CHAPTER TWO

Francis and His Companions

After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do. . . .

The Testament of Saint Francis

In the spring of 1208 some men of Assisi joined Francis to follow in his way of life. They were an eclectic group. Bernard of Quintavalle came from a wealthy family; Sylvester was a priest of Assisi who had previously scorned Francis and his doings; Giles and Peter and Philip are known to us mainly by name. What does it mean to say that they "joined" him? Francis himself had no real plan of life other than his determined effort to follow the example of the poor Christ, serve the needy, work with his hands, and flee the secular world. At this early stage it would be premature to speak of a religious "order" in any canonical sense of the term. As he wrote in his *Testament,* no one showed him what he had to do. Evidently, Francis sent his companions out on little preaching missions with the understanding that they would come back for periodic meetings at the Portiuncula — that little plot of land and chapel owned

by the Benedictine monks of Mount Subasio but given first on loan to Francis and then to the possession of Francis and his companions. At this stage of their existence they were little more than a like-minded group of pious penitents seeking a way of life but who, for now, simply acted in an ad hoc fashion.

By early 1209 a few more joined this little band so that their number was the highly symbolic twelve (whether we can trust that number can be left to the historians). It was quite one thing for Francis or Francis and a companion to be itinerant lay preachers living on the bounty of strangers, but it was quite another thing to have a dozen members in the community. With that number some need for structure was inevitable: when would the group gather for prayer? would they follow the canonical hours of the liturgy (Sylvester the priest would have had that obligation)? would they eat together? with what food and how supplied? As intuitive as Francis might have wished to stay, there was a certain inevitable need for a regularization of their life. That need became all the greater as the size of the fraternity increased in number.

Francis also knew that many ad hoc groups abroad had fallen into heretical practices or were under the suspicion of church authorities. Such had already become the case with groups like the Poor Men of Lyons (the Waldensians) and the Humiliati who had run afoul of Rome over issues like lay preaching and their understanding of sacramental powers. Consequently Francis decided, in the late spring of 1209, to take his eleven companions and go to Rome to get approval for their way of life and sanction for their activities from the pope, the powerful Innocent III, the former Lothario of Segni who had been elected pope as a thirty-seven-year-old cardinal deacon in 1198.

Innocent was a formidable figure who brought the papacy to its apex of power in the middle ages. It was Innocent who developed the claim that the pope possessed the fulness of power in both the spiritual and temporal realm; it was he who assumed the title "Vicar of Christ" as that which was appropriate for, and peculiar to, the pope alone. Before that time the popes were simply known as the "Vicar of Peter" since among their most fundamental tasks was to be guardians of the tomb of the apostle to whom Jesus entrusted the keys of the kingdom. Trained in canon law and theology, he organized anew the papal chancellery. He developed laws to coalesce jurisdictional powers to himself.

When Francis and his followers went to Rome the pope had many pressing issues on his mind. The Fourth Crusade (1202-04) to free the holy places from the Muslims had been a failure, but the pope single-mindedly sought to create a new crusading army. The church was in dire need of reform, which would lead him, in 1213, to call yet another general council to his palace in the Lateran — a council that would convene in 1215. The increased militancy of heretical groups in general and the Cathars of southern France in particular were a major worry. The flood of petitions for either ecclesiastical privileges or the settlement of legal grievances took up vast amounts of papal energy while giving a handsome living to the ever-swelling army of papal attendants living in Rome.

In preparation for that visit with the pope Francis wrote a simple rule of life to present to the pope for his approval, even though an earlier Lateran Council had decreed that there were only three monastic rules (those of Saints Basil, Benedict, and Augustine) to be used in the church. Francis managed to get an

audience with the pope through a chain of intermediaries: the bishop of Assisi introduced Francis to the cardinal bishop of Albano, John of Saint Paul, who then got Francis to see the pope. In fact, we do not know what this early rule of Francis looked like at all. It might even be incorrect to call it a "rule" in the technical sense of the term. It most likely was more in the form of a schema (Latin: *propositum*) indicating how this little band proposed to live. Based on a careful reading of a rule written by Francis in 1221 (known as the "non-sealed rule" [*regula non-bullata*] because it did not get the papal stamp of approval), we can surmise that the document Francis brought to the pope was little more than a catena of scriptural texts indicating their desire to live in poverty, to practice penance, and to preach to the ordinary people.

The early Franciscan sources surround this desire for papal approval with a series of rather baroque incidents involving the pope having dreams of a ragged figure holding up the crumbling church or the pope sending Francis packing only to receive him because of a prophetic dream — not to mention Francis's willingness to actually live in a pigsty when the pope, in a moment of pique, told him to do so when first laying eyes on him. Most of these incidents were retrospective touches to show the fidelity of Francis to the pope and his curia as well as the pope's providential role in the founding of the order. These pious embroideries should not blind us from the one important fact, which is that the pope saw something in Francis and gave him *oral* permission to take up his way of life for himself and his companions. The intricacies of these negotiations may, in fact, mask the uncertainty with which the papal court reacted in the face of this ragged band of penitents.

Evidently the pope was won over by the argument of Cardinal John of Saint Paul that to deny them their way of life was to go against the words of the gospel, which plainly stated that the life of the disciple includes a life of poverty dedicated to preaching the way of penance and conversion. After all, Innocent himself had written a widely read treatise on the misery of the human condition and the need for conversion *(De Miseria Humanae Conditionis)* when he was still a cardinal. That argument only echoes a commonplace that had been in discussion for over a hundred years in Christendom: how does one go about living the gospel life? What was the paradigm? To what "canon within the canon" of sacred scripture would one appeal?

Saint Bonaventure, in his major life of Francis, desiring to emphasize the orthodoxy of these early friars, noted that the pope had the lay members of the group tonsured (thus, indicating that they belonged to the clerical state) and gave them permission to preach penance to the people while "promising them more in the future." Was it also during this time that Francis was ordained a deacon? We know for a fact that he was an ordained deacon (but never a priest) for the sources tell us that. When he was ordained to that order we really do not know, but this would have been a plausible moment for it to have happened. With that oral approval and the added permission to preach Francis distanced himself from any identification with lay groups like the Poor Men of Lyons who assumed the role of preaching (which meant, in essence, to explicate the scriptures in depth) contrary to the discipline of the church. Even with the approbation of the pope in hand, Francis always proceeded cautiously by asking permission of the local bishop to preach in his diocese. From the beginning,

Francis aligned his work within the boundaries of the hierarchical church.

If the meeting with the pope happened in late 1209, what we can then deduce is that by the year following the band of friars (friars merely meaning "brothers") had settled permanently at the Portiuncula. The early sources refer to this group simply as a *religio* — a "religion" (from the Latin *religare* — to bind) which, in the usage of the day, meant those who adopted a certain way of religious observance. How can we describe that *religio?* Quite simply, it was a mixed community of laypersons and priests who had dedicated themselves to a life of poverty, a willingness to identify themselves with the poor and the outcast, a mission of popular preaching, a tendency toward itinerancy but with another impulse toward periods of retirement, and a robust resistance to the acquisition of goods, incomes, properties, and endowments. They desired to work for their living or, when work was not available, to beg for alms. Francis would send them out in pairs, in obedience to the gospel model of disciples going abroad "two by two" to preach in the villages and towns.

The shape of this early group is a bit of a puzzle. Saint Francis called the group a "fraternity" (the word occurs ten times in his own writings). We also see the word *religio* in the early sources; sometimes they identify themselves as an "order of penitents," and at other times they are simply called "the brothers." The precise character of their canonical standing went through various permutations as the number of followers of Francis increased and their relationship to the larger church became an issue.

