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## *Editorial*

### AREAS OF GROWTH

We often think of growth as a notion concerning numbers. Numerical growth is the most obvious sign of the development of an institution. In our long history as a religious family we Franciscans have seen extraordinary moments of growth. However, we often witnessed a decrease in numbers, and at this stage of history this is very evident.

But if, with growth, we understand the opportunity to rethink one's mission and presence and the quality of one's life, then growth is always possible. In our Franciscan family we badly need to bring about a growth of this calibre, namely a growth that does not stop at numbers but at quality of life.

There are many areas of growth we can develop. These include our commitment to a sustainable way of respect for creation against greed and overdevelopment of the earth's resources. It also calls for a renewed approach to dialogue with our contemporary culture. This necessitates a thorough knowledge of our roots and traditions that can be reworked to suit the kind of message our world needs to hear today.

The growth in our faithfulness to our identity, both spiritual and human, is an asset that knows no boundaries of numbers or age. We are all called to wake up to this new calling and stop moaning about our dwindling numbers and the lack of hope and trust in the future.

It is only by being pro-active that we can improve our quality of life and grow in the genuine sense of the term, proposing hope and growth in others and making the Franciscan way of life still relevant to our world today.

# FRANCISCAN ECONOMY AND THE FRATERNITY

Noel Muscat OFM

## Introduction

It must seem rather strange to speak about “Franciscan economy” in our contemporary culture, which sees economy as a lucrative activity managed in a professional way so as to generate profit at all levels, personal, familiar, social, technological, commercial, political. Given that Francis of Assisi envisaged a way of life for himself and his brothers built upon *sine proprio*, namely, upon lack of possessions, it follows that the contemporary meaning of the term “economy” is alien to the Franciscan ideal. At the same time, however, we know that Francis was not a stranger to a philosophy of economic management. While still a young man he was involved in the lucrative business enterprise of his father, Pietro di Bernardone, who by trade was a cloth merchant who often travelled along the Via Francigena, across the Alps, to trade precious bales of textiles in the fairs of Champagne. Francis might have accompanied his father on some of these journeys, and became familiar with the *lex mercatoria*, or the rules of the market, which were shaping a new kind of unified economy between cities in Europe, and prompting the emergence of a new social middle class consisting of merchants and tradesmen, who were also striving for a more democratic and representative system of government in the local communes of the towns, as opposed to the archaic feudal totalitarian system of the nobles and monks that had characterised European economy ever since the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Francis would eventually make the radical choice of creating a new religious family which was distinct from the feudal monks, nobles and clerics, the *maiores*. At the same time, although belonging to the middle class of traders and merchants, the *minores*, Francis also severed his family ties with this emerging social class, and created a new kind of *minores*, where the members were not consuls and mayors of the Italian communes, but a batch of *fratres*, brothers, coming from all kinds of social classes, who would make the radical choice of *sine proprio* and propose a way of life which even the institutional Church found difficult to comprehend.

There was nothing political about Francis and his Order of friars Minor, and yet these brothers were destined to shape politics and economy for many decades, if not centuries. The friars Minor were to become an institution which would propose an economy based upon equality and fair sharing, and that would privilege the have-nots of society without ever having been a reactionary movement of proletariat ideals such as would happen in the Marxist philosophy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In order to comprehend the true significance of what we are calling “Franciscan economy” we need to examine the Greek notion of *oikonomía* (οικονομία) in its original significance and how it was applied in Christian cultural tradition. At the same time, we would realise that this understanding of economy is very different from our contemporary usage of the term. Given that the notion is very much part and parcel of the Christian message in the dynamics of community and fraternity, we

will apply it to Francis and his brothers. Finally, we should draw our conclusions as to how we, as Franciscans, are to live this important aspect of our lives, particularly in our practice of “house management” as a fraternity and as stewards of the gifts of providence which we make an *usus pauper*, a poor use of, in our everyday lives.

### **The term *oikonomía***

The Greek term *oikonomía* (οικονομία) derives from two words, namely *oikos*, which is usually translated as “household”, and *nemein*, which is best translated as “management and dispensation.”<sup>1</sup> It referred to the management of a household, most often of an estate, and thus was not just concerned with making profit, but with an intelligent use of means and resources. Indeed, in Greek the noun *oikonomos* is normally linked to the image of the steward who administers goods that are not necessarily his in a way that is both just and correct. The term *oikonomia* soon became used in the *polis*, and therefore became an aspect of good government in the Greek classical age, particularly in the Athenian democracy and in the philosophy of Socrates.

This does not mean that the classical world had a concept of economic management based upon the notion of equal opportunities and rights. The *oikonomos* was the manager who saw to it that the lower castes, like slaves, women and children, would keep their proper place in the economic framework of the household. Political activity was not conceived as distinct from economic activity, and it was normal that no great radical changes in

economic activity would be evident. In other words, we cannot in any way compare the classical notion of *oikonomia* with our contemporary systems of a market-based economy. On this aspect, however, it is not easy to understand how our contemporary notion of economy is radically different from that of classical times, since it is also based upon the notion of competition and difference between haves and have-nots. It is in this sense that we can talk about what Franciscan economy entails in the ideals it proposes.

The classical view of the world resources was very different from ours. The world was seen as rich in resources that were placed at the service of mankind in order to provide for its livelihood in such a way that this abundance of resources would not lack, and this was possible only through good management of resources and avoidance of waste. This is another aspect of *oikonomia* which seems so far from our contemporary idea of how an economy should work. The culture of profit at all costs brings mankind to consider the earth’s resources as fully accessible for exploitation and gain, since good management is no longer linked with a kind of stewardship of creation and its gifts, but rather with domination and self-sufficiency that admits the possibility of waste and lack of respect for the sense of justice in the sharing of resources.

This cursory and incomplete presentation of *oikonomia* in classical times is important in order to see how it was understood in the Christian tradition. The cultural milieu in which Christianity developed during the first centuries was seeped in the classical notions and styles of government and management, besides being heir to the Jewish Biblical tradition. A look at these

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<sup>1</sup> D. LESHEM, *What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by Oikonomia?*, in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Volume 30, Number 1 – Winter 2016, 225-231: Nearly every economist has at some point in the standard coursework been exposed to a brief explanation that the origin of the word “economy” can be traced back to the Greek word *oikonomia* (οικονομία), which in turn is composed of two

words: *oikos*, which is usually translated as “household”; and *nemein*, which is best translated as “management and dispensation.” Thus, the cursory story usually goes, the term *oikonomia* referred to “household management” and while this was in some loose way linked to the idea of budgeting, it has little or no relevance to contemporary economics.

aspects of economic management in the early Christian tradition is our stepping stone in order to arrive at how Francis of Assisi found a new way of reconciling good management with social justice in a kind of new world order not based upon domination and gain, but upon fraternal sharing of resources and gifts, which were the personal property of no one except God.

### ***Oikonomía* in Jewish and Christian tradition**

The Old Testament often speaks about the gift of the land of the promise that God offers to His people Israel. The entire Pentateuch is based upon the quest for this land flowing with milk and honey, and even the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings continue to explain how the people of Israel took possession of this land and settled in it, even though they had a hard time to take full possession of the land because of the presence of so many other nations who had been there before them. Indeed, in the long history of the Jewish people, the only period in which the promised land was established as a stable kingdom stretching from the Mediterranean shores to the Jordan river and beyond, and from Mount Hermon to the Red Sea, was during the reign of David and his son Solomon. Here we are not just talking about a political entity. Indeed, it is important to distinguish fairly recent historical developments in the politics of the people of Israel from the religious history of the same people. Otherwise, one tends to confuse two aspects which are quite distinct.

Indeed, religious history always presented the gift of the promised land as a blessing given by God to Abraham and his descendants, who then entered into a covenant of obedience to God and to faithfulness to His economy of salvation. With Moses and the Exodus such a covenant became established as a *Torah*, a Law, leading the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the

promised land. However, this entry and possession of the land was not a question of military occupation or victory. The Bible is very clear that the whole land belongs to God, and that it is He who gives the portion of land to His people Israel, sanctifying them and the very land which they inherited. Thus we can truly speak of a Holy Land. In a religious perspective, at no stage of the history of the people of Israel did this land belong to it as a political entity, if not in the perspective of a participation in the gift of the Lord who is the true proprietor of the land flowing with milk and honey.

From this viewpoint it follows that no one, not even the kings of Israel, had any right to claim as their own the land they possessed. The right of settling down in the land of the fathers was a sacrosanct right that could not be usurped by political or military strategies, without going against the dictates of the divine law on the land. The Bible always denounces the exploitation of property and resources for economic gain by those who wield power and who dominate the poor. God often presents Himself as the defender of the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, the three categories of poor whose rights to settle down and have their own portion of the land were inviolable.

