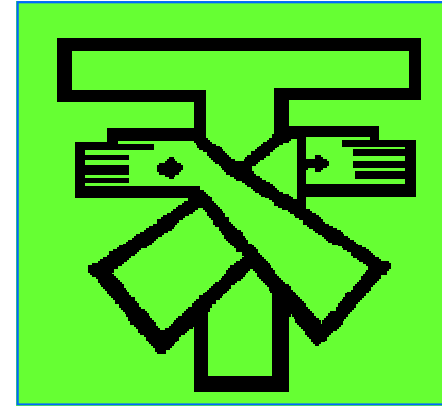




Annual Franciscan Lecture 2003



**Franciscan Diversity!
Gift for the World**

given by
Maurice Carmody OFM

Franciscan Diversity! Gift for the World

Annual lecture for
The Franciscan Association of Great Britain,
London 29 March 2003
By Maurice Carmody OFM

In October 1969 the Secular Franciscans held an international meeting in Assisi as part of a renewal programme in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. They were continuing the Order's response to the challenge contained in the Decree on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, to examine their way on of life in the light of five principles:

- the gospel as supreme rule
- the spirit and the aims of the Founder
- sharing in the life of the Church
- understanding the contemporary world in the light of faith
- the primary importance of a spiritual renewal. *1

Their goal was to contribute to the formulation of a new Rule, using world-wide comments on a previously circulated draft proposal as their starting point. At the heart of their discussions lay an attempt to define the nature of the Secular Franciscan Order. The delegates approved two definitions that were later to serve as guiding principles for the rule promulgated by pope Paul VI on 24 June 1978. They provide a useful starting point for a reflection on Franciscan diversity as gift for the world since the earliest days of the whole family. This afternoon I would like to share these two definitions with you as a modern point of reference for our topic, 'Franciscan Diversity: Gift for the World', that might well have been given a further sub-title: 'an Historian's Perspective'.

The Secular Franciscan Order is an institution founded by Christians who, by their vocation in the world and in the womb of the Church, are committed to living the gospel modelling themselves on the spirit of St Francis. As

*1 *Perfectae Caritatis*, §2

Sometimes these occur as communities or individuals lead the way in projects that stimulate and involve believers and unbelievers in the fundamental issues and serious problems of our world. At other times they happen as communities or individuals, mindful of Francis' command that his brothers are to be 'the lesser ones' and not 'treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others', choose not to take control. *39 they choose to journey as co-workers with men and women who share a similar concern for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.

Could it be that the Spirit is challenging us, not only to search for and welcome new members into our different families, to renew and revitalise the existing missions that our Church and society still need, to deepen our reciprocity, but also to encourage new expressions of the Franciscan charism as they emerge around us and in new contexts? By welcoming diversity and recapturing that spirit of openness to new ways of gospel living that Francis, Clare and their followers, albeit with difficulty at times, embraced in the 13th Century, could we not, in our turn, continue to offer Franciscan diversity as gift for the world in the 21st Century?

*39 'None of the brothers should be administrators or managers in whatever places they are staying among others to serve or to work, nor should they be supervisors in the houses in which they serve; nor should they accept any office which might generate scandal or be harmful to their souls [cf Mk 8.16], instead they should be the lesser ones and subject to all who are in the same house.'
The Earlier Rule, Francis & Clare: the complete writings, The Earlier Rule, 1—2, p 115

God on the way to the Father, [they live] in vital reciprocal exchange with all the Franciscan families, in community, according to a Rule approved by the Church.

The Secular Franciscan Order, a cell of the Church, the People of God on pilgrimage to the Father, is a community of brothers and sisters, in a vital reciprocity with other branches of the Franciscan family. It brings together those Christians who are committed by their vocation and according to a Rule approved by the Church, to live the gospel in the secular world according to the spirit of St Francis. *2

It is clear from both definitions that the delegates did not overlook another important point contained in *Perfectae Caritatis*:

Effective renewal and right adaptations, cannot be achieved save with the cooperation of all the members of an institute. *3

The delegates in Assisi interpreted this phrase as a call to cooperate with the whole Franciscan family. They championed life-giving reciprocity as they key to effective renewal, a conviction that subsequently found expression in the first two paragraphs of the new Rule for Secular Franciscans.

The Franciscan family, as one among many spiritual families raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church, unites all members of the People of God—laity, religious, and priests—who recognise that they are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi.