This style of life had certain novelties that marked the

religio of Francis off from the usual forms of religious life. Their emphasis on itinerancy was one. Unlike monks who vowed to live a stable life in a monastery for life, the friars were frequently "on the road." As Chesterton once said in a now famous aphorism: "What Benedict stored, Francis scattered." Unlike the clergy who maintained their life by the revenues derived from endowments, the friars would live from the work of their hands or, in times of need, by alms. It must be remembered that begging for alms was forbidden to the clergy as unseemly; they depended on incomes from fixed sources like tithes or endowments derived from possession of properties. When the friars went door to door asking for charity or begged in front of the churches of the towns and cities, they were crossing a social line that up to their time had been firm. "At that time," the *Legend of the Three Companions* insisted, "No one dared to give up their riches and their possessions and ask for charity door to door."

Their dress was simply the clothing of the very poor. It had no distinctive color; the use of brown, grey, or even green cloth was determined, not by rule, but by what was the cheapest cloth available. In England, for example, they came to be known as the "grey friars." They did adopt a distinctive style of dress to use as a social marker; their habit said something new since they did not adopt the typical habit of the monk nor that of the canon or the hermit. Their plain dress of gown with hood, cinched with a rope, was a sign of who they were. They either went barefoot or wore simple sandals.

The next few years saw Francis and his companions alternatively following the life of travel (Francis may have gone to Dalmatia in this period in a thwarted attempt to reach the

Muslim lands in order to preach and expose himself to the danger of martyrdom) and regular returns to the Portiuncula. On Palm Sunday evening in 1209 Clare Offreduccio, of the aristocratic family of the same name, came to Francis at the Portiuncula aspiring to live a life inspired by Francis's life of poverty. A great deal of romantic blather has been read into this encounter of the then eighteen-year-old young woman meeting the then twenty-eight-year-old man of penance. The very reticence of the early sources about their relationship may tell, in an oddly negative way, that they were great friends — a friendship that the sources may have wished not to emphasize overly much.

Recent writers such as Marco Bertoli, Ingrid Peterson, and Margaret Carney have been determined to see Clare in her own right and not merely as a star-struck adolescent who became infatuated with the example of Francis. That approach is surely correct. There is some evidence to suggest that Clare and the other women of her family, including her sisters, already had a vigorous spiritual life in their own home not unlike that of the medieval Beguines in the north. Witnesses at her canonization process (the proceedings of that process are extant) who knew her before her conversion mention her care for the poor, her life of prayer, her simplicity of life. She went with her mother on pilgrimage to Rome and to the shrine of the Archangel Michael at Monte Gargano in southern Italy. Her mother seems to have been an inveterate pilgrim who had visited the famous shrine of Campostela and also the holy places in Palestine. Clare wore modest clothes and, some testified, had resisted the idea of marriage in order to live a virginal life of prayer. Clare, in other words, came to the Portiuncula with a strong sense of

Christian discipleship and a formed spiritual maturity beyond her years. Clare thus underwent two conversions. She turned from an already pious life of Christian observance in a domestic setting toward the new vision that Francis and his companions offered. That this life of piety was first conducted within the confines of her own family would have been the rule and not the exception given the social standards of the day.

There was no question, however, of her taking up the mendicant life after the manner of the friars. Such a way of living would have been uthinkable in this period when women were expected to live within the shelter of the home or the convent. On that Palm Sunday evening Francis cut off Clare's hair as a sign of her withdrawal from the world; those shorn tresses are displayed in Assisi to this day. Francis had Clare go to a nearby Benedictine monastery but, within a month or so, after another short stay in another religious house, settled her at a house next to the rebuilt church of San Damiano. Eventually she set up her convent there, which became the home of her *religio* as it is to this day. What Clare insisted on, however, was that her companions (she was soon joined by her mother and two of her sisters) were to lead a religious life without having endowments or lands or other ordinary sources of income characteristic of monastic life at that time.

Clare determined to live purely on alms given to her community or by the work of their hands. This boldly risky enterprise was at the center of her understanding of religious life, but it was not until 1228, two years after the death of Francis, that this "privilege of poverty" *(privilegium paupertatis)* for three convents in Assisi was granted by the pope. This privilege did not come without difficulty since church authorities could

not understand how such a community could exist without some ready source of support. Part of the story of Clare and her community inevitably deals with the degree to which her understanding of poverty was to be protected from well meaning attempts to modify it. Although over the years there would be modifications and compromises (but not in Clare's lifetime!) the Poor Clares give witness to this day of the intuitions of Clare and her companions.

Clare outlived Francis by over a quarter of a century. She lived to see her communities spread over a good part of Europe. From her cloister in Assisi she became an influential mistress of the spiritual life, serving as an advisor to popes and a protector of the city of Assisi. The particular genius of Clare was to discover a way in which she could live out the Franciscan insight of poverty for the sake of Christ in a manner possible for the women of her time. During the lifetime of Francis they kept in close contact. In the basilica of Saint Francis one can see, among the relics from the life of Francis, a plain woven white gown she sewed for the saint in his final illness. A text, discovered only in the twentieth century, addressed to the *poverelle* (the "Poor Ladies") has Francis begging them "to use with discernment the alms the Lord gives you" thus underscoring the concern with poverty that Francis, like Clare, saw as central to their way of life.

From the pen of Clare we have a series of four letters that she wrote to Agnes of Bohemia, daughter of that country's king, who wishes to model a convent in Prague after the manner of San Damiano. One other letter and her *Rule* round out the authentic writings of the saint. Whether the testament attributed to her or a blessing bearing her name are authentic is

a matter of some scholarly debate. In the sixth chapter of her *Rule* Clare pays witness to the example and teaching of Francis as the inspiration for her own way of life. Within that same chapter are two excerpts from Francis's own teaching for the Poor Ladies. Francis promises "for myself and for my brothers always to have that same loving care and solicitude for you as I have for them." The *Rule* also quotes an exhortation of the dying Francis that the Poor Ladies should always keep their life of poverty and "keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone."

Clare is not often mentioned in the writings of Francis or in the early legends. She mentions him in her writings more frequently; she needed his authority as a founder to sustain her own form of life in poverty. One intriguing source mentions that Francis consulted her through an intermediary about his desire to take up the life of a hermit. We also know that he spent his last days ill and discouraged in a hut near San Damiano. What does seem to be the case is that Francis and Clare had one of those great spiritual friendships in which their mutual gifts were such to sustain the inspirations they had to live out their intuitions about the gospel life. In that sense, they are paired as naturally as Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, Saints Francis de Sales and Jeanne Marie De Chantal, Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, or Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day in our own day.

In the lifetime of Francis it might be premature to assume two "orders" of Franciscans — that of the friars and that of the sisters. It might be more correct to speak of a movement of people intending to lead a more intense Christian life with the

concomitant desire to privilege a life of poverty. Over some decades, through clarification and the adoption of a regular life (which is to say, life under a rule), this movement became two orders. It is the task of the historian of these matters to pinpoint precisely when this solidification came about, but it certainly was happening, in the case of the friars at least, toward the end of Francis's life.

But what about the laypeople? When did the so-called "third order" take shape? The answer to that question is not an easy one. We know from the sources that some people in Assisi and elsewhere thought that the little fraternity of penitents were layabouts or insane. Others listened closely to what the followers of Francis and Francis himself had to say. Many of these people, however, could not simply leave home and hearth to take up a mendicant life. They may have had obligations to family or to their social network. To those people Francis had to provide some spiritual advice to lead, more intensely, a Christian way of being in the world.

In two versions of a letter of exhortation written to "all people" (written perhaps less than ten years before he died) we may get verification of this more general style of life that Francis preached to people. It is not clear to whom these letters (more properly, exhortations) were addressed. Were they for all Christians or for all those who had taken up the penitential life? The salutation is ambiguous, but the main themes are clear. One can detect in them two distinct but interwoven messages.