In this light, the people of Israel appear to be stewards of the land that God gave them as their inheritance. That is why we can speak of an economy of salvation, that is, of a management of a plan that God decreed in His wisdom and goodness, in order to safeguard peace and justice among His people. Indeed, this ideal was even extended to creation itself, since even creation is the property of God, and therefore the respect for the cyclic pattern of cultivation, of the seasons, and of the need to consecrate the first fruits of the earth to God, is a further proof of an economy based not on the parameters of personal gain and profit, but on the equal sharing of material goods under the provident care of God. Whenever the

people of Israel did not respect this pact of friendship with God and creation, whenever social injustice was rampant, the result was always catastrophic. Sacred history is proof of this, as are all the prophets who foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple as a result of the unfaithfulness and injustice on the part of the people of Israel.

If we now turn our gaze to the New Testament we find ample proof of an economy of stewardship in the case of the new people of God, namely the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The Acts of the Apostles speak in idealistic terms regarding the community of the first Judaeo-Christian disciples of Jerusalem. The description is markedly vivid in the three so-called *summaries* of the Acts, namely Acts 2:42-27; 4:32-35; 5:12-16. These provide a picture of the salient characteristics of the early Christian community, which include a life of prayer, under the direction of the teachings of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and mutual love and charity, in the praising of God for the miracles that occurred as a result of the preaching of the apostles, and especially in the sharing of goods in order to help the poor members of the community. This last aspect is important to our theme. Although the communal sharing of goods in Acts was not imposed on the disciples, but simply encouraged, it marked an unshakable bond between the brethren and was a concrete sign of brotherly love. The institution of the seven deacons in Acts 6:1-6 is another example of the way in which the early Christian community understood its role as a steward of God's providence, and therefore administered an economy organised according to the parameters of social justice and charity. The link with the Hebrew Biblical traditions on economic management is highly evident, but this time it was not based solely upon the sense of belonging to a people chosen by God to live in the promised land, but rather upon the need to give a concrete witness of authentic love in the Spirit of Jesus Christ who

offered His own life as a sacrifice, and who therefore emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives in order to become a steward for the salvation of mankind.

The need to provide for an equal sharing of resources also prompted much of the missionary activity of St. Paul. In 2 Corinthians 8 we read about the organisation of the collection in favour of the poor of the mother Church of Jerusalem. Paul also gives the theological motivation for this economy of stewardship and charity: "[Jesus] was rich, but he became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty" (2Cor 8:9). In the care of the impoverished Christian community of Jerusalem Paul was seeing a link between his Jewish background and the new demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and he furthermore encouraged the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia, who were coming from the Gentiles, to show a sense of solidarity in the stewardship of their economic prosperity in favour of the Judaeo-Christian community in Jerusalem. Again, this is just a very cursory look at the development of an economy within the Church which can be seen as an economy of sharing of resources, in which God remains the proprietor and where mutual charity plays the key role in the relationship of give and take between believers. The same tradition was handed down over generations of Christians and marked the basis for the communal monastic life in the eastern Christian tradition, which was then exported to western Christianity by St. Benedict and his Order of monks. The Benedictine way of life, based upon prayer and work, and upon the dependence of the community under the providence of God, through the leadership of the abbot, who represents God the Father, introduced in Europe the framework of a society based upon work and sharing of resources. Even so, it was the direct heir of the classical Roman social and commercial system, and therefore it did not go far enough in guaranteeing a social order of justice in which there would be no lords and slaves,

but in which all would equally have the opportunity to share their goods and life as brothers. This last aspect was to fall squarely into the hands of Francis of Assisi and his friars Minor.

Our aim in the next section is that of delving deeper into the issue of the Franciscan *oikonomía* and seeing how innovative it was in the Church and in society, and how it shaped the social and economic European framework of the late Middle Ages and early Humanistic age. The method we use is that of going through Francis' own writings, and especially the Franciscan Rule, in order to discover the novelty of what we are calling a Franciscan *oikonomía*, a stewardship of responsible management of God's providence within the framework of the cosmic fraternity of which Christ is the head and exemplar.

### **Franciscan *oikonomía***

There are two aspects which relate to Franciscan economy, namely the duty of the brothers to work in order to gain a living and the radical choice of *sine proprio*, implying a sharing of life and limb as brothers who take care of one another, and particularly of the sick and the poor, both of those who are members of the fraternity as well as others in general. Here we shall take a look at what the Franciscan rules of 1221 and 1223 say regarding these themes, in order to provide the framework for the gradual development of a Franciscan economy along the course of history, and provide some conclusions as to how Franciscan economy can be lived today.

The *Regula non bullata*, chapter 7, speaks about the manner of serving and working of the brothers: "None of the may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others. They may not be in charge in the houses in which they serve nor accept any office which would generate

scandal or be harmful to their souls. Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house. Let the brothers who know how to work do so and exercise that trade they have learned, provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly. [...] And for their work they can receive whatever is necessary excepting money. And when it is necessary, they may seek alms like other poor people. And it is lawful for them to have the tools and instruments suitable for their trades. Let all the brothers always strive to exert themselves in doing good works, for it is written: 'Always do something good that the devil may find you occupied.' And again: 'Idleness is the enemy of the soul.' Servants of God, therefore, must always apply themselves to prayer or some good work. Wherever the brothers may be, either in hermitages or other places, let them be careful not to make any place their own or contend with anyone for it. Whoever comes to them, friend or foe, thief or robber, let him be received with kindness."<sup>2</sup>

The characteristic note underlying this chapter is that of minority. The brothers have the duty to work, even in this case by working in other establishments which are not their own. They may also make use of the instruments necessary for their trade. All kinds of work can be performed by the brothers, as long as they are not harmful to their vocation as religious. But, above all, the brothers are to assume an attitude of minority. They can never be proprietors of their work-places or of persons who are placed under their supervision. Rather, they are to work as humble stewards in service to all. The end product of their work is their livelihood, but not the pursuit of economic gain through money. Work and prayer are the foundations of a healthy Franciscan economy. Such an economy is not based upon the right of private property, but rather on the humble use of dwellings and work places, in the spirit of pilgrims who are

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<sup>2</sup> ER 7 (FAED I, 68-69).

always itinerant and ready to move on when duty calls.

The duty of work binds all the brothers. It is the ordinary means to avoid idleness, and in this way it also becomes an act of prayer. The notion of mendicancy, which is evident in the *Earlier Rule* particularly in chapter 9, although being part and parcel of the Gospel calling of the friars Minor, does not rule out the fact that the primary source of livelihood for the brothers is their own work. The Latin term *labor* indicates manual work, that is, a kind of work which is productive and which involves the whole person, body and soul, in the strenuous effort of participating in God's creative work. It is in this sense that the brothers are stewards of the fruit of their work, and they consider it not as an economic gain based on profit, but as a service to the brotherhood and to their spiritual well-being.

The *Regula bullata* speaks about work in chapter 5. "Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working may work faithfully and devotedly so that, while avoiding idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute. In payment for their work they may receive whatever is necessary for the bodily support of themselves and their brothers, excepting coin or money, and let them do this humbly as is becoming for servants of God and followers of most holy poverty."<sup>3</sup>

The *Later Rule* offers an element of novelty regarding what the *Earlier Rule* had stated. According to Giuseppe Buffon, whereas work in the *Earlier Rule* is seen more under the guise of an *ars*, that is, the work of an artisan or tradesman, in the *Later Rule*, "Francis defines work as a grace, and he does not speak about an intellectual activity, nor about a spiritual exercise, but about a manual work, precisely the kind of work which was reserved for slaves.

Francis does not make any distinction between manual and intellectual work."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the *Later Rule* again speaks about the attitude of humility and minority, calling the friars Minor "servants of God," namely stewards of God's gift of creation, in which they participate through their humble work with which they can earn a decent living as poor men, that is, without preoccupation on earning money for economical gain, but solely to earn whatever is necessary for their physical and psychological well-being as individuals and as fraternity. The twin image of work and prayer is again present, even more forcefully in the *Later Rule*, since working with devotion implies a consecration of precious time to God not only in the formal act of prayer or preaching, but also in manual work.

All these considerations bring us to consider the Franciscan way of creating a fraternal *oikos*, a fraternal home, in which all the brothers are the stewards and servants who give glory to God through their work and learn how to respect one another and creation through the work of their hands. This leads us to consider the other theme, regarding the fact that the brothers did not have anything of their own, their *sine proprio*, seen also as a fundamental aspect of Franciscan economic management. It is in this aspect that the Franciscan way of life differs from the community life of the monks and of the early Christians, all of whom could have common possessions for the good of the same community. In the case of Francis and the brothers, common property is also excluded in order to arrive at the notion of the simple use of the gifts that God bestows on those who do not possess anything, and who live the itinerant life of Jesus and his disciples.