In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church. *4

Secular Franciscans thus state unequivocally that Franciscan diversity is the Order's gift to the Church and to the world. They challenge their brothers and sisters in other branches of the family to remember that Franciscanism is not the special prerogative of any one group but that, together, they interpret Francis of Assisi's charism for our time. To each, Francis gave a 'form of life' summed up identically in the four Rules that are the foundation of

*2 Robert M Stewart, *De illis qui faciunt penitentium*. 'The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation', Rome 1991, p 248-249 [citations from the Rule are taken from this source]

*3 *Perfectae Caritatis*, §4

*4 Stewart, *Op Cit*, p 33

our way of life that stemmed from the gospel. Not for nothing does each Rule state that their 'rule and life is to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Francis realised that not everyone who chose him as their spiritual mentor could live exactly as he and his first companions did. As the number of his followers, men and women, laity and clerics, married and unmarried grew, he accepted that his unexpected family was actually one of God's gifts for the renewal of the Church in the spirit of the Fourth Lateran Council. This gathering of Church and civil rulers was the most important Council for the reform of the Church prior to that of Trent in the 16th Century. It took place in 1215 and called for a renewal of Christian life in the newly developing town and cities of the time; a renewal based on New Testament values presented in the light of sound theology and good preaching. The Church's acceptance of the Franciscan family, with its three-fold interpretation of Francis' call to gospel living, arrived on the scene just in time to become, despite the Council's ban on new religious rules, not only a confirmation of Francis' charism, approved in 1209, but also a powerful instrument for the implementation of the council's programme, sowing the seeds of a diversity that has characterised the three branches of the Order ever since. Diversity in unity was its gift to a radically changing urban society.

Life giving reciprocity, counterpart to creative and constructive diversity, has been part of the Franciscan charism since the beginning. One thinks immediately of Francis and his first companions. In his *Testament* Francis linked his own conversion, under God, to the poorest of the poor in Assisi: the lepers. Going among them changed his life. It was a reciprocal exchange that gave him more than he had bargained for. Thomas of Celano and the three companions says that he had to struggle to unravel the real meaning of this encounter. In a cave above Assisi:

Different thoughts followed one after another, and their restlessness severely disturbed him...while his past and present transgressions no longer delighted him, he was not fully confident of refraining from future ones. Therefore, when he came back out to his companion, he was so exhausted

Francis and Clare would surely have recognised. Interpreted in a Franciscan sense they challenge all branches of the family to reject that comfortable nest where reciprocity remains an ideal on paper. They incite us to search together for new insights and ways of working with and ministering to each other for the benefit of our world.

I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new prizes,
These are the days that must happen to you:
You shall not heap up what is call'd riches,
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve,
You but arrive at the city to which you were destin'd, you hardly
settle yourself to satisfaction before you are call'd by an
irresistible call to depart.

This call to depart, to continue on the journey, is also implied in that phrase of the Rule of the Secular Franciscans where they are reminded 'to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ'. Striving means moving on. This was undoubtedly what Francis and Clare and their first companions wanted to do and it remains an ideal for all Franciscans. Surprising things can happen when we journey on an equal footing with our brothers and sisters in the world.



When Francis and Clare met their fellow travellers, Franciscanism in all its richness and diversity was born. That those meetings continue today is evident in the birth of so many different groups that claim Francis and/or Clare as their inspiration. Our history demonstrates that such diversity is to be expected. 'Scattering with lavish hand' all that we 'have earned or achieved' is bound to have unexpected consequences.

people or the Church in different times and places. However, he also pointed out that diversity ‘in isolation’ had been a weakness. Because of this, the memory of many, once numerous, congregations of tertiaries had been lost leaving many modern members of the Third Order unaware of their rich heritage. Fortunately, that situation was remedied, in great part, by the inter-obediential discussions and communal preparation that preceded the publication of the new Third Order Regular Rule in 1982. *37

Dialogue and discussion between different groups within the Anglican tradition also bears witness to the surprising diversity and creativity inherent in the Franciscan charism. The current ‘Principles’ of the Society of St Francis are derived from those of the brotherhood, *Christa Seva Sangha*, established in India in 1922. They were revised for the Brotherhood of the Love of Christ in England in 1930 and again when that group united with the Brotherhood of St Francis of Assisi in 1937. When the Order of St Francis at Mount Sinai, New York, united with the Society of St Francis in 1967, they too adopted the ‘Principles’. By then the former Brotherhood had been combined with the sister of the Community of St Francis and known as the Society for three years. Continuing dialogue led, in 1973, to the announcement that the women were equal members of the first Order. *38

All branches of the Franciscan family have been involved in ongoing formation and renewal since the Second Vatican Council. One of the fruits of this process is an increasing awareness of our shared charism. It often finds expression in inter-Franciscan gatherings and working together in projects and missions. However, while few would disagree with the insight of the Secular Franciscans’ meeting in Assisi in 1969 that reciprocity gives life to our charism, much still needs to be done to put it into practice.

