

THE EARLY CAPUCHINS

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Introduction

The booklet presupposes that the reader is already familiar with the origins of the Franciscan Order. It does not attempt to cover ground already provided with an abundant literature. A very brief sketch of these origins is made in Part I so as to provide a setting for what follows. The period covered by the booklet is roughly the 125 years from 1525 to 1650 - hence the title.

Part 1: Background to the Capuchin renewal

At the time of his death in 1226 Saint Francis was the inspirer and leader of a movement of religious renewal that had caught the imagination of his contemporaries. What had begun as a personal search for the way to follow Christ had grown into an Order that numbered its members in tens of thousands. Saint Francis had struck the right note for the people of his time and they had responded on an unexpectedly large scale.

Even within the saint's lifetime, but still more later on, popularity had become a problem. It became the accepted thing to become a Franciscan friar. There must have been few young men in the Christian world in the centuries following Francis' death who had not at least considered it. Inevitably many joined the Order who had not clearly examined their motives. They were not too clear as to what they were doing or why. The Order, itself caught up with the enthusiasm of success, sometimes did not examine them too closely. Some came who had no vocation, and some of them stayed to become a source of trouble and division. The temptation to compromise, to water down a high ideal, was too strong for those whose motivation was not deep.

Other problems came with success. There were so many friars that large houses had to be built for them. With these houses came questions of ownership, legal disputes and the heavy financial burden of maintenance. Money had to be found to pay bills. In addition, the

Church was anxious to reform itself and it looked to the friars to be preachers, bishops and cardinals. But how could they preach without training, and how could they train without houses of study, books, lectureships and still more money? How could they be bishops and cardinals, necessarily involved in the affairs of a dynamic and rapidly changing society, without succumbing to the temptation of money and status and the subtle seduction of power? Many friars, perhaps the majority, did successfully live close to the original Franciscan ideal. Some did not. For all, it was a struggle that never ended.

Such, in brief, were some of the problems that form the background to our story.

Part 2: The first Capuchins

Matteo of Bascio

Early in the year 1525 a group of Franciscan friars was hurrying home to their friary, having attended a funeral in the nearby parish church. It was winter, and bitterly cold, as snow had fallen the previous night. The last among the group was a friar called Matteo, born in the town of Bascio, a priest of about thirty years of age. As the friars hurried home to a meal they passed by a beggar, half-naked and almost dead from the cold. They hurried past but Matteo, acting on impulse, took off some of his clothes and gave them to the poor man. He then went ahead quickly and rejoined his companions.

The incident remained in Matteo's mind to disturb him. He asked himself whether he was being true to his vocation. He was a follower of Saint Francis, the poor man of Assisi, who freely chose to be poor in order to be free to serve all people. He had bound himself by a vow of poverty, yet he was returning to a good house, where later a meal would be provided for him. The beggar, who had no vow of poverty, might by now be dead of cold and hunger. Which of them was the closer follower of Christ?

These thoughts were by no means new to Matteo. He had felt for a number of years that the Order had drifted away from its original ideals. Most of all he felt uneasy about himself. How could he be true to his vocation? How could he love like Saint Francis as he had solemnly

promised? He prayed about it a great deal, until at last it seemed to him that God was saying to him, 'Observe the Rule to the letter, to the letter, to the letter.' Here at last was the answer he had been waiting for. He was to follow the Rule of Saint Francis without compromise, relaxation or concession. As a sign of his new-found conviction he reshaped the hood of his habit so as to make it like that of Saint Francis. This was to be the outward sign of his inner attitude. (1)

Matteo was wise enough not to undertake this new venture without the sanction of the Church, so, like Francis before him, he set out for Rome, there to ask Pope Clement VII for approval of what he was about to do. He was fortunate in that he met the pope without too much difficulty. The pope proved to be clement in nature as well as in name and gave Matteo his approval and blessing. Encouraged by this, Matteo set out for home. (2)

However, if he expected everything to go smoothly on his return, he was disappointed. The other friars resented what they felt was his implied criticism of their way of life. The guardian of the friary reminded him that he should first have asked permission for his journey to Rome. In addition, how could he live a different way of life in the same community as others who were not committed to it? When Matteo had set out for Rome he had had no intention of changing the character of the Order; he had not seen himself as a reformer of others. Indeed, if asked, he would probably have replied that he had a full-time job trying to reform himself, let alone

others. It probably never entered his head that what he was doing was to lead to the formation of a new branch of the Franciscan family. (3)