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<sup>3</sup> LR 5 (FAED I, 102-103).

<sup>4</sup> G. BUFFON, *La Regola di Francesco spiegata ai semplici*, Terra Santa Edizioni, Milano 2023, 95. [Translation from Italian by the author of this paper].

## ***Usus pauper* and the Defence of the Mendicants**

The development of the Order during the mid and late 13<sup>th</sup> century brought the brothers in front of a dilemma. If they had to embark upon a full cooperation with the Church's demands that they be an Order of preachers, missionaries, university lecturers, they had to make use of large buildings and institutions, such as the convents in the cities and the houses of studies or *studia generalia*, as they had in university cities like Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Bologna and other centres of learning. The increased demands of apostolate necessitated the use of large conventual churches, and the need for study asked for the acquisition of countless volumes of precious books and manuscripts to be housed in libraries and archives. The brothers needed to be fed and clothed, and thus they had to make use of generous donations and organise their stocks in cellars and stores for grain, wine, fruit, etc. Gone were the days of spontaneous mendicancy, when the first brothers would go out to beg their living if they did not receive any remuneration in kind for their work. The brothers needed a stable and secure way of life in order to be truly functional as a great mendicant Order. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio was minister general of the Order during the poverty controversy between the secular masters and the mendicants in the University of Paris. Although he did not personally engage himself in a polemical attitude, Bonaventure defended the mendicant way of life in two treatises which he wrote. One is the *Quæstiones disputatæ de perfectione evangelica*, written while he was not yet minister general in 1254, and the other one

is the *Apologia pauperum contra calumniatores*, written in 1269. The first one was directed against William of St. Amour and the second one against Gerard of Abbeville, both secular masters who condemned the mendicants (Preachers and Minors) as traitors of their ideals, since although living as poor religious they had practically set up grandiose institutions and buildings for studies and conventual pastoral activities in Paris.

Bonaventure defends the mendicant way of life by insisting that the brothers lived *sine proprio*, but that they could make a poor use (*usus pauper*) of the means necessary for their livelihood and work. Bonaventure states that poverty is the *modus essendi*, the way of being, which is proper to mankind, since it reflects the state of mankind before sin. In this way the life of poverty is the most perfect kind of life, also because Christ himself chose it as his model, since he was poor in birth, in the course of his life and in death.<sup>5</sup>

In the *Apologia pauperum* Bonaventure states that a human person can handle the goods of this world in various ways, namely, as property, possession, usufruct and simple use. The friars Minor are called to make a simple use (*usus simplex*) of the goods of this world, which do not belong to them but which are necessary for their living and work.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of *usus pauper* has to be understood in its proper light as a responsible and conscious stewardship of the goods that God lavishly bestows upon those who profess a life of poverty. It does not imply a lawless use of means and goods in such a way that one can waste resources in an irresponsible way. It is precisely a *poor* use, that is, a use of things in the spirit

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<sup>5</sup> P. MÜLLER, *Il problema della Povertà nell'Antropologia di Bonaventura*, in *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 2/3 (2012), 311-335. [retrieved from [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)]

<sup>6</sup> P. MÜLLER, *Il problema della Povertà nell'Antropologia di Bonaventura*, 325: Rispondendo ancora a Gerardo d'Abbeville, il *Doctor Seraphicus* afferma che l'uomo può

rapportarsi ai beni temporali in quattro modi distinti, significati rispettivamente dai termini: *proprietatis*, *possessio*, *ususfructus* e *simplex usus*. L'uomo può vivere senza avere né proprietà né possesso né usufrutto di alcun bene economico, ma non può rinunciare all'uso semplice di ciò che è indispensabile alla sua esistenza.

of evangelical poverty. It is a direct result of the friars Minors' choice of voluntary poverty, which excludes all kinds of property, possession and even usufruct of goods that are nominally still the property of the person who makes use of the derivative benefits from the same goods. Seen in this perspective, poor use implies a conscious effort at personal and fraternal responsibility and accountability. If God is the proprietor of all goods, and if God permits men and women to partake in the possession of goods for the sake of the common good, then even the simple and poor use of these goods, although being the right of the poor, is not automatically a right of use at all costs, but a concession that must be evaluated according to the concrete needs of the ones who make such a poor and simple use of goods. In other words, persons who live in the spirit of an *usus pauper* of goods are doing so in the spirit of a humble service to charity which comes from God, who is the sole provider of all that is good.

The notion of *usus pauper* was developed especially by the Franciscan Master Pierre Jean Olieu, or Peter of John Olivi (1248-1298), who was a member of the movement of Spiritual Franciscans in France, but who also lectured in the *studium* of Montpellier and in that of Santa Croce in Florence. Olivi confronts the issue of *usus pauper*, and understands it as “a way to keep and guard this poverty in a monetary society, and bring the people who are looking for it in contact with life according to the perfection of the Gospel.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> W.M. SPEELMAN, *The Franciscan “Usus Pauper” as the Gateway towards an Aesthetic Economy*, in *Franciscan Studies* 74 (2016) 185-205. [retrieved from [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)]. Quote taken from page 185.

<sup>8</sup> W.M. SPEELMAN, *The Franciscan “Usus Pauper” as the Gateway towards an Aesthetic Economy*, 189: Peter of John Olivi played a prominent role in this process, for he translated and elaborated Franciscan life according to the perfection of the holy Gospel into the situation of the thirteenth century monetary economy. Francis had put all his creativity into discovering and showing his *vivere sine proprio*,

It is interesting to note that Olivi's view on Franciscan economy was also the product of the developments that had taken place in the Order and in society during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Franciscans, although renouncing to all kinds of possession and dominion, found themselves in the midst of a market economy that touched also upon the moral issue of how to handle money and goods in a fair way by accepting a morally honest system of business and sharing of resources. The Franciscans had many contacts with secular merchants, who were also members of the Third Order of Penitents, and therefore they had to provide some indications as to how the market economy could be driven by sound moral values.<sup>8</sup>

It seems to be a contradiction that a Franciscan master like Olivi, who professed absolute poverty in a way of life *sine proprio*, and who was also part of a strict branch of the Order of Minors, such as the Spirituals, would discuss the importance and convenience of a market economy in which money would flow in order to generate wealth. He did so, however, with the spirit of the Franciscan message of poverty, namely by stating that even this necessity could not create a situation whereby some would hoard wealth at the detriment of the common good. Franciscan economy is all about sharing and being stewards of temporal goods, and that is why the Franciscans were advocating the concept of *usus pauper*, which is defined by Speelman as “integral to the vow of poverty.”<sup>9</sup>

preaching it by gesture in *exempla*. But he failed to develop it into a juridical conceptuality, which left living without property somehow indeterminate and strange in the new reality. Confronted with the daily reality in the cities and attacked by secular and Dominican masters, Olivi searched for ways to defend their sharing way of life following Francis. Olivi sought perfection in the imperfect, for he recognized the sharing of gifts and needs in the practice of exchange in the monetary economy.

<sup>9</sup> W.M. SPEELMAN, *The Franciscan “Usus Pauper” as the Gateway towards an Aesthetic Economy*, 195: *Usus pauper* as integral to the vow. To keep and

Unfortunately for the Franciscans, this notion of *usus pauper* would be challenged in the strongest of terms by none other than Pope John XXII during the famous poverty controversy in the first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> However, the Franciscan practice in itself never waned, even when it was formally condemned by the Avignon papacy, and it would produce an even stronger effort at upholding the right of poor use and sharing of goods particularly in the Observant movement and the institution of the *Monti di Pietà*.

### **The Franciscan banking system: the *Monti di Pietà***

It may sound amusing to state that the Franciscans were among the chief bankers during the late Middle Ages, but this is historically true. It was within the Observant family of the Order of Minors that developed the idea of creating a kind of social consciousness of solidarity and sharing in favour of the poor classes of society, but instituting financial enterprises resembling banks in order to lend money to the poor without exorbitant interest rates. This initiative led to the establishment of the *Monti di Pietà* and *Monti Frumentari* in many Italian towns during the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The origins of the *Monti di Pietà* go back to ancient times and the Franciscans did not invent this institution, but rather revamped it and applied it to the changing social conditions of 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy, in a society that was being more and more becoming dependent upon a market economy. Business was thriving, but also livelihoods were at

stake, especially among the poorer classes of society. Persons had to make recourse to borrowing money, and this led to the practice of usury, or the lending of money with very high interest rates, thus exacerbating misery among the poor classes. The Franciscans were adamant opponents of usury, and unfortunately they were also scathing in their remarks regarding those who practiced usury. Since the most efficient bankers of the Middle Ages were normally Jews, it was obvious that many of the sermons against usury were tainted with what nowadays we call Anti-Semitism. The real aim of the Franciscan Observants, however, was that of being pro-active and creating a new social economic order in which the poor could find respite, more than simply that of attacking Jews or bankers.

