experiential knowledge of God, we can apply the term to him without hesita-
tion. But if we define the term according to particular interior states and super-
natural phenomena like ecstasy or levitation, Francis does not belong in this
category even if Bonaventure, in the *Legenda maior*, mentions certain forms of
supernatural rapture (*raptus*). At most, we might say that Francis was a mystic
of the Gospel. Indeed, for him, spiritual experience consisted in leading the very
life of God in becoming human. This means allowing to be born and grow
within oneself the person of Christ to the point of making of one’s whole life a
commitment that is ready for total surrender and martyrdom. The one who, in
the midst of suffering and humiliation, preserves perfect joy, rejoices in being
persecuted, and gives proof of the love of one’s enemies can only give thanks to
God for the divine life—the eternal life—which God has graced that person
with here below.

One of the characteristics that strikes us most often about the Poor Man of
Assisi is his special approach to Sacred Scripture. The desire to return to the
Gospel is certainly not unique to him; it had played an important role in vari-
ous religious movements of the twelfth century. But in some cases, this will to
rediscover and be faithful to the sacred text had led to erroneous interpretations
or had been marked by a narrow literalism. This had allowed clerics to deride
those unlettered laity who claimed the right to criticize their parish priests while
being incapable of correctly understanding the Latin text. Thus the monastic
chronicler Guilbert of Nogent had mocked some peasants of Picardy who had
translated the phrase *Beati eritis* ("Blessed will you be..."), proclaimed by Jesus
at the beginning of each of the Beatitudes, as “Blessed are the heretics!” Again,
around 1180, the curial official Walter Map drew the same lesson from certain
naïve interpretations of the Gospel by the Waldensians. Recalling that “it is not
permitted to cast one’s pearls before swine,” he noted that, in the Church, au-
thority does not derive from the public squares and that “the word must not be
given to the simple who we know to be incapable of receiving it and, even more,
to give what they have received.”

The relationship of Francis to the word of God follows along these move-
ments, but he knew how to avoid their exaggerations and deviations. As a
simple layman unfamiliar with the worlds of learned culture, he had no idea of
the hermeneutical principles which governed biblical exegesis at the time; he
employed, rather, a direct reading of the sacred text, without resorting to glosses
or erudite commentary. For him, the understanding of the word of God came
not from an outside master or from subtle analysis but from an awakening that
each person can receive, on the condition of being engaged with one’s whole
heart in its reading. The Gospel was not in his eyes a narrative or a holy story but a call addressed by one person to another; it is the very life of Christ which is communicated in order that it might be taken up and continued. By this token, the word constitutes, along with the Eucharist, a sign left by God to assure his presence in a permanent way in the midst of human beings, as he writes in the Letter to the Faithful: “No one can be saved except by the holy words of our Lord Jesus Christ, which clerics speak about, proclaim, and administer.”

This immediacy with respect to the sacred text can appear surprising to us. But let's not forget that simple believers, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, did not own a Bible. If they knew how to read, they had at the very most a psalter. Only monks and clerics—especially the “great clerics” who had gone to the schools—had a direct access to the text of Sacred Scripture, of which a full translation in the vernacular still did not exist. Thus the majority of laity knew only those passages that were used in the liturgy, provided of course that they understood Latin at least in a rudimentary fashion. And the direct and committed approach to Scripture that Francis practiced and advocated—“to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel”—could take the most diverse forms: reading for those who, like him, knew Latin at least approximately, or simple ruminations over a few verses memorized by heart, or the stringing together of various passages of the Bible in such a way as to constitute something like scriptural “chains,” as he did in the Psalms of the Mystery of the Lord Jesus (or Office of the Passion). The Bible of Saint Francis—a virtual Bible, we are quick to say, since he never possessed a complete copy—was a collection of chosen morsels which he found in the breviary or in an evangelary rather than a whole text of which he might make a continuous reading, as in monasteries, throughout the liturgical year. Using the very words of Scripture, he addressed God in his own language. In the most concrete sense of the term, one can say that he “speaks Bible” to the extent that his writings consist for the most part of words and phrases drawn from the sacred text which he appropriates and recomposes in a kind of “patchwork.” Whence the rather unoriginal, sometimes even disappointing character of his writings, at least at first glance—except for the Canticle of Brother Sun and the Testament, which have a more personal character—for they have their full meaning only in reference to his experience of God and of lived poverty. But we would be wrong to see here only simple repetitions or compilations, because these texts comprise something more like his personal reflections on the Bible than quotations properly speaking, with the exception of the rule of 1221, which he had asked Caesar of Speyer to adorn with scriptural references once he had finished its redaction. When he was writing alone, Francis made up prayers or meditations based on passages of Scripture which had attracted his attention and which had been etched into his memory. A phrase heard by chance during a sermon or read on a piece of parchment was enough to prompt in him an interior illumination or burst of enthusiasm and sometimes furnished a response to something he was wondering about. Thus, when in 1209 the Poor Man of Assisi, who had yet been joined only by Bernard of Quintavalle, was still seeking his way, “as they were without learning, they did not know where to find the passages of the Gospel on the renunciation of the world, they devoutly prayed that the Lord would deign to manifest his will on the first page that they would see upon opening the holy book.”

