Early Franciscan Documents: Introduction

1. Socio-economic class structure. Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*

What was happening socio-economically in Italy (and the rest of Europe) during the time of Francis was similar to what was happening, according to Crossan, in Galileee at the time of Jesus: commercialization, increase in productivity, and concentration of wealth in the hands of the few: the budding class of the bourgeoisie (inhabitants of boroughs, or cities), or modern capitalists (bankers, merchants, traders, etc.). It left behind the majority of the impoverished population.

Naturally, as Crossan points out, resistance grew among the population. As during the time of Jesus, it could take “passive” or non-violent forms, such as the “evangelical” movements of the Waldensians, the Humiliati, the Beguines, and finally the mendicants (“orders of beggars” such as Franciscans and Dominicans). Just like the Jewish hierarchy and priesthood was failing to uphold justice in society during the Roman times and succumbed to commercialization, so was the Christian hierarchy and priesthood at the time of Francis failing to uphold social justice and succumbed to commercialization.

Marx’s analysis of the change over from the feudal socio-economic system to the capitalist system shows that the new way of measuring social status, by wealth, leads to a callous and heartless treatment of human beings simply as potential sources of wealth. Thus the dignity of traditional professions, levels of education and knowledge, levels of spirituality, social ranks, and kinship relations are eroded.

2. Francis and the early friars’ interpretation of scripture (scriptural hermeneutics)

Based on Vauchez (pp. 261-270) and Flood (pp. 7, 18, 50)

Francis and his early friars frequently claim that they “follow the gospel” or “live according to the gospel.” But what does this mean? The question is directly linked to how they interpreted scriptures.

All spiritual and religious traditions follow the same pattern. The initial experience of the founder(s) is solidified in scriptures, which can be oral (e.g., the Hindu shruti, “something that is heard”) or written down (the Christian scriptura, “something to be written down”). The practices of the spiritual or religious community continue in the form of the tradition, e.g., the Hindu smriti (“something that is remembered) or the Christian unwritten traditio (“something that is handed over” without being written down).

Subsequent generations of followers of the tradition start to interpret scriptures; this is the birth of theology, at least in its simplest form: how should one read scriptures? In the Christian tradition, four different ways of reading developed from early on: literal, historical, allegorical (or metaphorical), and ethical.
Francis’s and the early friars’ interpretation of scriptures was literal. They favored the gospels, and specifically the texts from the gospels that called for action and transformation, such as the mission of the apostles, the call to give up possessions, family relations, not to resist evil, etc.

However, it was far from naive. By selecting texts from the gospels Francis and the early friars expressed their socio-economic program in the way that was acceptable to their society and culture. However, their program often did not coincide with the existing religious or socio-economic practices, but can be seen as a recovery of the program contained in Jewish law and the gospels.

Thus Francis and the early friars subverted current Christian religious and socio-economic practices (which have become corrupt and complacent to capitalist commercialization) from within the system by using the system itself, just like Jesus subverted the Jewish practices (that have become corrupt and complacent to Roman commercialization) from within the system of Jewish law.

Quotes from David Flood on Francis’s and the early friars’ use of the gospel text:

p. 7, ...Jesus Christ was not living on the outskirts of Assisi. There existed no social entity outside Assisi with Jesus at its center to which Francis and his brothers could rally.... [Francis] told the men, and they agreed, what God wanted of them. And they left Assisi factually. They broke off social relations, defined the footsteps of Jesus themselves, and set out.

With that in mind, we have to define carefully the function of the gospel texts gathered into [the Rule]....

An explanation composed of passages from the gospels had formal validity in a Christian context. Innocent III bowed to their use of the gospel. The Christian world acknowledged an intention extrapolated out of Jesus’s words.... As men of their age, [Francis and his brothers] used the gospels to send signals back and forth about their bold plan....

Yet the compilation of texts... [in the Rule] is no more than the cultural form of their decision.... Having made their momentous decision, the brothers had to decide what it meant in the details of daily life.... They had to do that themselves; the repetition of the gospel texts would get them nowhere.

p. 18, [The brothers] found in the gospel the words of Jesus which confirmed their decision. Jesus’s words did not lead to the decision; the words clarified and strengthened their refusal to recognize... [Assisi’s use of money]. They did not “put the gospel into practice.” They read the gospel in the process of thinking through their policy on money.

Many Franciscan writers today present a Francis who simply does what the gospel says. Such a presentation certainly does not result from a study of the early writings.... By his life Francis announced the gospel clearly and forcefully. He shows what the gospel means, for he gave meaning to the gospel.

p. 50, Francis and his brothers used gospel sentences to explain themselves just as other religious groups of the times did. They used gospel instructions to put their intentions.... the brothers did not intend to correspond to a recognized model. They pursued a social goal as a movement, which goal they pointed to in a culturally legitimate way.