For this reason, the Franciscans came out with the invention of the *Mons Pietatis* or *Monte di Pietà*. The first institution of this kind was established in Perugia in 1462 by the Franciscans Michele Carcano and Barnaba Manassei da Terni. This was soon to be followed by other similar institutions, the work of Bernardino da Feltre, Marco da Santa Maria in Gallo, Michelangelo Barnabò, Giacomo della Marca and others.<sup>11</sup>

The main characteristics which distinguished the *Monti di Pietà* as a Christian banking institution were the low interest rates that they charged, their sustainability, the idea of gratuity in offering spontaneous help to the impoverished classes, and the fact that the money lent had to be repaid within the space of at least one year. In this way the Franciscan Observants provided a new kind of assistance to the poor, without necessarily going against

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guard their way of life, Franciscans had been practicing a poor or restricted use of things that were offered to them, the *usus pauper*. *Usus pauper* meant that friars practiced *vivere sine proprio* or were in a situation to practice it the same way Francis did, that is in accordance with the perfection of the holy Gospel. Olivi argued that the Franciscan vow demanded not only lack of ownership, *vivere sine proprio*, in a technical sense, but that the *usus pauper* was integral to this form of life. Franciscans should use things that belonged to others only according to their real needs. Olivi argues that the *usus pauper* receives its value from the context in which it is practiced.

<sup>10</sup> For an explanation of the *usus pauper* as taught by Olivi and its rejection by Pope John XXII cfr. D. BURR, *The Spiritual Franciscans. From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis*, The Pennsylvania State University 2001, 51-52, 56-62, 267-277.

<sup>11</sup> N. DI MAURO, *I Monti di Pietà nel XV secolo. Origini e aspetti generali della loro Fondazione*, Effatà Editrice, Cantalupa (Torino) 2013. V. MENEGHIN, *Bernardino da Feltre e i Monti di Pietà*, L.I.E.F., Vicenza 1974. M.G. MUZZARELLI, "Il Vero Capital de' Poveri". *Parole e gesti di Bernardino da Feltre a sostegno del Monte Pio*, in *Antoniano* XCVIII (2023) 67-80.

the rules of the market or condemning the banking system. The philosophy of the Franciscan Observants was that of the *homo œconomicus* in a Christian sense. In other words, although the market economy had to accept the fact of liquid transactions and business, it should not be based upon the fact that one person could hoard immense riches and then donate funds for charity or for cultural initiatives, as modern day banks do, for example. The Franciscans envisaged a system which was still fruit of a market economy, since the banks did charge a minimum of interest, but which had the aim of helping the impoverished classes to live in a dignified manner. In other words, the Franciscans invented a Non-Profit Organization whose aim was that of creating a kind of welfare state in which the poor would be taught how to help themselves in a responsible way, without the need to fall prey to the exorbitant sums of money that the unscrupulous money-lenders would demand. The Franciscans could come up with such an initiative because they were in constant contact with the business class, made up of tradesmen who were members of the Third Order of Penitents, under the spiritual guidance of the Franciscans themselves. The *Monti di Pietà* had various ways of expressing this culture of social welfare. In some cities the Franciscans established the *Monti Frumentari*, which were banks that did not lend liquid cash, but that provided grain for farmers so that they could sow crops and make a decent living, while at the same time being able to pay back to the bank the amount of grain they had been given, with just 5 per cent interest rate. In the case of poor girls coming from the lower social classes, the *Monti delle Doti* offered dowries for weddings or to place these virgins in female monasteries, and thus avoid the danger of having female members of society ending up

in prostitution and immorality because of poverty and misery.

The history of the *Monti di Pietà* is long and complicated, and the Franciscans eventually had to abandon this initiative after the counter-reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, they were pioneers in what we can call a system of social welfare, creating a kind of economy based not upon profit for profit's sake, but upon a sustainable profit that went for the benefit of the common good, and which created a kind of social welfare in which the individual was given the tools for improving his social standing in all walks of life.

### **Some practical conclusions for living Franciscan economy today**

The theme regarding Franciscan economy has picked up momentum in Franciscan studies during recent times, and is one of the areas of study that need to be developed further on the conceptual but also on the practical level. Our aim here is to conclude our reflections, which are just an initial attempt on our part to delve into this subject, by applying some principles to our practical way of living the Franciscan life.<sup>12</sup>

The main aspect of Franciscan economy on the practical level is that of stewardship. As Franciscans we still profess a life *sine proprio*, but in effect we are making use of all kinds of means and goods that have become part and parcel of our daily lives. Chief among which, of course, is the handling of money. Liquid assets and their handling are very much part and parcel of the way we function nowadays, since we form part of a market economy in which liquidity is the basis for economic growth.

Among the main offices of our Order and of each individual entity we find that of the *economus*, or bursar. The bursar is the brother

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<sup>12</sup> GENERAL DEFINITORIUM OFM, *Franciscan Management of Finances. A Formation Aid from the General Definitorium. The Use of Our Economic Resources in Ways that are Transparent, Ethical and in Solidarity* (Cf. OFM General Chapter 2009, Mandate 54), OFM General Curia, Rome 2014. This document provides clear guidelines regarding the true nature of Franciscan fraternal economy, which

is not simply an effort to examine our fraternal economy *ad intra*, but especially regards our mission as Franciscans to share our resources in solidarity with the poor, to make a poor use of our resources, to be transparent and accountable and build an ethically sound financial administration with respect to civil law.

who is entrusted with the office of stewardship of goods and means of livelihood and work of the brotherhood, as well as of immovable and movable property. He functions under the direction of the major superior, namely the minister general or minister provincial, or of the local superior or guardian in the case of individual houses. His duty is that of keeping the books in order in such a way that the fraternal economy functions according to a transparent and fair methodology, reflecting our call to make an *usus pauper* of the means, goods, instruments related to our livelihood and work.

A first and important note regards the relationship between ministers and bursars. In some instances, such a relationship is not yet clear in the mind-set of many brothers. On the one hand there is the tendency to regard the bursar as the be-all and end-all of all financial transactions, functioning, more often than not, independently and without clear protocols and controls. On the other hand, some entities regard the minister or superior as the sole arbiter of all decision making regarding handling of money, to the extreme situation where he appears to be, in effect, the true bursar of his entity. This is very common in the case of local fraternities, particularly smaller fraternities, where the guardian is often entrusted with the office of bursar.

We have to admit that, in some cases, we are still far from understanding the true nature of stewardship in fraternal economy. This entails a conversion of heart regarding the way we use money and other means for the benefit of the fraternity. It is not just a question of transparency and correctness in accounting. An entity might very well have a very efficient system of financial administration, with protocols in place and with the full collaboration between minister, bursar, financial advisor, auditing, etc. In the case of many entities, civil law also demands this kind of transparent and accountable handling of resources. However, this structural setting of fraternal economy does not guarantee full trust and collaboration among the brothers. As long as the brothers do not feel part of the whole process of fraternal economy, no amount of organisation

can be a sign of a true Franciscan economy which is user-friendly to the brothers.

Most of the time the problem regards the issue of communication. Although an entity might be very correct in economic management on the professional side, it hardly succeeds in communicating itself to the brothers in such a way that they truly feel that they share in the fraternal economy. A bursar, especially if he also happens to be the minister or local superior, who does not regularly publish the accounts of the province and house so that the brothers can see them black on white, cannot pretend to receive full collaboration and a sense of mutual sharing in the running of the institution he represents. It is not enough to speak about income and expenditure on a general level, most often than not tied with projects which are certainly useful and necessary. Fraternal economy has to do with the process of making the brothers sensitive to what they earn and spend as a brotherhood, how they earn it and how they spend it, how much does it cost to keep a religious house in order. This should be done in every local chapter of the fraternity, which incidentally, according to our legislation, has to be held regularly, at least six times each year. If the brothers are aware of all this, they can feel that they share and are also responsible for fraternal economy. But if they are never given the opportunity to see the financial accounts in a detailed form, indicating true origins of income and expenditure, they can never be made to become sensible to the real needs of the fraternity, let alone to the *usus pauper* that they are called to make of the goods that are provided. They will hardly feel responsible to contribute to the same fraternal economy through their work and initiative. A good administrator is capable of investing in human resources of the fraternity and in their capability to work, and to show appreciation and reward the results of the work. The more open and transparent the fraternal economy is, the better it is to create this kind of mutual support and collaboration.

