

The Relevance of St. Francis in an Age of Globalization

*Philip V. Peacock**

1.1 Introduction

A legend from the Franciscan tradition speaks of a person who, when he entered the church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula to pray, left some money near the cross as an offering. After he had left, one of the Franciscan brothers simply picked it up and threw it on the windowsill. St. Francis found out what the brother had done. The brother seeing that he was found out, hurried to ask pardon. He cast himself on the ground and asked to be beaten. St Francis rebuked him most severely and commanded him to lift the money with his mouth and place it with his mouth on the ass' dung that lay outside the walls of the church.

While the brother gladly did what was commanded him, the legend tells us that fear filled the heart of all those who heard of it. The story ends by telling us that all held, in future, great contempt, for what was put on the level of dung and they were spurred on daily to contempt with fresh examples.¹

The obvious question that raises itself here is what do we make of this legend? Or more importantly, what do we make out of Francis himself and what relevance does this monk have for us today in this age of globalization. While today between \$800 million and \$1 trillion are traded in international currency markets alone and international trade between stock markets around the world involves incalculable sums of money what relevance does a twelfth century saint who would not have anything to do with money have? This paper is an attempt to draw out the significance of St. Francis of Assisi for this world caught up in globalization.

1.2 St. Francis: The Person

The figure of St. Francis has remained an enigma for theologians. Who was this man who spoke to the birds and called them his sisters? Who sang to the sun and called it his brother who practiced such extreme poverty that is referred to as his beloved? Was he a visionary or a lunatic? Why did he do what he did? What was his theology and most of all what does he have to tell us about money?

These questions are made all the more difficult for us because St. Francis wrote no systematic theology. In fact he wrote very little - a few prayers, a few hymns and some

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letters. However, we do have a large number of legends about St. Francis, these legends are contained in eight cycles of stories written between 1228-1385 CE each legend having its own ideological emphasis and import. But since these are stories much of them are rooted in the “imaginative and in the symbolic” and it is precisely the fact that much of St. Francis’ life comes to us in narratives with much symbolic meaning that there is so much ambiguity about them. This ambiguity is only compounded by each of the biographers of St. Francis writing with their own ideological import. This ambiguity is adequately seen today by the various pictures of St. Francis that have emerged. Reinhold Seeberg for example, would see St. Francis as a benevolent figure whose overflowing sentiment for Christ and the world causes him to be a ‘good’ saint in the worst sense of the word. He sees Saint Francis as,

“The one who discovered human individuality and opened it to an immediate intercourse with God. It may perhaps be correct to say that he wished to make all men monks, but he did certainly also teach the children of God to become Christians. As he found God and love in the Jesus of the gospels and attained liberation from the world in the following of Jesus, he exerted a powerful stimulus upon his contemporaries. He taught the world the directly individual character and the present blessedness of the religious life and he led men to look upon the world and mankind simply and without dogmatic spectacles. He glorified poverty and love and taught men to realize them in the sense of personal perfection”²

Seeberg, thus presents to us St. Francis as a sanitized saint in limbo, disconnected from his social context, calling humans away from the world to a ‘spiritual’ existence.

Paul Santmire is an author who presents us with a different picture of St. Francis. In his book *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* he attempts to rescue Christianity from the allegation that it is ecologically bankrupt. Here he sees Francis as a mystic who is already living in the age to come - as one who has found union with the rest of creation, which has also been blessed by God’s goodness. He observes that Francis’ burning anticipation of the coming consummation, the coming of the kingdom, that for Francis is so real and so near that he undertakes the impossible, to live a life in terms of the coming kingdom - humility, love, self giving, poverty, chastity, obedience-already in the midst of the world.³

Leonardo Boff, who sees him as a model for human liberation, as the title of his book suggests, may offer us a third view. However for us to be able to decipher whom St. Francis was it is important for us to place him within his social context.

1.3. The Social Context of St. Francis

It is important for us to remember that St. Francis lived in the feudal age and that the central features of this age were:

- a. Land upon which there existed multiple claims
- b. A graded hierarchy that existed from king to serf within which each person could be characterized as a ‘man of a man’.
- c. A certain connectedness within society in society that not only linked everybody but within which everybody had his or her place.

However, to use Bloch's words "it would ... be a grave mistake to treat feudal civilizations as one piece chronologically⁴. Bloch goes on to divide medieval Europe into two historical periods that he calls the first and the second feudal ages. It should be mentioned here that this division of European feudalism into two separate ages does not mean that each is distinct from the other or that the latter meant a distinct break from the past, rather this separation is used to point out the changes in direction that occurred that were to later precipitate the contradictions within feudalism to such an extent that it signaled its collapse.⁵ These changes began in the beginning of the 11th century and proceeded to become what many have referred to as the 12th century renaissance. The changes that took place were brought about by changes in agriculture, the crusades, increases in trade and commerce which were in some ways linked to the crusades. Instead of studying these in detail we shall turn our attention to what the consequences of these changes were.

1.4 Consequences of the Changes of the Second Feudal Age

1.4.1 Increase of Money

The role played by money in the first feudal age was probably negligible because most transactions in the feudal system were made by kind and not by cash. Money where it did exist, was found to be in commercial circles and not agricultural ones and since commerce had all but dried up so too did money circulation.

But increased economic activity beginning in the 11 century definitely did its bit to increase the circulation of money. Pirenne explains how not only did the actual amount of money increase far more than it had been in the 9th and 10th centuries but money also came to be more generalised.⁶

Obviously this increase in money came with its own consequences - firstly it meant an increase in prices that naturally favoured the producers. Secondly it meant an increase in the desire for ownership and consumption because money gives power over all other resources and lastly, it obviously marginalized those who did not have any money.

