one must ask exactly what the role of material deprivation is. If inner deprivation is the essential character of Franciscan poverty, what is the role of external poverty and is inner deprivation possible without external deprivation? It seems clear that Esser's interpretation of the Franciscan

tradition holds inner poverty/holiness to be possible without the extreme poverty Francis envisaged as necessary. He is able to hold this position because (a) he lives under the present Franciscan Rule which limits the experience of poverty and (b) because he sees the essential goal of Francis' poverty to have been inner poverty and not its radical outer expression.

Esser states: "Francis was not poor simply for the sake of being poor ... he considered poverty as a means to an end" (ibid., p. 88). This end is described by Esser as a kenosis which "rids man of every encumbrance and creates in him a void into which God can freely pour his grace" (ibid., p. 89). External poverty, as Esser sees it, thus creates the necessary environment in which inner poverty can be built. And yet, if this is true, would not an emphasis on inner poverty potentially make this transformation of the human soul less likely? It has been repeatedly stated that, because of the present limitations, a call to genuine poverty is both empty and unrealizable. It is this historical fact that forces one to conclude that in seeking to show the 'true end' of Francis' poverty Esser is not simply reemphasizing inner poverty but presenting it, in fact, as the only attainable goal in the present. And if this is true, and inner poverty is attainable in the present without outer poverty being experienced, there is surely a necessary *de facto* devaluing of outer poverty.

In *Love's Reply*, written in 1963, the same year as *Repair My House* was published, Esser seems to realize that in refocussing on the inner aspect of poverty he ran the risk of effectively negating the material aspect of poverty. He notes: "In addition, Francis demands an equal degree of inner poverty..." (*Love's Reply*, 1963, p. 101). However, he also states, soon after this that, "The *sine proprio* which stands at the beginning of each of his Rules does mean indeed such material despoilment" (ibid., p. 102). He further notes that:

For Francis, preoccupation with the things of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, anything indeed that can arouse concupiscence in man are the things which can choke the word of God.... Poverty for Francis is thus not an end in itself. (Ibid., pp. 102, 103)

It should be acknowledged that Esser does not *intend* to devalue outer poverty. There are simply too many instances in which he gives positive regard to such an experience. Nevertheless, from an objective perspective, that is precisely what results. By proposing inner poverty as both a valued and an attainable goal, the necessity and therefore value of experienced poverty is lowered.

Esser states that “We would miss the full import of such despoliation were we to limit it to the external ... the deepest reason Francis so loved poverty [was] because Christ ... had come into the world as a poor man” (ibid., p. 104). Esser’s need to describe Francis’ valuation of various aspects of the issue of poverty in superlatives is disturbing. Indeed, his articles are replete with superlatives: “the deepest reason” (ibid., p. 104), “the full import” (ibid.), which are just two of the many examples. What is troubling about this is that Esser does not provide us with reasons why these aspects are “so” important yet he uses these superlative descriptions to strengthen his position that the spiritual has been largely understated and is, in fact, the more important aspect of poverty.

In attempting to show the inconsistency in Esser’s position one does not necessarily ascribe a lower priority to inner poverty, or suggest the idea that material poverty is of greater importance than inner poverty or even that Francis did not teach the spirituality of inner poverty. Esser states that:

The life of poverty was revealed to Francis by the most High...[as] a reflection and imitation of the life of the Poor Christ. As he grew in such imitation Francis came to understand that the saving role of the poverty of Christ must be continued ... because the Christian life of poverty has ... a sanctifying part to play in the inner life of the church. (Ibid., p. 114)

Francis, thus, according to Esser, adopted poverty as an imitation of Christ. However, Francis later came to understand that the life of poverty was important because it had a sanctifying effect on the church. Francis then came to understand, according to Esser, that this sanctifying aspect was more important than the external impoverishment. This can be

understood to mean that Francis understood poverty initially as a value in itself, but later came to realize that its deepest significance lay rather in its being an example to the church. That is, Francis' understanding of poverty grew and that he came to see that it had value not as he had originally understood it, but more truly in terms of the spirituality it exemplified. In other words, the metaphorical interpretation which Francis extended to a renunciation of the self to God was in fact the meaning behind the outward observance of poverty. Thus, literal poverty did not have any intrinsic value but merely pointed to the poverty of spirit. And this may indeed reflect Francis' growth in understanding.

Lest it be misunderstood, however, Esser interprets the spiritual aspect to be the centre of Franciscan poverty. It is, in fact, here that Esser is most clear that material poverty is not as essential as Francis understood it but rather, that it is important only as an example, the outward expression of the inner holy life. It is at this point that he is most different from Francis.

Esser goes on to comment that: "Only when external poverty is a real reflection of inner poverty will it be a means of acquiring the freedom of the sons of God" (*ibid.*, p. 115). We need to follow the direction of the above quote. Esser posits inner poverty being reflected in external poverty and that external poverty will then result in the freedom of God's children. That is, inner poverty is achieved and is then evidenced by external poverty. External poverty, thus, is not the catalyst for the attaining of inner poverty, as Francis believed it to be but is merely the proof of inner poverty. In terms of Esser as an interpreter of Francis, this is a continuation of the idea that external poverty does not necessarily participate in the essence of sanctity (inner poverty). However, from the point of view of Francis, it is difficult to imagine Francis making such a statement. His entire teaching on poverty is replete with praise for the very external poverty that Esser, I would claim, seems to want us not to take so seriously. In fact, Esser appears to see external poverty, or at least the idea of this, as a potential hindrance, an incomplete idea that actually makes the attaining of spirituality possibly more difficult. This is because it is an action which can be informed by a

number of less than perfect motivations. For Francis, poverty was never taken by itself but always in conjunction with obedience to and dependence on Christ. For Francis, the impoverishment of the friars was a spiritual act in itself and participated in the grace of God, to use theological terminology.

If, contrary to the above, for Esser, it is true that external poverty exists in an intimate relationship with inner non-literal poverty then there exists, in this relationship, something of a co-equal necessity. However, (once again), serious poverty as Francis envisaged is simply not possible today for any Franciscan. Thus, either Esser is expressing a model for human behaviour that he knows is impossible, or he is steering the argument away from an external poverty towards that which is possible, namely inner poverty for actual poverty is an impossibility. The historical dimension exerts a powerful influence on how Esser's statements can be intelligibly understood. If one reads Esser one cannot assert that he does not value literal poverty, and thus, to assert that he is elevating inner poverty above literal poverty seems an invalid proposition. However, whereas it can be reasonably implied that Esser does wish the reader to develop the characteristics of inner poverty, unless Esser should be read as advocating disobedience to canon law, it is unlikely that he can be read as advocating deep external poverty. The implication of this stand is that he either regards the church as more of an eternal threat than the commands of the Gospel (if the Gospel does, in fact, command such deep poverty) or, it can be inferred, that he does not regard such deep poverty as of equal importance or necessity to the development of inner poverty.