First, Francis wanted those who heard his preaching to lead a Catholic life. He insisted clearly that a good Christian life demanded reverence and reception of the eucharist; that

this eucharistic piety presupposed the regular confession of sins; that priests were to be honored and churches visited. In all of those emphases there was an implied rebuke to the Cathars who did not hold to an orthodox view of the sacraments and the Waldensians who resisted the notion that true Christianity rested not in the authority of Holy Orders but in the purity of the believing community itself. If there is one thing that is not new, original, or radical in the mind of Francis it is his understanding of sacramental theology. His instructions are quite obviously inspired by the teachings of the Fourth Lateran Council.

The second great theme was his great catechetical instruction on Jesus Christ who is, in Francis's words, the one who was the Word of God who "received the flesh of our humanity and frailty." It is that same Christ who lived a life of poverty, who further humbled himself in the sacrament of the eucharist and through the cross, who is the exemplar for us. From that supremely orthodox christology — again, an implied rebuke to the Cathars — Francis deduces that our salvation comes from receiving this Christ "with heart pure and our body chaste." In other words, he invites people to convert to Christ and, in that conversion, fruits of penance will come. Those fruits are love of neighbor, alms for the poor, charity to all, and a spirit of humility.

When one looks carefully at this exhortation, it is clear that Francis had a vision for Christian living that had deep roots in ecclesial life modeled on the meaning of the Incarnate Christ. Francis sees this form of Christian living as a deeply relational reality that intertwines Christ, church, and society. He puts it brilliantly:

> We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven; mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example.

In the years between 1212 and 1215 we have a movement beginning to take shape. Francis has an increasing number of brothers who go out to preach and then return for periods of solitude and for common discussion. The women who have joined Clare are situated in convents where they lead a life of prayer sustained by alms granted by the local populace. There are also persons who, inspired by the gospel vision preached by the Lesser Brothers, ally themselves to the way of life preached by Francis. Ordinary laypeople would be attracted to the convents to ask for prayers, receive spiritual instruction, and so on. This was their role in the more general reformation of the culture. It would only be in the future that more canonical stipulations, in the form of recognized rules of life, would give more order and coherence to what is still in an embryonic state.

We are fortunate that there are some contemporary witnesses to the work inspired by Francis. The most valuable of these testimonies comes from the pen of Jacques de Vitry (died 1240) who had occasion to see the Lesser Brothers at their preaching. De Vitry wrote a letter back to his companions in his hometown of Liege before his departure to take up the bishopric of Acre in the Crusader States. He tells how the

Lesser Brothers and the Lesser Sisters were held in esteem by the papal curia for their way of life. He goes on:

> They live according to the form of the primitive church. . . . During the day they go into the cities and villages giving themselves over to the active life in order to gain others; at night, however, they return to their hermitage or solitary places to devote themselves to contemplation. The women dwell together near the city in various hospices, accepting nothing, but living by the work of their hands. They are grieved, indeed troubled, by the fact that they are honored by both clergy and laity more than they would wish.

There are a number of highly interesting things to note in that brief paragraph. First, De Vitry explicitly notes that their "form" of life is that of the primitive church — a "form" that had been sought after by reforming elements going back at least to the papacy of Gregory VII. Second, the Lesser Brothers are said to combine the twin activities of action (during the day) and contemplation (during the night), so that the old distinction between the active and the contemplative is now replaced by the so-called "mixed life" *(vita mixta)* that became more prominent in this period. Jacques de Vitry also notes that the women "accepted nothing," which, of course, means that they resisted the older monastic paradigm of receiving endowments or dowries or vested properties, preferring to work by their hands (we know, for example, that needlework and spinning were frequent occupations) or, although the letter does not say it explicitly, to receive alms. De Vitry's description

points to the fact that he drew upon a vocabulary that had been current for some time before the advent of Francis.

Nonetheless, Jacques de Vitry understood that what this movement was doing was something quite new. He was well acquainted with the Beguines in the north who worked out a way for women to live in small urban communities without formally entering religious life. He devoted a chapter to the Franciscans in his great work on the Latin Church *(Historia Occidentalis)*. In Chapter 32 of that book he said that up to this time in the life of the church there were three religious orders: monks, hermits, and canons. In our time, he said, the Lord lifted up a fourth order or, to be more precise, renewed something that had been the form of the primitive church of the Acts of the Apostles; his textbook case for this new way was the movement started by Brother Francis, "a simple, uneducated man beloved by God and man." Jacques de Vitry goes on to single out certain innovative characteristics of this new movement. He records that these Lesser Brothers are free of any property either in the form of monastery complexes and churches or sources of income like vineyards or domestic animals or fields. He goes on to note that the Lesser Brothers invite men from both the lower orders and "high born nobles" to dispossess themselves, which, he says, they do by girding themselves with a rope around a cheap tunic with a hood.

The idea of freedom from class distinction is, according to the *Historia Occidentalis*, one reason for their expansive growth. He says that the only men excluded from their order are those who are married and those who have made a promise (a vow?) to join another religious order. The growth of the movement was undeniable since, as De Vitry notes, there is

"scarcely a kingdom in Christendom" that does not have a representative number of these brothers.

In the period between Clare's visit to Francis on Palm Sunday 1212 and Francis's visit to Rome in 1215 a number of things happened that would play out in important ways in the subsequent history of Francis and his brothers. A noble lord, Count Leo, gave Francis the use of a mountain near the Tuscan town of Arezzo, called La Verna, that he would use for a hermitage. That place would play a significant role in the last years of his life. In the same period (1213? 1214?) Francis attempted a journey to Spain with the idea of again preaching to Muslims either in their Iberian territories or across the Mediterranean in Morocco, but that journey did not succeed and he returned to Italy. Francis's desire to preach to the Muslims would be fulfilled in the next decade both by himself and by the first friars making their way to Morocco, but his two early attempts in these years came to naught.

The tug of the Islamic world must be seen against the background of the crusading spirit in which Christian Europe attempted by force of arms to wrest the Holy Places from "pagan" hands. In these years of Francis's life there had already been four crusading attempts. The crusades were motivated not only by the restoration of the holy places but also by the attempt to keep the Muslim world at bay. The anti-Muslim spirit was deeply woven into the culture of Europe as early medieval epic poems like "The Song of Roland" so vividly show. Islam and Islamic forces were never far from the minds of medieval Christians. Despite some benign contact between these two cultural forces (in Sicily; in Spain) it is worth noting that three generations after the death of Francis, when Dante described

the walls of the City of Dis in hell, he describes them as like the fiery turrets of mosques. Mohammad himself lies mutilated in the ninth circle of hell punished as a sower of schism and scandal. Next to him is his son-in-law Ali, the fourth in line of succession after Mohammad. Medieval legend had it that Mohammad was an apostate Christian (sometimes described as a former cardinal!) who rent the Christian world.

Interestingly enough, Francis, a quondam knight, now sees his vocation to go to the Islamic world and preach his characteristic message of peace and the truth of the gospel. Given the bellicose fever of the time it was a rather quixotic approach, but it was an approach in which Francis had invested his whole soul. He also saw this as an opportunity for martyrdom which would count as a supreme example of following Christ who gave up his life. Some centuries later the young Teresa of Avila would have the same dream — to go to the Muslim lands and risk martyrdom in the name of the gospel. In the somewhat fevered religious imagination of the times Islam meant martyrdom.

In 1215 Francis took his little band to Rome to be present when the hierarchs of the church gathered at the Lateran Palace for the fourth time to hold a council for the reform of the church — a council called by the pope who had given approval to his way of life, Pope Innocent III. He spent his time with the poor swarms of beggars outside the churches or gathering news about what the deliberations inside the Lateran were all about. The trip to Rome was not only an act of piety toward the church but also an opportunity to be part of the plan to invigorate the life of the church, albeit with little chance that this still small band would have a direct part to play in the formal proceedings.

CHAPTER THREE

Rome and Beyond Rome

This sacred synod imparts the benefit of its blessings to all who set out on this common enterprise. . . .