1.4.2 Shift towards Urbanization

The second consequence that resulted from these changes is the shift towards urbanization and mercantile capitalism also meant a new spirit of individualism. In the feudal system, land had to be ploughed together, harvesting was a communal activity, even the extraction of surplus was possible because of social ties that existed between the lord and the serf. However, with the rise of mercantile capitalism, a stress was laid on the individual. It was entrepreneurship and speculation, essentially individualistic activity, that made money. This emphasis on the individual is most clearly seen in the cities where special rights were given to citizens to be 'free men', whereas feudalism spoke of each one being 'a man of a man'.

The second feudal age was an age of transformation - it saw the transformation of human relationships with each other as well as a transformation of human relationships with the land. And it was into this age that St. Francis was born to a rich merchant of the city of Assisi in 1182. Disgusted with the accumulation of wealth that his father was involved with Francis left his father's house to live a life of poverty and communion with nature. We now turn our attention to how St. Francis actually responded to these changes of human relationships to each other and also the land in the following section.

1.5 St. Francis and Money

The Biblical choice of God or Mammon is very central to the legends of St. Francis as well. 2 Celano tells us of St. Francis that "There was no one so desirous of poverty and no one so solicitous in guarding his treasure as he was solicitous in guarding this pearl of the gospel"⁷ Therefore it is not surprising to note that in the legends of St. Francis, the metaphors and images used for poverty and wealth are counter posed against each other. The metaphors for of money call to our mind images of Satan, of death and as barriers that restrict full humanity. The metaphors of poverty on the other hand are those that recall images of Christ, his church and the fuller life. We shall study these images separately.

1.5.1 *The Metaphor of Money*

The metaphors of money in Satan can essentially be divided into three sections.

1. Those equating money and Satan
2. Those equating money to death
3. Those that show money as a hindrance to full humanity

1.5.1.1 Those equating money to Satan: The equation of money and Satan are nothing new to the study of either economics or theology. The legends of St. Francis also make a similar equation but they do it in three ways, by equating money and flies, money and dung and money and a snake.

1.5.1.1.1 Money as flies: Francis is known to have equated money with flies. The story is told of once when Francis was sick at Nocera, the people of Assisi sent knights to bring him home lest he die where he was and others claim the body. The knights while bringing him back stopped at Satriano a very poor village. Since they were hungry they went out to buy provisions for food, but could find nothing. On their return they told Francis that he should give them something from his alms because they could find nothing to buy. Francis told them that this was because they trusted more in their 'flies' than in God and sent them back to bring food offering God's love instead of money.⁸ Surprisingly four of the cycles of legends tell this story and all four use the word flies. Other stories also tell us that Francis called his brothers in his order who did not beg and lived off the alms of others⁹ as well as those who did not part with their property in a correct manner as flies.¹⁰

What exactly did Francis mean when he called money or those who lusted after it flies? The immediate imagery that comes to mind is that of a parasite. A creature that lives off others - this is quite in tune with what Francis is referring to who would not beg but lived off others a fly. The story has wide significance if it is seen as a polemic against the leisure class of the feudal age as a whole. Applied in this way this story and the metaphor of fly is applied to all those lords and barons who did not work themselves but lived off the work of others. It is likely also that Francis is referring to the system of usury where some money which was lent out for high rates of interest which sucked out the life blood of peasants often taking their lives and livelihood away. In this manner money does seem to have a parasitic quality.

A second imagery that the term fly connotes for us is of course the imagery of death and disease. The fact that Francis connects money to death and disease can be seen from other

stories where one person who touches money is struck dumb.¹¹ Another story tells us of how a greedy bird who prevented all others from eating died.¹²

The most likely interpretation of the use of the word flies is Biblical. In 2 Kings chapter 1, the story is told of Ahaziah who fell through the lattice of his upper chamber. To recover he sends messengers to Baalzebul asking whether he will recover from this or not. The literal translation here of Baalzebul here is Lord of the flies, a word that later came to be understood as devil or Satan. It is interesting for us that theologically Satan is seen to have the connotation of being "The Lord of the Flies". Even in literature William Goulding's book *The Lord of the Flies* has the imagery of evil.

If Satan is referred to as the Lord of the Flies, what then does this speak to us about the theology of Saint Francis who referred to money and those who lusted after it as flies? The connection is obvious, if Satan is the Lord of the Flies, then money that is referred to, as 'flies' is the domain of Satan. Likewise those who yearn after money are also the subjects of Satan just as he is their lord.

The term flies then is used by Francis to tell us that money is the realm of Satan and all those who have anything to do with it become the subjects of Satan.

1.5.1.1.2 Money as Dung: Among the other legends that show St. Francis' distaste for money is the one that we referred to at the beginning of this article. Here the brother who touched money was asked to pick it up with his mouth and place it on asses' dung.

The equation of money with fecal matter or something dirty is not new to theology. Ezekiel 7:19 for example tells us 'they shall fling their silver into the streets, their gold shall be treated as unclean'.

Francis' equation of money with ass' dung here is of particular importance because he often referred to his body as brother ass.¹³ Therefore the reference could also be to human dung that several cultures treat as far worse than animal dung. But what could this metaphor of money as dung refer to? Of course the obvious implication is that money is dirty, unwanted, excretion etc. But another meaning is that *Baalzebul*, as we have already seen, is a reference to 'lord of the dung' as well. Here again Francis is equating money with Satan. Again the analogy of flies that rest on dung is not to be missed. Therefore both the metaphors of money as being flies as well as being dung ought to be seen together. Thus these imply that not only is money a parasite or makes people parasites, or that it is dirty, disease causing or not to be trusted, but that money is of Satan and hence should be avoided.