Matteo was not alone. There were others who felt as he did. The town of Montefalcone, where his friary was situated, was in the Marches of Ancona, a part of Italy which had always been a stronghold of those Franciscans who wished to follow Francis simply and directly. The Marches of Ancona were the homeland of those friars earlier called the “Spirituals”. It was their tradition that Matteo was following. (4)

What Matteo objected to was what he saw as a compromise of the original Franciscan ideal. He saw an element of worldliness, a too comfortable association with the surrounding world with its not too Christian practice. He felt that prayer did not have the priority, which it should have in the community. Likewise, since most friaries were built in towns, he felt that there was not a sufficient withdrawal from society to create that different environment which was necessary for the friars to challenge the world rather than conform to it. This uneasiness with the state of things focussed on the question of poverty. For Matteo, and for those who felt like him, the friars had become too comfortable and too distant from the poor. In their houses, clothing and food they were better off than the poor such as the beggar that Matteo had met on his return from the funeral. Even the religious habit itself had changed and was no longer what Saint Francis had worn. Blaise Pascal wrote that, ‘An inch or two of cowl can put 25,000 monks up in

arms.’ (The *Pensées*, cited by Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées Edited, Outlined and Explained*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1993, p.18) Maybe he had the friars in mind!

The question quickly became a matter of controversy among the friars. Nearly all agreed that the Order did need reform, and indeed many attempts at reform had already been made by men such as Saint Bernardine of Siena. For example, in some provinces of the Order, special houses had been set up where the Rule was lived with particular strictness.

But many regarded the ideas of Matteo and his associates as a kind of pharisaism, a preoccupation with external observances. Was it important, they said, that all should wear the same kind of habit as Saint Francis? Would a change in the shape of the hood make a man a better friar? Was this preoccupation with the external aspect of poverty not becoming a cult of destitution, a desire for deprivation for its own sake, and was this not simple an inverted materialism? When some of Matteo's followers began to sew pieces of sacking onto the outside of their habits to make them look poor, it did indeed begin to look as if their critics had a point. Again, these innovators could be challenged that if they wanted a stricter way of life, why could they not go to the houses set up for that purpose? Was the unity of the Order not more important than the design of the habit? Was this new development not becoming simply a self-opinionated and loveless fanaticism?’

To these challenges Matteo could make no reply except that this was what God had told him to do and what the pope had approved of. Nobody could deprive him of that in the name of the Gospel. But if Matteo lacked the ability of a leader there was another who felt as he did and had that quality, namely, Lodovico of Fossombrone. (5) He was able to articulate what Matteo felt merely as an intuition. He could point to the fact that even the special houses of prayer and contemplation had lost their idealism, so that there was now a need, widely recognized, to reform them also. (6) He could also show that several general chapters of the Order had shown themselves ineffective in making a return to the ideals of Saint Francis a reality. He challenged the critics by saying they had subordinated the Rule to the Order, when it was the Order that should serve the Rule. (7) He reminded them of the many concessions, all obtained through canonical channels, which had gradually led the friars to be a comfortable, semi-monastic establishment. Nobody could claim that that was what Saint Francis had begun.

It was a conflict between the spirit in pursuit of an ideal and the claim of a system to be the legal protector of that ideal. That conflict could be resolved only when the system lived up to its functions as the promoter of an ideal and resisted the temptation to take it over in the name of law. (8)

Lodovico of Fossombrone

Matteo was a good man but he was not a leader of men. Leadership among the first friars came from Lodovico. (9) And leadership was badly needed because problems abounded. There was deep resentment among many of the friars about this new development. In some friaries, individuals had left to join Matteo in his life as a wandering preacher. In other areas, entire communities had decided to follow this renewed commitment to the primitive simplicity of the Franciscan ideal. All of this created tension which, in some instances, even burst into violence.

One small group of friars, eager to return to the early ideals, went to a small house in a forest in the hills. Soon they heard that the provincial minister had despatched a group of strong young friars, armed with heavy sticks, to force them to return. The small group scattered among the trees but left behind them some bread and grapes for their pursuers who would surely be tired after a long, hard chase! (10) On another occasion a messenger came to tell the friars to leave the house immediately or they would be punished. To lend force to his order he placed a lighted candle on the table and told them that anyone still in the house when it had burned out would be excommunicated. The friars rose from the table where they had been eating, took their breviaries, and left. (11) No one, it seems, thought of blowing out the candle!