The Lateran Council (1215)

In the wake of the papacy of Gregory VII (died 1085) there had been a series of general councils held in Rome all concerned with reform within the church. Retrospectively, these councils have been called "ecumenical," although in fact they are more properly understood as general or plenary councils in the West since the bishops of the Eastern church were either not in attendance at all or, at most, only sparsely represented. In fact, in our own day, Pope Paul VI has referred to these five councils held at the Lateran (the last was held on the eve of the Reformation in 1517) as "general councils of the West" to signal, however subtly, that he does not want to make a break with the Christian East, which recognizes only the first eight truly ecumenical councils. The distinction between general councils and ecumenical councils is an important one for ecumenical reasons but it also underlines the character of the various

Lateran Councils: they were oriented fundamentally to reformation within Western Christianity.

The first Lateran Council sat for only a month in 1123. The canons produced by that council reflect the general concern for reform of church structures. The buying of church offices (simony) was condemned; clerical concubinage was excoriated; the relationship of vowed religious to bishops was set out; the prohibition of marriage by monks, deacons, subdeacons, and priests was decreed. Lateran II, which met in 1139 during the month of April, made the same rulings as did provincial synods in Italy (Pisa) and France (Clermont and Rheims) in the same period.

Forty years later in March of 1179, Lateran III met with 500 bishops attending (only one came from the East). This council reiterated the reforming canons of the earlier councils (thus testifying to how persistent the issues were) and added some procedures for the elections of popes in order to rectify the unseemly recurrence of competing claimants to the papal throne that had been a regular feature of earlier elections. One further salient reform was instituted but, alas, never fully implemented. The council forbade the custom of people holding multiple benefices — those ecclesiastical offices endowed for the support of parish priests or abbots of monasteries from which accrued the monies for these endowed positions. Most often, in fact, those who held legal title to those endowments did not reside in the place or have a direct concern for the well being of the benefice. The failure to reform the abuses of the benefice system, again condemned at Lateran IV and later councils, would fester in the church as an open wound down to the early modern period.

When Pope Innocent III called for a council in 1213 he had behind him the church's experience with three previous reform councils that had met in the Lateran palaces in less than a century. When the council actually met in November 1215 there were in attendance over four hundred bishops while another 800 prelates attended as auditors. Some scholars have argued that Innocent personally set the agenda, and the council did nothing but vote on the canons he put forward. For our purposes these scholarly debates on the procedures of the council are beside the point. What is crucial is that Francis and some of his companions were in Rome when the council was held and, further, that Francis took very seriously the deliberations and conclusions contained in the canons of that council. Whether he actually attended any of the sessions is unknown.

The canons of Lateran IV were the most balanced and far reaching of all of the councils that met in Rome during this period. They ranged widely on a variety of subjects for which they made precise stipulations: from the usual canons against clerical abuse to the increased segregation of Jews from the larger society; on the relationship of the Greeks to the papacy delivered in a ham-handed manner that did little to mend the strained relations between East and West; on the need to prepare preachers better and for more education for clerics; on who was to preach and by what authority. The most important of the canons carried an implicit rebuke to heretical groups like the Cathars and the Waldensians: all Catholics were to confess their sins at least once a year and those same Catholics were to receive Holy Communion at least once annually. Lateran IV conveyed a "strong" doctrine of the sacrament of the eucharist and the real presence of Christ in the consecrated

elements of the bread and wine and an equally strong affirmation of priestly powers derived from the sacrament of holy orders, both of which were expressed in the opening statement of faith that prefaces the particular canons adopted at the council. In that opening of the acts of the council there is a firm statement of belief in the true presence of Christ in the eucharist, the adoption of the technical language of transubstantiation, and the requirement that no person except a priest who had been properly ordained within the church can validly confect this sacrament.

Those affirmations were made as a statement against the heretical opinions of those groups who were bitterly critical of the priesthood as a whole. The annual "Easter Duty" (as it came to be called) of requiring confession made to a priest once a year and holy communion to be received from his hands during the Easter season had more influence, according to some historians, on keeping Christian identity intact than any other legislation coming out of the council even when the stipulation was not uniformly observed. Communion at Eastertide was also a way of distinguishing orthodox Catholic believers from their heretical brethren.

The reforming impulse deriving from the work of Gregory VII in the previous century had unleashed a long series of experiments in how one was to live the *vita evangelica*. The cumulative effect of the four councils held at the Lateran ended up providing a broad portrait of who this Christian was: a person who lived the sacramental life of the church; one who fit into the proper place within the hierarchical church; one who freed oneself from the abuses that marred church life; one who was a bearer of the cross (a crusader); one who held to the

unity of the church by the Catholic faith (professed as a prologue of the conciliar decrees) and eschewed the various heresies of the time. In other words, the work of the Lateran councils was to provide a framework within which the various experiments in gospel living were to be lived out. In that sense, Lateran IV provided a juridical framework within which experiments in "gospel living" were to be understood.

The corpus of Francis's own writings makes it clear that he intended to live a life of poverty and penance but within the boundaries of the Catholic faith. In Chapter 19 of the unconfirmed rule he states flatly: "Let all the brothers be, live, and speak as Catholics." In the very next chapter he orders the friars to confess to a priest in their order, but if one is not available, they should confess to "other discerning and Catholic priests." In his final letter to the faithful he admonishes the faithful to "fast and abstain from vices and from an excess of food and drink and be Catholics." "Catholic" in the vocabulary of Francis meant to live according to the belief and practice (*more catholico* is the Latin phrase he uses: "according to the catholic manner") of the great church under the authority of the pope. The reiteration of the word "catholic" in the writings of Francis is not without moment. At a very minimum the word was used to distinguish his followers from any heterodox group active at that time.

In a letter written to the entire order at a time close to his death, there is a passage in which Francis exhorts the friars to lives of conformity in faith. In the course of that letter he singles out a need to honor the holy eucharist. He goes on to plead with priests that they be properly disposed when they say mass. He gives solemn warnings to those who do not honor the

eucharist in a fitting manner. "Let everyone be struck with fear . . . when Christ, the Son of the Living God, is present on the altar in the hands of the priest." He stipulates that one mass a day is to be celebrated in a given house, that the members are to be careful with all liturgical objects and books, and that they are to celebrate the liturgical offices with devotion, harmony, and recollection. In a most solemn fashion, Francis ends these exhortations by saying, "I do not consider those brothers who do not wish to observe these things Catholics or my brothers; I do not even wish to see or speak with them until they have done penance."

The emphasis Francis puts on the eucharist cannot be fully explained by appealing to his reverence for church doctrine or his tacit repudiation of the various heretical sects of the time. Francis saw in the eucharist a continuation of something far more fundamental: the humility of Christ who took on flesh even though he was the Eternal Word. In the very first of his collected admonitions addressed at various times to his fraternity Francis makes the correlation explicit. He said that during his lifetime the disciples of Jesus saw him in the flesh by an "insight of their flesh" yet believed he was divine "as they contemplated him with their spiritual eyes." So, we now see bread and wine with our bodily eyes yet firmly believe that Christ's holy body and blood are present in the eucharist. What Francis states in this belief is a very old topos in the Christian tradition: possessing a mystical (in the deepest etymological meaning of "hidden") sense. The patristic tradition said that those who see beyond the text of the scriptures or the bread and wine on the altar or even the church itself intuit the hidden (that is, mystical) significance of those realities that go beyond the phe-

nomenal realities perceived by the senses. That insight comes only from deep faith.

To understand the true meaning of the eucharist is similar to the way we "see" Christ in the poor: by a vision that penetrates beyond surface realities. There is a very real sense in which the mystery of the incarnation and the mystery of the eucharist are related to that ability to understand deeply what only appears on the surface to those who lack the eyes of faith.

