Poverty and Prosperity: Franciscans and the Use of Money

Washington Theological Union 2009

The topic for this Symposium was chosen well in advance of the world economic crisis which developed in 2008-09 but with that reality the theme was infused with additional significance. While plans to gather academics for a thought-provoking investigation into Franciscan traditions involving poverty continued, their presentations were balanced with insights from activists to bring the past into dialogue with the present in order to help us understand how we might think about our resources.

As the papers in this volume demonstrate, Franciscan poverty has and continues to develop and to elicit new forms in the life of the Church. This 2009 symposium has raised many important questions and possibilities as to how Franciscans can and should use money that will be valuable for the Franciscan family to consider. Even so, the issues relating to prosperity still need further consideration. When one studies the history of the divisions of the Franciscan communities, it seems that they arise out of prosperity rather than poverty. How Franciscans respond to prosperity seems to play a significant role in how Franciscans respond to each other.

In 2001, the English Speaking Conference of the Order of Friars Minor (ESC), in collaboration with Franciscan theological schools of the English-speaking world, committed itself to promoting the renewal of Franciscan theological and intellectual formation among the members of the Franciscan family. This promotion has a twofold purpose: to help members understand the beauty and wealth of the Franciscan intellectual tradition and to extend to the whole Franciscan family and to society the intellectual heritage of the Franciscan school so that it can support effective evangelization. This series of publications aims to carry forward this purpose. It is hoped that, with hope, joy, and enthusiasm, Franciscans can once again look at their intellectual history, make it part of their lives, and prepare to become better proclaimers of the Word to the world.

POVERTY AND PROSPERITY:
FRANCISCANS AND THE USE OF MONEY

Washington Theological Union
Symposium Papers
2009
Poverty and Prosperity:

Franciscans and the Use of Money

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ABBREVIATIONS

Writings of Saint Francis

Adm            The Admonitions
BlL            A Blessing for Brother Leo
CtC            The Canticle of the Creatures
CtExh          The Canticle of Exhortation
LtAnt          A Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua
1LtCl          First Letter to the Clergy (Early Edition)
2LtCl          Second Letter to the Clergy (Later Edition)
1LtCus         The First Letter to the Custodians
2LtCus         The Second Letter to the Custodians
1LtF           The First Letter to the Faithful
2LtF           The Second Letter to the Faithful
LtL            A Letter to Brother Leo
LtMin          A Letter to a Minister
LtOrd          A Letter to the Entire Order
LtR            A Letter to Rulers of the Peoples
ExhP           Exhortation to the Praise of God
PrOF           A Prayer Inspired by the Our Father
PrsG           The Praises of God
OfP            The Office of the Passion
PrCr           The Prayer before the Crucifix
ER             The Earlier Rule (Regula non bullata)
LR             The Later Rule (Regula bullata)
RH             A Rule for Hermitages
SalBVM         A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
SalV           A Salutation of Virtues
Test           The Testament

Early Biographical Sources

1C              The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano
2C              The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul
LJS             The Life of Saint Francis by Julian of Speyer
1MP             The Mirror of Perfection (Smaller Version)
2MP             The Mirror of Perfection (Larger Version)
ScEx            The Sacred Exchange
AP              The Anonymous of Perugia
L3C             The Legend of the Three Companions
AC              The Assisi Compilation
LMj             The Major Legend by Bonaventure


PREFACE

When the Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition of the English Speaking Conference of the Order of Friars Minor (CFIT/ESC-OFM) met to decide the topic for the 2009 Franciscan Symposium in January of 2008, they did not know that the world economy was about to collapse. The topic they had chosen, “Poverty and Prosperity: Franciscans and the Use of Money,” was primarily thought of in terms of considering a type of Franciscan economics in which all things are seen as gifts to be used to enrich the lives of others. The plan was to look at how the Franciscan tradition could promote a just economy in a world dominated by a competitive market system.

By the time Ilia Delio and I began to plan the Symposium, the economic crisis was already becoming apparent. Suddenly the theme for the Franciscan Symposium was infused with additional significance, which we wanted to address. In a typically Franciscan fashion, we sought to bring the past into dialogue with the present in order to help us understand how we should think about our resources. As we looked at the situation, we decided we would also like to bring together academics and activists. We were blessed to find academics who had an activist dimension to their lives and activists who had academic backgrounds. My biggest disappointment is that this volume cannot include the vibrant and probing discussions these talks provoked, but I hope that this volume will provoke discussion in the Franciscan family.

