

Foundation Dates in the Franciscan Movement

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2008/2009 is a Jubilee Year for the Franciscan Family. Yet what is it exactly that we are celebrating? To come a little nearer to the precise content of the Jubilee, I would like to make a few remarks on this topic.

1. The Background to the Franciscan Third Order (the Franciscan Family)

The Franciscan Third Order has a very complex history. It reaches back to a time before St Francis, to the Penitential Movement to which both Francis and Clare must be assigned, but this movement had an even longer history.

In fact, it has to be said that it goes back much further, as early as the first centuries of Christendom. The prevailing received opinion then was that there were four grave sins that excluded the sinner from participating in the Eucharistic community [communion]: murder, adultery, perjury and blasphemy. Whoever was guilty of such sins, was *ipso facto* forced into the state of public penance. That person could no longer occupy any honourable office, was not allowed the rights of marriage and had also to lead a life of obvious renunciation. That person had to don a penitential garment and had to be present as the other Christians assembled to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy. As soon as the actual liturgical celebration began, however, the sinner had to withdraw. This lasted for weeks until *Maundy Thursday* in Holy Week or another day in Easter Week arrived when the words of absolution were spoken and the penitent could once more be taken back into the Eucharistic community (communion) of the Church.

And this was the practice for centuries. But then came the monks of the Celtic church in Ireland and Scotland who introduced another way of practising the sacrament of penance. This was no longer a public act, but a private one. This was 'confession' - at first, contrary to existing ecclesiastical laws. However, the Church gradually came round to accepting this. The longer this process lasted the less frequent became the practice of public penance. Yet there were men and women who wanted to take the Gospel especially seriously, and these began to wonder whether they could voluntarily live that form of life that the old Church so obviously and fervently desired. And so the first penitential movement arose.

Then, at the beginning of the 13th century, the rules governing these penitential movements began to be written down. A whole series of such texts exist. One of them goes back as far as 1221. For a long time this was held to be the Rule of the Third Order, indeed, as a text written by St Francis himself. Logically and consequently, this year was celebrated as the year of the foundation of the Third Order - that is, until it was recognised

- that this text has nothing to do with St Francis;
- that the Franciscans first called themselves the 'Penitents of Assisi' and there are many indications that they had a good deal in common with the 'Penitents' in their way they led their life (which is also true of St Clare's 'form of life');
- that many people, both men and women, wanted to follow in the footsteps of Francis, yet remain in their own homes. It was to these people that Francis addressed his 'Letter to All the People'.

But the Penitential Movement was far bigger and far broader than its Franciscan counterpart. In 1289, the Franciscan Pope Nicholas IV proclaims that the whole Penitential Movement was 'Franciscan', which was plainly not the case, for that same year saw the birth of a *Dominican* Third Order.

Which date, therefore, is the one the Franciscan Third Order can refer to as the year of its foundation? This would have to be a difficult one to establish convincingly and definitively. My opinion is that we could just as well say that it was also in 1208/1209.

2. The Poor Clares and the Women's Movement

Have the Poor Clares as an Order any role to play in the Jubilee Year we are about to celebrate in 2008/2009? I think they have. But here there must be some qualification.

An Order with the name *Poor Clares* did not come into existence before the year 1263. In this year, Urban IV

specified that all the 'Poor Ladies of San Damiano' were to be known as Poor Clares from then on. No amount of juggling can establish what was not there in the first place. For those who were to bear, from that date on, the name Poor Clares can be divided into two distinct groups:

- the first group - by far the larger - was formed by those monasteries where the Rule given them by Pope Urban IV was being followed. In essence, this Rule was a text that stood in direct line with the text that Cardinal Ugolino had written for the Order of the Poor Ladies of the Spoleto Valley, somewhat improved and updated.
- the smaller of the two groups was formed by those monasteries that were guided by the Rule that Clare, shortly before her death, had written and which had been confirmed by Innocent IV. The range of influence was very limited, restricted to San Damiano and a few other monasteries.

This 'doubling up' can only be fully comprehended if we recall that there existed in the centre of Italy and from there it spread out elsewhere a great women's movement, comparable to that which can be found north of the Alps, above all in France, the Low Countries, present-day Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as along the Lower Rhine - namely, the Beguine movement.