If one places Esser within the Greek philosophical context in which Western culture still finds itself, Esser appears to be focussing on the mind part of the mind-body question, i.e., on inner psychological processes separate from action in such a way that would, I believe, have been foreign to Francis. Further, Esser's following statement is a particularly revealing one:

Perhaps it is more to the point to ask what God wills one to have, rather than to ask what the individual thinks should be granted him. Particular questions

as to the extent of poverty in one's life are dependent on what concept or image we have of God.... It is up to the individual conscience in large measure to make the decision. (Ibid., p. 115)

Esser expresses in this statement a direct correlation between the image one has of God and the kind of question one puts as to the level of poverty one should experience. I would suggest that the questions referred to in the statement above are questions that have been part of Franciscan life since Francis' simple poverty was disallowed. Possible questions on the extent of poverty, in this regard, range from whether one should be totally poor, to that of various allowable levels of use, or even possession of things. Esser also states that within the limits of a Christ-like life, the decision as to what the answer to these questions is depends on us, "the individual conscience." If this is so, then the necessity of poverty is not a closed question but rather a debatable point. The suggestion by Esser that the degree of poverty is essentially a personal matter is further evidence that for Esser, poverty, while still theoretically agreed to, cannot, because of the indefiniteness that surrounds it, be seen as a necessary variable in considerations regarding inner poverty/holiness. Nevertheless, it may be argued that while indefinite, outward poverty is still a necessity. However, I would argue that, in that its "shape" is allowed as rather vague and individually defined, poverty is given less "concreteness." The effect of this, if only psychologically, is to weaken the motivating power of outer poverty in comparison to that directed to inner poverty, which is not at all vaguely defined. Indeed, though Esser himself would never subscribe to the following position, if one's image of God is such that poverty is unthinkable, while an unselfish, economic modesty is thought to be the goal, then the degree of lack, if one held this position, would be significantly different to one whose concept of God included absolute poverty as the ideal. This is not to suggest that Esser, as an individual wished to allow himself a luxurious life. It is to claim, however, that such varieties of interpretation are entirely consistent and logical within the parameters of the possibility of choice that Esser permits with the statement "up to the individual conscience."

One can only sympathize with Esser in his dilemma, and this is that he and many Franciscan are caught between obligations to two centres of authority, viz., the church and the expectations of the Gospel as they understand it. Esser's intention, I would suggest, is to focus attention on the inner experience of holiness-poverty. His goal is to take the problem of use out of the legal domain, and suggest that poverty, while still important in some manner, is not a rule with fixed limits. It is instead, a dynamic experience and that one progresses on this path in a dialectical fashion involving a continuity of choices that lead one closer to the complete experience of inner, and possibly outer, poverty. And yet, if the goal of inner poverty can be achieved at all, and achieved without actual external poverty being experienced, though he may personally view outer poverty highly, outer poverty cannot be seen as all-important or the whole experience would not be possible without it.

It should also be noted that it does not appear Esser views poverty as a social evil needing to be resolved. This is not to say that on the personal, human level he does not wish that the lives of the poor would be ameliorated. In contrast to Leonardo Boff, (who will be treated in the next chapter) and who speaks from within the problem of poverty as a social evil, Esser directs our attention to the spiritual and religious dimensions of poverty, as these need to be interpreted from the Franciscan perspective. However, if, as he states: "[one] will become most free through poverty, especially through such poverty as it was understood by St. Francis" (ibid., 1967, p. 6) and that this poverty frees us to love God and humans, then surely those ordinary people in poverty are potentially closer to this ideal state than those who are not poor. The need for their economic amelioration is then far from clear.

I would also claim that the generosity in giving away one's goods that Esser advocates towards the poor results from the natural compassion one has for those who suffer. Consequently, though this may sound obvious, Esser cannot, even as Francis could not, in taking the positions he does on poverty, simultaneously regard poverty as evil and also as the "norm" for all human life." Consequently, any such generosity with one's possessions can

only be a decidedly ambiguous activity in theoretical terms, though psychologically it may appear consistent with Franciscan attitudes.

Esser writes in an attitude of love for Francis. Of this there can be little doubt. Further, his apparent intention to cause a change of focus on the total understanding of poverty as including an imitation of the character of Christ and motivated by a love for the God who was willing to empty Godself of all, seems to be pastoral in orientation. Esser appears to look back nostalgically to the Franciscan origins. Yet he also believes it to be impossible to return to these. As a result, he seeks to reorient the discussion to focus on what he believes to be the essential part of Franciscan poverty in the inner renouncing of all right to the self's possession of anything. However, as I have repeatedly suggested, in attempting to achieve this refocussing, he unfortunately causes a devaluation of the very impoverishment that he so frequently supports and refers to. And whether this is intentional or unintentional seems hardly important in the face of the objective result. It would be impossible, if not foolish, to claim that Francis did not teach the necessity of inner poverty. Nevertheless, it seems also true that despite the very real fact that Esser is attempting to achieve an interpretation of Francis in the light of contemporary needs, Esser's emphasis is a refocussing of Franciscan poverty teaching that leaves the outer poverty he is at such pains to continue to defend in a theoretically ambiguous position.

For Esser, that a life of deprivation and minimal survival, as he understands this, is believed to be the norm for human life is clearly seen in his statement that: "Poverty is the norm and model of all human life, both interior and exterior" (*ibid.*, p. 86). However, though the above statement appears totally clear, given Esser's willingness to permit a variety of use of material goods (*ibid.*, pp. 82, 83), the individual's understanding and conscience to arbitrate the setting of "poverty" limits, and the implications of the historical situation on any decisions on real outer poverty, this passage can only be read as less than pellucid.

Further, given his emphasis on the inner nature of poverty, one suspects that the motivation for his analysis of the “inner” is a tacit admission that the experience of poverty can only be achieved, at this particular time in history, in the spirit. For, (a) if one is unable to enact radical material impoverishment one may, he seems to suggest, still become “poor” in the spirit, (b) if one can achieve inner poverty, perhaps outer poverty is not a *sine qua non* and finally, (c) in this regard I would suggest that Esser is interested in “reopening” the discussion on the use of property and, indeed, wishes to offer an alternative view based on inner poverty. He suggests this when he remarks: “True obedience logically appears as the expression of a radical renunciation” (ibid., p. 61) and “In [Francis’] eyes external poverty was merely the expression of a deeper inward destitution with far vaster implications” (ibid., p. 73).

Esser seems to have a Janus-like perspective in which he looks to the present and future while simultaneously looking nostalgically to the past. This is evident in his remarks regarding the “peak of highest poverty.” He states:

this is an ideal which can be realized only in the renunciation of all external security. The Friar Minor is to live in total dependence ... he will be completely abandoned to the goodness of God. (Ibid., p. 75)

Impoverishment, as Esser understands it, is intended to put one in a situation of total dependence on God. Yet Franciscans are not free to make this ultimate renunciation because of the Rule by which their lives are governed. Logically then, the highest peak to which Esser refers above, is also an impossible peak and a situation of total dependence on God an equal impossibility to the modern Franciscan. The obvious conclusion, then seems to be that today one almost certainly cannot become truly poor in spirit, for there will always be those things to which one clings as possessions and in which one puts one’s false trust.

Conclusion

Esser's interpretation of Franciscan poverty is far from simple. In fact, on the face of it, it does not immediately appear to be a contemporary interpretation at all but rather a reexamination of original Franciscan emphases that, in the ensuing centuries have become largely ignored. Yet he is not simply trying to correct; he is not simply trying to return to original Franciscan roots. There is something novel in his work that is discovered only in placing the work within the more complete historical context of the present, and in examining his interpretation of use along with his ideas on the function of individual conscience in relation to this use.

It is not that Esser is overtly proposing a rejection of poverty. Rather, by stressing the spirituality of the poverty model over its literality, and reinterpreting Francis' understanding on use, Esser is rejecting a legalistic interpretation of the *usus pauper* conclusions. He attempts this in favor of an interpretation of Francis which allows a more widespread use of things. He proposes this extended use within a novel interpretation of Francis that stresses the spiritual values which Francis sought to exemplify through radical and literal poverty. Esser, thus, essentially takes the focus off Francis' literal poverty and places it on a more metaphoric understanding of poverty that Francis derived from literal poverty.

The desired effect of this is to free "use" from legal interpretation by justifying it spiritually, setting its limits within the Franciscan ethos of the "needs of the other" and perhaps, paradoxically, by continually stressing the value of literal poverty within the domain of the "new" freedom of use. Unfortunately, this paradoxical position is similar, in fact, to promising the use of the family car to a teenager if he or she is particularly good while simultaneously burying the car keys in a block of cement. The fact is Franciscans cannot be radically poor.