1.5.1.1.3 Money as a Snake: Another story that echoes the same view that money is to be equated with Satan is found in the legend about when Francis found a money belt on the road full of money. The companion of the Saint wanted to take the money and distribute it among the poor. Francis warned his companion that this was the trick of the devil. Both Francis and his companion walked further along the road, but the companion was not fully satisfied. Returning to the spot to prove his point, Francis asked his companion to lift the purse. Instead of money from out of this purse, came a rather large snake. 2 Celano ends this story by telling us that Francis told his companion 'Money to God's servants, Brother, is nothing else but a devil and a poisonous snake'.¹⁴

The snake in this story is obviously connected to the serpent in Genesis 3 and should be

seen as the devil himself as Francis himself suggests, the significance of money being equated with a snake is important. Firstly, just as in the Garden of Eden the snake is probably an image of a tempter and this brings out the quality of money being a tempter of people. Secondly, as Francis also suggests, the metaphor of the snake points to the poisonous quality of money. Most of all, though this text again connects money to Satan. However, this is done in a new way as compared to the previous two stories. In the previous two stories money is seen as belonging to the realm or domain of Satan, the big difference in this story is that money is connected to Satan himself Satan here is seen as the personification of money.

1.5.1.2 Metaphors Equating Money to Death: There is nothing unique about connecting money and the sin of avarice to death. Tawney accounts how in the Middle Ages there existed innumerable tales about the usurer who was carried prematurely to hell. Tawney quotes one story that may be of particular interest to us, he says, "about the year 1240 a usurer on entering the church to be married, was crushed by a stone figure falling from the porch which, by the grace of God, turned out too be a carving of another usurer and his money bags".¹⁵ The legends of Francis also have a similar story that can be classified as moral instruction. The story is about a family of birds who lived and ate together along with Francis. One of the larger birds got greedy though and persecuted the other birds. For when this particular bird had his fill he would drive the other birds away. The story is told that St. Francis cursed the bird and the bird getting up on to a vessel of water to drink, fell in and drowned. The legend goes on to tell us that no cat was found that would touch the dead bird that had been cursed.¹⁶

The didactic intent of this story is obvious. Riches or greed for riches lead to death.

1.5.1.3 Those That Show Money as a Hindrance to Full Humanity: As mentioned earlier there is one story in the legends of St. Francis that accounts how when one brother picked up money against the advice of his companion he was struck dumb.¹⁷ The story is important for its symbolic value, one must ask why the brother was struck dumb? The fact that he was struck dumb is a possible indication of the fact that money deprives people from the ability of being fully human.¹⁸ The brother lost his ability to communicate and hence lost full participation in human fellowship.

The story can be seen as a radical critique of the values of a monetary economy against the values of a feudal economy. While a feudal economy ran on personal relationships and personal ties, a monetary economy involved no such prerequisite. While personal relationships may have benefited a merchant it was in no way essential to his trade. For the usurer on the other hand personal relationship was detrimental to his trade. The story then can be seen as showing us the effect of a monetary economy on society.

It then acts as a pointer to the fact that money destroys human relationships and destroys participation in full human fellowship. The brother's speech is only restored once he had thrown the foul stuff away¹⁹ and washed his lips with the 'waters of repentance'.²⁰ A sign that money is a sin and that we must repent from the sin of money.

1.5.2 The Metaphors of Poverty

Two metaphors of poverty can be counted in the legends of St. Francis. In both these cases, poverty is personified. In the beginning of these we see that Christ is equated with the poor.

In the second poverty is personified into a woman - lady poverty.

1.5.2.1 Christ Equated with the Poor: The equation of Christ with the poor is, as we are already aware, a Biblical theme. Mathew 25 accounts that at the throne of judgement, Christ tells both the goats and the sheep 'whatever you do to the least of these my brethren you also do unto me' (Matt. 25⁴⁵).

This same saying of Jesus is worked out by 1 Celano, making most clear the Biblical connection. The story in 1 Cel. is that one of the Brothers rebukes a poor man telling him that perhaps he was not poor but only pretending to be so. St. Francis commands the brother to take off his tunic and seek pardon from the man and then tells him, "Who curses a poor man does an injury to Christ, whose noble image he wears the image of him who made himself poor for us in this world".²¹

The other three places²² where this story is accounted not only do not articulate the admonition of Francis clearly but also adds other differences - firstly the rebuke of the brother to the poor man is that though he may be poor, the poor man was richest in desire in the entire province. The second difference is that not only is the brother to ask for forgiveness but he also asks the poor man to pray for him. The theological implication of this legend is significant. We shall study it under separate headings.

1.5.2.1.1 The Equation of Christ with the Poor: All the four versions of the story are steadfast in one point by doing an injury to the poor man injury has been done to Christ, which is an obvious paraphrase of Matthew 25:45. The theological relevance of the text is significant Christ not only identified with the poor, or has a preferential option for the poor, but that Christ is the poor and that Christ is found among the poor. The fact that Francis saw the image of Christ in the poor shows us that the presence of Christ is always with us and is to be found among the poor. No wonder Francis in his devotion to Christ opted for a life of poverty.