Although Walt Whitman did not write his *Song of the Open Road* with Franciscans in mind, his words contain a challenge that

*37 See: S Conley, *The Diversity of the Third Order—In Isolation its Weakness, in Unity and Strength*, in *The Cord*, Vol 40, no. 4, 1990, p 121-124

*38 Historical note: *The Principles of the Brothers and Sisters of the First Order of the Society of St Francis*, 1984

from his struggle that one person seemed to have entered, and another to have come out. *5

His struggle took on a new dimension when, praying for enlightenment at the foot of the cross in San Damiano, he heard Christ’s words: ‘Francis, don’t you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me.’ *6 reflecting on the continuation of his personal journey, the details of which are well known, one is reminded of some of the verses from Walt Whitman’s poem, ‘Song of the Open Road’, in which this 19th Century American expresses the restlessness of the traveller in search of life and offers some advice:

Listen! I will be honest with you,
I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new prizes,
These are the days that must happen to you:
You shall not heap up what is call’d riches,
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve,
You but arrive at the city to which you were destin’d, you hardly
settle yourself to satisfaction before your are call’d by an
irresistible call to depart,
You shall be treated to the ironical smiles and mockings of those
who remain behind you,
What beckonings of love you receive you shall only answer with
passionate kisses of parting,
You shall not allow the hold of those who spread their reach’d
hands toward you. *7

Whitman’s advice would surely have appealed to Francis. Continuing his journey, he met those like-minded companions who became his brothers and sisters. As he wrote in his *Testament*, his first companions were a gift from the Lord as, too, was his understanding of how they should live:

After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me. *8

*5 *First Life of St Francis*, Thomas of Celano, III, 6

*6 *Legend of the Three Companions*, V, 13

*7 Walt Whitman, *Song of the Open Road*, Selected Poems, Dover Publications: New York, 1991, p 35-36

*8 *Testament*, Francis & Clare: the complete works, 14-15, p 154-155

While these words were intended primarily for the brothers of the first Order, one has only to scan the three volumes of the recently published *Early Documents* to see that Francis also revered as the Lord's gift every sister and brother, from whatever walk of life, who wanted to follow in his footsteps. He gave them all a way of life. Again, Walt Whitman's delight in reciprocity and diversity as he shared the challenge and excitement of a spiritual journey come to mind.

Allons! After the great Companions, and belong to them!

They too are on the road—they are swift and majestic men—
they are the greatest women,...
Journeyers gaily with their own youth, journeyers with their
bearded and well-grained manhood,
Journeyers with their womanhood, ample, unsurpass'd content,
Journeyers with their own sublime old age of manhood or
womanhood,...*9

Did Francis realise that when he and his brothers asked pope Innocent III to approve their way of life in 1209 that they were beginning just such a journey? One wonders. Nevertheless, these penitents from Assisi were laying the foundations for a numerous and diverse family destined to spread throughout the world. That diversity was to express itself not only in the first, second and third Orders, but also within each group as the brothers and sisters embraced Francis' charism and made it their own.

Among the brothers of the first Order, the needs of the Church played an important part in promoting diversity. After all, Innocent III and the fathers of the Fourth Lateran Council wanted to respond more effectively to the pastoral needs of the faithful at that time. As the number of Francis' companions grew, men of ecclesial vision such as Cardinal Hugolino da Segni [later pope Gregory IX], saw the potential of a fraternity that had, within a few short years, grown rapidly and captured the imagination of young men throughout Christendom. As papal legate charged with implementing the reform decrees of the Council in central and northern Italy, he

*9 Whitman, Op Cit, p 36

Poor Life', observed a routine of prayer and probable individual involvement in the hospital run by the Lesser Brothers who lived nearby. *34 Surviving documentation also indicates communities of Franciscan penitents in other countries. Many of these were Beghines affiliated to the Franciscan Order in deference to the Fourth Lateran Council's requirement that new religious groups adopt an already existing rule. *35

In Sicily the 'Temperate Brothers (I Contenti) of Raineri of the Rule of Blessed Francis' dedicated themselves to the safety and welfare of seafarers. St Raineri was a locality close to the port of Messina. Br Giovanni da Messina and his companions lived there in a tower of the same name. They took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and devoted themselves to good works. In 1279 the judges and leading citizens of Messina publicly thanked them for agreeing to place a light on their tower as a navigational aid to sailors in the dangerous waters below. As a reward for their public spirit the city authorities promised to protect them from anyone, either religious or secular, who might seek to harm them. They also gave the brothers permission to construct a dwelling for themselves and sailors who had escaped the dangers of the sea. *36