It is really astonishing that the penitential movement, which was the subject of the last contribution, spontaneously led to the foundation of communities of women. There was scarcely a town or city which did not have women who would leave their extended family environment to pursue a common aim: they wanted to live the Gospel, to lead a life pleasing unto God, either in the middle of the town or else a little way off. These apparently had no personal Founder, no identifiable Foundress - there was a spontaneous 'generation', each independent of the other. Obviously, the time was ripe for new form of spiritual life to arise.

Yet then the Church's desire to organise and regulate intervenes. Cardinal Ugolino petitions Pope Honorius III for permission to bring these communities of women together. He composes the Rule mentioned above he imposes strict monastic enclosure and gathers them all together under the name of the '*Poor Ladies of San Damiano or of the Spoleto Valley*'. From 1218 onwards the guiding and regulating hand of Cardinal Ugolino can be traced in all these communities. A new monastic Order arises and takes its place upon the stage of history, although the intention of these women was quite different at the beginning. Even in San Damiano Ugolino's influence was setting the standard. Of course whether his Rule was the one followed can be doubted. Clare had **two** spiritual bases on which to build:

- the '**Privilege of Poverty**' granted by Innocence III (1216)
- the '**Form of Life**' of St Francis of Assisi from the year 1212, which Clare will later insert into the middle of her Rule.

We have therefore two dates that can be considered 'Jubilee-worthy' for the so-called 'Second Order'. But faced with the fact that San Damiano is to be regarded as arising within the greater framework of the spontaneous birth of the women's movement or the penitential movement, then we have to think about this matter once more.

3. The First Order

The year 1208/1209 is favoured as the date of the foundation of the First Order. But can that be taken as a fact without further examination?

Actually, this date is recorded as the year during which Francis, as he explicitly states in his Testament '*Brothers were given*' him, or the year in which the Pope confirmed by word of mouth the so-called 'Primitive Rule'. It is, however, not a formally correct date for the foundation. This is especially true as the Brothers call themselves the '*Penitents of Assisi*', which allows for no other interpretation than that, in Assisi and associated with Francis himself, there was a special form of the Penitential Movement, similar to those existing in other place. [See §1]

An Order, in the sense of a canonically approved community, does not exist for these 'Penitents' until after some time has elapsed. They form a sort of brotherhood in which one was obedient to another and the members of which were loosely bound together in fraternal love. At the beginning, therefore, there are scant institutional structures: a few Biblical verses are all that they had to go by; a few rules to govern their common life. They have no permanent residence, no monastery, no churches. They spend the night in village bake-houses, in caves, in churches, sometimes in the open air somewhere. They take part in the liturgy in the parish churches. They do odd jobs to earn enough to live on. They live like the other poor people do. They wander through the world,

meditating; now and again, they call upon others to join them, to convert to God. Each year they gather together at the so-called Whitsun Chapter, exchange experiences, both positive and negative. These will be written down and added to the Primitive Rule or inserted somewhere within the text. The rapid growth of the number of friars is also requiring that organisational measures are taken: regulations, subdivisions, definition of responsibilities. Gradually, therefore, over time, a longer text arose, the 'Regula non Bullata'. It is obligatory, of course, but not in the sense that ecclesiastical law understands it.

This is changed in the year 1223. At the behest of the Pope, Francis writes a shorter Rule. Now in this Rule the Evangelical Counsels also appear. The Brothers now promise 'to live in obedience, without possessions and in chastity', which for some decades has been the obligatory form, according to ecclesiastical law, in which a community becomes formally an 'Ordo'. The Papal Bull, which now confirms the Rule, is consistent when it speaks of an 'Ordo'. So from a simple fraternity arises a real Order. The actual date of the foundation of the First Order is accordingly to be reckoned as the year 1223.

The year 1208/1209 marks the origin of the Franciscan *Family* in the broadest sense.

4. Individual personalities

This year it is not only the Franciscan Third Order that will be celebrating the birth of St Elizabeth of Hungary (1207) as its spiritual model and reference. In fact, she is worthy of having a special commemoration all to herself, even if she had not undergone an equivalent total and radical renunciation of herself under the inspiration of Saint Francis. She looked beyond the confines of her condition and circumstances of life and wanted to share the lot of those people who were suffering injustice, she wanted to be in solidarity with them, in what she ate and what she drank, in what she used and in her whole way of life. She lived her life accordingly - bound up with those in need and in misery - in performing works of mercy and charity (Matt 25, 31 ff). Such a life is a constant source of inspiration for the whole Franciscan Family and far beyond. It would therefore be false to claim this exemplary and inspirational life for oneself or one's own community or even to separate it out from the wider sources of Franciscan inspiration. Moreover, there are other dates in her biography which are suitable for a jubilee celebration, the year in which she was inspired to adopt the Franciscan ideal, for example (1225), or the year of her foundation in Marburg (1229), or the year of her death (1231). For the Third Order there would be other personalities in which the embodiment of the Franciscan ideal is tangible and who would therefore be worthy of a celebration.