1.5.2.1.2 Salvation from the Poor: The three other readings of the story that are found in 2 Cel.85, LM 8:5 and LP 89 have the brother rebuking the poor man because 'nowhere in the whole province is there a man richer in his desires'. By saying this, the brother is immediately acknowledging that for the poor too the system of the rich that is having wealth and riches is the standard for life. The meaning of life in such a system is found in having, possessing and owning.

In one sense the brother is not wrong in the fact that the poor too are caught up in the system of the rich believing that salvation will come from wealth. Yet Francis seems to take a different angle on the whole thing where the poor need not necessarily be caught up in the system of the rich. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan in his article 'Christianity and Creation: a Franciscan Speaks to Franciscans' speaking of the great American middle class says,

"When you have this phenomenon of a massive middle class, its values tend to be rather naive and simplistic. The Romans called this 'bread and circuses'; people have just enough worldly comforts that they stop thinking. Those who are kicked around oppressed by the system, search for justice and truth. 'Why am I at the bottom of the system?' 'Why, no matter how hard I work, as I always get kicked to the bottom?'"

Why does the system never work in my favour?' They have to remain politically astute and recognize their viewpoint and the viewpoint of those on top. But those of us in the middle class have the luxury of not caring. We have a bed, a car, three square meals a day. We're basically comfortable. We have been bought off by bread and circuses; we are entertained to death"²³.

It is the poor then who are really able to perceive the system for what it is. If this is true, then Francis admonishes the brother because he has not recognized the power of the poor to do this. The poor, the ones at the bottom of the system are the only ones who can perceive the system for what it is and can therefore question it. Justice oriented social change cannot come from the rich and powerful because they can neither see the evil of the system nor do they want to change it because of the power it gives them. The powerless on the other hand perceive the system for what it is and need not be caught up by its claims rather their clarity of vision enables them to change the system. Thus salvation comes from the poor, not in a sense of glorifying, romanticizing or spiritualising poverty, but because only the poor and the oppressed can recognise things for what they are.

This is probably why Francis admonishes the brother, because the brother by considering that riches are the standard of life does not realize that because the poor are able to see the system for what it is actually can bring about a new system of justice.

1.5.2.1.3 The Priestly Function of the Poor: Not only does Francis recognize that salvation comes from the poor but by asking the brother to ask the poor man to pray for him shows us that the poor have a priestly function as well. The poor then are not only the representatives of God on Earth, a fact we have already noticed by looking at how Christ is found among the poor but are also the mediators between God and humanity who intercede on behalf of humans, thereby playing the role of Christ.

1.5.2.2. The Image of Lady Poverty: One of the most important images in the entire corpus of writings of St. Francis is the personification of poverty into lady poverty. Seen as Francis' lover, in the *Sacrum Commercium*, lady poverty accounts how she had been in the Garden of Eden along with Adam. But she leaves him once he has been banished from the garden. From then on she wanders all over the earth and cannot find rest anywhere, not even with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their promised riches.

Then when Jesus comes to earth, Lady Poverty accounts how she ministers to him and to his disciples who chose to follow his principles of poverty and simplicity. Lady Poverty is also with the early church, but slowly her rival's avarice and sloth turn the Christians away from her. The people of the world instead of following poverty begin to follow the ways of avarice and sloth and moved far away from the ways of God. Lady Poverty became a reject and an outcaste although she kept on calling humans back to the true way. Eventually it is only Francis and his friends who accept Lady Poverty. The *Sacrum Commercium* ends with a symbolic wedding feast between Francis and lady Poverty.

The entire *Sacrum Commercium* is a critique of the church and the principles it was living by, Placid Hermann informs us that in the time of Saint Francis, some of the older monastic orders had grown prosperous and 'poverty was little loved among them'.²⁴

While the term Lady Poverty is obviously the personification of poverty, one must ask

whether in the writings of St. Francis it has any other connotations.

In many senses Lady Poverty can be seen as the church. It cannot be denied that Francis in all the eight cycles of legends is represented as a Christ figure. While this is made explicit by the various stories about the stigmata other smaller deeds also point to the same conclusion. The miracles of healing the sick,²⁵ exorcising²⁶ and even turning water into wine²⁷ are examples of this. If Francis is presented as a figure of Christ and Lady Poverty is the lover of Francis, is it possible then that Lady Poverty could in some way be compared to the church, which after all is the bride of Christ? In fact, *Sacrum Commmercium* projects Lady Poverty as the lover of Christ as well. However, it is obvious that Lady Poverty could in no sense represent the church as it was in the time of Francis. Rather the Lady Poverty stands out as an ideal of what the church should be like. If it is taken in this way, then Lady Poverty stands for Francis' ideal of a poor church.

Having discussed the metaphors and the images of poverty let us now turn our attention to the various themes that arise out of these stories.

1.6 Themes Arising Out of the Stories

1.6.1 Preferential Option for the Poor

Probably the best example of de-classification we have is St. Francis. Born to a wealthy merchant who had business interests in France, St. Francis lived his youth in an atmosphere marked by the greed of businessmen and dedicated to the lucrative deals of commerce.²⁸ However, his life underwent a total conversion - he gave away all his wealth and began to live a life of a poor man. The concept of preferential option for the poor in Saint Francis is not about God's preferential option for the poor. As many theologians have pointed out, God does not make a preferential option for the poor. God is categorically on the side of the poor, as the legends of St. Francis so adequately acknowledge. Rather, the preferential option is for us, whose side do we choose to be on, this is what conversion is about. 'There has been no real metanoia, no conversion until we move from the side of privilege and power and prestige',²⁹ says Richard Rohr. Francis understood this true meaning of conversion that meant a preferential option for the poor.