In reading through Francis's writings (especially the writings from the last decade of his life) it is striking how often he returns to the same themes of the dignity of the priesthood, of the sacred mystery of the eucharist, of reverence for the physical plant of the church building, of veneration for the written word in general and the Word of God in particular; of the need for confession and penance; and of his protestations of orthodoxy. In other words, the very stipulations drawn from Lateran IV give tone to the fraternity he leads. Francis was a preacher of penance and renewal, but it was from within the Catholic Church that he wished reform to come.

About this picture of Francis as a supremely orthodox medieval Catholic (*pace* the tradition deriving from Paul Sabatier who wished to turn Francis into a simple evangelical Protestant) two points need to be made. The first is a simple one: nobody can attain an adequate understanding of Francis by reading only the *legenda* written about him. This is a point that current scholars make with increasing frequency: it is to the writings by Francis and not only those about him that serious students of the saint must go if they are to understand him. While many of the texts that come from Francis's pen are less than elegant and written for an *ad hoc* occasion, it is precisely

in those writings that we get a clear picture of what issues were closest to his own desires and aspirations. A fair and unbiased reading of his writings gives no comfort to those who would like to edge him closer to the Poor Men of Lyons or the Humiliati and away from a firm place within the structures of the medieval church and its sacramental and judicial demands. Francis lived, to borrow one of his own phrases, *more catholico* — after the Catholic manner.

That being said, however, we cannot simply place him in some stereotypical category like "medieval saint" by a lack of nuance in reading about him. He was not simply "hewing a certain line" as an unblinkingly obedient automaton. Francis was not "typical." If he were, how does one explain the singular power of his person within his own lifetime and later? What makes him for us, as it did for his contemporaries, "untypical" was the rigor with which he attempted to flesh out what he learned from a profound meditation on the meaning of the gospel. What Francis understood was that the core meaning of Christianity did not come from following the New Testament as some kind of manual for spiritual perfection. The New Testament was a witness to the meaning of Jesus Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus was not to follow a doctrine but to imitate a person as that person is witnessed to in the Word of God. The continuing presence of the church in its attempt to do that is the context for this imitation (we can always look back into the tradition to see models about how to do this), but there are always far richer resources to find new ways and other angles to bring this imitation to fruition.

Within the half decade between the end of the fourth Lateran council in Rome and the year 1220 a number of quite

important events occurred that affected both the life of Francis and the direction of the movement he inspired. On July 16, 1216, Pope Innocent III died. Jacques de Vitry, that indefatigable chronicler of life in his day, has a lugubrious account of how the pontiff's body was denuded by persons who stripped him of his pontificals and jewelry for profit as his body lay in state in Perugia where he succumbed to a fever while on a journey. Two days after his death, on July 18, the cardinals elected the aged cardinal priest of St. John and Paul, the great protector of Francis and his fraternity, who took the name of Honorius III. It was this pope who would give final approval to the mendicant order of preachers known as the Dominicans (1216), similar approval for the revised Franciscan rule in 1223, and for the Carmelites in 1226. Honorius, in short, set his seal of approval on these new movements, which distinguished themselves from the older monastic orders. All of these groups were mendicant: they begged for their support. Their particular emphases were also quite distinct. The Dominicans put their main focus on preaching; hence, their name, the Order of Preachers. The Carmelites had evolved from an eremitical foundation in the Holy Land whose impulses were mainly contemplative.

The Franciscans, then known as the Minor Brothers, in obedience to the decrees of Lateran IV, held regular chapters of their order. The most significant of these was the Pentecost chapter of 1217 that convened at the Portiuncula. By the time the order met again in 1221 the order had been divided into provinces with their own supervising ministers, and, if we can trust the numbers, three thousand friars attended that Pentecost meeting which, due to the rudimentary provisions for sleeping, has come down to us under the name of "the chapter

of mats." It was at the 1217 Pentecost meeting, according to tradition, that Dominic Guzman (1170?-1221), the Spanish founder of the Order of Preachers (now more commonly called "Dominicans"), came to spend time with Francis.

Dominic Guzman had little of the charismatic appeal of Francis but he did have some gifts that Francis lacked — most notably, a clear sense of what his *religio* was to do (study and preach) and a good head for administration. Those gifts, and the fact that his order took on the well-established Rule of Saint Augustine, spared the preaching friars from the rancorous divisions that afflicted the Franciscans who looked to their founder to divine how religious life was to be lived. Dominic and Francis were friends and, touchingly enough, even though they were in some sense competitors, Dante has Thomas Aquinas praise Saint Francis in the *Paradiso* while Saint Bonaventure does the same for Saint Dominic.

It was at the Pentecost chapter of 1217 that it was officially decided to send friars on missionary journeys both beyond the Alps and into the world of Islam. The beloved Brother Giles left for Tunis while Brother Elias of Cortona (who would figure prominently in the later history of the order) went to Syria where Francis would meet him later when he himself journeyed to the Middle East. Francis himself decided to go to France but, while in Florence, Cardinal Ugolino persuaded him to remain in Italy. This emphasis to spread the influence of the friars gets its greatest impetus from the Pentecost meetings at the Portiuncula. Within less than a decade after the death of Francis we have independent witnesses attesting to the work of the Lesser Brothers in France, Germany, the Iberian peninsula, the Middle East, and in the British Isles.

The increasing number of friars attending the Pentecost chapters can be understood as both a tribute to the attractive power of the lesser brothers and a premonition of problems that would soon come into the open. It was one thing for Francis to act as a spiritual master and guide for a small band of loyal followers, but it was hardly possible for Francis, in person, to be a spiritual guide for three thousand brothers. The very growth of the order brought with it immediate issues: by what criteria were friars to be accepted into the group? Who was to do the screening of applicants and, more crucially, who was to form them into the way of life to which they had come? How were they to give theological instruction to those who were priests or who aspired to the priesthood? Lateran IV stipulates theological education for preachers and clergy. Where was this to be done? By whom? And further: how did one hold the need for infrastructure that such education and administration demanded in some kind of harmony with the rigid understanding of the poor life that was the rock-solid foundation on which Francis envisioned his life? These were practical considerations which Francis had neither the focus nor the interest to solve.

Not to put too fine a point on it: with the growth of the Lesser Brothers there came, almost as a necessary consequence, more structure, more material needs, and an inevitable reshaping of the vision of what the order was and how it was to carry out its task. This process has been described, in the language of the modern social sciences, as the "routinization of charisma," which is almost a necessary consequence of a social phenomenon that arises under the inspiration of a charismatic leader. The anxieties and sense of disappointment reflected in Fran-

cis's later writing, especially in the *Testament*, was a very human reaction to a very inevitable evolution. That evolution should not be judged as a betrayal of Francis but as the impossibility to duplicate a social structure totally faithful to the extraordinary gift of one person. Some scholars have argued that Francis effectively lost control of the whole order after the Pentecost chapter of 1217. One thinks of the cynical remark (not lacking in truth simply because it is cynical) of the nineteenth-century savant who said that Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God and we ended up with the Catholic Church. Is it the case that Francis preached the humble following of Christ but ended up as the head of a vast religious order?

After another chapter held at the Portiuncula in 1219 some of the friars left to evangelize the Muslim world in Morocco. The following year five of them died as martyrs. Their death, among other things, inspired a Portuguese canon and theologian known to us as Anthony of Padua (1193?-1231) to join the Lesser Brothers. Anthony's decision to become a Franciscan added another dimension to the evolving shape of the movement. What was to be done with a friar who had an excellent theological education and evident gifts for preaching and writing? Would such a person have to submerge quite clear intellectual talents to join the poor brothers? Francis was not very enthusiastic about "book learning," but he did have great admiration for those who were theologians and/or commentators on the scriptures. In one of the very few private letters that we possess from his pen Francis wrote to Anthony some time around 1223 to indicate his approval for theological work: "I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers provided that, as it is contained in the Rule, you 'do not extin-

guish the Spirit of prayer and devotion' during study of this kind."