Into this confused and troubling situation Lodovico entered. He went to Rome supported by letters from

various leaders who had been impressed by this new and strict way of life. On 3 July 1528, Pope Clement VII in the bull 'Religionis Zelus' gave his sanction to the new development that had taken place. This document was the first official recognition of the friars. (12)

Lodovico set about building on this foundation. He called a chapter of the friars that met at Albacina in 1529. This achieved two important tasks. Firstly, it elected Matteo as Vicar general with Lodovico as his first defnitor. This was an accurate reflection of the feeling of the friars, all of whom, including Lodovico, held Matteo in high esteem. They recognized the need for a firm hand at the top by their choice of Lodovico as his first assistant. The second achievement of this chapter was to draw up Constitutions for the guidance of the friars in living the Rule of Saint Francis. These were written not in Latin but in Italian, a symbol of the simplicity of the friars.

The Constitutions of Albacina

According to the Constitutions, the friars were to rise at midnight to recite Matins. They were to say no other office so as to have more time for mental prayer. Normally only one Mass was celebrated and all priests attended it. The friars were not to receive stipends for Masses, nor were they to sing High Masses, conduct funerals or take part in processions. Those rules were intended to avoid the financial involvement with which these had become associated. They were to observe a strict silence. Only one dish was to be served at each

meal. They were not to store more food than was necessary for a week. Those who were unable to go barefoot were allowed to wear sandals. They were to beg their food from day to day. Preachers were to be sent out often but they were not to receive payment for their work. Friars were not to undertake the spiritual care of the convents of religious women. Houses were to be some distance from towns and were not to belong to the friars but to the municipality, which could turn them out at will. The churches were to be small and poor, but decent and clean. Friars were not to hear confessions of laypeople except in cases of necessity. (14)

Nearly every clause was directed at an existing abuse. In this there was a clear danger of being merely reactionary. Perhaps, in their strictness, the friars were guarding themselves against the accusation that all they were doing was providing an opening for discontented men who, unwilling or unable to accept the constraints of obedience or of community, merely wanted to be sanctioned in doing as they wished. Clearly, anyone who came to the new friars expecting to find an escape from obedience would be disappointed.

The new movement now had papal approval in writing, elected leaders and written Constitutions, but it still did not have a name. The bull *Religionis Zelus* had described the friars as living an eremitical life. (15) The people, also regarding them, though not quite correctly, as hermits called them “Scappuccini”, or hermits. (16) In time the 'S' came to be dropped so that the name developed into the present form of 'Capuchin.'

New strength followed by new problems

If the Capuchins felt in any way elated by the way their life was developing they did not remain so for long.

The Observant friars, as the other Franciscans were called, were not at all reconciled to the new movement. In particular, they wished to prevent the Capuchins from receiving Observants into their ranks. The story of developments in the succeeding years is complex and not very edifying. It is a story of canonical wrangles, intrigues at the papal court, the involvement of secular princes and some straightforward power seeking. One gets the impression that had there been greater tact and flexibility on all sides the matter could probably have been resolved within the framework of one Franciscan Order. The outcome of these quarrels was the bull *Exponi Vobis* of Pope Paul III on 25 August 1536. (17) In this document he confirmed the earlier bull *Religionis Zelus*, but forbade the Capuchins to receive any more Observant friars or to move north of the Alps, that is, outside of Italy.

A major problem of the first Capuchins was in regard to the leaders of the Order. Matteo, realizing his lack of leadership ability, resigned as Vicar general after about only ten days in office. He was succeeded by Lodovico (18), resumed his life as a wandering preacher and went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Shortly after his return from there in 1537 he was told that he was obliged under the terms of *Exponi Vobis* to settle in the ordinary life of a friary if he wished to remain a Capuchin. With great regret he left the Capuchins and returned to the

Observants from whom he had come. He continued the former pattern of his life until his death in Venice in 1552. His body is buried in the Franciscan church there. (19)

