

POVERTY, SPIRITUALITY AND POLEMIC: THE SPIRITUALS

In his time as Minister General of the Order, Bonaventure confronted a reform movement whose members were known as 'Spiritual' Franciscans. Their name derives from a phrase in the Rule which speaks of brothers who are seeking 'to observe the Rule spiritually'. There Francis is talking about obedience to those in authority ('ministers') and possible conflicts of conscience. Here is the important passage:

Therefore I strictly command them to obey their ministers in all those things which they have promised the Lord to observe and which are not against [their] conscience and our Rule. And wherever there are brothers who know and realize that they cannot observe the Rule spiritually, it is their duty and right to go to the minister for help.²⁶

As popes and General Chapters interpreted the Rule over the years, certain exceptions were allowed in the practice of poverty to encourage expanded opportunities for study and various forms of stable ministry, especially in cities. With larger communities and growing libraries, these 'new' types of

Franciscan houses disturbed the consciences of some friars, who felt unable 'to observe the Rule spiritually', and when they appealed to their ministers for help, they often received rebuke instead. They wanted the Order to return to smaller, contemplative groups of brothers living in hermitages, supporting themselves by manual labour and begging. Many of the Spirituals in fact lived in the hermitages of southern France and central Italy.

Meditating on the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore, many Franciscans, including Bonaventure, saw Francis as a prophetic figure, announcing the coming of a 'New Age' of the Spirit, one in which the Church would be renewed and reformed, and in which the Franciscan Order would play a pivotal role. Some Spirituals took this meditation a step further, promoting a dramatic, apocalyptic spirituality, in which their own sufferings at the hands of superiors in the Order and the Church only confirmed their special role as the 'elect' awaiting the dawning of a new spiritual age (and their enemies were then easily labelled as the 'Antichrist'). An outstanding example of this approach is the 'History of the Seven Tribulations of the Order of Minors', written by the leader of Italian Spirituals, Angelo Clareno (d. 1337).²⁷

UBERTINO DA CASALE

A friar who was profoundly affected by the teaching of Angela of Foligno, Ubertino (d. 1330s) had been a student of Peter John Olivi (d. 1298), one of the great teachers of the Spirituals. Olivi and Ubertino emphasised poverty as essential to Christian perfection and, with other Spirituals, admired the apocalyptic spirituality of Joachim of Fiore.

In the Introduction to his work *Sanctitas vestra* ('Your Holiness'), Ubertino raises up what the Spirituals considered the fundamentals of the Franciscan way of living the gospel, proposing especially the example of their life as one of the seven fundamental qualities of the tradition. That life is lived

in highest and hence pacific poverty; in most innocent simplicity, and thereby it eschews all subtlety and cunning; in spotless purity, hence set apart from the din of the world; in deep humility, whereby it avoids superiority, and anything inimical to respect for the hierarchy; in assiduous prayer and work, defence against distraction, idleness, greed and worldliness; in perfect charity, defence against mutual persecution and hatred; in being an example to others, and hence avoiding offence to the faint-hearted and the laity.²⁸

But the 'highest and hence pacific poverty' of the Spirituals seemed dangerously close to views about the poverty of Christ that seemed heretical. Ubertino himself received his own punishment for his views: exiled to the hermitage at La Verna, Ubertino wrote his masterwork, the *Arbor vitae crucifixae Iesu* ('The Tree of Life of Jesus Crucified').²⁹ In the context of exile, under the censure of church authorities, Ubertino turned to meditation on the cross, not as a symbol only of suffering, but as a life-giving tree.

In an extended allegory, the *Arbor vitae* compares the life, suffering and death of Jesus to the roots, the trunk, branches and fruit of the Tree of Life. It also contains moving meditations on the inner life of Jesus, his suffering prompted by love, and that love itself as the moving force of salvation. Following Joachim, Ubertino predicted that the unfaithful and 'carnal' Church of his day would soon return to this life-giving Tree, after passing through the end of the sixth 'state' of salvation history. Francis inaugurated this era, one of spiritual renewal, and it continued in the work of his true followers, those who embrace Lady Poverty (that is, the Spiritual Franciscans). One of the visions of the Book of Revelation provided Ubertino with his point of reference: 'Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God' (Revelation 7:2):