After this Francis and Bernard opened the New Testament three successive times and landed each time on verses where Christ urged those who wished to follow him to strip themselves of their goods, to carry nothing for the journey, and to deny themselves. They immediately decided to follow his advice—which allows Francis to write, when he mentioned this event in his Testament of 1226: “The Lord himself revealed to me that I must live according to the form of the Holy Gospel.” Even later, when clerics had entered the order and Francis had acquired a more advanced knowledge of the Bible through reading and meditation on the texts of the liturgical office of the Hours, his relationship to Scripture never became academic. Moreover, according to Thomas of Celano and the author of the Assisi Compilation, the only copy of the New Testament that the friars possessed at the time, from which they read the lessons at Matins, Francis had sold in order to take care of the needs of a poor woman whose two sons had just entered the fraternity. Francis was thus not a writing man, even if he probably turned to it more often than we might think, given the small number of texts that have come down to us from him. It suffices to think about the role that dreams and visions had in his life, without even mentioning his deeds and spoken words, in order to gauge to what extent it would be anachronistic and inexact to see in him one religious author among so many others and to reduce his spiritual experience to what we can gather from his writings. According to theAnonymous of Perugia and Bonaventure, although Francis may have received the tonsure in 1209, making him a cleric, the Poor Man of Assisi behaved his whole life like a layman when it came to learning; and it is in this perspective that we must place the prohibitions that the rule of the Friars Minor contains on this matter: “Let those who do not know how to read not go seeking to learn how; but let them remember that they must above all else desire to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation.”

This rejection of every intellectual advancement within the order is somewhat shocking to modern sensibilities. But it constituted an indispensable precaution—infective, as succeeding events will show—for maintaining the
original characteristics of the Franciscan movement. The praise of simplicity by Francis was not to be equated with ignorance. If he left to intellectu­als, whom he mistrusted, "the verbal jumble, the embellishments, the displays of knowledge and subtleties," it is because he dreaded above all else the search for wisdom and knowledge that had led his spiritual sons to cut themselves off from the poor by enclosing themselves in a "wooden language" that was allegorical or academic. In his eyes, the relationship to Scripture had to remain above all operational (the "holy operation"), and the profound meaning of the sacred text resided in an action designed to make it effective in the world. In every divine word, Francis first saw an invitation to begin to do something so that the words might become life through the personal commitment of the speaker or reader. Nothing was more painful for him than to see his brothers be moved at the reading of certain hagiographical texts, like the passion of the Franciscans martyred in Morocco in 1220, and to draw glory from their exploits. Thus did he prohibit them from reading it by saying: "Let each one glory in his own martyrdom and not in that of others!"