Meanwhile all was not well with Lodovico. He was autocratic in his rule, having no definitors and refusing to call a chapter. The Order, he said, owed its existence to him and he was its general minister for life. In order to build up numbers he admitted postulants who were unsuitable. It was only on the direct order of the pope that he convoked a chapter at Saint Euphemia in Rome at Pentecost 1536. To his dismay he was not re-elected general, Bernardino d'Asti being chosen in his place. He stormed out of the chapter in a rage, shouting, 'I am Lodovico from Fossombrone. I am a Tenaglia. I have made a stir and I know how to make a greater one.' He kept his promise. (20)

The Constitutions of 1536

Under the leadership of Bernardino d'Asti the chapter set about the task of revising the Constitutions of Albacina. These needed revision because they over-emphasized the eremitical character of the life of the friars. Indeed, their title had been *Constitutions of the Friars Minor called Friars of the Eremitical Life*. (21) This was principally due to the influence of Lodovico since that was his personal preference. Another factor which led to this emphasis was that the first Capuchins had sought refuge with the Camaldolese monks and had been influenced by their life. In addition, it must be admitted that the Constitutions of Albacina had been

clearer about what they were against than what they were for.

The new Constitutions were mainly the work of Bernardino d'Asti and remained substantially unchanged until the large-scale revision of 1968 as a result of the second Vatican Council (1962-65). The first article of the 1536 Constitutions reads, 'The friars should always have before their minds the teaching and life of our Saviour Jesus Christ and should ever keep the Gospel in the centre of their heart.' In number 41, on prayer, we read, 'Holy prayer is the spiritual teacher of the friars. In order that the spirit of devotion may not grow cold in them, but rather that its fire may continue to burn on the altar of their hearts, always blazing more strongly, as our Seraphic Father wished, so that a truly spiritual friar minor will pray always, yet for the less fervent it is prescribed that two special hours be set aside for prayer...' The understanding was that a friar who was truly responsive to the Holy Spirit would pray always, in accordance with the Gospel.

The following exhortation was addressed to the friars engaged in preaching, 'Let them strongly imprint the Blessed Christ on their hearts, and try to give themselves wholly into his peaceful possession, so that it may be He who moves them to speak from an abundance of love, not in words alone but even more in deeds.'

One of the achievements of the Constitutions of 1536 was to restore the balance between prayer and apostolic activity. In the Constitutions of Albacina the aspect of

withdrawal from the world had been overemphasized with a consequent loss to the apostolate.

With these new Constitutions the friars were established on a solid basis. Historians of the Order have been unanimous in regarding them as the founding charter of the fraternity. (22)

More problems of leadership

The Order continued to grow both in numbers and in spirit under the leadership of Bernardino d'Asti, but in the background was the person of Lodovico of Fossombrone. Bernardino pleaded with him to relent but his answer to all such pleas was a torrent of bitterness. He was even quoted as saying to the newly elected Bernardino, 'I tell you that I have come to destroy the reform.' (23) He left the Order and was later excommunicated. The friars continued to pray for him. After sixteen years one of the ministers went to visit him and invite him to return. By then he was a broken man. He replied, 'During all these years I was never asked to return.' Despite this he remained in his hermitage and died outside the Order. (24)

Bernardino d'Asti was a great pillar of strength at all times and was held in the highest regard by the brothers. He convoked a chapter in 1539 at which a successor, Bernardino d'Ochino, was chosen. (25) During his first three years in office he, like the first Bernardino, gave an example of what a friar should be. For this reason the friars at the next chapter in 1641 had no hesitation in re-

electing him to a further term of office. (26) The fact that he had asked not to be re-elected only made him seem better. Nobody could accuse him of clinging to the reins of power.

However, within himself, all was not well with Bernardino d'Ochino. It was the time of the Lutheran schism and Protestant ideas were receiving a wide hearing. Ochino, as he was more often called, was influenced by them. On one occasion he was walking with a friar called Liberio who was saying the rosary. Suddenly Ochino snatched the beads from his hand, saying, 'Shut your pious muttering. You'd be better off reading the letters of Saint Paul!' (27) When Liberio reproved him for his action he tried to pass it off as a joke. But it was not only Liberio who had noticed a change. Ochino, who had been noted for his regular attendance in the church for office and meditation, was now habitually absent. (28) To those who asked him about this he replied that pressure of work prevented him. One of the early chroniclers, Paul of Foligno, recorded a conversation between the two Bernardinos on the subject of prayer. Asti had warned Ochino that his neglect of prayer would lead him into trouble, but Ochino replied, saying, 'Don't you know that those who work well for others pray in doing so?' (29) Another chronicler and spiritual writer, Mattia of Salò, perhaps had Ochino's reply in mind when he wrote, "Although it is true that he ceases not to pray who ceases not to do good, it is equally true that he who ceases to pray ceases to do good. For he who ceases to pray under the pretext of doing good works will in the end cease to do even

these."(30) Ochino, however, asked for and received a dispensation from the recitation of the office. (31)