Let us now return to the perfection of Francis, declared to be the Angel of the Sixth Seal, not only by external wit-

nesses but also by his most perfect life. He ascends from the rising of the sun: always rising from virtue to virtue of Christ's mortal life in his holy way of living, he modelled himself on the life of Christ. And he had preeminently the sign of the living God: because of the merit of his life he was found uniquely worthy to bear truly in his body the signs of the wounds of the Crucified. He shone uniquely with the life of Christ: as is clear from his observance of the Gospel; in crucifixion, profound humility, extreme poverty, burning charity, desire for our salvation, the suffering of the cross, and merciful condescension and compassion for sinners and the suffering.³⁰

In the Book of Revelation, this angel (not identified as the 'sixth') calls for marking the elect with the sign of salvation (Revelation 7:3-8). But the 'sixth angel' blows his trumpet to unleash plagues that kill a third of humankind (Revelation 9:13-19), a prediction of the punishments to be inflicted on those who rejected salvation (thus a warning to Ubertino's opponents).

The *Arbor vitae*, with its fulminations against the Antichrist in the Church, also reflects the polemics of the time, especially the struggle between the Spirituals and Pope Boniface VIII. Other popes (Benedict XI, Clement V and John XXII) turned the forces of the Inquisition against these radical Franciscans. The movement met its own apocalypse in the person of John XXII. After arrests and excommunications, the last four Spirituals who refused to submit were burned alive in the market-square of Marseilles on 7 May 1318.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the meaning of poverty in the Franciscan tradition had changed dramatically. From the desire to live *sine proprio* in Francis and Clare, the Spirituals transformed it into an apocalyptic sign, charged with notions of the impending upheaval of a corrupt and wealthy church establishment.

Despite the excesses of some of the Spirituals, we are beginning to see today the important service to the Franciscan

tradition performed by these 'revolutionaries of the Spirit'. They remained familiar with the broad corpus of Francis' own writings, and kept alive valuable oral and written traditions about the early years of the Franciscan movement. Some of these traditions are reflected (and coloured by the Spirituals' prejudices) in works like *The Mirror of Perfection* and the *Fioretti*, 'The Little Flowers of Saint Francis'. And their relentless emphasis on the early style of life in hermitages helped to shape revivals of the practice of poverty and contemplation for centuries. These revivals included the Observant movement in the fifteenth century; and the 'houses of recollection', 'retiros' and the Capuchin reform in the sixteenth century. These groups in turn were the living environment for important Franciscan mystics and spiritual writers, and for the development of forms of popular devotions, as well as systems of prayer, meditation and contemplation.

THE GOLDEN AGE

The great flowering of Franciscan contemplative practice and reflection had its centre in Spain in the sixteenth century, the so-called 'Golden Age' of Spanish mysticism. The most familiar names from that period are probably those of the great Carmelite mystics and reformers, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. But there are also some very significant figures from

the Franciscan tradition who contributed to that history as well.

The renewal of the Franciscan contemplative tradition in Spain and elsewhere grew out of a new form of the hermitage tradition of the Order. As mentioned earlier, in regard to the Spirituals, various reform movements after them turned back to the type of life modelled in Francis' Rule for brothers living in hermitages. In the latter part of the fourteenth century the movement called the 'Observance' grouped together communities of Lesser Brothers seeking a 'regular observance' of the Rule, with greater emphasis on poverty; emphasising the role of lay brothers (the head of the group was Paoluccio de Trinci, a lay brother from Foligno); and a return to the life in hermitages, away from the larger urban friaries (*conventi*) and churches. It was the eventual dominance of this reform movement that led, in 1517, to the division of the Lesser Brothers (Friars Minor) into two distinct families: the Friars Minor Conventual and the Friars Minor of the Observance.

Another reform movement, with its centre in Spain, established *retiros*, contemplative Franciscan communities outside the large cities. These communities produced most of the great writers of Franciscan spirituality in Spain in the sixteenth century. As the movement spread to Italy, it inspired the foundation of other communities there. The Friars Minor Capuchin, founded in 1525, were originally called the Friars 'of Eremitical Life', because of their practice of the contemplative life in hermitages as a fundamental aspect of their Franciscan life. The Capuchins became another independent family of Friars Minor in 1619, and contributed greatly to the spreading of Franciscan spirituality during the Catholic Reformation, in the wake of the Council of Trent.

With this history in mind, let us turn to some of the authors from these new movements whose work contributed to the great revival of mysticism and contemplative prayer in Spain.