Anthony would outlive Francis and serve the order well in northern Italy. He composed a series of sermons on the Sunday readings as well as another series for the feast days of the liturgical year. It is on the basis of those writings that he was later declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XII in 1946. Those sermons are little read today by anyone but scholars, but this learned friar who combined study with simplicity and humility is one of the most popular of saints. In many places to this day people make contributions for "Saint Anthony's Bread" — offerings used to sustain the poor and the homeless. The basilica which houses his body in Padua is a popular destination for pilgrims and variations of his name are common among Catholics even to this day. Few, however, remember Anthony as a fine, if not first-rate, theologian in his own day.

Saint Francis, who had tried before to go to the Muslim world, finally made such a trip in 1219. He sailed from Ancona in June and made land shortly thereafter in Acre. He visited the friars who had gone to Syria and then proceeded to the Crusader camp outside of Damietta, which had been under siege for some time. The Crusader camp itself housed soldiers and mercenaries from twenty different European states who, variously, joined the crusade for either religious ideals or the promise of loot or the sheer joy of warfare. There was little in the way of overall leadership at the camp, and the forces were frequently riven into factions especially when tensions boiled over between the aristocratic knights (the *majores*) and the common foot soldiers *(minores)* — a problem that Francis would easily recognize given his own experiences in Assisi.

It is difficult to describe the brutality and sheer savagery of warfare in this period. One incident that occurred when Francis was in the camp must suffice. On August 16 a band of eight Saracen scouts were captured by the Christians. Their noses, arms, lips, and ears were cut off, and one eye was put out. Half of them were sent back to Damietta to warn, by their very appearance, the inhabitants what was to come when the walls were breached. The other scouts were hanged on the crusader fortifications as a salutary warning. Those poor men, in the words of a recent author, were "reduced to bloody scarecrows."

On November 5 the crusaders finally breached the walls of Damietta and entered the city to find a macabre scene. The city had been devastated by illness, lack of provisions, and the inability to bury the corpses. The dead had been savaged by packs of dogs, and the stench of death hung like a pall over the city. The long siege, the crusader blockade of those who had attempted to provision the city, and the deplorable hygiene inside the walls had turned the city into a veritable charnel house. The ruler himself, along with some of his troops, retreated south to take a stand against further incursions aimed at Cairo.

Either before the Christian victory over the city or later in the caliph's retreat headquarters (scholars are not of one mind over the chronology), Francis crossed the battle lines in order to speak to the caliph, Malik-al-Kamil. Some early Franciscan chroniclers say that he made the visit because he was horrified by the violence of the crusading army. Whatever the case may be, Francis did make such a visit in the company of Brother Illuminato, one of his early companions. Pilgrims can still see some tokens the sultan gave him, including a mounted ivory

tusk, exhibited in the basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. Jacques de Vitry, who was bishop of Acre but present at Damietta, tells us in his *Historia Occidentalis* that Francis spent a few days speaking and preaching in the court and that Malik-al-Kamil "listened attentively to Francis as he preached the faith in Christ to him and his followers." De Vitry says that the sultan saw Francis as a man of God but fearing his persuasive powers had him returned to the Christian camp with "reverence and security."

Some of the early sources say that Francis offered to go through an ordeal by fire if some of the Muslim holy men would do the same to see who was speaking the truth, but the sultan refused to allow such an encounter. The account of such a proposed encounter is actually depicted in one of the series of frescoes in the upper church of Saint Francis in Assisi. A much later account (in the fourteenth-century vernacular collection known as the *Fioretti*) actually has the sultan making a secret conversion, but that is most likely hagiographical wishing. Nor is it absolutely clear, as some have attempted to prove, that Malik-al-Kamil was a member of the Sufi brotherhood which, if true, might explain why Francis was so graciously received, since the Sufis had strong mystical tendencies with a concomitant reverence for holy men and a mystical practice of adoring God as love. The Sufi emphasis on union with Allah out of love may have made Malik-al-Kamil respectful of this Western holy man. Whatever the case may be, it does help to explain the epitaph on the Cairo grave of a Muslim scholar and confidant of the sultan which says that he had an "adventure with a Christian monk."

Scholars dispute many aspects of this famous encounter

and different voices gave different interpretations of the event. What seems indubitable, however, is that Francis gave an example that was rare enough in his day. At a time when violence was the rule of the day he dared cross enemy lines at the risk of painful death in order to speak face to face with someone who was demonized by the crusaders. Moreover, this was one of the few times that a Christian actually confronted a Muslim not with arms but with nothing more than Christian intentions of evangelization. One could say that Francis gave an alternative understanding of the word "crusader" (Latin: *Crucifer;* Greek: *Christopheros*) — one who bears the cross.

Arnaldo Fortini, the former mayor of Assisi, noted biographer of the saint, and indefatigable student of the Assisi archives, wrote in his great work on the saint that something happened there at Damietta that interested his own contemporaries not at all: at the very time when two armies were trying to annihilate each other two great and noble spirits came to understand and love one another. The experience of Francis before the sultan's court was a representative example of the primitive Franciscan desire to be a witness in Muslim lands. In the same period that Francis sojourned in Egypt, five of his confreres were executed in Morocco, where they had gone to preach the gospel.

The example of Francis in the Middle East did inspire the Franciscans to make their presence known in that part of the world. To this day, the Franciscans are the Catholic custodians of many shrines and churches in the Holy Land where they minister both to the native Christian population and to the millions of pilgrims who travel there out of devotion.

Francis went on to the Holy Land for a pilgrimage to Jeru-

salem, which, apart from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, was mostly in ruins. The greater area lay devastated due to the constant warring of the time. During this journey a simple friar named Stefano, who had been searching for him, delivered this simple message: "Return, Return! On account of the absence of Brother Francis the order is disturbed, torn asunder, and scattered." In the late spring of 1220 Francis landed in Venice after a year in the Middle East. His sojourn there may have made a great impression on him. In an open letter to all civil authorities he may have had the Muslim call to prayer in mind when he asked them that every evening "an announcement may be made by a messenger or some other sign that praise and thanksgiving may be given by all the people to the all-powerful Lord God."

CHAPTER FOUR

Francis and the Rule(s) of the Lesser Brothers

The Rule of these brothers is this: to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own and to follow the teachings and the footprints of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Saint Francis of Assisi

When Saint Francis returned from the Middle East after a year's absence it was clear that during that period he had not been in firm control of his order. He was too distant and preoccupied with other issues to follow closely the affairs of his brethren. It was at this time (or perhaps as early as the Pentecost chapter of 1217) that Francis ceded governance of his order to the friar Peter Catani who, alas, was to die in the early spring of 1221. It was in that same year that a new chapter was held at which two things of some moment occurred. First, Brother Elias of Cortona took over the order as minister general and, at the same time, a new rule was written to stipulate more clearly the character and discipline of the order. This new rule was to flesh out the original form of life presented to the pope for his approval a decade earlier.

That there was some necessity for a more precise rule is evident from a papal bull issued by Pope Honorius III *(Cum Secundum)* in early fall 1220. The pope condemned the practice of those who give away their earthly possessions, assume some kind of a penitential habit, and begin wandering from place to place. Such persons were under no kind of religious rule, had received no formation, and, inevitably, drew some who were either not stable persons or, worse, vagrants and mischief makers. For the good order of society and for the reform of religious enthusiasm, there had to be some kind of framework in which those who were attracted to the itinerant and mendicant life were shaped. Free-floating bands of religious zealots was a reality with which medieval society would have little sympathy. As a partial response to this need, the lesser brothers needed a clear rule of life.