1.6.2 Voluntary Poverty

1 Celano 22 accounts how Francis was so deeply touched when he heard the gospel reading at the church. The gospel reading was from Luke 9:3 that said, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money - not even an extra tunic.' When Francis heard that he said 'This is what I wish, this is what I seek, this is what I long to do with all my heart'. Celano tells us that 'He immediately put off shoes from his feet, put aside the staff from his hands, was content with one tunic and exchanged his leather girdle for a small cord'. He even designed for himself a 'poor and mean tunic one that would not excite the covetousness of the world'.³⁰

St. Francis made a choice for voluntary poverty, but what did it mean for him to do so?

The stories about St. Francis' feeling genuinely remorseful when he saw somebody who was poorer than himself³¹ shows us that Francis saw voluntary poverty in terms of human relationships. We shall discuss how St. Francis saw voluntary poverty under the following

headings:

- Protest
- Negation of the Negation

1.6.2.1 Protest: Not only was voluntary poverty a response to Christ and a participation in his presence that is found in the poor, it also is a protest against injustice in the world. To quote Gutierrez, “to be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor”³² Poverty is an act of love and liberation. If poverty is caused by injustice and selfishness, voluntary poverty is an act of protest because it is an act of love and solidarity. A solidarity that manifests itself in a specific action, a break with one’s social class, which according to Gutierrez can also help the poor become aware of their exploitation and be liberated from it, he tells us,

“Christian poverty, an expression of love is solidarity with the concrete, contemporary meaning of the witness of poverty. It is a poverty lived not for its own sake, but rather as an authentic imitation of Christ, it is a poverty that means taking on the sinful condition of man to liberate him from all sin and all its consequences”.³³

Thus the concrete act of solidarity of Francis with the poor was a protest against the very fact of poverty. Thus voluntary poverty became the call to justice in an unjust world. As Pieris reminds us, “Voluntary Poverty is an indispensable prerequisite for the just order of society wherein forced poverty has no right to ”.³⁴ Voluntary poverty then is the cure for poverty.

1.6.2.2 Negation of the Negation: As we noticed in the earlier chapter, money was an influence that had begun to break down feudal structures and change the relations of production. New classes were beginning to emerge. Yet at the same time the existence of money made the possibility of accumulation all the more possible. How much could agricultural produce, or even luxury goods, the products of the feudal age, be accumulated? Due to the fact that these were material goods, often perishable, it was not possible to endlessly accumulate these. Money, however is different, due to its unreal nature it lends itself to becoming capital, i.e. the use of wealth in various concrete forms, not as an end in itself but as a means for gathering more wealth’.³⁵

Accumulation is in direct conflict with humanness because accumulation falsely believes that meaning in life is found in having rather than sharing. However only care for one another humanizes life. Care is the way of being human. Francis with his affirmation of poverty and his absolute refusal to have anything to do with money, negates the negation. He refuses to hold that accumulation and wealth are the standards of life, but rather he upholds poverty as the standard for humanity. To use the words of Boff regarding Francis, “to be Radically poor is to be Fully Human.”³⁶ But how was this life of humanness worked out in Franciscan poverty?—to understand this, let us turn to a discussion on Francis and sharing.

1.6.3 Francis and Sharing

There are several stories about Francis and sharing.³⁷ They speak of how Francis gave away his mantle, his tunic, and a copy of the New Testament etc. but interestingly never money. Other stories speak about how Saint Francis never hesitated to ask for alms.³⁸ We shall study

whether in the writings of St. Francis it has any other connotations.

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- Protest
- Negation of the Negation

1.6.2.1 Protest: Not only was voluntary poverty a response to Christ and a participation in his presence that is found in the poor, it also is a protest against injustice in the world. To quote Gutierrez, “to be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor”³² Poverty is an act of love and liberation. If poverty is caused by injustice and selfishness, voluntary poverty is an act of protest because it is an act of love and solidarity. A solidarity that manifests itself in a specific action, a break with one’s social class, which according to Gutierrez can also help the poor become aware of their exploitation and be liberated from it, he tells us,

“Christian poverty, an expression of love is solidarity with the concrete, contemporary meaning of the witness of poverty. It is a poverty lived not for its own sake, but rather as an authentic imitation of Christ, it is a poverty that means taking on the sinful condition of man to liberate him from all sin and all its consequences”.³³

Thus the concrete act of solidarity of Francis with the poor was a protest against the very fact of poverty. Thus voluntary poverty became the call to justice in an unjust world. As Pieris reminds us, “Voluntary Poverty is an indispensable prerequisite for the just order of society wherein forced poverty has no right to ”.³⁴ Voluntary poverty then is the cure for poverty.

1.6.2.2 Negation of the Negation: As we noticed in the earlier chapter, money was an influence that had begun to break down feudal structures and change the relations of production. New classes were beginning to emerge. Yet at the same time the existence of money made the possibility of accumulation all the more possible. How much could agricultural produce, or even luxury goods, the products of the feudal age, be accumulated? Due to the fact that these were material goods, often perishable, it was not possible to endlessly accumulate these. Money, however is different, due to its unreal nature it lends itself to becoming capital, i.e. the use of wealth in various concrete forms, not as an end in itself but as a means for gathering more wealth’.³⁵

Accumulation is in direct conflict with humanness because accumulation falsely believes that meaning in life is found in having rather than sharing. However only care for one another humanizes life. Care is the way of being human. Francis with his affirmation of poverty and his absolute refusal to have anything to do with money, negates the negation. He refuses to hold that accumulation and wealth are the standards of life, but rather he upholds poverty as the standard for humanity. To use the words of Boff regarding Francis, “to be Radically poor is to be Fully Human.”³⁶ But how was this life of humanness worked out in Franciscan poverty?—to understand this, let us turn to a discussion on Francis and sharing.