This direct and personal implication in and through Scripture is likewise demonstrated through his selective reading of the Bible. Francis did not go searching for obscure passages requiring learned commentaries; his preferences were for the Psalms and the New Testament. In the texts of the Gospels, he especially valued the words that we might call radical because they forced the human being to correct and reorient himself at the very core of his being and behaviors. Nourished by the sacred text, he privileged a few passages or themes which we find, for example, in the two rules that have come down to us. Sometimes he even changed the text ever so slightly in order to adapt it to his purpose. Thus, in the Officium Passionis Domini, he says, with respect to the Nativity, that "the most holy beloved Child has been given to us and was born for us on the road and was placed in the crèche because there was no place for him in the inn." Francis’ text draws both on the antiphon Puer natus est nobis, taken from the liturgy of the feast of Christmas, and on the passage from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:7) that is read at Mass the same day. But he adds that Jesus had been born "on the road" (in via), which does not appear in any of these two texts and puts the emphasis on the condition of pilgrim and wanderer which was his from the moment of Jesus’ birth. Francis has, however, not invented this, for we find the mention of Christ “who was born on the way” already in a homily of Gregory the Great. Francis certainly had not had direct access to this writing, but he had come to know of it through the breviary of the Roman Curia which he, as well as his friars, were using; there the passage in question is the second of four readings for Christmas night borrowed from the patristic literature. Beginning with these texts, Francis made a montage of texts that corresponded to his vision of Christ. Indeed, for him the Son of God is a child without a country who was refused lodging. Likewise, he wrote in the rule of 1221 that Jesus “lived on alms, he and the Virgin Mary and his disciples,” which corresponded to his intimate conviction but not to any explicit mention of it in the Gospels. Indeed, in the life of Christ, Francis had a predilection for the figure of the newly born Jesus and for the dying Jesus: that is, the moments of the greatest weakness of the God-made-man. But he did not remain outside the biblical text: in recomposing it, he placed himself in a parallel, if not identical, situation to that of Christ in order to discover from the inside that which could have been the concrete life and feelings of the Son of Man, who was born in a stable, suffered the suffering of the world, and identified himself with it in his Passion. In this approach, Francis ushered in a veritable spiritual revolution, because this was tantamount to saying that humility and pain were the real face of God.

The passages of the Gospels most frequently cited by the Poverello are first of all those from the synoptic Gospels. We have seen the decisive importance for his vocation of the discourse of the sending of the disciples on mission (Matt 10; Luke 9:10). It is necessary to add to this the verses from Luke where Christ says that God alone is good (Luke 18:19) and where he urges those who want to follow him to put themselves in the most unassuming place (Luke 22:26), as well as, of course, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3–11) and the Infancy and Passion narratives. The borrowings from John, though more rare, are no less important. Francis often cites the passages which exalt Christ glorified and those which underline the bond existing between the Spirit and life. The whole first chapter of the Admonitions is but a paraphrase of the last Gospel, centered on the revelation of the Triune God in Jesus Christ, only mediator and sole “channel” between heaven and earth. Among the epistles, the most employed are those of Paul to the Corinthians and Romans, as well as that of James concerning the concrete demands of charity, and the First Letter of Peter. From this last text the Poor Man of Assisi has especially retained the call to follow the footprints of Christ (2:19), the definition of the Christian as “pilgrim and stranger” in this world (2:11), and the ideal of mutual love advocated by the prince of the apostles (1:22). In contrast, we might be surprised to find in all of Francis’ writings only two quotations from the Acts of the Apostles, which had had an important role in most of the popular religious movements of the twelfth century. Moreover, Jacques de Vitry, witness of the beginnings of the Franciscan fraternity in 1216, had cited, in reference to them, the famous passage from this text about the first Christian community of Jerusalem, where it is said that
the “group of believers was of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32). Jacques' allusion is not surprising, since the prelate, as open as he was to the new spiritual currents of the day, had not yet understood the real novelty of the message of Francis. After visiting him during the siege of Damietta in 1219, Jacques showed a greater understanding of him when (in Palestine, it seems) he wrote: “This order is that of the true poor men of the Crucified.”

When we try to summarize the religious experience of Francis in “a few words” (to use an expression that was familiar to him), it appears as a concerted effort to conform himself to the Gospel and to make of it an absolute norm of behavior. Defining in the first paragraph of the rule of 1221 the specificity of the life of the friars, he simply writes: “This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”; it is an affirmation that will be taken up again in a more developed manner at the beginning of the rule of 1223: “The rule of the Friars Minor consists in observing the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Thus for him, Christian perfection is identified with the faithful and complete observance of a text of divine inspiration.