As Americans became more focused on our internal economic problems, we wanted to raise the issue of the crisis over food that had been pushed out of the headlines by the collapse of the housing market. We invited Marie Dennis,
who is director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and vice president of Pax Christi International to address the problem of hunger. As a secular Franciscan, she has worked with Maryknoll and other organizations to help feed the hungry and advocate for the poor and excluded in some of the most desperate places on Earth. Her paper, “The Cry of the Poor: Are We Listening?,” challenges us to consider whether we are helping to bring the struggles faced by people at the margins into clearer focus. She also provided some strategies to do so.

Having raised the issue of the marginalized and their relationship to current economic systems during the opening session, we came back to the origins and the early history of the Friars Minor the following day. Michael F. Cusato, O.F.M. who is the director of the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University, presented an excellent and fascinating paper: “The Early Franciscans and the Use of Money.” In a truly illuminating way, he outlined the sociological factors that led Francis to reject the use of money. After Michael presented his paper, Steven J. McMichael, O.F.M. Conv., who teaches at the University of St. Thomas, explored how Franciscan interpretations over poverty and money evolved and affected the Franciscan community in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Whereas Francis had absolutely forbidden his brothers to handle money, Steven showed how some Franciscans in the fifteenth century essentially ran an alternative banking industry.

David Burr concluded the day with a paper entitled: “Poverty: A Cause of Unity or Division?” We were grateful to have David speak this year. In the last several years he has won the 2003 Gründler Prize for the best book in Medieval Studies, the 2002 John Gilmary Shea Prize awarded by the Medieval Institute, and the 2002 Howard R. Marraro Prize awarded by the American Catholic Historical Association. David began with a discussion of Peter John Olivi and the early Spirituals of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but he applied the historical material to contemporary questions over ecology.
Jane Kopas, the next day in the final session, asked the provocative question, “Is it Possible to Live Franciscan Poverty Today?” Jane has participated in the Franciscan Symposium in the past and she is retired from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Scranton. However, it was her work as an activist on various fronts that led us to close the Franciscan Symposium with her presentation. Her paper focused on ways that we could reframe poverty and asceticism to address the challenges of the twenty-first century.

As the papers in this volume demonstrate, Franciscan poverty has and continues to develop and to elicit new forms in the life of the Church. This 2009 symposium has raised many important questions and possibilities as to how Franciscans can and should use money that will be valuable for the Franciscan family to consider. Even so, the issues relating to prosperity still need further consideration. Is prosperity something we should embrace and pursue, or is prosperity something we should fear? While prosperity was far from an immediate concern of our panelists and participants, eventually the investments that many Franciscan communities and institutions hold will recover. When that time comes, the papers covered in this symposium will be an invaluable resource for considering how Franciscans should respond to their own prosperity. When one studies the history of the divisions of the Franciscan communities, it seems that they arise out of prosperity rather than poverty. How Franciscans respond to prosperity seems to play a significant role in how Franciscans respond to each other.

C. Colt Anderson

Washington Theological Union
“The cry of the poor: are we listening?” Without a doubt the greatest gift of my work for Maryknoll has been to accompany impoverished people and their communities. I am sure many of you have received that gift as well. So let us begin our reflections this evening by calling to mind a few of their stories, a bit of the harsh reality in which they live day by day – their names and faces. In many ways they are the leper Francis embraced; the hungry and excluded ones toward whom Francis moved his life; the poor ones who welcomed Francis into their own circles of survival.

Not long ago I had the privilege of visiting Sudan – South Sudan and Khartoum. In the South, poverty was everywhere – exacerbated by decades of unrelenting war. Roads were practically non-existent. Small towns were thought to be prosperous if they had a school of any kind. Schools, where they did exist, were extremely simple – almost bereft of furniture and without the most basic supplies like books and paper or pencils.

In fact, public schools – or the lack thereof – are often a good indicator of poverty. I have seen the same situation over and over – in Cambodia and Bolivia, Tanzania and Afghanistan, Colombia and Burundi: broken desks, very few books, sparse writing supplies, teachers who are often absent because they cannot survive on the meager wages they are paid.