On the part of the brothers there is, more often than not, a kind of passive attitude towards fraternal economy. This attitude causes individualism and a sense of personal

independence in the handling of money and in the use of means. Sometimes this kind of attitude is the result of a feeling of lack of mutual trust. Brothers might feel that their needs are not met in the fraternity. It is not enough to legislate in provincial statutes that brothers have a right for a period of annual holidays, if the entity involved does not also legislate how they are to receive the fair amount of money for spending on vacations or on personal needs. If it is just a question of depending upon the generosity or otherwise of their local superiors, or of benefactors, this is certainly not conducive to fraternal economy. Again, we are in a vicious circle. The brothers feel their needs are not met, and so they do not contribute but strive for personal gain. The institution feels that the brothers are not contributing, and expects them to provide for their needs, thus encouraging individualism. Accountability on the personal level is often non-existent. The brothers are also called to render an account of their expenditures. They do not own the money given to them. They are stewards and have to make an *usus pauper* of the means at their disposal. If the local or provincial fraternity is transparent to the brothers in publishing its accounts for all to see, the individual brother is also responsible and accountable to the fraternity by handing over an account of the way he handles the monies given to him for his livelihood, work, apostolate, office or vacations. This also includes the need to be educated for an *usus pauper* in the use of means of transport and travelling of the brothers.

Fraternal economy is also a question of solidarity and sharing our resources, especially with the poor. It is true that charitable activity is based upon what the Lord states in the Mt 6:3-4: “When you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.” This, however, does not mean that solidarity with the poor entails

a kind of personal initiative, even on the official level, without making the brothers become sensible to the need to share their resources, not only their superfluous assets, with the poor. The principle of a free market economy has never been condemned by Franciscans, but it has never been conceived as a kind of individual right to hoard riches and distribute them according to one’s own tastes. Generosity on an individual level is not conducive to creating a genuine Franciscan fraternal economy. It is only by sharing what we consider to be God’s own possessions entrusted to us as stewards that we can truly live our fraternal economy. Solidarity implies a globalised vision of sharing of goods, with respect to creation itself, in such a way that creation becomes a collaborator in solidarity and not a source for exploitation of riches, even for the sake of solidarity.

If one tries to summarise these thoughts one arrives at the conclusion that fraternal economy in Franciscan life is all based upon mutual trust and upon the notion of stewardship at whatever level it is exercised. The fact that we profess a Rule and Life which states that we are to live *sine proprio* does not mean that we can feel free to make an indiscriminate use of means and money as long as we do not possess it. It rather implies a more conscious role of responsible behaviour in the interests of the entire fraternity to which we belong. This becomes possible when we are not afraid of being transparent, and when we have nothing to hide from the brotherhood regarding our handling of financial assets and other goods administered by the fraternity. Above all, it means that we are not in control of our fraternal economy, but our fraternal economy is in control of our faithfulness to our calling in the spirit of what our Father St. Francis writes in his *Admonitions*: “Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Adm 27* (FAED I, 137).

# GRECCIO AND THE NATIVITY SCENE IN THE FRANCISCAN SOURCES [Part 1]

Noel Muscat OFM

The celebration of the 800 years since the Christmas celebration in Greccio, where Francis of Assisi re-enacted the Nativity scene within the context of a Eucharistic celebration, is an opportune moment for our reflection upon the importance of the mystery of the Incarnation in the life of the *Poverello*. The Christmas celebration in Greccio has already been the object of studies that have been published recently, and which are fairly exhaustive in the analysis of the documentary sources that deal with this episode in the life of St. Francis.<sup>1</sup> Our reflections are necessarily indebted to the insights of these expert scholars, and are simply aimed at providing a simplified approach to the consideration of the historical event itself and to the sources that document it.

## **The *castellum* of Greccio**

Greccio is a small fortified settlement, practically a castle, which is visible from the Franciscan hermitage and sanctuary commemorating the event of the Nativity scene of 1223.

The castle of Greccio<sup>2</sup> is found in the Monti Sabini in the central Apennines, on the western flank of the Rieti valley, some 705 metres above sea-level. The name Greccio suggests that the castle was traditionally

founded as a Greek colony. In fact the ancient name of the castle was Grece.

The name could also derive from the Latin *Curtis de Greze*, an expression found in a document of the Abbey of Farfa. The *Curtis* would be a kind of mediaeval feudal organisation, led by a local nobleman, and functioning as an economic establishment in a kind of castle or fortified mountain village. Indeed, Greccio is built in a kind of hollow between Mount Peschio and the rocky ledge where the Collegiate church of San Michele is situated.

The origins of the mediaeval castle go back to the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it was built on properties of the Abbey of Farfa. The first reference to the castle is that by the Benedictine Gregorio da Catino (1062-1133) who mentions the *Curte de Greccia* in the *Registum Farfense*. The castle was fortified all around and had six towers. Only some of the original fortifications still stand, since the entire village and castle were burnt down and destroyed by the mercenaries of emperor Frederick II in 1242. Two of the original towers are still standing, one of which was transformed into the bell tower of the Collegiate church of San Michele. The castle was rebuilt, but again destroyed by Napoleonic troops in 1799.

The main building in the castle is the Collegiate church of San Michele

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<sup>1</sup> F. ACCROCCA, *Il Natale di Greccio nelle testimonianze delle Fonti*, in *Frate Francesco* 70 (2004), n. 1, 7-25; J. DALARUN, *Il Natale di Greccio: una Sinfonia Pastorale*, in *Frate Francesco* 89 (Aprile 2023), n. 1, 21-56.

<sup>2</sup> F. BENEDETTI, *Greccio. Dal castrum ai nostril giorni, un viaggio millenario nel segno della presenza di Francesco d'Assisi*, Ercole Baraldi Editore, 2008.

Archangelo, which was built during the 14<sup>th</sup> century upon the highest part of the ledge overlooking the plain of Rieti. The church was built in a section of the original castle. It has one aisle with two side chapels dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua and the Immaculate Conception.

In the main square of the castle there is the Church of Santa Maria del Giglio, built in 1400, also with one aisle, and with a 15<sup>th</sup> century fresco depicting the Virgin Mary and Child with Angels.

The fortified village of Greccio is dominated by the Monte Lacerone, rising to 1205 metres. On top of the mountain there is a small chapel, build in 1712, as a result of popular devotion towards St. Francis of Assisi, who is traditionally associated with this hermitage where he would have lived in prayer whenever he would pass through Greccio on his way up or down the Valle Reatina.

On the flanks of Monte Peschio there is a natural spring known as Fonte del Lupetto, which flows some distance above the fortified village

The Rieti valley is known as the *Valle Santa*, because of the presence of four Franciscan hermitages, two on each side of the same valley, namely Fonte Colombo and Greccio on the western flanks and Santa Maria della Foresta and Poggiobustone on the eastern flanks. Francis was familiar with these places, since he would pass through Rieti on his way to Rome, taking the Via Salaria. The hermitages are well documented in the Franciscan Sources. They lie close to inhabited centres, which are fortified villages or castles, namely Sant'Elia close to Fonte Colombo, Greccio, a short distance above the Franciscan hermitage, and Poggiobustone, another fortified village just below the Franciscan hermitage of San Giacomo.

### **Greccio in the Franciscan Sources**

Although it appears to be a very small fortified village, with the castle walls

around the central square, having the mountain as its backdrop and the Rieti valley at its feet, Greccio is mentioned more than once in the Franciscan Sources. The most widely known reference is certainly that of the Nativity scene of 1223. However, Greccio is more than just the celebration of Christmas 800 years ago.

It is Thomas of Celano who, besides giving us the narrative of the Christmas celebration in his *Vita beati Francisci (Vita Prima)* written in 1228-1229, which we will consider at a second stage, presents Greccio as one of the favourite hermitages of the Saint in his *Memoriale in desiderio animæ* (1246-1247):

“The saint used to enjoy staying in the brothers’ place at Greccio. He found it rich in poverty and there, in a remote little cell on a cliff, he could give himself freely to heavenly things. This is the place where he had earlier recalled the birth of the Child of Bethlehem, becoming a child with the Child.

Now, it happened that the people there had been stricken by multiple disasters. A pack of raging wolves devoured not only animals, but even people. And every year hailstorms destroyed their wheat, fields and vineyards. One day, while preaching to them, blessed Francis said: ‘To the praise and honour of Almighty God, listen to the truth which I proclaim to you. If each of you will confess your sins, and hear worthy fruit of genuine repentance, I swear to you that all these disasters will cease, and the Lord looking down upon you, will multiply your earthly goods. But also hear this,’ he said. ‘I tell you again, if you are ungrateful for these gifts, and return to your vomit, the disasters will return, the punishment will double, and greater wrath will rage against you.’