This episode is reminiscent of the life of Ochino's contemporary, Martin Luther. Luther had written to a friend, 'I could use two secretaries. I do almost nothing during the day but write letters. I am a conventual preacher, reader at meals, parochial preacher, director of studies, overseer of eleven monasteries, superintendent of the fishponds at Litzgau, referee of the squabble at Torgau, lecturer on Paul, collector of material for a commentary on the Psalms and then, as I have said, I am overwhelmed with letters. I rarely have full time for the canonical hours and for saying Mass, not to mention my own temptation with the world, the flesh and the devil. You see how lazy I am.' (32) Eventually Luther simply stopped saying the office altogether.

Questions came to be asked about the doctrines Ochino was preaching. His commentaries on Saint Paul seemed to have a Lutheran ring to them. He was called to Rome to answer questions about his teaching but instead left for Switzerland, there to join the Calvinists in 1542. (33) It is said that, on his death-bed, Ochino said, 'I never wanted to be a Catholic or a Calvinist, just a simple Christian.'

Ochino's apostasy was the most severe blow that had yet struck the Order. He had been held in such high esteem that people had said, 'Happy are the Capuchins to have such a man!' (34) Only the previous year he had been re-elected general of the Order. A storm of abuse

broke about the friars. It was said that they too must be Calvinistic since they had just re-elected Ochino, a Capuchin turned Calvinist, to be their general minister. When the friars appeared on the streets they were jeered and shouted at, being called heretics and hypocrites. Doors were closed against them. Their friends no longer wished to know them for fear that they too should be called heretics. Only with the Camaldolese did they find friendship. (35) The pope ordered them out of Rome and, seeing a Capuchin friary near Spoleto, he said, 'Soon there will be no more Capuchins.' (36) He called a consistory of cardinals to consider the matter. All advised him to suppress the Order, except one, San Severino, who urged that all should not be condemned for the sins of one, but that an enquiry should be made into the lives of the friars. (37)

At this critical point, Bernardino d'Asti resumed the leadership of the Order. However, a discontented friar called Timoteo, who still resented a correction he had received some years previously from Bernardino, managed to obtain an audience with the pope and there accused Bernardino of being a heretic. When challenged he failed to produce either evidence or witnesses and was dismissed. (38) The pope called a meeting of the provincials and criticized them severely. 'You deserve to be wiped from the face of the Church but you have one who pleads for you, Saint Francis.' He dismissed them all from office and ordered them to hold a new chapter. When this was held Francesco from Jesi was elected general. For the moment the friars had a breathing space. But they were forbidden to preach. This may well have

been a blessing in disguise as the obscurity that it gave them allowed the storm to pass. (39)

Part 3: The life of the Friars

It would be a mistake to assume from Part 2 that the life of the friars was one of constant turmoil and strife. Generally speaking, these disturbances left the ordinary friar relatively untouched. It was only something as significant as the apostasy of Ochino which really affected all. For the most part, the ordinary friar was free from the cares that rested on the leadership of the Order and was able to live his life in peace.

What kind of men came to be Capuchins? It was made clear from the beginning that the Capuchin life was only for a minority. 'It was not founded for the many but for the few who wished to keep the Rule as it had been practised in the days of Saint Francis and his companions. Those who prefer a freer life do wrong in entering it, as there are plenty of Orders having a less strict observance which they might choose.' (40) Such was the policy of the early friars. One general laid down that "beardless youths" should not be admitted as they would only require special care and would not be able for the life. The friars came from all ranks of society, although the very first men included a large proportion, nearly half in fact, who came from members of the lesser nobility. (41) However, it was clear that what was required of a friar was a firm commitment to living the Gospel in the tradition of Saint Francis.