The Rule of 1221 is commonly called the "unsealed rule" because it never got the final seal (*bulla:* the lead seal affixed to official papal documents; hence its Latin title *regula non-bullata*). We do have the text of that unconfirmed rule, and it is worthy of some attention. The actual text consists of a prologue followed by twenty-four chapters of varying length. Printed in a modern version it is less than twenty-five pages long. The first chapter enjoins chastity, obedience, and a life without personal possessions. The second describes how friars are to be received and clothed. The following chapters make certain stipulations about a regulated life in the community: the organization of superiors (to be called ministers and servants); work; resistance to receiving any money; the begging of alms; how to care for the sick; fraternal charity; leading a chaste life; etc. Friars are forbidden to ride horses (the mark of a cer-

tain social status); those who are so called may go among the Saracens but not to engage in "disputes or arguments" but simply to proclaim the Word of God. Preachers, according to Chapter 17, are not to do so except according to "the rite and practice of the church" with the due permission of the minister (stipulations of Lateran IV are echoed here) but all brothers may preach "by their deeds." Two chapters later, as if to press the point of orthodoxy, brothers are enjoined to live and speak "as Catholics" and those who do not are to be "expelled from our brotherhood."

The penultimate chapter consists of a long exhortation combined with prayerful outbursts of adoration. Replete with both trinitarian and christological themes one hears the passion of Francis coming through the text:

Wherever we are
let nothing hinder us,
nothing separate us,
nothing come between us.

Wherever we are,
in every place
at every hour
at every time of day
every day and continually,
let all of us truly and humbly believe
hold in our heart and love,
honor, adore, and serve
praise and bless,
glorify and bless,

Magnify and give thanks
To the Most High and Supreme and Eternal God
Trinity and Unity. . . .

The next, and final chapter, has been the source of some scholarly speculation about whether it belongs in this redaction of the rule or not. It seems to convey the anxiety that Francis felt about the slippage of the ideals he held most dear about the order of lesser brothers and, in that sense, echoes what Francis wrote in his *Testament.* Chapter 24 insists that nothing is to be deleted or added to what was written in this rule. The penultimate sentence is starkly apodictic in tone: "The brothers may have no other rule."

In fact, the brothers would get another rule. The Rule of 1221 never got official approval. The reasons for its rejection are not easy to understand but it is clear that as it stood the 1221 version, while zealous and redolent of holiness, was simply too prolix to pass muster with the legal-minded Roman curia. Lovers of precise legal language would have little patience with the more homiletical portions of the rule. It was simply too discursive; it cried out, in the eyes of the curial officials, for the touch of the canon lawyer. Accordingly, the rule was rewritten by Francis with the aid of some learned friars, probably at the hermitage at Fonte Colombo outside Rieti. After discussion at the June chapter of the lesser brothers, the new draft of the rule was submitted to Rome in 1223. It was approved by Pope Honorius III on November 29, 1223, and now stands as the foundational document of the three orders of the Franciscan family. Because it did get the papal seal it is now known as the *Regula Bullata.*

A comparison between the two rules is instructive. Gone are the hortatory passages and the scriptural texts. The twenty-four chapters of the earlier rule are now reduced to twelve (alluding by symbolic number to the "apostolic" character of the rule?). Each chapter of the 1223 rule has a heading summarizing the content of that chapter. The twelve chapters may be summarized as following:

1. The rule and life of the lesser brothers is to observe the gospel by living in obedience, without possessions of one's own, and in chastity.
2. Prospective members are to be observant Catholics. Regulations concerning disposition of personal wealth, the proper clothing of postulants and professed members of the community, and simplicity of life are laid out.
3. Rules for liturgical prayer, fasting, and manner of going abroad in the world on mission.
4. The use of money prohibited.
5. Obligation to work but without cash wages.
6. Necessity of dispossession of goods; the begging of alms; the care of sick brethren.
7. Penance(s) for errant brothers.
8. Rules for electing the minister general; the Pentecost chapter.
9. Rules for preaching.
10. Admonition and correction of brothers.
11. Relationship with women and prohibition of entering convents.
12. Permission needed before going out to Saracens and other non-believers.

When comparing the two rules the differences are clear. Some specific regulations in the earlier rule (for example, prohibiting the use of horses; rules about the reception of the sacraments; etc.) are suppressed. Other chapters are radically shortened. The chapter on preaching in the earlier rule, with its long peroration and prayer, was reduced from over nineteen separate verses to barely ten lines. The prologue and first chapter of the earlier rule are collapsed in chapter one of the 1223 rule with the catena of scriptural texts excised. In short, the differences between the two rules is mainly (although not exclusively) an exercise of editing, pruning, and telescoping the text of the former into something that approached the canonical style of the latter. It is for scholars to debate the extent that Francis's intentions were compromised in the emendations made in 1223 but it is patent that the scriptural tone garnered from the old form of life orally approved by the pope more than a decade earlier disappeared in favor of a more precise legal statement.

The problem that arises from the legal stipulations of the Franciscan way of life is easy to state, namely, the near impossibility of capturing in legal terms the esprit of a movement that was based on the intuitions of a singular religious genius. Attempts to sort out the legal issues concerning the Franciscan way of life would vex the Franciscan family long after the death of Francis. That being said we should also note, from a human commonsense point of view, that the emergence of some kind of structure, fortified by a rule of life, had a certain inevitability to it. Free-floating movements without structure have an almost inevitable tendency either to peter out or turn into anarchic curiosities.

What one sees at close range with respect to the Franciscan *religio* is a microcosm of the larger problem within all institutional religion. One could say that the persistent problem of Catholicism has been to somehow balance fidelity to the gospel with the need for some kind of institutional coherence. The most fruitful way the problem has been handled, when recognized, has been to constantly refine the institutional weight of structures against the sources of the faith in an ongoing process of what the French call *ressourcement*. This demands a firm understanding that Christianity in general and any of its particular manifestations, such as religious movements, are not perfectionist sects but ongoing attempts to strive toward the demands of the gospel itself.

As far as we can tell, Francis tried very hard to do what he had originally set out to do: preach penance, live by the gospel demands, and, as occasion demanded, tend to the growth of the movement he had inspired. One thing is very clear: he did not act as the "head" of an order. There is no evidence that he stopped his wandering ways, his times of retreat, or his care for the immediate needs of the day. Indeed, while he was obedient to the letter, the adoption of the Rule of 1223 did very little to change his own way of life. His anxiety concerned those who would subvert that way of life for others. It seems clear that Francis held on to his way of life, and the Franciscan *religio* was taking on a life of its own as it grew. Even the charismatic power of Francis's life and witness could not change that.

After his return from the Middle East Francis traveled and preached in Italy until his worsening health made this impossible. The precise character of his itinerary is impossible to determine in detail. We know, for example, that he toured south-

ern Italy in 1221 and 1222; we also hear of him preaching in Bologna. Those journeys were punctuated by moments of retreat into contemplative solitude, as was his custom from the beginning of his converted life.

Contemplative retreat was always part of Francis's life; it was something that he urged on his friars. After the death of Francis in 1226 the hermit impulse increased among some of the friars and some of them, in reaction to those who accented the preaching and academic life, turned their lives into almost continual contemplative retreat. For some generations after the death of Francis some of the friars, especially those in the Marches of Italy, were more contemplative than active in their style of life.

It was out of this esteemed practice that there grew another rule written by Francis, the Rule for Hermitages. When it was written, as with so many texts from Francis, is not clear. Editors place it sometime between 1217 and 1221. The text itself is brief, in modern translation barely a full printed page. The themes of going aside for contemplative prayer; the models of the Gospel figures of Martha and Mary who are emblematic of the active and contemplative life; and the provision for individual cells clustered near each other reflect long usages in the eremitical tradition. What is charming about this rule, however, is the language that Francis uses to describe the order of these contemplative retreats. He envisions a community of about four members, arranged among "mothers" who will see after the needs of the "sons" as well as provide an atmosphere of separation and silence for those who are to spend their time in prayer and meditation. This arrangement is seen as a reciprocal one. The rule concludes with these words: "The 'sons', however, may

periodically assume the role of the 'mothers' taking turns for a time as they have mutually decided. . . ."