And so it happened: at that very hour the disasters ceased, and through the merits and prayers of our holy father, all dangers vanished. The wolves and hailstorms caused no more harm. And even more remarkable, whenever the hail, falling on neighbouring fields, reached the boundaries

of Greccio, either it would stop or move off in a different direction.

So they received relief, increased greatly, and overflowed with earthly goods. But prosperity had its usual effect: either their faces grew bloated, or the dung of earthly riches blinded them even more. They fell back to ways worse than before, forgetting the God who had saved them. But they did not go unpunished. Divine justice punishes one who falls less severely than one who repeats an earlier fault. The wrath of God flared up against them. The evils which had departed returned. The sword of human violence was now added, and a decree of death from heaven devoured them. In the end the whole town was burned to the ground by flames of vengeance.”<sup>3</sup>

Celano states that Francis enjoyed staying at the *locus fratrum*, the hermitage of the brothers in Greccio. When Celano wrote the *Memoriale* the hermitage was an established residence, with the tiny oratory of the Nativity scene. It was not so during Francis’ own life, at least not before 1223. The biographer is referring to the period after 1223, since states that the hermitage was rich in poverty, and that Francis lived in a little cell on the cliff, the same place where he had celebrated Christmas.

We have already noted that the presence of Francis in Greccio goes back to the period prior to 1223, since there is a local tradition that the saint would stay in solitude on Monte Lacerone. The fact that the saint celebrated Christmas in 1223 after receiving the collaboration of the local population and of the noble Giovanni shows that he was already familiar with the place. The Sources do speak about other events that occurred in a hermitage overlooking Greccio, and which are linked with the saint’s love for creatures.

In his *Vita beati Francisci* Celano narrates the following episode: “Once while he was staying near the town of Greccio, a certain brother brought him a live rabbit caught in a trap. Seeing it, the most blessed man was

moved with tenderness. ‘Brother rabbit,’ he said, ‘come to me. Why did you let yourself get caught?’ As soon as the brother holding it let go, the rabbit, without any prompting, took shelter with the holy man, as in a most secure place, resting in his bosom. After it had rested there for a little while, the holy father, caressing it with motherly affection, let it go, so that now free it would return to the woods. As often as it was put on the ground, it rushed back to the holy man’s lap, so he told the brothers to carry it away to the nearby forest.”<sup>4</sup>

The presence of Francis in Greccio is therefore linked with other elements besides the Christmas celebration. The biographers insist upon the saint’s closeness to creation in this remote and wooded area of the Apennine mountains. Besides living in peace with creation and saving brother rabbit, Francis is also presented as the one who liberates Greccio from natural calamities, which include the attacks of ravenous wolves coming down from the heights of Monte Lacerone, and also the havoc brought by violent hailstorms during the spring season, which devastated the wheat and the vineyards before the time of harvest during the summer months. These natural calamities are presented as God’s judgment for the sinful life of the inhabitants of Greccio. That is why Francis preaches penance to the inhabitants of this fortified village. The initial response of the inhabitants was very positive.

It is the *Compilatio Assisiensis* that states that the effect of the penitential preaching of Francis was that of inviting the locals to join the Order of Penitents:

“Blessed Francis found the hermitage of the brothers at Greccio to be becoming and poor and the inhabitants, although poor and simple, were more pleasing to him than those of the rest of the region. For this reason he rested and stayed there, especially because there was a poor cell, very isolated, in which the holy father

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<sup>3</sup> 2C 35-36 (FAED II, 269-270).

<sup>4</sup> 1C 60 (FAED I, 235).

would stay. Many of these people, with the grace of God, entered religion because of his example and preaching and that of his brothers. Many women preserved their virginitly and, remaining in their own homes, dressed in the clothing of religion. And although each remained in her own home, each of them lived the common life decently, afflicting her body with fasting and prayer. Thus it seemed to the people and to the brothers that their manner of living was not among seculars and their relatives, but among holy and religious people who has served the Lord a long time, despite their youthful age and simplicity. This is why, with joy, blessed Francis often said to the brothers about the men and women of this town: 'Even in a large city not as many people have been converted to penance as in Greccio, which is only a small town.'

For frequently, when the brothers of that place used to praise the Lord in the evening, as the brothers at that time were accustomed to do in many places, the people of that town, both the great and the small, would come outside. Standing on the road in front of the town, they would respond to the brothers in a loud voice: 'Praised be the Lord God!' Even children, who could not yet speak, when they saw the brothers, would praise the Lord as best they could."<sup>5</sup>

This description of the inhabitants of Greccio is a fitting background for the event of the Nativity scene of 1223. Indeed, if the sources speak about the affluence of the entire population of Greccio for the Christmas celebration, it is evident that Francis was well-known in the fortified village and that he had already preached to the locals.

The *Assisi Compilation* give us this initial presentation of the effects of Francis' preaching in Greccio by depicting the locals as a kind of penitential confraternity. Indeed, from the description one can

conclude that the Greccio population had a very close bond with the brothers, in such a way that they were living a kind of penitential life which the sources present as similar to that of the members of the Order of Penitents.

All this goes to show that Francis would have stayed for a certain length of time in the hermitage above Greccio, in order to be able to gather so much success in his preaching mission. It is true that the *castrum* was a tiny fortified village, and the people would easily gather to pray with the brothers or to hear Francis preach to them. The description also fits within the normal practice of the brothers to live in hermitages in the mountains above the central Italian Apennine villages, which were remote places, but were placed not so far from inhabited centres. Many of these hermitages, in fact, are within walking distance of the villages, in such a way that the brothers could easily come down for preaching to the people during the day and retire to their hermitages for prayer and rest during the night hours.

The joy of Francis at seeing such a positive response on the part of the inhabitants of Greccio is evident in this description. It is interesting to note that the compiler of the *Assisi Compilation*, although finishing his work in 1318, was making abundant use of the written testimonies of the brothers who accompanied Francis, and particularly of the *florilegium* of the three companions who resided in the Greccio hermitage, and who provided this documentary material to the minister general Crescenzo da Jesi, together with the covering letter they sent from Greccio on 11 August 1246.<sup>6</sup> Maybe that is why the compiler devotes such a long section of the same *Assisi Compilation* to the presence of Francis in Greccio, and especially to events linked with the fraternity of brothers who accompanied him in that place. It might not be very possible to assume that there was a stable

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<sup>5</sup> AC 74 (FAED II, 177).

<sup>6</sup> Th. DESBONNETS, *Legenda Trium Sociorum. Édition critique*, in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 67 (1974) 38-144.

Franciscan fraternity in Greccio before the Christmas event of 1223, but it is very probable that Francis had already preached and lived in Greccio at a moment of time before that date, since he found so much collaboration on the part of the local population when he made preparations for the Nativity scene.

The companions also recount other memories of Francis' presence in Greccio, which strengthen the possibility that the saint would have resided in some remote hermitage close to the fortified village more than once. The *Assisi Compilation* gives us the following account:

“A brother, a spiritual man and a friend of God, was living in the place of the brothers of Rieti. One day he got up and came with great devotion to the hermitage of the brothers of Greccio, where blessed Francis was then staying, out of a desire to see him and receive his blessing. Blessed Francis had already eaten and had returned to the cell where he prayed and rested. Because it was Lent he did not leave the cell except at mealtime and returned to the cell immediately afterward. The brother did not find him and grew very sad, attributing this to his sins, especially because he had to return that day to his own place.

The companions of blessed Francis consoled him, and he had not gone more than a stone's throw away from the place when, by the will of the Lord, blessed Francis came out of his cell and called one of his companions, who was travelling with him as far as Fonte del Lago. He said to him: ‘Tell that brother to look back toward me.’ And when he turned his face to blessed Francis, he made the sign of the cross and blessed him. That brother, rejoicing both in body and spirit, praised the Lord who fulfilled his desire. His consolation was so much the greater because he saw that it was the will of God that the saint bless him without being asked by him or others.