The life of prayer

What marked off the Capuchins more than anything else from their Observant brothers was their insistence on the primacy of contemplation in the life of the friars. (42) We have already seen something of this in the Constitutions of Albacina and those of 1536. The Capuchin friar was to be distinguished not by any particular apostolate such as the care of the sick or teaching. The essential thing was being more than doing. The Order was not founded primarily for an external apostolate though of course it engaged in apostolic work. The primary reason for its existence was so that its members should be true followers of the Gospel. (43) From that commitment would flow their apostolic service. The heart of this following of the Gospel was in prayer. This was the spring that kept the stream flowing. This was the source of life and grace for the friars.

In order to facilitate a life of prayer the friars lived in small communities. This was regarded as a basic principle. (44) Their houses were usually built at some little distance from towns. (45) They did not undertake parish work, although one reason for this was to avoid the involvement with money that this inevitably meant. Like Saint Paul they felt they were called to preach more than to baptize. (46) Some wished to go to the extent of living an eremitical life but clearly this was not what Saint Francis had done. (47) We read in the *Fioretti* how God revealed to Saint Clare and Brother Sylvester that Francis should go and preach. They carefully cultivated a spirit of silence so that prayer should not be interrupted by conversation. It was said that their silence was such

that one could have sworn that their houses were empty. (48) For them silence was a necessary condition for prayer.

They met for common prayer at the stated hours of the Divine Office. They then went to work or to study in silence. They slept before the midnight office of Matins. When that was finished they were free to return to bed, but many went back to their rooms or to the adjoining woods to pray. From time to time they would withdraw into a particularly quiet place to be alone with God. (49)

An outstanding leader in the life of prayer was Bernardino d'Asti, who showed the way by word and example. During the whole time that he was general he would never meet the friars in the morning but always prayed for an hour before celebrating Mass. Then, after thanksgiving, he said his office and only then was ready to receive those who had come to see him. He used to say, 'I will never say Mass without praying for an hour either before it or after it. If a man perseveres in prayer, even though he is a real demon of wickedness, he will be converted in the end and restored to the grace of God. On the other hand, if a man neglects prayer, even though he is an angel of God, he will soon become a devil.' (50) He would add that when friars left the Order it was the neglect of prayer that had been their undoing. When asked what it was that constituted perfect observance of the Rule he replied, 'In praying well.' In visiting the friars he would ask them if they prayed, and if one replied 'No' he would say, 'It is only by a miracle that you are still in the Order.' (51)

In 1548, Bernardino wrote a pastoral letter to the friars in the course of which he stated, ‘When you see a Capuchin friar who continually cares for prayer and holy poverty, when you see such a person charitable towards his brothers, then you can believe that in him there is true charity. But if you see one who neglects prayer, and who takes pleasure in a comfortable life and an abundance of sensual comforts and who yet preaches and practises charity, keep away from him and hold him in suspicion. Don't believe that his charity is true charity. More likely it is self-love or a love that is sensual. Charity cannot stay in us without the other virtues, especially and necessarily prayer and poverty.’ (52)

In a similar way, a later general minister, Eusebio of Ancona, used to say, ‘Our Rule is purely spiritual and cannot be kept without the interior spirit, which in its turn cannot live without prayer. A friar who does not pray does no more than wear the habit...’ He added, ‘No one can be a good Capuchin who does not pray’ (53) and also, ‘I would put more trust in a humble friar who said his Pater Noster with devotion and simplicity than in a famous preacher who had fallen into worldly ways.’ (54)

The fraternal life of the brothers

It is recorded that among the early friars whenever brothers came visiting the friars would run out to meet them with a heartfelt joy and for three days they would give themselves entirely to ensuring that the visitors were made welcome in every way possible. They would converse about the things of God, and when the time

came for the visitors to leave, their hosts would escort them some distance along the road. (55)

In the care of the sick they faithfully fulfilled the precept of Saint Francis that whenever any friar falls sick the other brothers should serve him as they would wish to be served themselves. It was the particular task of the guardian to see to their needs through his personal work and the help of others. (56)

They shared all things willingly so that if there were only a little food in the house they would offer it to each other. (57)

It was the same in regard to the affairs of the house. These were discussed in common. Bernardino d'Asti often urged guardians never to undertake anything of importance without having asked advice. He said, 'When I have no one with me to ask for advice, I ask my companion, and no matter how ignorant he might be, I have never been the loser by asking.' He added that ministers who would be guided only by their own views were not worthy of office and ruled like despots. (58)

The friars, whether ordained or not, shared the offices of novice-master, guardian and provincial since it was held that what was necessary for these offices was spiritual wisdom and virtue. (59) They also shared in preaching the word of God, especially by sermons on the Ten Commandments. (60)

In the tradition of Saint Francis poverty had a special place and so also did it with the Capuchins. They agreed that the best observance of poverty lay in living by the work of their hands (61), although they were careful not to make work an end in itself. If what was earned in work was insufficient then they were allowed to beg from door to door.