Finally, Esser reinforces this freedom to use by stressing the individual as the centre from which the choice as to limits of this use, must be derived. This allows the possibility of

a plurality of acceptable choices in regard to these limits – all, according to Esser, within the parameters of a spiritual quest towards the goal of absolute poverty.

The issue is not that this is not the poverty of St. Francis. The question is rather, given the conclusions arrived at in this chapter, namely individual freedom to choose the level of poverty, a more liberal understanding of use, and the sheer historical impossibility of being radically poor, whether Esser's frequent invocations of literal poverty are sufficient to overcome the overwhelming feeling that the experience of inner poverty can actually be achieved without the need of literal poverty at all.

CHAPTER THREE

The theologian Leonardo Boff is an immediately recognizable modern writer. Both Esser and Francis seem, (and in Francis' case it is obviously true), to speak from within the ideas of the Middle Ages. The primacy of the idea of poverty as a personal path is the main thrust of the teaching. On the other hand, Boff, while emphasizing the need for identification with the poor and marginalized, and indeed, focussing on the identification by Christ with these poor, repeatedly stresses the dehumanizing aspect of the experience of poverty.

Boff is a well known Franciscan theologian. He was brought up in Brazil, teaches there and, until his silencing by the Church and his subsequent resignation from the Franciscan order and the priesthood, was an advisor to the Brazilian Conference of Bishops. While liberation theology did not originate with him, Boff has been involved in developing and spreading these ideas throughout Latin America and indeed, the world.

It is often believed that liberation theology owes its dominant theoretical base to Marxism but that would, I believe, be a misunderstanding. Whilst it is true that Liberation theology does derive aspects of its teaching from Marxism, particularly in regard to its analysis of the oppressive structures of society, its main motivation has been the need to develop a more suitable theology for the Third world situation. Its sources have been the Scriptures and other theoretical sources from economics, sociology or political theory that throw light on, and allow a better analysis of, the situation of societal poverty. It should not be thought, therefore, that Boff's theology of the poor is a Marxism to which theology has been tagged on in a somewhat *ad hoc* manner. Rather, Boff sees Marxism as one source that can be

‘borrowed’ from, a source that understands “the importance of economic factors, [gives] attention to the class struggle [and critiques] the mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones” (L. and C. Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1989, p. 28). According to Boff, Marxism correctly critiques ideology and religion as potential sources of delusion, sources which conceal the oppressive nature of socio-economic systems and which justify these systems in terms of societally accepted religious and ideological ideas and values.

The term “liberation theology” needs to be further examined. Boff is interested not simply in asserting that poverty is dehumanizing, but in formulating a solution to this dehumanization. Further, as a Franciscan, and as a Christian, he is extremely concerned that the process of liberation be a theologically based experience and not simply the result of sociological processes. He states:

the new evangelization...[sees] the humanizing potential of the gospel ... generating a new meaning for life by condemning the forms of historic oppression ... and promoting a commitment to liberation that helps in the building of a society which is more participatory and life enhancing. (*The Voice of the Victims*, Boff and Elizondo, 1990, p. 131)

The significance of the statement is that Boff, and other such theologians, see the hope of the gospel as not restricted to an eternal spiritual dimension but including an experience of redemption and liberation within the present lived experience. This is implied in the statement that the gospel should have a humanizing effect which is the result of a removal of historic forms of oppression. The above quotation, thus, is very clear in its thrust that the gospel should have a transformative societal and historic impact.

In terms of Boff’s claim that this is a “new” evangelization, he outlines eight reasons why this is so. Of these the following three are perhaps the most crucial:

- (1) [The new evangelization’s] primary agents are the poor themselves. (2) [New evangelization] expresses new ideas deriving from the engagement of faith with social justice...[this stresses] the essential connection between the God of life, the cry of the poor and ... the relationship between the kingdom

of God which is beginning to establish itself through the poor and the successful conclusion of history. (3) [New evangelization] is creating a new relationship between the church and the world, abandoning the alliance with the powerful ... and showing that Christianity is not a prisoner of the capitalist system. (Ibid., pp. 131-132)

In these statements Boff expresses ideas absolutely central to the theology of liberation: its independence from capitalism, the centrality of the poor in the understanding and work of the church, an evident opposition to social injustice and, finally, this liberation as symbol of, precursor to, and intrinsic element of the kingdom of God both as idea and as experience.

To understand Boff's conception of liberation one must understand that for him poverty is not simply a lack of material goods. Boff understands the word poor

in an immediate and direct sense: poor is that individual who [as Michel Mollat defines him or her] temporarily or permanently finds himself in a situation of weakness, dependence, humiliation, characterized by the lack of means, variables according to the age and society, means of power and social consideration ... living day to day, the poor man has no possibility to change his state without the help of another. (*Saint Francis*, L. Boff, 1989, pp. 51-52)

As can be seen, this definition does not limit poverty to mere economic deprivation but includes the experience of powerlessness, lack of political, social and potentially, even ecclesial powerlessness.

For this reason it is important to understand Boff's use of the terms the "people of God" and the "Body of Christ." These terms are totally synonymous with the expression "the Church" and yet have historically been used by the church, according to Boff, to locate the "laity" in a subservient position *vis-à-vis* the clergy. Boff states that:

[the use of the term] the people of God as 'simple faithful', while maintaining a universal character, in fact tends to accentuate the importance of the clergy ... the lay people of God, according to Gratian, has the duty to submit

itself to the clergy, to obey them'. (*The People of God Amidst the Poor*, Boff and Elizondo, 1984, p. 92)

This describes a situation of unequal power and, indeed, of genuine powerlessness among lay people. However, according to Boff, in a popular Church, in a Church of the poor such as was envisaged by Vatican II:

most of the members of the popular Church are poor. In this type of Church, the paternalistic relationship with the poor, which allowed no room for making use of the social and ecclesial strength of the poor, has been largely overcome; now the poor participate within a framework that they have worked out for themselves. (Ibid., p. 95)

The liberation of the poor is not, thus, simply a redistribution of common wealth. Poverty, as seen by Boff, is as much a state of humiliation and powerlessness as material lack. The liberation of the poor, then, exists, in part in a revaluation of the poor as human individuals to the extent that they become active participants in the organizational, and perhaps even sacramental life of the church.

This does not, in itself, imply any economic restructuring. The poor remain poor while the non-poor, instead of identifying with the rich and powerful, begin to identify with the powerless. Thus respect is granted to the poor as participants in a complex of social and religious activities and not simply as receivers of the "left overs" of the wealthy. Liberation of the poor is not, however, a simple 'political' restructuring as may appear to be suggested above. The poor are not romanticized and imitated by those who actually are not poor.

Boff sees poverty as an objective economic evil which needs to be eradicated. He states:

What the people and the poor seek above all is to escape from the poverty that prevents them from living. They see poverty as a social injustice contrary to God's purpose. The popular Church sees as self evident that the integral liberation willed by God requires an equitable sharing of goods. (Ibid., p. 95)

That there is the beginning of a genuine liberation of the poor in the acceptance of the “church of the poor” is evidenced in that the poor are no longer passive but become active participants, not only in the church but also in their struggle to become free of the experience of material poverty. Boff tells us that common phrases among Christian militants are: “I am a fighter for the Gospel; I am in the fight for the liberation of my brothers” (ibid., p. 95).

The poor in this statement have undergone a radical change in consciousness. They no longer see themselves as unfortunate recipients of the generosity of the well off. There has been a paradigm shift in their thinking that shows itself in an understanding that God’s justice demands a necessary sharing of the goods of the world such that all may live a truly human life.