The companions of blessed Francis, and the other brothers of the place, were amazed,

considering it a great miracle since no one had told blessed Francis about the arrival of that brother. And neither the companions of blessed Francis, nor any other brother would have dared approach him unless he had called them. This was true not only there but everywhere blessed Francis stayed to pray, for he wanted to remain so removed, that no one would go to him without being called.”<sup>7</sup>

Again we meet Francis who lives in solitude somewhere close to Greccio, but at the same time is accompanied by some brothers. This account shows that it might have been customary for Francis to stop for some days in the Greccio hermitage on his way up and down the road to and from Rome to Assisi. Francis could very well have stayed in the friars' residence in Rieti, which was also a papal city and the centre of communications of the region, and thus it might have been convenient for him to stop in the city rather than in the remote hermitage on the mountain above Greccio. Yet Francis seems to prefer these solitary places, more so during the period of Lent. This detail refers to a penitential moment in the life of Francis which he used to live more than once every year. The reference to Lent might certainly indicate the great period of Lent before Easter, but it could also indicate the penitential period of Advent that Francis prescribes in the Rule as a period of fasting, from the feast of All Saints to Christmas. Maybe this second option is to be preferred if one places it within the context of Francis' preparation for the Christmas celebration. We know that after 29 November 1223, the date of the confirmation of the *Regula bullata*, Francis spent some time in Greccio, because it was there that he celebrated Christmas that same year. So, the period of penance and fasting indicated in this account could very well refer to the few weeks preceding Christmas that Francis spent in solitude and prayer somewhere close to Greccio.

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<sup>7</sup> AC 73 (FAED II, 174-175).

Another episode which occurred in Greccio, and which might be linked with the one just mentioned, since it also probably happened during the period of penance just described, regards the presence of the devil in a pillow that Francis was given in order to rest his head at night, since he was suffering from various ailments. Here we quote the event as narrated in the *Assisi Compilation*:

“At one time blessed Francis was staying in the hermitage of Greccio. He remained in prayer day and night in the last cell, behind the large cell. One night, during the first sleep, he called his companion who was sleeping near him in the old, large cell. The brother got up immediately and went to him, and entered the yard of that little cell, next to the door, where blessed Francis was lying inside.

Blessed Francis said to him: ‘Brother I couldn’t sleep this whole night, or remain upright and pray; my head and my knees are shaking as if I had eaten bread made from rye grass.’

His companion talked with him, trying to console him. Blessed Francis said: ‘I believe there’s a devil in this pillow I have for my head.’ He had received that pillow that was filled with feathers the day before from Lord John of Greccio, whom the saint loved with great affection and to whom he showed great friendliness during his whole lifetime. After he left the world, blessed Francis did not want to sleep on a mattress nor have a feather pillow for his head, when he was sick or for any other reason. This time the brothers forced him to accept it, against his will, because of his very serious eye disease. He threw it at his companion. His companion got up and picked it up in his right hand, threw it over his left shoulder, and holding it there with his right hand, he left that yard. He suddenly lost the power of speech, could not move from that place, nor could he move his arms or hands to throw away that thing. There he stood, stiff, it seemed to him that he was like a man

outside himself, sensing nothing in himself or others, He stood like this for about an hour, until through the mercy of God blessed Francis called him. Immediately he returned to himself and threw the pillow behind him. He returned to blessed Francis and told him everything that happened to him.

Blessed Francis said to him, ‘Last night as I was saying compline, I sensed when the devil had come into my cell.’ After he realised it was true that it was the devil who had prevented him from sleeping or standing up to pray, he began to tell his companion, ‘The devil is very cunning and subtle. Because by the mercy and grace of God he cannot harm me in my soul, he wanted to disturb the need of the body by preventing me from sleeping and standing up to pray, in order to stifle the devotion and joy of my heart so that I will complain about my sickness.’”<sup>8</sup>

The description of event is vivid and can be easily explained even by offering a brief description of the hermitage of the brothers in Greccio. The cell of St. Francis is, in fact, a cleft in the rock at the back of a small dormitory, and this is the place where this event occurred. This shows that by 1223 Francis would have lived in the hermitage together with the brothers, and therefore that after the Christmas celebration of that year a kind of stable fraternity would have been established in the hermitage, where Francis would sometimes stop for short periods of time.

The presence of the devil in the cushion shows how Francis cherished the life of penance and seclusion that shunned all kinds of comfort, even if such a necessary comfort as that of a feather pillow was the gift of a dear friend, such as Lord Giovanni of Greccio, who had taken care to prepare all the necessary things for the Christmas celebration in Greccio that year. The hermitage of Greccio is often presented by the sources as a place of extreme poverty and penance, and Francis tries hard to

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<sup>8</sup> AC 119 (FAED II, 227-228).

conserve this kind of attitude in himself and in the brothers. There is a very important event in the same sources that shows this, namely the meal of the brothers in the same hermitage on a solemnity that could have been Christmas or, according to some other sources, Easter.

### **Francis enters as a beggar to ask for alms from the brothers in Greccio**

The *Assisi Compilation*, as we have seen, dedicates a section to Francis' presence in Greccio. It is highly probable that the episode to which it refers took place during the same month in which Francis celebrated Christmas in Greccio in 1223. The compiler gives us a detailed account of the fraternal meal of the brothers on Christmas day and of Francis' attitude regarding what he considered to be their lack of poverty:

“One day a minister of the brothers came to blessed Francis who was then staying in that same place [Greccio], in order to celebrate the feast of Christmas with him. It happened that the brothers of that place on Christmas day itself prepared the table elaborately because of that minister, covering it with lovely white tablecloths which they obtained for the occasion, and vessels of glass for drinking.

Blessed Francis came down from the cell to eat, and when he saw the table set on a dais and finely prepared, he went secretly and took the hat of a poor man who had arrived there that very day, and the staff he carried in his hand. He called one of his companions in a whisper and went outside the door of the hermitage, unnoticed by the other brothers of the house.

Meanwhile the brothers came to the table, especially because it was sometimes the custom of the holy father that, if he did not arrive immediately at mealtime, and the brothers wanted to eat, he wanted them to go on the table and eat.

His companion closed the door, remaining next to it on the inside. Blessed Francis

knocked on the door and he immediately opened it for him. He entered with his hat on his back and with staff in hand, like a pilgrim. When he came to the door of the house where the brothers were eating, he called out to the brothers like a poor man: ‘For the love of the Lord God, give alms to this poor, sick pilgrim.’

That minister and the other brothers recognised him at once. The minister told him: ‘Brother, we are also poor, and because we are so many, we need these alms we are eating. But, for the love of that Lord you invoked, come into the house, and we will give you some of the alms which the Lord has given us.’

When he came in and stood in front of the brothers' table, the minister gave him the bowl from which he was eating and some bread. Taking it, he sat down on the floor beside the fire, facing the brothers who sat at the elevated table. Sighing he said to the brothers: ‘When I saw the table finely and elaborately prepared, I considered that this was not a table of poor religious, who go door-to-door each day. For more than other religious, we should follow the example of poverty and humility in all things, because we have been called to this and have professed this before God and people. So, now it seems to me I'm seated like a brother.’

The brothers were ashamed at this, considering that blessed Francis was speaking the truth. Some of them began to weep loudly, considering how he was seated on the ground, wishing to correct them in such a holy and simple way.

He told the brothers that they have a humble and decent table so as to edify secular people. And if the brothers invite a poor person he should sit with them, and not have the poor man sit on the ground and have the brothers sit on high.”<sup>9</sup>

Again, we are faced with a first-hand account of an eye-witness who could very well have been one of the close companions of the saint who would later gather their

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<sup>9</sup> AC 174 (FAED II, 175-176).

memories in the *florilegium* sent from Greccio in 1246. Francis is here presented in the guise of a prophet who makes a symbolic act in order to convey a message to his listeners. The action of Francis is typical of the *Poverello* who often behaved as an *homo ludens* in many instances of his life. The simplicity of the gesture of Francis, aimed at providing a lesson to the brothers who wanted to celebrate Christmas in a more refined manner at table, thanks to the visit of a certain minister, is seen as another typical representation of how the brothers should live poverty in the hermitage of Greccio. The theological background of the whole event is certainly evident, but also the human aspect which is underlined by the compiler in order to present a true and faithful picture of the dynamics of fraternal life even in a remote hermitage of the Order.

Note, first of all, that the reason why the brothers wanted to prepare a special table for the Christmas lunch was not exactly that of celebrating this important feast, which even Francis had recommended to celebrate with lavish generosity.<sup>10</sup> The true reason was that a certain minister of the brothers (*quidam minister fratrum*) came to visit the *locus* (hermitage) of Greccio, and the brothers wanted to prepare a lavish table for his honour (*honorifice pararent mensam*). So they were moved more by human interests than by genuine intentions.