Modern Third Order Regular Congregations follow in this communitarian tradition of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. Writing for *The Cord* in 1990, Seraphin Conley TOR noted that diversity in the Third Order Regular was one of its great strengths over the centuries. Its adaptability had enabled it to meet the needs of

*33 See Temperini, *Fenomeni...* Op Cit. St Mary in the Monti district (1223), St Apollonia in Trastevere (c 1282) & St Elizabeth of Hungary (1288), the Holy Cross and the Immaculate Conception near Montecitorio (1300)

*34 C Carpaneto, *Beghine ed eremiti del Terz'Ordine nella Liguria dei secc. XIV-XV*, Prime manifestzioni, p 615-626, 195-19

*35 S Gieben, *I penitenti di San Francesco nei Paesi Bassi (secoli XIII-XIV)*, in M D'Alatri (ed), *Il movimento...* Op Cit, p 59-80. P Peano, *Les religieuses franciscaines: origines, histoire et valeurs constants*, Lens, 1981, p 21. E Pasztor, *Per la storia dell'esperienza penitenziale francescana in Ungheria nel medioevo*, in M D'Alatri (ed), *Il movimento...* Op Cit, p 117-123

*36 See: F Costa, *Espressioni de vita comunitaria alla fine del sec. XIII tra i penitenti de Messina*, Prime Manifestazioni, p 655-673. This document is published as an appendix to the article

communities or branches of international congregations were begun for many reasons and in many different locations, yet all have a share in the charism and the spirit of the poor man of Assisi and his followers, and the charism of the Third Order in particular. *30

Sr Margaret, points out that TOR congregations in the US, to which we could add those in many other countries, participate in a centuries-long tradition that gave witness to an experience of conversion through service to those in need. She hopes 'in some way, to foster a sense of unity among present day members of the Third Order Regular as part of one family, following in the footsteps of the many great women and men, named and unnamed who brought to birth the congregations that still survive today'. *31

Franciscan Brothers and Sisters of Penance have lived in community since the earliest days of the Order. In the region of Palestrina near Rome, Margaret Colonna led a group of like-minded women in the way of penance. As well as being deeply involved in ecclesiastical politics, her family had strong Franciscan connections. In 1222 St Francis clothed her uncle Matthew Rossi Orsini, pope Nicholas III's [1277-1280] father, in the habit of penance. In preference to marriage, Margaret and her companions opted for the eremitical life on a mountainside near Castel San Pietro. They lived there in caves from 1273 until, in 1285, they adopted Isabelle of France's Rule for the Second Order and became Poor Clares. During their time on the mountain they also helped care for the sick Lesser Brothers in nearby Zagarola and for a woman who had leprosy in the village of Poli. *32

A number of communities of Franciscan women, not living in enclosure, devoted themselves to prayer, penance and works of charity throughout the 13th Century. There were more in the next century. *33 In Genoa a community of Franciscan 'Beguines of the

*30 M Slowick, *The Franciscan Third Order Regular in the United States: Origins, Early Years and Recent Developments*, Ohio, 1999, I

*31 Ibid, 2, p 16

*32 Details from: L Temperini, *Fenomeni di vita comunitaria tra i penitenti francescani in Roma e dintorni*, Prime manifestazioni, p 606-614. Also: L Temperini, *L'ordine della penitenza a Roma*, in M D'Alatri (ed), *Il movimento francescano della penitenza nella societa medievale*, Roma, 1980, p 455-456

directed the brotherhood towards an increasing involvement in the life and mission of the Church. This inevitably led to an increasing number of the brothers becoming priests so that they could preach, administer the sacrament of confession, confront heretics and do whatever else was required. Francis' original idea of a fraternity living alongside the poor and sharing the precariousness of their life was adapted for many brothers as they responded to what the Church was asking of them. While Francis, in his letter to Anthony of Padua/Lisbon, agreed that these brothers should be taught theology, he urged him to remind them that they should never neglect the spirit of prayer and devotion. The living out of his charism may have been different from what he originally intended but the fundamentals remained the same.

Cardinal Hugolino also influenced the development and interpretation of Francis and Clare's charism among the sisters of the second Order. He wrote his own Rule for religious women that Clare interpreted in the light of her own values, especially that of absolute poverty. He did the same with the third Order, formulating a list of statutes [*Memoriale Propositi*] similar to those that other penitential groups observed. These were to be adopted in addition to the way of life suggested in Francis' *Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters in Penance*. Along with their companions in the other two Orders, Franciscan laity were allotted their proper place in the post-conciliar Church. Franciscans and their historians have long debated the pros and cons of Hugolino's influence on the Order's development but, strange as it may seem, his friendship and support were major factors in ensuring its eventual survival.

