Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, two crucial events took place which left a mark on the life of the Church in general and of the religious orders in particular: namely the so-called Schism of the West (1379–1417) and the birth of the Observant movements.

The Schism provoked a deep wound within Christian society. This was expressed in the birth of two distinct poles of obedience: the pope in Rome and the pope in Avignon. Repercussions of the situation were felt also at a political level, since each nation followed the pope who best adhered to its own interests. The Mendicant orders were no exception, with internal divisions electing a Master General for each obedience, as well as holding a double series of Chapters General. But most importantly, the Schism arose in a religious context in which the first clouds of a spiritual crisis were gathering, and which was to lead, in turn, to a deep rethinking of the relation between man and God, and between the Church and its faithful.

A synthesis of the first of these tendencies is the most relevant phenomenon of the period: the affirmation of mysticism as a model for sanctity and as a spiritual guide in the sign of *docta ignorantia*. The religiosity of these mystic movements was characterised by their new way of conceiving of the relation between creature and Creator: through love, conceived of as a path towards total adherence to the Other, and as the sole way of reaching knowledge of God. The imitation of Christ in bodily suffering turned from being an instrument for practicing Christian charity (being poor together with the poor) to becoming the goal of a spiritual and solitary experience. The confessors, men of the Church, monks or highly cultivated friars, became the bearers of the often prophetic words of uneducated mystics, venerating the penitential and ascetic figures and proclaiming themselves their disciples, as in the case of Raymond of Capua and Catherine of Siena.
It is in this period that a new kind of relation took shape between the simple faithful and spiritual directors who assumed responsibilities of a certain weight within ecclesiastical or religious ranks. It was a kind of personal and private continuation of the sermons which used to be held for the people in public places; an additional mark of the new tendency of a spirituality lived privately rather than publicly, a phenomenon exemplified in the teachings collected in small books or letters.1

As we said, a new relation between man and God, and a new relation between faithful and Church were the salient elements in the structure which synthetically characterised the spiritual context of the period extending over the two centuries which we are considering. Besides these aspects, which are connected to both common and personal religiosity, other tendencies developed which lead towards a renovatio of ideas—but not without a return to the origins, which mainly meant for the religious Orders a return to the ideals of perfection of their founders.2 It was a renewal through a reinterpretation of the past which had its correlate in literary humanism, and which, in refusing the via antiqua, turned to the Greek and Latin classics to encourage the rebirth of study.3

Given these premises, and considering the great changes of the times, it is legitimate to wonder: how, if at all, does the concept of mendicancy change in this period? And what place is it assigned in the new theoretical framework of the Mendicant Orders?

We shall limit the examination to the situation in the Order of Preachers given that the question has been to this day but little studied4 and

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2 Not for all Orders, in fact, Knights’ and Hospital Orders only express, with the Observances, their wish for a regeneration of the structure of the Order and not a return to the origins which had been triggered by very particular phenomena, such as the crusades; see *Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen*, ed., Kaspar Elm (Berlin, 1989), 17.


4 A richly documented and complete study of the immediately preceding period to the one examined here, is Ulrich Horst, O.P. *Evangelische Armut und Kirche. Thomas von Aquin und die Armutskontroversen des 13. und beginnenden 14. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1992), hereafter cited as Horst *Evangelische Armut*, in which a Thomistic conception of poverty is analysed though its consequences on the Dominican and Franciscan schools of thought until the beginnings of the 14th century. For the period spanning from the 14th to 15th century, there is the fundamental study of Gabriel M. Löhr, O.P. "Die