

The Franciscan Movement as Vanguard

In the official announcement of the Vatican Council (*Humanae Salutis*, 25 December 1961) Pope John XXIII says:

If anything is demanded of the Church today, it is this: that she brings mankind in contact with the imperishable, life-giving and divine power of the Gospel.

In Bahia, the Council of the Order of Friars Minor has defined the place of the Franciscan movement within the Church in exceptionally bold terms:

As Friars Minor, then, we are called to be "an evangelizing vanguard" in a Church which must be continually reincarnated and renewed. Accordingly, we must be especially alert and sensitive to the movements of the Holy Spirit, both within and without the Church. Besides ministering to the faithful we see a need to reach out into our societies to those yet un-touched by the Gospel and to those alienated from the Gospel as traditionally presented (Bahia 1983, 17).

Of course, this determination of role is not designed, in the narrow sense, for the friars alone but for all people, lay and religious, who look to Francis and Clare of Assisi for inspiration. One should read that quotation very attentively. The Franciscan movement belongs in the Church, but not on the side of those who wish to go along well-trodden paths or do not want to admit anything other than what has been tried and tested.

The Church, therefore, faces a challenge from the world. The Church wishes to venture into new territories in the spirit of the Council. In order to do that, the Church needs pioneers, people whose

hearts are ready for risk, for boldness, for experiment, a vanguard that the Church can follow in confidence. The Franciscan movement has to share in this task; this is in agreement with the role of the Orders as they understand themselves and also with its own history.

The Franciscan movement also has demands made upon it from the outside. What Jesuit Peter Lippert said in 1927, long before the Second Vatican Council, is surely even more appropriate for today, reflecting as it does the expectations of our own period:

The principle that led, through Benedict to Dominic and on to Ignatius, to the organization of more recent congregations seems to be nearing the term of its inner possibilities of development. This does not mean to say, of course, that it will ever be superfluous or replaceable. But a fundamentally new guideline, sought for by so many, and experimented in new foundations, especially today, can probably be found on a quite different track, namely that of the primitive Franciscan ideal: unhampered vivaciousness in agree community of love, that expresses itself spontaneously without being forced into the mould of prescriptions and ordinances, developing personalities according to their own essential nature, both vital and original, obeying their own inmost law of discipline and self-command. If God should grace His Church one day with the Order of the future, for which so many of the best are yearning today, then it will probably bear the imprint of St Francis' inspiration (Lippert 11).

Another Jesuit has taken up these words and asso-iated them with the achievements and the insights gained during the Second Vatican Council. Mario von Galli, in his book *Living our Future: Francis of Assisi and the Church Tomorrow*, maintains that Francis of Assisi has been the secret theme of the Council and that the Church has taken the path of Francis.

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