The years following Francis' death were marked by an increasing tension between the secular clergy and the mendicant Orders of whom Franciscans and Dominicans were only two among many. By 1274 many bishops and clergy were calling for their total suppression on the grounds that they were intruding on their own pastoral responsibilities and that begging was a burden on society. That they did not have their way was due principally to St Bonaventure and his Dominican counterpart, Humbert of Romans. Before and during the Second Council of Lyons, held in that year,

both friars mounted a strenuous campaign to preserve the mendicant way of life. Thanks to them, the Council fathers declared a compromise. Mendicant groups founded after the Fourth Lateran Council without the Apostolic See's permission were suppressed outright. Others were no longer permitted to receive novices. But, of course, they declared:

We do not allow the present constitution to apply to the Orders of Preachers and Minors; their approval bears witness to their evident advantage to the universal Church. Furthermore, we grant that the Order of Carmelites and the Hermits of St Augustine, the institution of which preceded the said great Council, may remain as they are, until other regulations are made for them. *10

Undoubtedly, the Franciscan and Dominican Orders would have found themselves suppressed in 1274 had they not accepted their role as instruments of the Church in the decades following the Fourth Lateran Council. Paradoxically, the Council's reprieve also ensured the survival of the group of brothers within the Order who kept to the traditions and way of life that Francis and his first companions had taught them. linked t their pastoral brothers, they were not condemned to die out in the same way as other groups with similar ideals. Thanks to the Second Council of Lyons, diversity continued to flourish in the Order.

Had Francis refused to let Anthony teach, or not recognised that the brothers needed to study as well before they could preach, his Order may never have produced a John Duns Scotus, a Bonaventure of Bagnoregio or many other brothers who contributed to the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual tradition. The authors of a recent report to the English Speaking Conference of the Order of Friars Minor on *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*, speak of the enthusiasm that Franciscan theology continues to evoke:

When [the Franciscan intellectual tradition] in its view of God's overflowing goodness, its Christocentric emphasis, its moral decision-making process, its view of a Spirit-filled yet sinful Church, its understanding of property and community, and its valuation of freedom and personal dignity, is

*10 Second Council of Lyons, 1274, §23, N Tanner (ed), Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils

early history of the brothers and Sisters of Penance, it is the variety that characterised their living out of the Franciscan charism. For some, that diversity also included living in community.

Following the Second Vatican Council the brothers and sisters of the Third Order Regular also sought to renew and reaffirm their charism. Many different congregations worked on this project in their own nations prior to the international assembly in Assisi in 1979. The commission appointed to formulate a new Rule, taking into account the five foundational principles mentioned in *Perfecti Caritatis*, plus suggestions from all over the world, confidently declared that 'diversity is not inimical to unity in essential spirit and mission'.*28 That so many congregations immediately adopted the new Rule, approved by pope John Paul II on 8 December 1982, is a clear indication that they were not wrong.

Two relatively recent studies have shown just how wide that diversity was and continues to be. In his book *The Franciscan Sisters*, published in English in 1993, Raffaele Pazzelli TOR traces the history of some congregations of Franciscan women from the 13th to the 20th Century. While noting their differences on account of their place in history, geography, culture, political and ecclesiastical environments, he highlights their shared charism: an intimate conversion of the heart expressing itself in a commitment to community living in the spirit of Francis and in the service of the poor, the sick, the elderly, the orphans, the emarginated, the illiterate etc. *29

Margaret Slowick OSF has examined the history of the congregations of the Third Order Regular sisters and brothers in the United States. Beginning her book, *The Franciscan Third Order...*, she states:

It is a story of both diversity and commonality. The ninety four congregations described in these pages, established in the US as either new

*28 'Commentary Introduction', *The Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St Francis and Commentary*, Pittsburgh, 1983, p 3

*29 R Pazzelli, *The Franciscan Sisters: Outlines of History and Spirituality*, (trans A Mullaney), Steubenville, 1993

prepared meals for everyone each day. Other women came to help her and it was not long before some of them were living in small communities and dedicating themselves to this apostolate. They also helped her with whatever else she happened to be doing for the poor and disadvantaged.



Margherita had a strongly developed social conscience. She told the local bishop to give up his worldly and bellicose way of life, insisting that it was Christ himself who, through her, was calling him to take his pastoral responsibilities more seriously. She prayed for peace in the world and for an end to community strife in Cortona and elsewhere. She told her confessor, Fra Giunta, that in addition to his other duties, he was to campaign for peace in the city.

