Chapter 2

The Friars in Secular and Ecclesiastical Governance, 1224–c. 1259

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William of Nottingham, minister of the English province of Friars Minor from 1240 to 1254, was an exemplary figure who, it was recorded, ‘assiduously avoided intimacy with great lords and with women’ and who fled with his companions into the wintery night rather than sleep in an episcopal palace.¹ Through these acts of avoidance, he reinforced the idea of a moral distance between the friars and those involved in both secular and ecclesiastical governance. This was in keeping with his desire to live according to his understanding of the ‘mind and intentions’ of Francis, and his notoriously rigorous leadership of the English province.² His behaviour provided his brethren with an additional model for a way of thinking about temporal affairs that was already deeply embedded in the self-conception of the order. We can see it in a variety of normative writings. The Rule required the friars to live in accordance with the life of Christ and his apostles, as described in the Gospels and the Acts. This meant itinerancy and visibility in society, preaching in public and entering the houses of the laity. At the same time, their attitude towards human interests was to conform to monastic ideals: the friars were to go ‘as pilgrims and strangers in this world’, standing apart from its concerns.³ The beginnings of the order were presented by Francis himself, and in the hagiographical tradition, as divinely inspired: distinct from, and preceding, any involvement by the papal Curia with all its worldly concerns. ‘No one showed me what I must do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern

² ‘[M]entem sancti Francisci et intentionem in regula’: Eccleston, 99; his rigour, 86, e.g., 23, 45.
of the Holy Gospel,’ asserted Francis.⁴ The independence of the friars from episcopal authority was developed in a series of papal bulls from 1219 onwards and explicitly asserted in 1231. The pope warned the bishops not to hinder the work of the friars, and emphasized that it was precisely the friars’ detachment that enabled them to perceive and address the impediments to the salvation of the population.⁵ The alleged failings of the episcopate, and the secular clergy in general, were given as justifications for the expansion of the order’s activities.⁶ In the case of the secular authorities, there was no shortage of exemplary tales to remind the friars of the necessity of avoiding the courts of princes and restricting contact with the rich and powerful to matters of pastoral care.⁷

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⁵ The earliest bulls (Cum dilecti, 1219, and Pro dilectis, 1220), instructing bishops to support the friars and their work, emphasized the role of the friars in ‘serendo semina Verbi Dei Apostolorum exemplo diversas circumeant mansiones’ and warned the bishops not to impede this (‘Quare monendos vos duximus, et hortandos per apostolica scripta’). In 1228, Gregory IX was already stating (Recolentes qualiter) that: ‘quod in deserto huius mundi sacrae Religionis honestas ab eodem ordine procedure videatur’. Honorius characterized the ‘populares tumultus’ as something that the friars needed to flee so that they could pray freely (‘ut in sancta quieta liberius oration vacare possitis’) and Gregory (Quo elongati, 1230) wrote of the benefits of the friars’ detachment. The bull Nimis iniqua freed them from the control of local bishops. BF, 1, respectively 2, 5, 46, 20, 68, 74–77, nn. 2, 4, 29, 17, 56, 63–66. It is worth viewing this in the tradition of libertas Romana—described by Cowdrey as freedom under Rome from all claims of earthly lordship, freedom for: ‘complete dedication to spiritual ends and to the purposes of the Papacy’, which went back at least to Cluny. H.E.J. Cowdrey, The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform (Oxford, 1970), esp. 4.

⁶ The notion of episcopal insufficiency was embedded in Lateran IV, constitution 10, and was used to make a variety of cases. For example, Letters of Robert Grosseteste, 122, 131–134. Cf. Frank A.C. Mantello and Joseph Goering (eds.), The Letters of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (Toronto 2010), 149, 159–162: ‘the way of life of the Friars Minor … generously makes good the deficiencies of the prelates under whose authority they live’. Grosseteste used this argument to justify receiving extra assistance from the friars in carrying out his episcopal role. On the agendas behind this presentation, see: Jeffrey H. Denton, ‘The competence of the parish clergy in thirteenth-century England’, in The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of R.B. Dobson, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Jenny Stratford (Donington, 2001), 273–285. See also the editors’ observations in the introduction to John S. Ott and Anna Trumbore Jones (eds.), Bishop Reformed: Studies of Episcopal Power and Culture in the Central Middle Ages (Aldershot, 2007), 1–20. Papal bulls such as Gregory IX’s Quoniam abundavit (1237) (BF, 1, 214–215, no. 224), specifically positioned the friars as the remedy.