Further, this statement not only clearly states that Boff supports the economic liberation of the poor but also shows that, independent of the controversy surrounding the soteriological implications of a liberation theology, (that is, that it is impossible to liberate the poor until the Kingdom of God is installed or that it is God who must perform this liberation and not humans), poverty is a social injustice contrary to the ethical demands of the deity. These simple ethical demands, thus, need not be tied to eschatological models such as the Kingdom of God, though they are in fact so linked by Boff and other liberation theologians. For whether there is such a reality as the Kingdom of God, the characteristics of which we should try to emulate, is not relevant to the theologically ethical demand for social justice and compassion.

Boff’s teaching on economic liberation seems to fly in the face of traditionally understood Franciscanism, though in describing St. Francis he writes:

Poverty is the essential path of Saint Francis realized in the physical place of the poor. The poorer he was the freer and more fraternal he felt. Possession is what engenders the obstacles to communication between human beings themselves and between persons and things. Interests, selfishness and exclusive possessions interfere between the individual and the world.... The more radical the poverty, the closer the individual comes to reality. (*Saint Francis*, p. 39)

This does not sound too radical. Indeed, it is a very traditional understanding of Francis' attitude to poverty. However, if we fail to recognize that the heart of the poverty described above is the failure to achieve genuine human relations we shall miss the point. Poverty is seen as essential in order to achieve a freedom from things and a true relationship with others. Indeed, Boff states:

Poverty, fundamentally does not consist in not having things, because individuals always have things ... poverty is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them the objects of the will to power. (Ibid., p. 39)

Here he describes poverty as an inner state, a psychological or spiritual state of freedom from the bondage to things while not necessarily not enjoying their use. This understanding is not dissimilar to Esser's position. In fact, Boff states, "Poverty is thus a synonym for humility" (ibid., p. 39).

Despite this spiritualizing of poverty Boff is not unaware of the lack of a theme of liberation in the writings and sayings of Saint Francis. He states:

If we want to look at the liberating dimension of Francis we have to do so within the correct epistemological consciousness.... One must place Francis within his time ... to look for social liberation in St. Francis within present day schemes of society or liberation, means to fail to find any parallel. (Ibid., p. 88)

That is to say, contemporary categories whereby we analyze and understand society, and without which we would be hard pressed to converse meaningfully, were not present in the time of Francis. Therefore Francis should not be held accountable for the lack of these contemporary categories in his writings. Boff goes on, nevertheless, to say that: "The theme of liberation must be sought in categories such as poverty, love, rule, authority, fraternity, money, obedience etc." (ibid., pp. 88-89).

What he is suggesting is that liberation can be found in the attitudes to *praxis* and belief inherent in a Franciscan understanding of these terms. Boff further notes that:

A social actor does not live and think whatever he or she wants, but rather what is possible within concrete social coordinates. As a result one must always be understood within the dialectic of society-individual. (Ibid., p. 89)

The conceptual codes and consequent ways of expression are thus determined by the society and times in which one lives. This is not a novel idea, but perhaps it does need to be stated in terms of understanding the relationship between the ideas of Saint Francis and those of Boff and other liberation theorists.

In relation to Francis' own commitment to liberation Boff states: "To understand Francis' contribution to liberation it is necessary to have first defined ... the interests and commitment for the poor" (ibid., p. 89).

In his editorial preface to *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries*, Boff alludes to the statement by John XXIII at the Second Vatican Council that: "The Church is, and wishes to be, the Church of all but principally the Church of the poor" (ibid., p. ix). This refocussing implies that, rather than speaking from the point of view of wealth and power down to the power-less, the church wishes to speak to the world from the point of view of the marginalized and impoverished. It is this 'option for the poor' that Boff sees in Francis' response to the structure of power in the late feudal period. In the time of the major and the minor classes in society Francis chose to be a minor. In other words, he chose to be one of the "church of the poor." Boff notes:

Faced with a feudal system centred on the "greaters" Francis becomes a lesser.... Faced with the bourgeoisie.... Francis proposes the idea of radical poverty.... Faced with the church of the time, the hegemony of the *sacerdotium* Francis is a lay person. (*Saint Francis*, pp. 92-93)

In making these choices Francis is, according to Boff, doing nothing less than liberating himself and his followers from the power structures of the day, just as the church today, to the extent that it does choose the option for the poor, frees not only itself but also the poor themselves. It does this by breaking the invisible wall that separates humanity in contemporary structures of unequal power.

Boff further shows that, if not in word, then definitely in deed, Francis was genuinely concerned with the economic liberation of the poor. In quoting Francis, Boff states:

I have always been content to receive less than what was offered me, so that other poor people may not be left needy; to act any other way would be sinful. (Ibid., p. 93)

Not only does this show, for Boff, that Francis was concerned with the economic state of the poor, but it also indicates that the theologically ethical demand to share the goods of the world fairly, expressed by Boff and other liberationists, finds its echo in Francis' own remarks.

Indeed, an echo it may be, and as a way of acting towards another Boff's economic liberation may be teased out of this way of acting by Francis. Yet Boff's form of liberation implies a positive value to liberation from economic deprivation, and it is far from clear whether Francis envisaged his act of liberality in exactly this light. For Boff, compassion is evidenced in just such a deep and far-reaching liberation. The question is not, I would suggest, whether Boff has a more 'developed' or 'enlarged' compassion than Francis. It seems to be that compassion for both these thinkers and actors finds expression in differing acts. Francis found expression for compassion in a vast array of acts of human interaction and not specifically in continued acts of economic amelioration. Boff, on the other hand, focusses predominantly on just such acts.

Boff also sees the theme of liberation in Francis' relationship with the poor. In contemporary liberation theory, activity is not performed *for* the poor but together *with* and *by* the poor who are equal agents of change. Boff points out that Francis had

a liberating vision, avoiding assistiveness ... he did not see the poor primarily as objects of aid.... We see here, in action, not a pedagogy for the oppressed, but a pedagogy of the oppressed. It is a way of rescuing the value of the poor ... and of avoiding help that is not at the service of their creativity and values. (Ibid., p. 95)

We do not, however, find expressions of social and economic liberation in the works and sayings of Francis, nor is there a theoretical program for the liberation of the poor. Boff, nevertheless, asserts that within the actions of Francis there is a direct correspondence between

the theoretical positions that he (and others) take in liberation theology and the theoretical implications within the deeds of St. Francis. Indeed, Boff discovers, in Francis' respect for the poor, and in his rejection of a hierarchy of power within the order, that his (Boff's) understanding of poverty as more than economic deprivation, is closely paralleled in Francis' life and actions.

Saint Francis is understood by Boff to be liberating in another, interesting fashion. Francis recognized that behind the day to day experience of poverty there existed the potentiality, and often the actuality, of violence. This violence was of a systematic variety that permitted the unjust structures of the time to continue. Accordingly, Francis perceived that:

behind the dissimilarities are camouflaged injustices and violence. Especially property maintains strict ties with violence or the loss of inner peace and tranquillity ... [and in response to Bishop Guido] Francis responded, 'Lord, if we had goods we would need arms to defend them'. (Ibid., p. 96)

Thus, Francis, in choosing to reject ownership, was rejecting the use of violence to defeat violence. This rejection was threefold in nature. Not only was ownership and violence rejected but there was also affirmed a solidarity with all, especially those in poverty. For in rejecting violence, Francis is also rejecting the alienation of one person from another that results from this violence. This solidarity or this desire for solidarity, is evident when Boff notes, "He never attacks ... openly because he does not want to destroy possible bridges" (ibid., p. 98). Solidarity, or possible solidarity, is not unrelated to the problem of poverty. This is so because Boff, and by implication Francis, see poverty as intimately connected to the threat of violence which, by its very nature, is a denial of the ideal of human solidarity and of the unity of the body of Christ, the people of God. Both, according to this interpretation, see liberation from poverty as necessitating a similar liberation from the threat of violence. What Boff is asserting, then, is that with Francis there is an implied liberation theology, as opposed to an overtly expressed one.