She denounced self, money grabbing governors and local rulers who tricked and oppressed the innocent by interpreting the law in favour of themselves and their relatives. She condemned dishonest notaries who amassed fortunes, by altering wills and contracts or who delayed probate to the detriment of widows, orphans and minors. Likewise, councillors who pretended to act in the community's interests but, all the while, promoted their own interests and those of their friends or other privileged parties.

Margherita also proclaimed Christ's displeasure with dishonest merchants. Determined to make a profit, they disguised defective goods: bread, wine, wax, oil, cloth, yarn and all manner of things. Others, like those who sold grain and salt, falsified their weights and measures. Envy of those who bought and sold or shopped with others was also a crime. Christ would punish them all if they did not turn away from their sins. *27

Space forbids further examples but if one thing is clear from the

*27 For details of Margherita of Cortona's life see: Iunctae Bevegnatis, *Legenda de Vita et miraculis Beatae Margaritae de Cortona*, Introduction and Critical Edition: F Iozelli, Grottaferrata (Roma), 1997

presented, it almost always meets with an enthusiastic reception. *11

Had Francis not written his letter to Anthony, that tradition may never have developed. As the authors of the report indicate, the Church would be the poorer for not having a life-giving and credible alternative in the fields of philosophy, theology and spirituality.

However, had Francis, his closest companions and other brothers not chosen to follow a more prophetic way, the life-giving spirit and joy of the early days preserved in the oral tradition, the writings of Francis and the early biographies could well have been lost. So, too, the link with Clare and her sisters, and the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. The eremitical tradition, an integral element in all three Orders, may never have developed. Francis, Clare and their companions were the first point of reference for those who wanted to live the gospel just as they did.

Our history demonstrates that diversity was creative and productive when Franciscans maintained the supremacy of prayer and devotion, gospel poverty, brotherhood and sisterhood and service over busyness without God, superiority, privilege, patriarchy and a clericalism that neglects the ultimate equality of God's people. The Franciscan story clearly points to the positive value of the former and the ruinous consequences of the latter.

The recently published Franciscan sources in English are an excellent starting point for exploring the truth of this assertion. They can help us to 'retrieve and vitalise our past' in ways that respect foundational principles and promote

'our mission to give people hope, speak to their fears, and present a coherent intellectual pathway which strengthens faith and encourages just action for our neighbours'. *12

Here we can discover the roots of that life-giving reciprocity that the Secular Franciscans have identified as the key element in

*11 Task Force Report to the English Speaking Conference of the Order of Friars Minor: *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition Project*, Pulaski: Franciscan Publishers, 2001, p 8-9

*12 Ibid, p 9

Franciscan life.

Clare and Francis of Assisi are inseparably linked in the early history of the Franciscan family. An understanding of gospel values that are remarkably similar, but not identical, took them over the barriers that stood between the two opposed classes in Assisian society from which they came. Clare mingled her insights with those of Francis enabling him to appreciate the feminine, contemplative dimension within his variegated charism. When he realised that she and her companions 'did not shirk the deprivation, poverty, hard work, distress, or the shame and contempt of the world', that he and his brothers had chosen, 'he promised [them] the same loving care and special solicitude.' *13 Ever after Clare treasured the fact that they were members of the one family.

The importance that Clare attached to this family link with the Lesser Brothers was made abundantly clear in 1230 when Hugolino, now pope Gregory IX, declared that only those brothers who had his special permission might visit the monasteries of nuns.

The pious mother, sorrowing that her sisters would more rarely have the food of sacred teaching, sighed: 'Let him now take away from us all the brothers since he has taken away those who provide us with food that is vital.' At once she sent back to the minister all the brothers, not wanting to have the questors who acquired corporal bread when they could not have the questors for spiritual bread. When pope Gregory heard this he immediately mitigated that prohibition into the hands of the general minister. *14

Such a ban violated Clare's conviction that she and her sisters at San Damiano, as well as the small number of communities that lived as they did, were part of Francis' family. They did not consider themselves members of the 'Order of Poor Cloistered Nuns' who observed, without change, the rule that Hugolino had written for them.