They had none but the poorest houses made of clay and wattle. Even those they didn't own but simply had permission to use. At a later stage they built simply stone houses. Francesco of Jesi used to say that it was always dangerous to begin building as religious were almost certain to abandon poverty before they were finished. (62) He reminded the friars that they should dress like the poor and be housed like the poor. (63) However, the Capuchin understanding of poverty was not limited to its material aspect, however important that might be. Indeed, they saw clearly that external poverty was its least important aspect (64), that its observance was more a matter of the will than of the use of things. (65) In their own words, 'This is the poverty of our self-will; for the love of God we have stripped ourselves of the power of willing or not willing.' (66) They appreciated the liberty of spirit which comes from true poverty, which frees a person from attachment to things and most of all to oneself. (67) In the words of Francesco of Jesi, 'To desire nothing but Christ and those things which draw us closer to Him, this is true poverty.' (68)

A life of penance

The friars' life was not easy nor did they attempt to make it so. Indeed, when anyone asked to join them he was sent first to work in a hospital, especially in the care of lepers, as a test of the genuineness of his vocation. The friars wanted to exclude those who simply wanted to have an easy and secure life. (69)

All except the sick and elderly slept on bare boards with a piece of wood for a pillow. Only in winter did some use a blanket. (70) They were men who valued time. It was regarded as so precious that no one was allowed to be idle. (71) Many fasted for a large part of the year and they shared their food with the poor.

But their austerity was joyful. There was nothing gloomy about it. On one occasion, two friars were walking along a road when a man, who thought they were thieves, ran after them with a sword in his hand for about five kilometres. Every time he caught up with them he prodded them with the sword and then ran after the other. When the two friars finally reached home they told the story to their confreres and afterwards they often recalled it with great laughter. (72)

They were often misunderstood by people who suspected them of heresy or accused them of causing trouble in the Church. But their patience won in the end for they persevered in their life of penance and poverty. Eventually, their example won people over to them and many were encouraged to embrace a better life. (73)

The apostolate of the brothers

The chief apostolic work of the brothers was to live the Gospel in obedience, without property and in chastity. By doing so they gave the people an example of holiness to stimulate them to be faithful to their own calling.

Their main work outside the friary was preaching. In this they seem to have created something of a revolution. The type of preaching common in their day had wandered far from its proper course. The sermon might be on a point of philosophy or some controversy between the different schools of theology, or perhaps on Aesop's fables. Aristotle and Plutarch were often quoted but not often the Gospels or indeed any part of scripture. Preaching had become mere oratory, designed to impress the hearers with the learning of the preacher. (74)

The friars' method was different. In their preparation they were allowed to use only two books, the Bible and one other. (75) It was not so much in the schools that they learned their message but in the silent hours of prayer and the hard battle with the world, the flesh and the devil that their life involved. (76) They preached with great fervour on the Gospels and the Ten Commandments. People who were longing for something solid and substantial came to them, sometimes as many as fifteen or twenty thousand gathering for special sermons. (77) So powerful was the effect of this new way of preaching that other preachers found that no one came to them and they were forced to change. The non-ordained friars played their part in this and those who begged for food were often spiritual

advisers to many. (78) Such, for example, was Saint Felix of Cantalice. Whenever the friars left the friary they found that people came to them asking them to preach the word of God.