There could be adduced also other exemplary models in the other branches of the Franciscan Family. It goes without saying that Francis and Clare have a special role to play, but it would also be equally false to claim these personalities for one's own private backyard, so to speak. These saints belong to the whole Franciscan Family and beyond, they belong to the whole Church - and to the whole world! This is because they are an ever-present and existential interpretation of the way the Gospel can be lived and in fact they are the canonised prototypes of the 'Poor'. The beginning of this initiative begins in 1208/2009 when the Gospel took wing in a new historical and significant form, socially effective, and empowered to create a new form of community.

Allow me to quote from the Pope's book on the Person of Jesus in connection with this topic:

"Perhaps it is appropriate that before we continue to meditate upon this text, to turn our attention once again for a moment to that figure in the history of the Faith in which this Beatitude has been translated and embodied most closely in the human span of history; Francis of Assisi. The saints are the true interpreters of the Holy Scriptures. What a word means is mostly to be understood in those persons who have been enraptured and captivated to the greatest degree by it and who have lived by it. The interpretation of Scripture cannot be a purely academic exercise and it cannot be relegated to a purely historical category. Holy Scripture bears within itself the potential to be active and productive in the future, too, and this potential cannot be realised until it is opened up by living through its words and through suffering in consequence of its words. Francis of Assisi has understood the promise contained within the words of Scripture in all their utmost radicality: he understood it to such an extent that he gives away the very clothes from his back. This most radical humility was for him above all freedom to serve, freedom to go on the mission, the ultimate trust in God Who takes care not only of flowers of the field but also cares for His sons and daughters of mankind especially. This serves as a corrective to the Church of his times that had lost the freedom and the dynamism to undertake the pilgrim path of the Mission, due to the prevailing feudal system of the time. Francis shows himself to be unreservedly open

and receptive towards Christ to Whose very image and likeness he was raised through the grace of the Stigmata so that he from then on was no longer able to live his own life but was as one newly-born to live and exist in Christ and from Christ. He did not intend, of course, to found an Order, but simply to gather the people of God around him to listen to the simple word of God, which was not to be loaded with learned expositions that could rob it of the high seriousness of the call. But with the creation of the Third Order he has been forced to accept the distinction between the radicality of the absolute and the practical need to be able to live in the real world. ..." (p.108 f).

5. The Third Order Regular

The problem of establishing the precise date of foundation of Franciscanism will become ever more complicated when we bring the Third Order Regular into the picture.

The Penitential Movement, which takes on its specifically Franciscan form from 1208/1209, becomes more and more differentiated as time passes: in 1223, what is the group of 'Franciscan Brothers' becomes the 'Ordo Fratrum Minorum'. Under the influence of Cardinal Ugolino, from 1218 the corresponding women's communities founded by St Clare become a traditional enclosed monastic order, whose specifically Franciscan character is only finally established shortly before Clare's death in 1252. However, this applies to the smaller part of the Order, which is known henceforth as the 'Poor Clares'.

From the very beginning, there are parallel initiatives and movements which start by being inspired by a Franciscan tradition under the Statute of Penitents, and then, from 1289 onwards begin consolidating as the Franciscan Third Order.