In obedience to the Fourth Lateran Council Clare may have adopted the Benedictine Rule and agreed to be called abbesses; she may have accepted, Hugolino's rule for religious women, albeit with her

*13 *The Testament of St Clare*, Francis & Clare: the complete works, 8, p 228

*14 *The Legend of St Clare*, ED Clare, p 289-90

powerful group of political exiles. *25 In Imola, in 1279, the penitents were given the responsibility of dealing with the Roman Curia on the commune's behalf. A year later, Brother Bonmercato di Pietro defended the interests of both the city and its surrounding countryside before pope Nicholas III. In August 1288 Perugia was under excommunication and two penitents, John de Montsperello and Elimosina di Techabene, were sent to discuss the matter with the papal authorities. *26

St Margherita of Cortona (+ 1297) was a peacemaker with a strong sense of social justice. Having lived for nine years with a young noble and having had a son out of wedlock, her conversion followed the sudden death of her partner and the shock of discovering that her father and step-mother had no place for them in the family home. She found refuge with two pious women of Cortona and set about earning her living as a midwife. Although her acts of penance, including rubbing her face with soot and attempting to disfigure her face by breaking her nose with a stone may sound strange to modern ears; although a mysticism, that included conversations with the crucified Christ, may be difficult for the contemporary mind to grasp or appreciate; her actions on behalf of the poor and emarginated are not.

Margherita eventually became a Franciscan penitent after pestering the Lesser Brothers to admit her to the Order. They thought she was too young and beautiful and doubted, given her past, that she would persevere. Her persistence won them over and she received the habit in 1276. Prayer, fasting and penance, care for the poor and sick were key elements in her spirituality. With the help of a benefactor and a certain Signora Diabella, who donated her dwelling for the purpose, she established a house of mercy for the destitute. In order to maintain the dignity of those who came for help, she insisted that the house be as well furnished and comfortable as possible. As a way of thanking the Lesser Brothers for their help and guidance she took their sick among her guests. She happily

*25 G Casagrande, *Attività ed opera dei penitenti nei secoli XIII e XIV*, Frate Francesco, XLVI, n. 2, 1979, p 9

*26 Temperini, *Op Cit*, p 342-344

have refused to bear arms for the defence of their city or Lord, they did not turn their backs on other civic responsibilities. In Bologna, for example, tertiaries maintained the bridges over the ditches in and around the city; others helped with the financial administration, paying wages and acting as treasurers. Some carried out religious duties: ensuring that a light was kept burning before the image of the Madonna in the commune's chapel; lighting the candles for mass; buying incense and candles to be given to the mayor and people's captain along with their families on 2 February, the feast of Our Lady's purification.

Given their vow to live by gospel principles, Franciscan penitents were often responsible for honesty in the workplace: verifying weights and measures; weighing the grain brought to the mill and sealing the sacks of flour after checking to see that their weight was the same as the original cereal; overseeing public works and reporting to the mayor on the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges. In Siena penitents worked as customs officers and looked after the public fountains. As price watchdogs in Ferrara they ensured that customers were not overcharged for oil, salted meat and cheese. They also ensured that produce was not hoarded unjustly and that citizens received a fair share according to their circumstances. *23

As followers of Francis of Assisi, penitents were expected to be peacemakers. In January 1246, for example, Innocent IV, hoping to bring peace to the Italian provinces in the interests of a common crusade, wrote to the fraternity in Florence ordering them to get actively involved in bringing peace and unity to the city. *24 Local governments, too, presumed on this ideal. Penitents appear among citizens chosen to represent them in peace negotiations with their enemies and, sometimes, the papacy. For example, in 1276 the city of Pisa chose a merchant-penitent, Ugolino Gatti, as its ambassador in peace negotiations with the emperor and his supporters in the Guelph League and also to act as negotiator with a

*23 Lino Temperini, *Il penitente francescano nella società e nella chiesa nei secoli XIII-XIV*, Analecta TOR, XX, 1988, p 337-339

*24 Meersman, *Dossier*, 56

her own interpretations, but never have surrendered her right to radical gospel poverty. Just like Francis and his companions she refused to possess anything, either personally or in common. As early as 1216 she had bombarded pope Innocent III with gospel texts in support of her stand. He accepted her arguments and confirmed that she could rely entirely on divine providence. When cardinal Hugolino became pope Gregory IX he tried

to persuade her that, because of the events of the times and the dangers of the world, she should consent to have some possessions which he himself willingly offered, she resisted with a very strong spirit and would in no way acquiesce. To this the pope replied: 'If you fear for your vow, We absolve you from it.' 'Holy Father,' she said, 'I will never in any way wish to be absolved from the following of Christ.' *15

Having no reply to give, he confirmed her privilege of poverty.

Although other communities of women who wanted to follow Clare's example were not so fortunate, they still managed to share her ideals and those of Francis without infringing canon law or wasting energy in a fruitless rebellion against insurmountable social convention. There was another example of creative Franciscan diversity.