At first glance, this looks like an approach that comes from what we would today call fundamentalism, defined as the desire to go back to the fundamental texts of a religion, to put them fully into practice, and to look there for a response to all the problems of private and public life. Indeed, the behavior of Francis often seems to come from a literal approach to the word of God, which can indeed seem naïve. Thus when Christ asked Francis to “rebuild my house,” he began to rebuild with his own hands the little church of San Damiano that was falling into ruin. Moreover, his desire to apply in a direct and immediate fashion certain precepts or evangelical examples relative to rejection and “folly” was reminiscent of other “fools for Christ,” so numerous in the eastern tradition, who led an existence both marginal and scandalous in the eyes of the contemporaries they hoped to shock.

Even if it is not likely that Francis would have read the Lives of these personages, he is nevertheless similar to them in his manner of behaving: crazy in the eyes of the world, as when he had had himself dragged naked, a cord around his neck, by one of his brothers through the streets of Assisi, or had himself attached to a column on the town’s public square. Indeed, did he not define himself, in his Latin-Italian jargon, as “unus novellus pazzus” -not, as it is sometimes mistranslated, a “young crazy person” but “a new kind of fool”—obsessed by the holy folly of the Cross and of divine love? Such attitudes attest to a desire in him of a fidelity to the very letter of the New Testament and a rejection of every reading distanced from the word of God. Francis, however, never employs the expressions “literally” (litteraliter) or “to the letter” (ad litteram), except in a passage of the Admonitions where, along the lines of Saint Paul, he speaks in severe terms of “religious who are killed by the letter who do not want to follow the spirit of the divine Scriptures but desire only to know the words and interpret them for others.”

But was it possible to adhere to the texts of the Bible while avoiding every gloss or interpretation without falling into a deadening or laughable literalism? To resolve this contradiction, we have to go back to the conviction which inspired the Poor Man of Assisi, according to which the spiritual meaning resides in the very letter of the sacred text. In his eyes, the relationship between the letter and the spirit is similar to what intellectuals of the period had established between matter and form: the letter serves to give flesh to the spirit and gets its value to the degree that it contains it and expresses it. This explains the emphasis that Francis puts, tenaciously and passionately, on the necessity of a concrete and immediate observance of the Gospel. But the literal respect of the sacred text was not for him an end in itself, because, in order to become operative, it had to be put into practice “in a spiritual and pure way.” We might be tempted to say that he was a champion of a “spiritually literal” reading of the Scriptures, centered not on the detailed accomplishment of its prescriptions but on a necessity of a thorough and personal consistency. The important thing was not to remain fixed on the words themselves (however sublime they might be) but to allow oneself to be implicated by them and to commit oneself to the path that they opened, the purpose being to make the inner and outer person the same, behavior identical with word, in order to come to a perfect conformity to Christ. For Francis, the true word of God is Christ himself; the Scriptures are but the witness given by men and women to the Incarnate Word. Three centuries before Luther, Francis believed, like the later reformer, that the Bible is not to be confused with Christ: the one is the servant, the other is the Lord. The authority of the Bible is not that of a Scripture holy in itself; it derives from the one of whom this Scripture speaks and who must guide its reading and comprehension.

Lexical analysis proves fruitful for penetrating into the mental and spiritual world of the Poor Man of Assisi. Indeed, we can see that in the texts where he evokes the relationship between the human person and Christ, Francis uses not the term “imitate” (imitari, imitatio) but the verb “to follow” (sequei). The model, for him, is “Our Lord Jesus Christ whose footsteps we must follow.” Between the two words there is more than a nuance, for what he advocates is not a literal imitation but rather a creative endeavor: every Christian
who wants to be seriously engaged on the path to salvation will have to accept, in a context unique for each, to endure trials similar to those which Jesus suffered during his earthly life (poverty, solitude, suffering, and rejection) while striving to discover his fundamental attitudes, especially his spirit of prayer and love. Only at such cost will one be able in turn to escape the “second death,” after the Last Judgment, as Francis writes in the Canticle of Brother Sun: “Blessed are those that she [death] will find in your most holy will / for the second death will do them no harm.”