It is not possible to reconstruct fully what the actual setting of these retreats was like, but we do know of various places in central Italy which tradition demarcates as places of Franciscan retreat. Judging from the description given in the "Rule for Hermitages" the community was not unlike those clusters of monastics who live in a very small settlement that in the Orthodox monastic tradition is known as a *skete,* although the Franciscan model seems more temporary — a period of retirement away from the work of preaching and mendicancy. Today, the more assiduous pilgrims to Assisi make their way the four kilometers up Monte Subasio which takes them to the hermitage of the *Carceri* (literally: "prison cells") where contemporary Franciscans still live and pray in a small friary. There were a number of such places which Francis knew and loved in his own lifetime and which, even today, are marked by modest friaries and shrines.

Less than a month after Pope Honorius III put his seal on the revised rule of Saint Francis, the exhausted saint found himself in the town of Greccio just a few days before Christmas. It was a feast for which Francis had a special love. According to Thomas of Celano's second life of the saint, he observed the day "with inexpressible eagerness over all the other feasts, saying that it was the feast of feasts, on which God, having become a tiny infant, clung to human breasts." That insight of Francis about the helplessness of the Infant Christ is consistent with his more general understanding of the Incarnation and not unconnected to his love for and understanding of the hidden Christ in the eucharist. Francis never ceased to wonder at

the implication of the simple phrase "The Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14). He saw in the Incarnation a humility in the Son of God that allowed him to be an infant, to put himself under the obedience of the Holy Family, and finally to die on the cross, naked and alone. If one is to understand such things as the emphasis of Francis on poverty one must keep in the background of such considerations his emphasis on the humility of Christ as part of the Incarnation itself.

According to Thomas of Celano he was so taken with the feast of Christmas that "He wanted the poor and hungry to be filled by the rich and oxen and asses to be spoiled with extra hay." "If ever I speak with the emperor," he would say, "I will beg him to issue a general decree that all who can should throw wheat and grain along the roads, so that on the day of such a great solemnity the birds may have an abundance, especially our sisters the larks."

Christ not only humbled himself by taking on flesh as an infant but he did so in the meanest of circumstances: in a manger at Bethlehem because "there was no room for them at the inn" (Lk 2:7). Francis was not insensitive to the fact that Mary and Joseph attended the birth of their child far from their home as part of a crowd who were, in effect, homeless. Sensitivity to such poverty may explain why Francis, some days before Christmas, contacted a local noble of Greccio named Giovanni whom Francis knew and admired because of his charity. He asked Giovanni to prepare a place for the celebration of the Christmas mass (it was actually Christmas Eve by our reckoning) in a poor stable with a manger and the traditional presence of the ox and the ass. Francis invited the lesser brothers who lived in the environs to come and light the

place with their torches and lanterns for the celebration of mass.

Francis himself served as deacon at the Christmas mass and, as Thomas of Celano wrote in his first life of the saint, "with full voice sings the Gospel" and preaches with such love and tenderness that saying the word *Bethlehem* "he fills his whole mouth with sound but even more with sweet affection." He subtly alludes to a miraculous moment when Francis, according to those who were there, seems to hold the Christ Child in his arms during the homily. Saint Bonaventure, in his major life of the saint, fills out that story by making the witness to the event, the same Sir John (Giovanni) who "had abandoned military service for the love of Christ," claim that he saw a beautiful little boy asleep in the crib and that "the blessed Father Francis embraced it in both of his arms and seemed to wake it from sleep."

That first Christmas at Greccio captured the imagination of those who first heard of it. By the time Thomas of Celano wrote his first life (had he been at the original event in 1223?) he noted that there already was a chapel built over the site with an altar marking the place of the first Christmas mass. He also reported that some of the hay which had been used for the liturgy had been distributed to people who used it both to aid sick animals and some humans who had various illnesses. Therein marks the beginning of a highly complex Christmas custom whose final end is the beautiful custom of the Christmas creche.

Thomas of Celano's account of the Greccio Christmas marked the end of his first book of the life of Francis. It obviously represented a high point for him since, by the time

Thomas writes, there is already an established tradition of celebrating Christmas in this fashion, a tradition that is observed to this day in the Franciscan friary at Greccio. Scholars have maintained that the event at Greccio might have been the origin (or, more likely, the popularization) of the custom of building Christmas creches in Catholic churches to celebrate the nativity of Christ. Long before the time of Francis there had been a tradition of honoring the birth of Christ in various ways. As early as the late fifth century there was an oratory annexed to the basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome built as a replica of the cave of Bethlehem. A century later the same Roman basilica claimed to have relics of the original crib. Depictions of the Christmas scene go back as early as late antique sculptured panels on Christian sarcophagi.

What was unique about Francis's notion was the use of live animals in an authentic setting of a stable. It was only in the seventeenth century that the Capuchins (a reform movement of the Franciscans so named because of the length of their hood — a *capuche* in Italian) encouraged the erection of Christmas crib scenes in private homes as a way of encouraging devotions to the humanity of Christ. The custom of erecting public creche scenes now is so common that one finds it not only in Catholic churches but among Protestant ones and as lawn decorations in front of homes. It may well be that the Franciscan tendency to create Christmas creches inspired music to be sung at Christmas like the lauds composed by the Franciscan Jacopone of Todi that developed into the traditional Christmas carol. Later, of course, would come the charming mystery plays that would celebrate the mystery of Christmas.

The intense focus on the humanity of Christ, manifested in this case in the nativity of Jesus, was not peculiar to the spirituality of Francis. There is a tradition that goes back at least as long as the prayers and meditations of Saint Anselm of Canterbury (died 1109), which dwells intensely on Jesus in his life and his passion. That form of devotion reached a new pitch with the intensely affective piety of the twelfth-century Cistercians. What Francis accomplished was to put into concrete visual terms the things that he read or heard in the Gospel. In that sense his spirituality was a kind of performance in which the gospel was a script that gave him directions not about how to think but about how to act. If the gospel said that the giving away of goods led to perfection, Francis took that as a stage direction. If Christ was born in a stable then surely when he was, as it were, re-born in the eucharistic liturgy then it was fitting to create that setting to remind us of poverty and humility.

The Franciscan emphasis on the concrete historicity of the gospel events had a profound impact on the spirituality of the Middle Ages as well as on the emerging realism of late medieval art. That the sixteenth-century *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola instructed those who meditate to create in their minds and imagination a "composition of place" — to picture the real setting of the Gospel events — has a lineage that runs back through Francis and earlier to the Cistercians and the piety of Anselm of Canterbury.

Francis most likely stayed in semi-retreat in Greccio through the Easter season. His exact itinerary through the summer months is not all that clear. What we do know is that he headed north and by the feast of the Assumption of Mary (August 15) he arrived at Mount LaVerna near Arezzo to begin

a period of fasting and prayer on a mountain ceded for his use by a local noble. What happened in that retreat has almost become identified with who Francis was and what happened to him.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Stigmata of Saint Francis

With the gnarls of the nails in thee, niche of the lance, his Lovescape crucified and seal of his seraph-arrival!

Gerard Manley Hopkins
"The Wreck of the Deutschland"

If one accepts as authentic (and there are those who have great doubts about it) the circular letter Brother Elias of Cortona sent to announce the death of Saint Francis, then it is in that letter that we first learn about the experience Saint Francis had on Mount LaVerna in October of 1224. In the course of his circular Elias wrote of a great joy to announce:

> Not long before his death, our brother and father appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds which are truly the marks of Christ. His hands and feet had, as it were, the openings of the nails and were pierced front and back revealing the scars and showing the nails' blackness. His side, moreover, seemed opened by a lance and often emitted blood.