One such community lived at Rieti not far from Assisi. Their leader, Philippa Mereri, was like Clare in many ways. She came from a local noble family and there is a legend that, as a young woman, she met Francis as he travelled through the Rieti Valley in either 1221 or 1225. She is said to have asked him how to live a truly Christian life. Afterwards she vowed herself to a life of virginity and lived a secluded life in one of the rooms of the family castle. She also found time to help the local poor and offer hospitality to strangers.

Feeling called to an even more radical way of life, Philippa and three friends eventually left the castle and established a hermitage in a cave on a nearby mountain. Her brother, Thomas, did not approve but could not persuade her to come back home. He was forced to compromise. He promised to give her the church of

*15 Ibid, p 269

St Thomas and an attached villa as a convent if she and her companions would come down. Philippa agreed but only on condition that her brothers gave her legal ownership of the buildings. She wanted to ensure that they did not continue to interfere in her chosen way of life. They signed the relevant papers on 18 September 1228. By coincidence this happened only a few days after pope Gregory had granted Clare her privilege of poverty.

Philippa's sister, several nieces and some other women soon came to join her new community. They used their dowries to transform the villa into a monastery and furnish the church with all they needed for the liturgy and community prayer. On 31 July 1231, pope Gregory incorporated them into the 'Poor Cloistered Ladies' and took the buildings under his and the Holy See's protection. They were thereby automatically affiliated with the Order of Lesser Brothers to whom the pope had confided his Order in December 1228. Philippa and her sisters may have been obliged to accept property and land for their upkeep as the social convention of the time demanded, but personally they lived as poorly as possible. Their monastery survived until 1940 when Benito Mussolini submerged it in the waters of an artificial lake. *16

Clare and Philippa provide precedents for dealing with a problem that Brother Giacomo Bini, Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, highlighted in a recent letter to celebrate the 750th anniversary of Clare's death:

We constantly run the risk of treating as absolutes things that are secondary and should be considered only in function of what is essential. As a result we forfeit the true beauty and harmony of the edifice of our spiritual life...How sad and painful it is to meet communities whose progress is blocked by a purely legalistic rigidity, light years away from the radical character of the Gospel which bubbles over with joy, imagination and daring. *17

*16 For details of Philippa Mereri's life see: A Benvenuti Papi, *Donne religiose e francescanesimo nella Valle Reatina*, in L Pellegrini e S Da Campagnola, *Il francescanesimo nella Valle Reatina*, Rieti, 1993, p 189-207. Also: A Chiappini, *Santa Filippa Mereri e il suo monastero di Borgo S Pietro de Molito nel Circolano* (Biografia-Liturgia-documenti), *Miscellanea Francescana*, 22, fasc. III-VI (1921), p 65-119

*17 Giacomo Bini, *Clare of Assisi: A Song of Praise*, Rome, 2002, p 30

Neither Clare nor Philippa allowed legalistic rigidity to undermine their shared desire to walk, albeit in their own unique ways, the same road as Francis. To paraphrase Br Giacomo, both accepted Francis 'as the living Gospel word which accompanied them' but without losing that 'originality that was never reducible to Francis'. A vibrant, creative diversity emerged from 'a relationship of identification and differentiation'. Their example 'powerfully invites us to remain alive in love and never lose heart—and above all never seek refuge in the dreary routine which inevitably anaesthetises and stifles any spirit of initiative' that might lead to something wonderfully different. *18

The representatives of the Secular Franciscans, gathered in Assisi in 1969, declared that their vocation stood on its own two feet in the world and in the Church. The Rule of 1978 states unequivocally that 'fraternities of various levels—local, regional, national and international', have their 'own moral personalities in the Church.' *19 They are 'called, with all people of good will, to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively'. *20 More specifically they are summoned 'individually and collectively to be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they [are told] to make definite choices in harmony with their faith.' *21

Statutes such as these have reclaimed, in modern terms, a tradition that their forbears established in the 13th Century. One thinks immediately of the prohibition against bearing arms contained in the *Memoriale Propositi* that cardinal Hugolino had formulated for the Brothers and Sisters of Penance as a complement to the way of life that St Francis had given them. *22

Franciscan Third Order Regular historian, Lino Temperini, has demonstrated that while the Brothers and Sisters of Penance may

*18 Ibid, p 40, 51

*19 Rule of SFO, cap 3 § 20

*20 Rule of SFO, cap 2 § 14

*21 Rule of SFO, cap 2 § 15

*22 See: *Memoriale Propositi*, in Stewart, *De illis...Op Cit*, Appendix II, p 374-388