Boff asks what the strategy to liberate individuals was with Francis and answers with two legends as illustrations. One is the tale of the thieves of Burgo San Sepulcro and the other the legend of the wolf of Gubbio. Explaining these tales, Boff suggests:

As one can see, there is an explicit denial of accusation censure and condemnation....[there is] confidence in the healing energies that are hidden in each individual ... the strategy of Francis [is] liberation through kindness.... Francis understands the situations ... [and sees] a creature to save ... to achieve peace without violence. (Ibid., pp. 99-100)

Boff's commitment to peaceful liberation is further supported by a statement in *The People of God Amidst the Poor*, where he writes "poverty as well as riches have to be set aside in the quest for just and fraternal relations. This process means carrying on the struggle through evangelical means" (p. 95). This commitment to Franciscan non-violence is not unnecessary. The vocabulary of class struggle that Boff employs, and his use of Marxism in general, carry overtones of potential violence. History is replete with horrific stories which relate the phenomenon of powerful elites violently resisting the ordinary citizen struggling to attain some level of social dignity and security. The probability of violence in response to attempts at radical economic reform would seem high.

To some degree it may be argued that it is not Boff's attitude to the poor that places him in the Franciscan stream but rather his attitude to the wealthy. Boff tells us that Francis encouraged the brothers "not to scorn or judge those who wear colored and fancy clothes, who eat and drink fine foods, but rather that each one judge and scorn himself" (*Saint Francis*, p. 102). Even more strongly, Boff states that "what determines relationship is goodness and not the spirit of vengeance" (ibid., p. 103). These statements are simultaneously deeply Franciscan and deeply non-Marxist. Boff's repudiation of poverty as an acceptable human experience does not involve a similar repudiation of the wealthy, though it would seem to involve a repudiation of wealth.

Nevertheless, while there are correspondences in the life and words of Francis with the tenets of liberation theology, it is also true that within Boff's 'program' there appears to be an emphasis on eradicating poverty that is missing from the life of Saint Francis. Boff has or had, it seems, two problems. Given the silence in St. Francis regarding liberation from poverty, how should Francis be understood in terms of the deeply perceived need of libera-

tion for the poor by Boff? Secondly, even if Francis could be understood in terms of a liberation philosophy, would Franciscan ideology be adequate for the needs of this philosophy or would a theology have to be developed that would go beyond or even contradict Boff's Franciscan values? Actually, that 'pure' Franciscanism is not chosen, suggests that Boff sees it as not completely adequate, or at least adequately expressed, to meet the needs of the Latin American situation. Further, in that Boff understands that Francis lived in and was limited by his own time and assumptions, the question of a covert ideology in Francis is not a major problem for him. On the other hand, in that Boff situates Francis within the liberation stream, one can justify Boff's reading as a contemporary hermeneutic of St. Francis' ideas and practices.

If the viability of a rejection of capitalism were to be discussed at this moment the question could well be asked as to what this had to do with Franciscan poverty. For Boff, however, capitalism has very much to do with poverty. In the final document of the Puebla meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Council the misery of the poor was described thus:

[There is] a high rate of infant mortality, lack of adequate housing, health problems, starvation wages, unemployment and underemployment, malnutrition, job uncertainty, compulsory mass migrations etc. (*Salvation and Liberation*, 1979, p. 2)

This is the starting point for a theology of liberation and Boff states, "Anyone not perceiving this scandalous reality will fail to understand the discourse of the theology of liberation" (ibid., p. 2). That the experience of human suffering is the basis for such a development can be illustrated in the life of Francis, for it was, indeed, the embracing of the leper that began Francis' real commitment to the poor and to the path of poverty.

In surveying Boff's work for differences from Francis it could be argued that Boff is hostile to capitalism and has not taken the time to examine the potential for social improvement within capitalism. This is so because Boff is unrepentantly critical and sees capital negatively as spiritually destructive. He states, "Today ... almost everything is organized in view of productivity [and] production is geared toward the consumer market" (*Saint Francis*,

p. 7) It may not be correct to state that Boff rejects capitalism completely, but it is certainly true that he holds it to be sufficiently destructive that he attempts to attempt to formulate a societal theology which circumvents it and proposes modes of human relationship that do not fit the competition model. Further, Boff and other liberationists do not seem willing to take the time to discover any positive aspects in capitalism, given the pressing need they see in the misery of the poor. The impact of this misery on Boff is clear when he states, “A deafening cry rises from millions of persons, asking their shepherds for a liberation that does not come to them from anywhere else” (ibid., p. 49). Boff calls poverty “the most painful and bloody wound in the history of humanity” (ibid., p. 49). He does not appear to support the idea that poverty is ineradicable but rather believes modern society has the technology to solve this problem and that this has not occurred because of “politico-cultural factors linked to the domination and repression of the capitalist world” (ibid., p. 50). Further, Boff believes that this problem cannot be solved solely by individual moral repentance because “poverty is not only a problem of the moral conscience [but] is fundamentally a political problem” (ibid., p. 50). One could accuse Boff of not being sufficiently realistic in this assessment. This is because he sees that the only way to make structural change is by revolutionary means. He states:

It is not enough to morally condemn situations of poverty; rather a concrete effort must be made to overcome it by means of a true revolution in the arena of relations between human beings and the means of producing the goods necessary to guarantee the lives of all people. (Ibid., p. 50)

In addition to its Marxist flavour, what is immediately evident is the enormity of the task and its virtual impossibility. Yet the statement is not Quixotic in the sense that Boff is not tilting at windmills. The objects of his attack may well be worthy of his criticism. Further, the remark is carefully worded so as not to appear to be advocating a violent revolution but one based on a transformation in the relations between humans. In addition, evidence that he may not believe in the actual success of the venture may be found in the seemingly

desperate tone of the words: “concrete effort must be made to overcome it.” He does not say that it must be overcome, but that an effort must at least be made. Boff is not an idealist unaware of the political realities and he is certainly aware of the real dangers. He notes, “Any movement of the poor is immediately controlled and repressed with a violence intolerable even to animals” (ibid., p. 51). It seems, in fact, that having reached for such macro-socio-political goals he is left in despair at the almost certain impossibility of their attainment and retreats back to the known gentleness and individual success of Saint Francis. Boff’s final comment with regard to macro-solutions is:

Saint Francis’ option for the poor covers in this context, an unusual political reality. What makes the poor poorer is the fact of generally being considered from the point of view of the rich. The greatness of Saint Francis consisted in seeing the poor with the eyes of the poor ... to discover the values of the poor. (Ibid., p. 51)

It may seem completely logical that those who have taken vows of poverty should reject wealth but it also seems logical that if one has taken a vow of poverty, the poverty of others, in itself, would not necessarily be seen as scandal. Yet, for Boff, it is. In quoting the Puebla document Boff states:

in the light of faith we see the growing gap between rich and poor as a scandal and a contradiction to Christian existence. The luxury of a few becomes an insult to the wretched poverty of the vast masses. (*Salvation and Liberation*, p. 3)

Strictly speaking, what is evident in this quote is not a rejection of capitalism but rather a rejection of wealth. Wealth can only be wealth in relation to another who has less. As Boff states, “the poor are defined in terms of a relationship because there are no rich or poor in themselves” (*Saint Francis*, p. 52). There are at least two implications for the existence of ‘the rich and the poor.’ Firstly, the objective result of this disparity is humiliation for the poor. Secondly, to be wealthy is a result of a decision in favour of oneself instead of the needs of another. Wealth is thus a deliberate decision, though one may not be aware of the

implications and the fact that such a choice runs counter to the demands of the Gospel. Indeed, it also runs counter to the ethical demand of the decalogue, which is essentially to love others as one loves oneself.