To become like Christ is thus, for Francis, nothing other than to live in finitude to the Spirit that was animating him. Thus does he urge the Friars Minor to read the rule and to act “in a spiritual manner,” that is, in all simplicity. This “spirit of the letter”—if we can express it in this way—is, for Francis, in opposition to what we might call the “spirit of the flesh”: the “flesh,” in this context, signifies not the physical body but the natural tendency of human beings, by reason of their sinful nature, to appropriate the gift of God to themselves and to glory in their own talent or wisdom as if it belongs to them. This false holiness is incarnated for Francis in the preacher who is content to announce the word of God without putting it into practice: “Woe to the religious who delights in lazy and vain words! . . . Woe to the religious who does not keep in his heart—and does not show to others in deeds—the goods that the Lord has shown to him but, under pretext of some recompense, desires rather to show them to people in words!” To talk about the truth without acting on it is, for Francis, the very essence of its perversion—the sin against the Spirit that destroys the word of life. In Francis’ eyes, hypocrisy is the letter that kills, according to the expression used by Saint Paul, in contrast to the letter that saves, which is a readiness to follow the Word and, for the Friars Minor, the rule which actualizes it in this world. The authentic spirit is recognized by its fruits, which are the embrace of poverty, purity of heart, humility, patience in persecutions and illnesses, the love of enemies, and the forgiveness of offenses: spiritual attitudes that are at the very heart of the notion of “minority” (minoritas).

When all is said and done, one can thus firmly state that Francis is not a fundamentalist, to the extent that he values the letter of the sacred text less than the attitude of the one referred to therein. In this sense, the distinction between a “carnal” approach and a “spiritual” approach to Scripture plays a central and decisive role. For the Poor Man of Assisi, religious life is defined as a struggle not against others or against the world but rather against oneself. The human person must not impose his truth or his law or do violence to anyone. One must hold only oneself and one’s evil inclinations accountable. The desire to live in a spiritual manner or, what amounts to the same, “according to the form of the Holy Gospel,” is expressed above all in an effort to purify the heart and in the search for an increasing intimacy with God in prayer. The “form of life” of the Minors is nothing other than a spiritual fidelity to the letter of the evangelical text, considered as the touchstone of Christian behavior and the standard against which all religious observances of the friars had to be measured. Thus we know that in 1220 Francis annulled the statutes regarding fasting and eating which his “vicars” had promulgated during his sojourn in Egypt. The dispositions contained in the rules of 1221 and 1223 about this subject confirm this: “And let them be permitted to eat all foods set before them, according to the Gospel.” It is by fidelity to the letter—but simultaneously to the spirit—of the Gospel that he rejects the prohibitions regarding eating which surely belonged to the monastic tradition and Christian asceticism but which contradicted the fundamental demands of the word of God, namely charity and evangelical freedom. Francis is aware that there is no one single way to follow Christ and that it is incumbent upon each one to find his or her way, even within the fraternity and within the framework of the rule. This is what led him to write to Brother Leo, seized by doubt, on the best manner to live out his vocation: “In whatever manner it seems best for you to please the Lord God and to follow his footsteps and his poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience.” Thus it is right to consider authentic, as much as it was in conformity with his spirit, the words of Francis to the friars on his deathbed: “I have done what mine to do; may Christ teach you what is yours!” Never wanting to consider himself a founder of an order, he admonishes his spiritual sons not to imitate him but to follow the footsteps of Christ, in a creative fidelity which ought not to be a mere repetition.

From the life and writings of Francis we get a new definition of what it means to be religious: it ceases being a separate category, distinct from the profane, and becomes a commitment embracing all aspects of one’s personality and life. For him, salvation is not to be won through the begging of alms or through rituals: it is a way of living in a relationship of intimacy with Jesus, the incarnate God, while at the same time seeking to gain the world for Christ through the example of a dynamic and joyful asceticism. In this perspective, poverty is not something negative—to lack something, to be deprived of this or that thing—but rather something positive. It is, first of all, to recognize God as the one from whom every good comes and as a means of attaining perfect joy. This is not a blessed optimism but the refusal to let oneself be distracted by the failures and humiliations of the fundamental certainty of being a sinner, both saved and reconciled. At the same time, this kind of religiosity opens itself up to the affective depths of the human person, since it is founded on compassion...