1.6.3 Francis and Sharing

There are several stories about Francis and sharing.³⁷ They speak of how Francis gave away his mantle, his tunic, and a copy of the New Testament etc. but interestingly never money. Other stories speak about how Saint Francis never hesitated to ask for alms.³⁸ We shall study

Francis' approach to sharing under two headings:

- Francis and alms giving.
- Francis and gift economy.

1.6.3.1 Francis and Alms Giving: 2 Celano tells of a rather unusual story that may be it is best to repeat verbatim.

When St. Francis was living in the palace of the Bishop of Rieti, trying to get a cure for the infirmity of his eyes, a certain poor woman from Machilone who had an infirmity similar to that of the saint came to the doctor. The saint, therefore, addressing his guardian familiarly, said something like this: "Brother guardian we must give back, what belongs to another". He replied, "Let it be given back Father, if there is such a thing here". "This mantle" he said, "which we borrowed from that poor women, let us give it back to her, for she has nothing in her purse to take care of her expenses". The guardian answered, "Brother, this mantle is mine and it was not lent to me by anyone. But use it as long as it pleases you, when you no longer want to use it give it back to me". Actually, the guardian had bought it a little earlier for Francis' need. The saint said to him: "Brother guardian, you have always been courteous to me and I beg you to show me the same courtesy now". The guardian replied, "Do as you wish, father, whatever the spirit suggests to you".³⁹

The story goes on to speak about how the woman received her mantle.

The church has always maintained the tradition of giving alms but there are two ways in which this can be seen, they way of charity and the way of justice. As we have earlier seen, Ambrose and Clement of Alexandria actually justified and legitimised wealth by claiming that wealth enabled people to give charity. The Francis tradition is extremely critical about this view in the *Sacrum Commercium*, the personification of avarice, the enemy of Lady Poverty is seen to use this argument. She says,

"would not god be pleased if you had at hand what you could give to the needy, being mindful of the poor, since he said: It is more blessed to give than to receive? Why do you not receive the goods that are offered to you and thereby avoid depriving the givers of their eternal reward? There is no reason why you should be afraid of companionship with riches, since you consider them as nothing. Vice is not in the things, but in the heart, for God sees all the things he made, for they are very good. Good things are for the good, all things serve them for all things were made for them. How many who have riches make but ill use of them; if you had these things, you would convert them to good use, for your purpose is holy, your desire holy".⁴⁰

The text is evidence enough to prove that St. Francis disapproved of wealth even if it was used well and was used to give alms. In any case Francis did not see alms giving as charity, but as justice. The poor received what was rightfully theirs. This is why Francis is able to tell the guardian to return the mantle that was "borrowed" from the poor woman. Francis understood that he was not giving charity but giving back to the poor what was rightfully theirs. Jose Miranda in his book, "*Marx and the Bible*" makes a same point he tells us that the original word that has been translated into English as almsgiving is '*sedekah*' which literally means justice. Thus Miranda says "the act which in the West is called almsgiving

for the original Bible was a restitution that someone makes for something that was not his".⁴¹ Therefore Francis was correct in saying that the mantle did not belong to him but he had borrowed it and was now returning it. By doing so, he was doing justice - making restoration for something that was not his.

1.6.3.2 Francis and gift Economy: Francis as we have already noticed had nothing to do with money - in fact; he did not even touch it. Similarly he rejected all private property- his life was an open critique of both the growing monetary economy. Instead, he was always giving things away and when he wanted something he asked for alms.

It can be said that Francis circumvented the exchange economy that was facilitated by money by following an economy of gift giving. Genevieve Vaughan in her book "*Forgiving: A Feminist Critique of Exchange*" argues the differences between gift-giving and exchange. She says,

"Opposed to gift-giving is exchange that is going in order to receive there calculation and measurement are necessary and an equation must be established between the products. In exchange, there is a logical movement that is ego-oriented than other oriented. The giver uses the satisfaction of the other's need as a means to the satisfaction of her own need".⁴²

Vaughan unfortunately does not make any reference to Saint Francis of Assisi but he would be the model for her vision as gift-giving as an alternative economic model. There are so many stories of St. Francis in which he gives away things, so many others where he goes begging alms and encourages others to do so as well. Still others picture him as a man of humility who is other oriented and not ego oriented that is as necessary for an exchange economy.

Francis' gift-giving and receiving forms a radical critique of growing monetary economy and is presented to us as an alternative to exchange. An important point to make here is that Francis seeing the changes brought about by money, did not attempt to return to the old structure. This in fact the church also wanted to do because it held a large number of feudal holdings. Rather, Francis evolved a whole new alternative that did not take either money or hierarchy as its standard. In the next section where we discuss St. Francis' social and ecological vision, we shall also notice his critique of feudalism.

1.6.4 Francis' Social and Ecological Vision

St. Francis has been dubbed by the Catholic Church, as the patron saint of ecology, yet to look at St. Francis' ecological vision without taking into consideration his social or economic vision, is lopsided. To view Francis only ecologically is to make him into a saint of the birds and butterflies instead of the radical prophet that he was. Since we have already studied Francis' economic vision in some detail, let us now look at his social and ecological vision together.