In *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Nations*, Boff, in his editorial, presents the reader with six points which he sees as vital for an acceptance of the option for the poor. Choosing this path of solidarity with the poor would make the church a genuine Church of the poor. Such a transformation is potentially revolutionary. Boff informs his audience in his first point that this option requires that we see

the reality of the poor through the eyes of the poor [though] we usually see the poor through the eyes of the rich, so the poor appear as those without possessions, without knowledge and without power. (Ibid., pp. ix-x)

He goes on to state that when such an option is adopted there is discovery of the strengths and wisdom of the poor. This, however, seems to be a rather romanticized view. What would also be discovered is the violence that poverty generates. It would also reveal the hopelessness that is part of the day to day life of those without any chance to free themselves from the cycle of poverty. Further, there is a reason why we see the poor through the eyes of the rich and that is that we are not poor. How does one enter into the life of the poor without becoming poor oneself? If one does not experience the hopelessness of poverty one can never enter into such an experience in any genuine fashion.

Boff tells us that the option for the poor also demands that we embrace the cause of the poor:

The cause of the poor is the cause of life and the means of life such as work, bread, clothing, housing and basic education ... the churches can make an invaluable contribution to the planning and building of a society centred more on persons than on increasing the pace of development and accumulation. (Ibid., p. x)

This “cause of the poor” is more of a theoretical position or attitude than a set of particular actions. To have such a goal would obviously involve activity but Boff is indicating a direction rather than providing a program of set behaviour. That the churches could change the focus of societal interest away from economic development to a more person-centred orientation is a fascinating possibility. One wonders, nonetheless, how such a change in direction would be accomplished.

Boff’s third point is that we take up the struggle of the poor. This section begins to suggest strategies for accomplishing the goal of liberation. Boff states that:

It is the oppressed who bring about liberation. They become aware of their dignity, organize their action, form links with other groups which, like them, want a different society. The churches should join this struggle, make their specific contribution as religious bodies, reinforce the power of the poor to enable them to press for changes and participate in their implementation.
(Ibid., p. x)

That the churches are said, by Boff, to have an ability to contribute to the liberation of the poor surely suggests that the church is not “poor.” If to be poor implies powerlessness, the church is not poor as long as it has significant societal influence. That the church should use this influence I do not contest. However, is not the organization of either formal or informal groupings suggested in the quote above an admission that social *force* must be used to bring about change? And is this not a replicating of the idea that power is the basis of societal change? And is Boff not attempting to transform the social “face” into one of non-violence and respect for the other, despite that other’s difference? And are not these ideas of compassionate non-violence essential Franciscan values? At the end of the day is Boff not admitting that in this world one can only accomplish things in society if one has the power to force other power groupings to submit to one, and what level of transformation does this imply?

Boff's fourth point is that people should opt to experience the life of the poor. As he states:

The option for the poor is not authentic unless we participate, at least a little, in the life and sufferings of the poor ... there is an obligation on all to adopt an anti-consumerist attitude. Support for the struggles of the poor frequently means suffering. (Ibid., p. xi)

There are three sub-sections to this point. These are, firstly, that an individual is not sincerely choosing to be in solidarity with the poor if she or he does not begin to remove some of the protective barriers shielding the individual from economic suffering. Secondly, that there needs to be a reduction in spending on oneself if one truly identifies with the impoverished. Given the dependence on consumption that drives the capitalist economy, one wonders what negative effect this would have if it were put into widespread practice. The final section speaks of the personal suffering that may follow such a decision. However, it is not simply becoming more like the poor that results in suffering. The suffering that Boff speaks of is that which follows attempts to change the dominant way of understanding wealth and possessions.

The fifth point is an analysis of the structures that produce poverty. Boff writes:

Today we need to be clear about the source of the poverty of the poor. [This] is a result of ... the international capitalist system and the relations of dependence and oppression it establishes.... The benefits are, on the whole, accumulated by the countries which are already highly developed or by the social classes in the poor countries which exercise social control.... If the churches do not develop a critical attitude towards the socio-economic system [they are not] allies of the poor who are demanding a replacement of the existing system. (Ibid., p. xi)

That there should be an analysis of the structures of oppression is not questioned. That the instruments of the capitalist system do cause oppression and poverty to workers in the third world is also not questioned. What seems to be overlooked by Boff is that there are

vast numbers of the poor in the first world that he describes as “already highly developed” and that the highly developed first world can be described as such only because there has been a broader sharing of the gross national wealth than in the third world. That this is so may weaken the argument that it is the capitalist system itself which is the cause of impoverishment. Nevertheless, the possessors of capital have never willingly given up their complete control of the surpluses that Boff states have benefitted many in the first world. Also, this “sharing” has been far from equitable and is far from complete. Yet while it is obvious for Boff that the wealth of the first world should be shared with the rest of the world, it may not necessarily be the capitalist system that is the correct target of Boff’s analysis. Finally, one must surely question whether the poor are truly demanding a replacement of the capitalist system or simply a more fair sharing of the wealth and benefits that this system so obviously produces.

The sixth and final point is that there needs to be a redefining of the task of theology. Boff declares that:

Theology’s mission is to produce understanding [of] the Christian mystery. But it must also evangelize, that is, produce good news. It evangelizes by also being prophetic, denouncing specific oppressions, and announcing God’s plan in history. It evangelises by being pastoral and inspiring a commitment to liberation. (Ibid., pp. xi, xii)

Boff is stating here that the good news is not only the soteriological achievement of the cross but also the revelation of the character of God as expressed in the poor and gentle Christ. That is to say, the character of Christ is a condemnation of the greed and cruelty of those who oppress the poor. The good news, according to Boff, is that Christ identified himself with the poor and not with the rich and powerful. This, accordingly, should place the church on the side of the poor. The theology of the church should be consequently formulated to express the liberation that is inherent in the gospel message and if it does not it is failing its deepest mission to bring “healing and freedom to the captive.” Indeed, Boff

is saying, given the fact that the majority of the world's population is unbearably poor, that if the gospel is unable to say anything to their suffering, it will "in the end become totally irrelevant" (*ibid.*, p. xii).

Boff sees Christ as Liberator and, as such, seeks to develop processes whereby this liberation of humanity can be experienced in the areas of politics and socio-economic structures. There seems to be a conflation of the spiritual and the earthly however, which should at least be questioned. By seeking to find liberation in socio-political processes one must at least ask just how Christ the Liberator is supposed to be liberating in his, Christ's own right. One sees a very human activity with an appearance of giving only lip service to any spiritual work on Christ's part. To understand Boff's claim that his liberation is a spiritual one he must accept a radically close identification of the people of God with Christ. This is a complex theological position and one which, in its orientation to the human, Francis may have taken issue.

The problem, however, may find a solution in a correct understanding of the two different but related kinds of liberation that Boff expounds, namely spiritual liberation and earthly liberation. Indeed, part of the problem seems to be caused by this multivalent use of the word liberation. Soteriology, as understood to mean the ultimate and spiritual salvation of the world has been achieved, according to Boff and the church generally, through the work of Christ. This salvation guarantees a further, and ultimately universal transformation eschatologically. In this eschatological time there will be an experience that liberation theologians call the Kingdom of God, in which the character of God, understood as just and loving, will be expressed by all throughout the world. Thus, Christological salvation is the guarantee of the ultimate earthly liberation from suffering and inequality. Boff, according to this model, in expounding a liberation model, is not altering the traditional understanding of salvation to one of an earthly experience by itself, but is presenting the ethical character of the final Kingdom of God

achieved through the pre-eschatological salvific work of the suffering Christ.