Two trends are evident

1. Increasingly, men who want to live in a Franciscan way, form communities and start living together. They profess to follow the three Evangelical Counsels, which means that their life-style conforms more and more closely to the criteria of a religious order in the canonical sense of the term. That here supposedly lay people are also intent on following the Evangelical Counsels in their form of life does not happen without meeting stiff opposition, of course. So John XXII has to take these Franciscans under his protection in the face of these attacks upon them. In 1323 he declared that this way of life is not only praiseworthy but is also in accord with the will of St Francis. Monastic vows are finally being made accessible to all those who are striving towards a greater perfection of life. Soon pastoral and clerical activities are taken on. The Order will be officially approved by Pope Nicholas V. At the same time as he does this he recommends them to organize themselves as real 'Orders' - in order to distinguish themselves from Franciscan hermits - by summoning a General Chapter and electing a Minister General. They are to give themselves their own statutes and to wear a recognizable religious habit. This takes place on April 29th, 1448 in Montefalco. In 1474 their own statutes are approved. A whole string of foundation dates, therefore!
2. Independently of this development, there are other lay communities spontaneously springing to life in the course of the second half of the 13th century. Among these are the Beghards (Beguins), recorded in Germany, for example in Dillingen, Kaufbeuren, Maria stern, Augsburg and so on. They are suspected of heresy and are obliged to accept monastic enclosure and to follow the Rule of the Third Order. In addition to these there are the hermits who take Francis as their model. In 1521 Pope Leo X gives them a specific common Rule, which remains in force until 1921. From then on until after Vatican II, a revised Rule was the norm. To this group belong the innumerable foundations that arose to meet social needs of the time, especially in the 19th century.

In the 20th century both trends are being brought together and, after the Council, their members now follow a common Rule. However, these two tendencies have not yet found their way to achieving a real unification so far.

6. The Conversion of St Francis

I have just returned from Assisi. There I discovered that they were celebrating a jubilee, for 2006/2007, which is the 800th anniversary of the Conversion of St Francis.

If we set aside for the moment the uncomfortable idea that the sheer multiplication of jubilee celebrations may well be neither wise nor welcome, nevertheless, this date can be taken as good cause for a special commemoration and reflection. For it is during this period that Francis has had those decisive spiritual experiences, namely the encounter with the leper, the mystical moment before the San Damiano Crucifix, the hands-on work restoring the church, the dramatic step he took when he abandoned his father.

The mystical experience that lies at the base of all these events in his life can be clearly defined: contrary to all that is usually associated with God, it seems that the ultimate Mystery of God is to be found in those places where one would prefer to hold one's nose - in the person of the leper, who becomes the 'sacrament' of the Crucified One. Or, to express it differently, the Crucified Christ exposes Himself to the gaze of all the outcast of this world. It is not in the amassing of the material goods of this world that counts, not in being *in possession* but in simply **being** - in *'being poor in temporal things, but rich in virtue'* (RB 6), in living in the solidarity of poverty shared with the poor and suffering people of this world. Here God has written into history history's essential significance. To follow in the footsteps of the God-Made-Man, the Crucified God, *that is the Franciscan vocation.*

Pope Benedict XVI went to Assisi for the commemorative celebration. On this occasion he said:

"Ever since the leper's face, which he loved for the sake of the Love of God, had allowed Francis a glimpse, in no uncertain manner, of what the mystery of 'kenosis' involves, the mystery of God's (con)descension in taking on human nature through the Incarnation of the Son of Man, ever since the Voice from the Cross in San Damiano implanted in his heart his life's work -- 'Francis, go, repair my house, [...]' (2 C 1, 6, 10; FF 593), the path Francis took in life was nothing less than a daily effort to resemble Christ Himself. The Wounds of the Crucifixion were engraved deep in his heart long before they were dug into his body at La Verna. He could really say with St Paul: 'No longer do I live but Christ lives in me'. What was the life the converted Francis lived but one great single act of love? This can be seen in the ardour of his prayers, so full of the spirit of contemplation and praise of God, in his tender embracing of the Divine Infant in the Crib of Greccio, in his contemplation of the Passion at La Verna, in his determination 'to live the life of the Gospel' (2 Test 14), in his decision to adopt radical poverty and in his quest to find Christ in the faces of the poor. His conversion to Christ was so profound that it literally 'transformed' him into a 'figure of Christ' by making him Christ's own image and likeness, and this is the explanation for that which typifies Francis' life, the potential that remains actively effective down to the present day when it comes to tackling the great issues of our time: the desire for peace, the care and the concern for the created world, the furthering of dialogue among all peoples. Francis was a true master of these things. But he is so only because of Christ. Christ is 'our peace' (cf. Eph 2, 14). Christ Himself stands at the beginning of the Cosmos, because in Him all things are made that were made (cf. Jn 1, 3). Christ is the Divine Truth, the eternal 'Logos' in which every 'Dialogue' in time finds its ultimate foundation. Francis has taken up this 'Christological' truth, imprinting it most profoundly in his own flesh; this truth, the truth of Christ, stands at the very roots of human existence, at the beginning of the Cosmos, and of history."