Early Franciscan documents, Discussion 1. Points and observations.

Topic 1. Francis on work and daily life

What was at stake for early Franciscans was the socio-economics of work. Franciscans simply tried to implement the gospel model “the laborer is worthy of his hire” (Luke 10:7-9). The main idea was to contribute to the circulation of goods but not to accumulate goods or claim ownership of them. It is important to understand that the way of working and claiming or not claiming goods in return was the message.

According to the ER, work is a requirement and compensation is a right:
ER 7.5-8: The Apostle says: Whoever does not wish to work shall not eat. 2 Thes 3:10 and Let everyone remain in that trade and office in which he has been called. 1 Cor 7:24 And for their work they can receive whatever is necessary excepting money. And when it is necessary, they may seek alms like other poor people.

To beg for alms for the lepers and to attend to the lepers was also work, but uncompensated by regular means; thus compensation was due in the form of alms.

Ideas from D. Flood:

p. 13, a way of working can be used to subvert the current system of values and pursue a different vision (if you are paid, you owe someone; if you do not seek compensation you are free).

p. 14, the main point is that early Franciscans promoted a different notion of work: “good work without claiming a return.” In this way one escapes the alienating effects of one’s social system’s relations of production and distribution. Again, what would happen if you worked but did not demand adequate pay? You would not be indebted to your employer or enslaved by your contract.

Another trait of the new model of work was “workers at each other’s service,” and not fighting for their own advantage.

Text:
ER 7.1-2, None of the brothers may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work (laborare) for others. They may not be in charge in the houses in which they serve nor accept any office which would generate scandal or be harmful to their souls Mk 8:36; Let them, instead, be the lesser ones (minores) and be subject to all in the same house. 1k 22:26 1 Pt 2:13

D. Flood’s commentary:
p. 15 and 17, not being in charge means not entering the feudal vassalage system of lords and vassals. Minores here means not a lower social rank but “free workers.” “Subject to all” here means not feudal subjection of a vassal to his lord (i.e., not social ranking) but service to all, work in the interests of others (as servants).
Topic 2. Francis on Money

D. Flood on why money was rejected: Franciscans rejected Assisi’s economy by rejecting money; money separates and imprisons people; money prevents circulation of goods (hoarding). Money is inherently dangerous because of the ease with which incredible amounts of wealth can be concentrated in one physical spot, moved, and manipulated. Compare to an even easier way of spending by using credit cards and smart phones.

Topic 3. Francis on Possessions

Texts:
ER 1.1, “to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own (sine proprio)”

Test. 24, Let the brothers be careful absolutely not to receive churches or poor dwellings or anything else built for them, unless they always remain guests (hospitantes) there, as pilgrims and strangers (sicut advenae et peregrini; Leviticus 25:35)

There was something important in not claiming any possessions. One of the reasons why it is important is that such a state allows us to relate correctly to reality: as in Jewish law, we are guests and visitors in this world, and the correct way of relating to things is by using them but not claiming them as our own.

Ideas from D. Flood:

p. 23, Francis and his brothers were not poor in the sense of not having social networks or social support. Also they had some possessions that they needed to use (such as tools). What they rejected was the tendency to accumulate goods. Thus they possessed not as citizens, according to rules and laws, but according to human need or use.

p. 26, Franciscans exercised their natural rights and built an “economy of sharing and serving”; they did not participate in the court system by not claiming or reclaiming goods (ER 11.1).
Topic 4. Francis and the meaning of “following Jesus”: a model for social action

The economy of the early brothers was based on the following principles expressed in their texts:

ER 17.7, 17 We may know with certainty that nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins. Let us render all good to the Lord (omnia bona Deo reddamus/bona Deo reddere), God Almighty and Most High, acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him, “from Whom all good comes, for everything.”

This means that only our wrong choices (willful behavior) are really ours. All the good things come to us from God and belong to God. So it is our duty to give back all the good things. And the best way of implementing this is the economy based on equal distribution and circulation of goods.

Test. 3, “And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world”; Francis means that he exited the socio-economic system that existed in Assisi at the time.

Ideas from D. Flood:

p. 30, “following Jesus” means not following Assisi’s rules but building an alternative economy (“off the grid”) that is not based on power and wealth (like it was in Assisi). It means to include everybody in this just new world. p. 29, Franciscans included “good, but not socially successful people.” Assisians, instead, were leaving under an illusion or a delusion of a view based on rank and wealth.

p. 31, “Poverty” for early Franciscans meant identifying with Jesus. It was “a social condition of exclusion, not a material condition of insufficiency.” Indeed, the brothers had social support. They were building socio-economic support for their vision, which was to be able to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. And the kind of economics that they practiced allowed them the experience of Jesus.

p. 49, The economy that would allow such an experience was based on “openness to others: give to them and receive from them” and on “circulation of goods,” a “new practice with goods” that they developed.

p. 50, early Franciscans yearned for and had the experience of peace; this experience, however, resulted directly from their economy: a “human distribution of the means of life” or a share of social product.
Topic 5. Francis and Clare on begging, economics, and social justice

Recall the scriptural passage (Luke 10:7-9), “for the laborer is worthy of his hire”

Main ideas:
1) alms is a right for the takers
2) alms benefit the givers

That is, begging for alms and giving alms make sense as commerce (exchange of mutual benefits, circulation of advantages) and thus can serve as a basis for a new economy and a new system of relations.

Important texts:
ER 9.3-4, When it is necessary, they may go for alms. Let them not be ashamed

LR 6.2-3, As pilgrims and strangers in this world, 1 Pt 2:11 serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made Himself poor in this world. 2 Cor 8:9

Test. 22, And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door.

ER 9.8-9, Alms are a legacy (hereditas) and a justice due to the poor that our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us. The brothers who work at acquiring them will receive a great reward and enable those who give them to gain and acquire one; for all that people leave behind in the world will perish, but they will have a reward from the Lord for the charity and almsgiving they have done.

Ideas from D. Flood:

p. 35, the strategy of working but refusing to appropriate goods leads to a different model of distribution of goods: their circulation and “right use.” An understanding that begging for alms is a new type of economy should remove the shame and humiliation associated with begging.

p. 37, quotations from contemporary canon law: giving alms does not amount to giving what belongs to us; instead, by giving alms we return what belongs to them. The needy have a right to the rich man’s excess (cf. Jewish law). That is, begging is part of an economy of distribution.

p. 38, begging has social usefulness: circulation of goods and reward in heaven for those who give.