The distinctive feature of society in the time of Francis was the extreme polarities that existed, polarities between noble and serf, landed and landless, urban and rural and of course even between humans and nature. It was a time when all power was wielded by the three estates - clergy, nobility and merchants. In fact, these three groups even enjoyed special

legal rights. This was a society that valued people because of what they had, instead of who they were.

Francis' whole theology and especially his voluntary poverty must be seen as a confrontation and a protest against this. It was the confrontation of the power of powerlessness with the powerlessness of power. This view of powerlessness as a radical critique of power and poverty as a radical critique of wealth Francis receives from Christ as is evident from the story where he hears the gospel of Christ (Lk.9) in the chapel and decides to make a change. Other texts particularly those in *the Sacrum Commercium* show us that Francis was also deeply influenced by the incarnation of Christ.⁴³ Of Christ the *Sacrum Commercium* says,

“For he, the king of kings and lord of lords, the creator of heaven and earth, desired your splendour and your majesty. While the king was at his repose, rich and glorious in his kingdom, he forsook his house and left his inheritance for wealth and riches were in his house and coming thus from heavens royal throne, he very fittingly sought you out.”⁴⁴

It is this kenosis of Christ that Francis found appealing. Francis imitates the international Christ, who gave up all his power to live on earth a life of poverty. It is this kinetic Christ that gives Francis his inspiration and stands in the centre of his theology. But how does Francis' imitation of the powerless Christ manifest itself in his ecological and social thought?

1.6.4.1 The Ecological Significance of the Incarnation of Christ: The ecological significance of the incarnation of the powerless Christ has pervaded both the life and thought of Francis. This is best seen in the story of the Christmas tableau set up at Francis at Greccio.⁴⁵ There Francis laid a crib with an ox and ass standing by and celebrated the mass above it. It is said that this delighted both humans and beast and that beasts who were ill were cured when they ate the hay of the crib.

The message is clear to us - the incarnation, the giving up of power by Christ brings all creation once more together. The work of Christ is to heal the split between God, humans and nature that is done by his kenosis and its consequent expression of his solidarity with nature. The creator is not polarized from creation but by kenosis has identified with it and made all things whole.

Christ then becomes the initiator of the oneness of all creation that is done by his giving up of power. This is then paralleled in Francis who through his imitation of Christ finds that solidarity and unity of creation is found therefore in powerlessness and not in power or acquisition. Thus Francis' decision of voluntary poverty resulted in a feeling of solidarity with all life. Voluntary poverty meant begging, an activity that means absolute dependency and hence powerlessness for survival and thereby breaking down the barriers of individualism. Hence, the Franciscan order stressed community living, giving and sharing-there are an innumerable number of stories of Francis and his followers giving away even the little they owned. Francis saw himself as the humble servant of all. We can see that this was done to realize and to proclaim the oneness of all life in an age that saw so much fragmentation due to ownership.

1.6.4.2 The Web of Life: It becomes apparent to us now that Francis saw a certain connectedness in all of life that was initiated by Christ in his powerlessness and is perpetuated

by ours. Conversely it is also clear that this oneness of all life is broken down by power and private ownership. Thus, to the people of Greccio it is said, "wealth breeds pride and hatred: they even engaged in battles with swords and did not hesitate to murder; they killed animals in an underhanded way, pillaged and robbed at night, and committed many other heinous crimes."⁴⁶ Powerlessness builds up this oneness of all life and wealth and power breaks it down.

But the question remains, what was the nature of this connectedness. Francis did not see a great chain of being - creation was not connected by the overflowing goodness of God upon all creatures in a hierarchical chain - the connectedness that Francis saw was not vertical but horizontal.

Going back to the Christmas tableau, Francis saw an inter-connectedness between all creation with the kenotic creator the initiator of this inter-connectedness at the centre. Francis did not see any great chain of being but what he saw was the web of life.

This is why Francis is able to refer to the sun as his brother and the birds and the moon as his sister. This is why he can join with the birds in praising God and call the flowers to worship, and most of all this is why Francis could share such a beautiful equalitarian relationship with Clare. Francis living in a context with great inequalities, so much social differentiation and an alienation from land as a means of subsistence is able to feel a great oneness in all creation. His life then stood as a parable that called all to experience the oneness that he could by giving up power.

But Francis did not see only that which is living as part of this web, but all that is necessary for life. Therefore Francis is able to call fire his brother because fire like all the other elements are necessary for the sustenance of life - in fact Francis in the *Canticle of the Sun* was even able to call death his sister - death is an essential component in the web of life, for it is in dying that life is found, for when humans die they give life to the trees and plants, who in their death, give life to the animals, who in their death give life to humans.

Thus we see in death, the ultimate level of powerlessness the highest level of connectedness is found. The web of life is sustained by powerlessness and self-emptying but is destroyed by power and wealth.

1.64.3 Implications of the Web of Life: From ancient times to present day there have been various views of nature that have swung from worship of nature to treating nature as raw material for profit. But Francis' view of the web of life sustained by powerlessness is a view that sees power equally distributed throughout all of nature. None has the place to rule therefore we have Francis admonishing the wolves that attack and the birds⁴⁷ that sing too loud and disturb the preaching. On the other hand Francis also submits himself in obedience to the animals - in the hymn *'In Praise of the Virtues'* he says of obedience:

'Holy obedience puts to shame
all natural and selfish desires
It mortifies our lower nature
And makes it obey the spirit
And our fellowmen

Obedience subjects a man
To everyone on earth
And not only to men
But to all the animals as well
And to the wild animals
So that they can do what they like with him
As far as God allows them'.