St. Francis sought to imitate Christ in his poverty. In this there was, I believe, a confluence of two non-identical but possibly compatible values. Francis' basic motivation was the spiritual relationship with God. However, because this form of religious motivation was expressed in radical poverty, he was able to express compassion for the poor. Any social change is traditionally understood to have been secondary. Boff, on the other hand, seeks to bring about a social transformation, not primarily by imitating Christ in his poverty but by deriving a liberation model from Christ. It may seem, then, that the differences between the two are those of focus. While Boff employs religious terms, his goal, nevertheless, is primarily an earthly one. It is not at all clear that Boff's motivations are the imitation of Christ except in the sense that Boff identifies Christ, to a great degree, with the community of faith and perhaps, also to a great extent, sees this community as being made up predominantly by the poor. In this sense, then, Boff may see himself as identifying with Christ as St. Francis did. Indeed, while Francis viewed the following of the path of Christ as involving impoverishment, Boff appears to believe, at least where it regards the "laity," that impoverishment is a curse from which one should be liberated. In fact, though Boff teaches that one should identify with the poor, this is done, as much for the sake of the poor, as it is to imitate Christ in order to become more spiritually attuned to the nature of God.

Boff asserts that there should be a commitment "to fight against poverty" and sees this as an aspect of the liberation of the whole person. For Boff, then, liberation is an integrated result involving what is traditionally called body, soul and spirit and not simply limited to the spirit as Francis could be so interpreted. Boff, thus, sees this struggle to liberate as a lived experience in which one "does liberation" and claims; "Theology is always a second step; the first is the faith that makes its power felt through love" (Boff. 1987, p. 23). In this Boff is deeply Franciscan in spirit. It was Francis' life and behaviour that attracted people to him and his orders, and thus, if practice is divorced from Franciscan life and thought, I

would claim, one may well not have a unity of thought and praxis that is genuinely Franciscan.

“The more we know ourselves the more we can know Jesus” (Boff, 1972, p. 39).

Boff believes that Jesus is known through the study of the gospels but also through the community of faith. That this implies an earthly centred ‘knowledge’ is reinforced by his belief that our knowledge of Christ is limited by the historical situation in which we exist. For Francis, Jesus was a spiritual being with whom one had real, explicit and almost palpable communion and who was the source of the transformation which Francis sought to achieve in his own heart. For Francis, Jesus was a-historical and Francis’ statements were decidedly mystical. Boff’s, on the other hand, are decidedly earthly. Both thinkers represent a focussing on the two poles of Franciscan theory, compassion and the imitation of Christ. However, while compassion and imitation of Christ form an integrated unity in Francis, in Boff there is an emphasis predominantly on compassion, and compassion is not a uniquely Franciscan idea.

CONCLUSION

When one begins an examination of the ideas and values of St. Francis of Assisi, one is immediately struck by the fact that Francis' life and values find a resonance with certain values and behaviours that are highly regarded in our present society. Yet one is also confronted by their strangeness, by an 'otherness.' Francis' submissive approach to the religious and political structures of his day does not seem appropriate to the needs of today or, indeed, to its more liberal possibilities. Human and religious freedoms were dramatically restricted in Francis' day and one could not confront the political and religious forces of his time head on. Indeed, it would probably be easier for the oppressed church in a Communist country to understand Francis' approach to societal and religious change than it would be for those who live in the relatively free 'air' of a Western democracy. Francis' approach to change had to be indirect and, as a result, many in the contemporary West might be tempted to criticize him for his apparently all too willing submission to those whose behaviour was actually antithetical to the behavioural changes he desired.

Yet despite Francis' indirectness, his life and the values of human equality and anti-materialism that he sought to instill in his followers are radical in the extreme, not only for his own day, but also for the present. That he was successful, to the degree that he was, seems due, nevertheless, to his complete willingness to submit to the church and to a non-condemnatory love, evident even to those in the church hierarchy whose lives contradicted much of what his life of poverty stood for.

David Flood in *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries* states that:

In practical life, Francis and his brothers were never poor ... (1) they pursued a meaningful life ... whereas the poor suffered society's relegation to meaninglessness. (2) They had work in the fields and workshops and (3) they had the assurance of life's basic goods through the brotherhood and mendicancy. (Ibid., p. 63)

Whether Flood is completely justified in these remarks or not, the question implied in the statements is valid. In what sense is the poverty of those who have chosen to be poor similar to those for whom poverty is an imposed and probably inescapable experience? The brothers in Francis' day were, in fact, often employed in activities which, if they had wished, would have resulted in some kind of remuneration. To what extent then was it genuinely possible for the early Franciscans to claim to be one with the poor? Indeed, it could be claimed that to choose an experience which one could, if one chose, freely abandon, is not to experience truly that experience. Yet, in that they did experience the ridicule and rejection of society as long as they followed Francis' original radical poverty, and in that they did undergo extreme hunger and lack of material comfort, it surely cannot be said, as Flood asserts, that they were not poor. It could also be claimed that there is not one common experience among the poor and, in fact, that there are levels of poverty even among these poor. Whose experience, then, is Flood referring to in comparison with the Franciscans experience of deprivation? I would claim that Francis' experience of poverty was a genuine living of poverty. Further, even from the standpoint of faith, in which Flood, as a Franciscan also locates himself, it would seem that if this were not so, then it must also be true that the self chosen poverty of Christ which Francis sought to emulate, is likewise not a genuine poverty.

Francis was an individual in whom political astuteness, inner understanding, knowledge of the nature of humanity and religious passion came together in a creative fusion that had the potential to undermine the society in which he lived. While highly active in the affairs of people, he began an organization that was essentially a rejection of the political

and religious structures that controlled the rest of society. The church correctly understood the radicality of his vision and the danger this presented to their continued control. The church saw that if it were not to fall to the kenotic thrust of this vision it had to restrain the anti-material and radically democratic nature of Francis' views. This it effectively did in the imposition of the last and currently obeyed Rule, drafted by Francis, later edited by Hugolin and finally approved by Pope Honorius in 1223 (Engelbert, pp. 185-187).

Nevertheless, the contemporary Franciscan order has never been able to lose sight of Francis' austere vision and Cajetan Esser's interpretation of Francis is both traditional and innovative in its attempt to rediscover the spiritual force that St. Francis embodied. However, the question of the validity of the experience of the involuntarily poor, given the Franciscan obligation to choose poverty, is one which confronts anyone who would seek a solution to poverty. If one chooses the path of poverty voluntarily how can that individual simultaneously work to liberate the poor from their poverty? Esser, in stressing the inner nature of poverty seems to inadvertently provide a partial solution to this question. If it is valid to interpret Esser as suggesting that external poverty is of less importance than inner spiritual poverty, and perhaps, theoretically not even absolutely necessary, then Franciscan external poverty may not be an immutable experience. Further, if this is so, then poverty does not have intrinsic value but rather has value only in terms of an identification by the church with the weak and powerless. The implication of this line of reasoning may then be that poverty is a reality that can and should be eradicated. This does not imply a rejection of the anti-materialist orientation of Franciscan theology. Furthermore, it keeps intact Esser's positive exposition of Franciscan spirituality. What it also does is to provide a theoretical justification for the teaching and practice of Leonardo Boff, whose Franciscanism involves, not so much an experience of poverty as it does the eradication of poverty with its accompanying social stigmatization.