Francis arrived just in time to realise what the brothers had done, and he certainly did not approve their action. However, he did

not chide them publicly, but resorted to a prophetic action. Francis went to dress up like a poor pilgrim and became a beggar in his own house. This action on the part of the *homo ludens* who was Francis was motivated by a sincere wish to give a lesson to the brothers, but it had a deeper meaning. It is Celano in the *Memoriale*, who interprets this action in a different light. In fact, he states that the day was the feast of Easter.<sup>11</sup> Bonaventure goes even further, and compares Francis dressed as a poor pilgrim to Christ himself, who on Easter Sunday appeared to Cleopas and the other disciple on the road to Emmaus as a poor pilgrim:

“Once, on a holy Easter Sunday, while he was staying at a hermitage that was so far from any houses that he could not conveniently go begging, he begged alms from the brothers, like a pilgrim and beggar, mindful of him who that day appeared in the guise of a pilgrim to his disciples travelling on the road to Emmaus.”<sup>12</sup>

When Francis entered the dining room of the Greccio hermitage begging alms from the brothers, it was the minister who was the main guest who intervened. One notes the diplomatic way in which the minister answers to Francis’ prophetic gesture. *Frater, nos simili modo pauperes sumus*. Although sitting at table he still considered himself and the brothers to be poor just like Francis, and therefore he offered his own bowl to the *Poverello*, *amore illius Domini quem invocasti*, for the love of that Lord

<sup>10</sup> 2C 199-200 (FAED II, 374-375): He used to observe the Nativity of the Child Jesus with an immense eagerness above all other solemnities, affirming it was the Feast of Feasts, when God was made a little child and hung on human breasts. [...] When there was a discussion about not eating meat, because it was on Friday, he replied to Brother Morico, ‘You sin, brother, when you call Friday the day when unto us a Child is born. I want even the walls to eat meat on that day, and if they cannot, at least on the outside they be rubbed with grease!’ He wanted the poor and hungry to be filled by the rich, and oxen and asses to be spoiled with extra feed and hay.

<sup>11</sup> 2C 61 (FAED II, 287). It should be noted, however, that sometimes the term *Pascha* would refer to an important feast day, in this case to *Pascha Nativitatis*, that is, the Feast of Christmas.

<sup>12</sup> LMj 7,9 (FAED II, 582). This account, however, raises some doubts as to whether Bonaventure is referring to the same episode. In fact, the hermitage in Greccio, although located in a remote area, is not that far away from the fortified village as to render it impossible to go begging in the inhabited centre. Maybe Bonaventure is referring to another episode, since he does not even mention the name Greccio.

which you [Francis] have invoked. In a way the minister and the brothers continue to participate in the actions of the *homo ludens* who was Francis. Indeed, even the companion who opened the door for him, is presented as his accomplice in this matter. Yet, the action is meant to place the brothers in front of their responsibility. Francis sits on the ground and looks up at the brothers and minister who were sitting down at table, with the same attitude of a servant who looks up to his master. The effect of this action was that of making the brothers realise how they had strayed from being faithful to Lady Poverty without in any way humiliating them. In fact, the close link between the action of Francis who sits down to eat on the floor and the brothers who weep over their mistake is also underlined by Celano in the same section of the *Memoriale* that speaks about Francis' devotion to the Lord's Nativity:

"He could not recall without tears the great want surrounding the little, poor Virgin on that day. One day when he was sitting down to dinner a brother mentioned the poverty of the blessed Virgin, and reflected on the want of Christ her Son. No sooner had he heard this than he got up from the table, groaning with sobs of pain, and bathed in tears ate the rest of his bread on the naked ground."<sup>13</sup>

This goes to show the link between the prophetic action of Francis on Christmas day at Greccio and his attitude towards the mystery of the Incarnation and humility of God. The presence of Francis in the hermitage of Greccio can be seen as a kind of participation in the self-emptying of the Son of God in the mystery of the Incarnation, expressed in the witness to a life of poverty and humility, in solitude and prayer, in penance and joy. It is in this light that the sources portray the various moments in which Francis stayed in Greccio and the significance of this *locus* of the brothers to him.

## **In preparation for the Christmas celebration**

This year we are commemorating the 800 years of the Christmas celebration in Greccio, particularly the Nativity scene during the celebration of the Eucharist. We now have to examine the event itself and its true significance in the life of Francis and of the brothers.

Before doing so, however, we should not forget to link this event to the other major event that occurred barely one month before, namely on 29 November 1223, the confirmation of the *Regula bullata* by Pope Honorius III. The Rule was written also in an attitude of humility and penance and in the peace of solitude some kilometres away from Greccio, namely in the hermitage of Fonte Colombo. This indicates that Francis spent some months in the Rieti valley, and particularly in these two hermitages. On his way back from Rome after the confirmation of the Rule, Francis retired in the hermitage of Greccio. It was the Lent preceding Christmas, namely the period of penance and fasting that Francis observed from the feast of All Saints to the Christmas vigil. It is to this period that we must refer mentally if we want to understand the preparations that Francis did for the celebration of the vigil and Mass on Christmas night of 1223 in the cave-church of Greccio.

The fortified village that welcomed the celebration of Christmas in 1223 was never famous or significant. It was just another *castrum* in the heart of the Italian Apennines. Its fame was to come to the forefront with the figure of the *Poverello*, and its history became one with that of the last years of Francis, when he became more reflective and contemplative in the face of an Order that was escaping his grasp and in front of the need to remain steadfast to the humble beginnings. That is why the last months of 1223 become a kind of watershed in the life of St. Francis, since they introduce him to the last two years of

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<sup>13</sup> 2C 200 (FAED II, 375).

his life, marked by suffering and also by an intense mystical union with Christ and His humanity.

It is in the light of this global vision of the life of Jesus Christ that Francis understood the significance of the humility of God in the form of life that the Church confirmed for him and the brothers, enlightened by the mystery of the Incarnation and poverty of the Child of Bethlehem and projected towards the full resemblance of the icon of the Passion and Resurrection in the paschal mystery expressed in the event of the stigmatization on La Verna in 1224. All these elements are expressed in the innovative way in which Francis celebrated Christmas in Greccio, within the context of the Eucharist and in the proclamation of the Gospel of the Incarnation. The attitude of humble service and charity can also be seen to be expressed in the liturgical role that Francis played when he appeared to be vested as a levite (deacon), prescinding from the historical fact of whether or not he was actually a deacon. In heart, Francis was a deacon, and so he appears during the Christmas celebration in 1223.

Our next step will be that of considering all these elements in the sources which speak about the Nativity scene enacted by Francis on the night of Christmas 1223 in the castle of Greccio, which becomes for Francis the new Bethlehem, making him relive the experience of the contact with the Holy Place that witnessed the first cries of the divine infant in the manger.

## Latin Abbreviations

### Writings of St. Francis

Adm	Admonitiones
CantAudPov	Canticum Audite Poverelle
CantSol	Canticum fratris Solis
LaudDei	Laudes Dei Altissimi
BenLeo	Benedictio fratri Leoni data
EpAnt	Epistola ad S. Antonium
EpClerI	Epistola ad Clericos
EpCust	Epistola ad Custodes
EpFid	Epistola ad Fideles
EpLeo	Epistola ad fratrem Leonem
EpMin	Epistola ad Ministrum
EpOrd	Epistola toti Ordini missa
EpRect	Epistola ad rectores
ExhLD	Exhortatio ad Laudem Dei
ExpPat	Expositio in Pater noster
FormViv	Forma vivendi S. Claræ
Fragm	Fragmenta alterius Regulæ
LaudHor	Laudes ad omnes horas
OffPass	Officium Passionis Domini
OrCruc	Oratio ante Crucifixum
RegB	Regula bullata
RegNB	Regula non bullata
RegEr	Regula pro eremotoriis
SalBVM	Salutatio Beatæ Mariæ Virg
SalVirt	Salutatio Virtutum
Test	Testamentum
UltVol	Ultima voluntas S. Claræ

### Sources for the Life of St. Francis

FAED I	<i>Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Saint</i>
FAED II	<i>Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Founder</i>
FAED III	<i>Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Prophet</i>
1C	Celano, <i>Vita beati Francisci</i>
LCh	Celano, <i>Legenda ad usum chori</i>
VB	Celano, <i>Vita brevior S. Francisci</i>
2C	Celano, <i>Memoriale in desiderio anima</i>
3C	Celano, <i>Tractatus miraculorum</i>
LJS	Julian of Speyer, <i>Vita S. Francisci</i>
OR	<i>Officium Rhythmicum</i>
AP	<i>Anonymus Perusinus (De Inceptione)</i>
L3C	<i>Legenda trium sociorum</i>
CA	<i>Compilatio Assisiensis</i>
LMj	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Maior</i>
LMn	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Minor</i>
SPMaj	<i>Speculum Perfectionis (Sabatier)</i>
SPMin	<i>Speculum Perfectionis (Lemmens)</i>
ABF	<i>Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius</i>
Fior	<i>Fioretti di San Francesco</i>



**Cover page:** Church of San Paolo, Assisi. A Benedictine Priory established in 1071 by Abbot Eginaldo and depending upon the Abbey of San Benedetto al Subasio. Today it belongs to the Confraternity of San Rufino.