But preaching was not by any means the friars' only external activity. The care of the sick formed a large part of it. (79) In keeping with the tradition of Saint Francis, the care of lepers had a special place. (80) This formed a substantial part of the friars' work from the beginning. However, this particular work was gradually dropped as it was found that its demands took the friars away from prayer to such an extent that 'the spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things ought to be subservient' was suffering. (81)

Other friars responded to the needs that they saw before them. Some, for instance, saw that many of the problems of the Church rose from ignorance, so they set themselves to teach Christian doctrine to groups of people who committed themselves to regular attendance at the lessons and the sacraments. (82) Others worked among prisoners, bringing them both material and spiritual help. (83) The friars in Paris started the city's first fire brigade and ran it for 200 years. (83a) One friar set up what were called "Christ's shops" where food was sold to the poor at a price they could afford (84) but he was careful to heed the warning that the Order was not to become an Order of shopkeepers. (85) Another friar fearlessly denounced the cruel behaviour of soldiers who constantly threatened and beat people. He was put in prison and died there a year later. (86) Yet another friar,

Peter of Montagna, promoted a type of credit union so that the poor could borrow money without interest. (87) Perhaps the most lasting of those works was that of Giuseppe of Ferno who propagated a devotion which became known as the Forty Hours' Devotion. Its purpose was to promote devotion to the Blessed Sacrament by calling the people of an area to a church in groups to pray for a period extending over forty hours. One of its effects was to achieve reconciliation between groups who had previously been quarrelling. (88)

Part 4: The Growth of the Order

The Capuchinesses

A community of sisters living according to the traditions of Saint Francis and Clare decided to adopt the Rule of Saint Clare in a renewed form that was inspired by the Capuchin Constitutions. These sisters, who lived in Naples, were inspired by a Spanish sister, Maria Longa. The new way of life was approved by Pope Paul III on 10 December 1538; he also appointed the Capuchins as their chaplains and directors. (89) Today there are about 4,000 Capuchinesses and their numbers are growing. They are found especially in Spain, Italy, Mexico and Thailand.

The implantation of the Order in various countries

According to the bull *Exponi Vobis* of Pope Paul III, the Capuchins were confined to Italy. Fortunately for the Order, however, that limitation was removed by Pope Gregory XIII in the document *Ex nostri pastoralis officio* of 6 May 1574. It stated that the Capuchins were permitted 'to go forth freely to all parts of the world and there found houses and provinces.' (90)

Within a period of 35 years of the publication of this document a rapid and substantial expansion of the order took place. (91) We can set it out briefly as follows: -

1574: France

1578: Spain

1581: Switzerland

1585: Belgium

1593: Austria and Germany

1608: Ireland, England and Scotland

One particularly important work of the friars in those countries was in countering the effects of the Protestant Reformation that had taken away many people from the Church. The historian Philip Hughes has this to say, 'The Capuchins provided the popes of the next hundred and fifty years with an army of zealous, well-trained, popular preachers who did untold good work among the uneducated masses of Italy, France, and of Germany. Not even the Jesuits has a greater share in the victories of the Counter-Reformation than these new Franciscans.' (92)

The missionary work of the Order

Saint Francis, in his Rule, had devoted a chapter to missionary work, and, from the earliest years of the Order, friars had gone to spread the faith to those who had not yet heard the Gospel message. This tradition was followed by the Capuchins. In the years immediately after the beginning of the Capuchin renewal, individual friars went out on missionary work. It was not until 1587 that the Capuchins officially assumed responsibility as an Order for such work. (93)

The growth of the work may be set out as follows: -

1551: Turkey, Egypt, and Ethiopia

1584: Algeria

1612: Brazil

1620: Congo
1624: Morocco
1626: Lebanon and Syria
1628: Iraq, Iran and Georgia
1632: Canada
1634: Guinea and Benin
1636: Antilles (Caribbean)
1639: India and Tibet
1642: America
1646: Angola and Nigeria
1648: Panama
1650: Venezuela, Colombia, Tunisia, Central
Africa and the Caucasus.

The difficulties involved in this work were enormous. One example from another source may serve as an illustration. The Society of Jesus, which kept accurate records of its work, sent 376 missionaries to China between 1581 and 1712. Of those, 127 men, that is, a little more than one third were lost on the way through shipwreck, disease or piracy. (95) It is probable that a fairly similar proportion of friars suffered in the same way.

Some of the brothers made outstanding contributions such as the translation of the Bible into Arabic and Farsi (Persian). (96)

The greatest number of friars in the Order was in 1761 when there were 34,039 men in 1730 houses. (97) In 1982, there were some 11,000 friars, including 400

novices, in 27 countries of Europe, 26 in Africa, and 20 in Asia and Oceania and 20 also in America. (98)

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