CHAPTER 10

Histories of the Present: Interpreting the Poverty of St. Francis

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Introduction: Appropriating the Poverty of St. Francis

Interpreting the poverty of St. Francis has long been an object of historical contention. The tensions surrounding poverty traverse his life, its memorialization, and its institutional elaboration. The Earlier and Later Rule, the hagiographies of Celano and Bonaventure, the papal bulls of Gregory IX (Quo elongati) and John XXII (Quorundam exigit), and the strife between the Conventuals and Spirituals all evidence an abiding uncertainty that hinges on the question of how Francis’s apostolic poverty ought to be understood—and even lived. Indeed, one could argue that the shape (or shaping) of the Franciscan order can be understood as an expression of the conflict(s) over and surrounding poverty.

These antagonisms, however, are neither confined to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries nor to the historical Francis himself—they are forcefully present in the reception history. Modern appropriations of the saint tend not to treat him exclusively as an object of historical inquiry. Rather, modern investigations center on precisely the question of appropriation: how are we to fit Francis's exemplarity and/or shortcomings within our own historical horizon? This question comes with a thorny set of historiographical problems. Laying claim to a thirteenth-century saint requires a mapping of the local conceptual topography of appropriation, i.e. the place from which and for which he is claimed.

In this essay I take up these historiographical issues in an examination of two monographs that press Francis's relationship to poverty into contradictory interpretive frames. The first, by liberation theologian Leonardo Boff—Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation—conceives Francis's relationship to poverty as exemplary, as humanizing, as anticipating liberation theology’s preferential option for the poor, and as a site through which one can both affirm and imagine models of flourishing human community. Boff, through Francis,

offers a theological account of human persons that is tethered to a political and historical project of liberation rooted in God’s promises of redemption. The second—the historian Kenneth Baxter Wolf’s *The Poverty of Riches: Saint Francis of Assisi Reconsidered*—employs modern sociological categories to distinguish between the “poor-poor” and the “rich-poor,” interrogating the ways in which Franciscan spirituality instrumentalizes poverty inside its economy of moral formation. Wolf draws attention to the ways in which the Franciscans implicitly (functionally) reinforced forms of social inequity in precisely the measure that they explicitly protested them. At issue in these conflicting accounts is both the status of a historical event as well as the possibilities of its elaboration, of whether this religious form of life is best understood vis-à-vis its potential to disrupt dominant social logics or as an expression or effect of those logics. It is, of course, overly schematic to present the interpretive options in terms of a neat either/or, but the diametrically opposed character of Boff’s Francis and Wolf’s Francis proves instructive for a set of reflections that attempts to explore the structure of modern intellectual, social, and religious investment in Francis’s story as it unfolds around his relationship to poverty.

One of the claims I wish to make is that recourse to the historical Francis, while necessary for any investigation of this sort, cannot definitively adjudicate such contending claims. This is not to resort to a simplistic “Francis of faith” versus “Francis of history” dichotomy, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which the meaning of Francis’s poverty remains underdetermined in its very historicity, that is to say that it does not have an already given meaning in Francis’s life. It finds meaningful expression in a variety of theological and biblical idioms, but it also meets resistance in those places. This is one of the main reasons that his poverty became such a charged site of moral and theological energies, of division within the order, and of controversy inside the hierarchy. The historiographical problems that surround Boff’s and Wolf’s modern appropriations are already problems evidenced in the history itself; this is a hermeneutical circle in the sense that the interpreting is internal to the problem that requires interpretation. Thus while the historical Francis is of decisive importance, he is not outside the problem in a way that would allow accuracy of depiction to have the final word on meaning.


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