Hence Francis sees in the web of life power is equally shared among all - so Francis refers to the earth in the canticle of the sun as Sister Mother Earth. Though she is one who provides, as found in the metaphor of mother, she is not a goddess to be worshipped but a sister to be embraced. In fact the same relationship is shared with Clare whom Francis sees not as a subordinate but as a friend and as an equal.

1.6.4.4 Nature as Sacred: Lastly we see that Francis' powerlessness makes him see all nature as sacred. This comes to us clearly in the story of lady poverty who comes to visit Francis. Francis being poor can only offer her poor food - bread and water, later when she wants to rest the monks can give her only a stone and not a cushion to lay her head on. But when she asks them to show her their cloister, they took her to a certain hill and showed her the whole world around her and said, 'This lady, is our cloister'. The poverty of Francis makes him see nature as sacred.

1.7 Conclusion

Central to Francis' theology then is his concept of powerlessness for which the person of Christ was his inspiration. For Francis this powerlessness meant stepping out of the norms and values of society and making a radical stand along with the poor and the oppressed. It is this that makes Francis totally reject money that for him symbolizes wealth, possessions and power. In an age of globalization where human worth is determined by what a person owns and not by what a person is St. Francis stands out as a radical prophet showing the way by example.

In a world such as ours we obviously can not completely do away with money as Francis sought to do, but we can resist it becoming more than a means of exchange and a determinant of value. Francis' fear was that money would begin to dominate all of life and that all of life would evolve around the making of money. In many senses what he feared then has come true today. To resist the all pervasive omnipotent demi-god Mammon we should be able to see St. Francis as a model for human liberation today. His example of recognizing the evil power of money and naming it as such should be at the centre of a theological critique in an age of globalisation. We should be able to recognize the evil that the capitalist economy is wrecking on the lives of the oppressed and marginalized of the world as well as on the environment. But merely recognizing money's evil power is not good enough, theology should also be willing to take a radical stand along with the poor, and recognize that Salvation comes from among the poor and oppressed, and that Christ in our world today is to be found among the poor. In a monetized economic system which treats us all as atomized individuals, as mere consumers on a global market and nature as separate from our selves, Francis gives

us a new vision of society as being a web. That life in all its fullness is to be had if we are able to recognize that we are all connected to each other, with power being equally shared among all and not being held by a few.

We see therefore that Francis' life and theology was a radical critique of society in his time. By opting for voluntary poverty, he provided an alternative vision of a society in which women, men and nature stood as equals. This alternative society was an alternative to both, feudalism with its graded hierarchy as well as of the newly growing money economy that precluded human relationships.

In conclusion we can only say "surely this man was a saint."

NOTES

1. 2 Cel. 65.
2. Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines Vol II: History of the Doctrines of the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1958) p. 89.
3. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1988) P. 113
4. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society, Vol 1*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p.60.
5. This was first noticed in the peasant revolts of the 16th century and also in the English enclosure movements whereby property and free labour were created.
6. Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936) p. 39
7. 2Cel. 55
8. 2 Cel' 77, LP 59, SP22, and LM 7:10
9. 2 Cel 75b, LP 62b, SP 24, LM 5:6
10. 2 Cel 81, LP 20, LM 7:3
11. 2 Cel 66
12. 2 Cel 47, LP 108b, SP 107d
13. 2 Cel 129, LP 96b, SP 97, LM 5:6
14. 2 Cel. 68, LM 7:5. It should be mentioned here that the connection between Satan and the serpent is a theological and not a Biblical one. The Bible does not equate the two (cf. Jay Williams, 'The Wisdom of the Serpent', *The Guest* Winter 1997, p.25). Yet it is obvious that Francis made the connection.
15. RH. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1922) p. 32.
16. 2 Cel. 47, LP 108a, SP 107d.
17. 2 Cel. 66.
18. This does not imply in any means that those who are unable to speak are in anyway less than human.
19. 2 Cel. 66.
20. *Loc. cit.*
21. Cel. 76.
22. 2 Cel. 85, LM 8:5, LP89.
23. Richard Rohr, Christianity and Creation: A Franciscan Speaks to Franciscans in *Embracing Earth Catholic approaches to Ecology*, Albert Le Chance and John E. Carroll ed. (Maxyknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), p.151.
24. Placid Herman in "Introduction" to *Sacrum Commercium* in Marion A. Habig ed. *St. Francis of Assisi: An Omnibus of Sources*, (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1987), p.v
25. LM12:10.
26. *Loc.cit.*
27. 1 Cel. 61b
28. LM 1:1.

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29. Richard Rohr, op. cit, p.148.
30. 1 Cel. 22.
31. LP 88,2 Cel. 84, SP 17, LM 76.
32. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973) p.301
33. *Ibid*, pp.300-301.
34. Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1986) P.20.
35. Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985, pp.34-35.
36. Leonardo Boff, *St. Francis: A Model of Human Liberation*, (New York: Crossroads,1986) p.72.
37. Cel. 86-92.
38. 2 Cel. 71-76.
39. Cel. 92.
40. SC 64
41. Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, (London: SCM Press, 1997), p.15.
42. Genevive Vaughan, *For-giving: A Feminist Critique of Exchange*, (Austin: Plain View Press, 1977), p.31.
43. 1 Cel. 8487.
44. "SC 16.
45. 1 Cel. 84-87.
46. 2 Cel. 61
47. 2 Cel. 35.