Boff, a Franciscan from the Third World, incorporates his Franciscan values in an ecumenically oriented liberation theology that originated in South America. This theology is essentially anti-capitalist and whether Boff is justified in this rejection of capitalism is perhaps a moot point. The socio-political situation St. Francis found himself in was, to a great degree, an unambiguous one. Political and religious power was concentrated and the religious world view was relatively homogeneous. The contemporary situation is far from unambiguous. The liberalization of the religious and political world has led to a multiplicity of possible actions. Indeed there is no certain predictability as to how the power structures will respond to external challenges. In such an environment it is far from clear which socio-religious strategy is appropriate or more likely to succeed. It is also unclear what religious interpretation of the current pluralistic socio-politico-religious situation should be attempted. It also seems true that in every social system there are aspects that are positive and some that are negative. Communism is almost certainly not all evil, just as capitalism is certainly not totally good. In fact, one can only be sympathetic to a system, such as Marxism, that attempts to remove poverty and social inequality. Capitalism does not seem to have been of great benefit to the majority of the population in South America and, indeed, the numbers of the desperately poor are great. For these reasons, Boff is justified in his rejection of a system that has not met the needs of his people.

However, while Boff is clear in his rejection of capitalism, he is not as clear in his delineation of the kind of system of production that should replace it. As long as human nature does not universally express either the nature of God or the kingdom of God that he attempts to describe, how will it be possible to create the kind of society which reflects this divine nature? Francis sought to institute "islands" of Christian equality and love. One wonders if he ever imagined that he was capable of instituting the kingdom of God. One

suspects not. Boff's lack of precision as to the process of change and the form the structures of production and consumption would take, may be taken to indicate that he does not expect the steps he and other liberation theologians have taken towards a humanization of society will be successful on the macro level of society. Indeed, if this is a correct understanding and Boff does not foresee that his theology will be completely successful, it seems required of him that he describe the logical and realistic limits of the reformation he is seeking to achieve.

Indeed, though there do exist in the South American church situation grass roots organizations which attempt to restore dignity to the poor and improve their standard of living, a detailed agenda for changing the society seems to be somewhat lacking. It is suggested by Boff that organizations be founded that will, with the support of the church, put pressure on the various power structures. This, though, is not the blueprint for a vast societal change of the economic paradigm but rather the expression of a reformist program.

In addition, the nature of the pressure to be put on these power structures is not adequately spelled out. Gandhi spoke of a *satyagraha*, a war by truth against the forces of oppression. He described this war as a war of total non-violence, *ahimsa*, that would eventually convince the opposition of the error of their actions. The non-violent nature of this opposition was clear. Boff rarely refers to the nature of the opposition he encourages, though it must be stated that he does describe it in non-violent terms. The problem is that it is rarely mentioned, whereas, in practical terms, if any kind of opposition is to occur, the nature of the response by the poor must be completely clear. This is a significant area of concern. Sontag, in *The Politics of Latin American Theology* notes that "Jesus did not hate his enemies, a tendency we see ... in some liberation theologies" (ibid., p. 109). He goes on to state:

Listening to the rhetoric of recent liberation theologians one detects ... a tendency to pit one group against another [and] insofar as Latin American liberation theology incites hate against North American economic oppressors ... it draws strength from the stormy emotions of hate and retaliation. (Ibid., p. 112)

It is clear then that the issue of violence to achieve a liberation of the poor is far from being a theoretical discussion for the proponents of liberation theology such as Leonardo Boff. The problem is not that there is a contradiction between Boff's need for a mass solidarity of action, a force that can achieve a societal change, and his Franciscan values of compassion, non-violence and forgiveness. The problem is also not that some kind of force is unnecessary. The question to be answered is, "What is the nature of this force?" and how adequately does Boff describe it?

Poverty for Francis was never an end in itself. From the beginning, poverty was encapsulated within compassion. This compassion was directed towards both the impoverished Christ and the impoverished of this world. Compassion was, in fact, the axis around which other aspects of Franciscan thought and practice moved, and, though, with Francis, Esser, and Boff, compassion would be evidenced in different ways, it, nevertheless, is the point at which Franciscanism finds its strength and attractiveness.

If it can be accepted that 'compassion' is the answer to the question, "How can the problem of suffering be resolved?" then it seems reasonable to claim that interpretations of compassion can be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they truly solve that problem. This position sounds clear and logical; however, it is far too facile. In the real world a solution to the problem of poverty will almost certainly be beyond our reach. Solutions to poverty, as with most things of a universal nature, will be matters of faith, subjective evaluations of degrees of probability.

For Francis, Esser and Boff, Franciscan values provide a resolution to the problem of poverty. Their solutions are not, of course, identical. Yet, in their respective interpretations of compassion, each is suggesting a way of behaving that removes the dehumanizing impact of poverty on the individual. This ethic, held by all three writers, and upon which the resolution of poverty is based, assumes a solidarity with all humanity in a quasi-familial relationship. That is, the model of the family as a caring and supporting unit is taken as the model for a compassionate humanity. This implies that humanity is indeed a unity and one

that exists simultaneously with the family. Such a stance, of course is unprovable, but surely it is the basis of the felt sense of obligation to others that Boff, and indeed all the Franciscan writers examined, seem to support.

One may take this macro-unity as a simple given, or one may conceive of it ethically, as Emmanuel Levinas does, when he speaks of obligation in the face of the other. However, the truth, for Francis, Esser, and certainly for Boff is that the human family is a unity because it is the creation of God and as a result of the salvific death of Christ.

The question to be resolved must surely be whether the Franciscan tradition of the imitation of Christ in the giving away of one's possessions to the poor is an internally consistent or inconsistent one. Is one able to seek the liberation of the poor while simultaneously promoting the necessity of a vow of poverty? This question is particularly relevant to the liberation theology of Leonardo Boff. Is there, in fact, a Franciscan ethic which justifies the attempt to eradicate the poverty of the poor, or is the behaviour of its founder, St. Francis, the expression of a system in which ethical behaviour toward others should be seen only as an example of how one's impoverishment allows one to imitate Christ? Francis' compassion for the poor and, indeed, for all living creatures, nevertheless seems to fly in the face of such an easy interpretation. It also puts into question Boff's interpretation of St. Francis which sees the behaviour of the Saint in terms of societal transformation. If we read one of the texts that motivated St. Francis we become aware that the poverty of Christ which Francis sought to emulate was in fact a temporary state undergone in order to raise humanity to a state of spiritual wealth. This text states that "our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor that you through his poverty might become rich" (II Corinthians 8:9). It is doubtful that a valid exegesis of this verse would reveal the desire on the part of Christ to make people monetarily wealthy. Nevertheless, in that Christ's poverty was seen as temporary, poverty is not thereby seen, in this context, as a valuable experience in itself, as exemplifying normative behaviour. That is, one could become poor for a time so

that other poor could be liberated from their poverty. Given Francis' attitude to possessions and poverty, however, it can not be simply taken for granted that his compassion necessarily implied a desire to liberate the poor from their poverty.

If it can be shown, nevertheless, that Francis did have an ethic of compassion that involves an interaction with the poor for their economic good, the implications of this ethic would still make the possession of wealth, whatever that level of possession, unacceptable as long as there were those who suffered from a lack of necessary material support. Francis felt that all labor was undergone, not solely for one's own benefit, but also for the benefit of one's neighbour. This being the case, to retain more than one needed would be to keep back that which was ultimately intended for another. This is not an unproblematic position, however, for it seems to imply that not only the possession of 'wealth' is anathema to Francis, but also the retaining of anything above that which one's neighbour possesses is unacceptable. If Francis did indeed have an ethic as regards the sharing of wealth, whether this ethic was consistent with or internally contradictory to the rest of his beliefs, then Boff would appear to be justified in his attempt to free the poor from their suffering.

My personal position is, however, that compassion and imitation of Christ, as Francis saw them, are internally inconsistent but that in interpreting the imitation of Christ in terms of identification with the poor and in terms of a "Kingdom" ethic that demands the personal liberation of the poor, Boff is, at least on the point of consistency, not guilty of this contradiction. This, however, may have been achieved at the expense of the spiritual dimension that Francis sought to attain, or even at the cost of consistency with Francis' own thought, however ambiguous.

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