Richard FitzRalph and the Franciscans: Poverty, Privileges, Polemic, 1356–1359

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1 Introduction

The relationship between the Franciscans and Richard FitzRalph (known throughout late medieval Christendom as Armachanus from the archbishopric of Armagh to which he was provided in 1346 by Clement VI and which he held until his death in 1360) was varied and complex. Students of FitzRalph’s intellectual progression have, indeed, to confront what his most comprehensive biographer, the late Katherine Walsh, identified as ‘one of the most problematic aspects’ in understanding him—his ‘apparently sudden change of heart with regard to the four orders of mendicant friars and their role in later medieval society’. Whatever explanation may be thought best to accord with the evidence, the effect is of a fault-line whose opening threatened peculiar devastation for the Franciscan structure—in England (and Ireland), of course, but no less for the role of the order generally and for its fundamental ideology and self-conception. Had FitzRalph succeeded in the objects that he finally set himself and that energized and dominated his last decade, Franciscans, had they survived at all, would have been left without a function other than that of a protest movement, a latter-day version of the ancient Cynics, rebuking society’s assumptions by the eccentricity of their own deviance from its norms. The perception of a kinship between FitzRalph’s developed outlook and that of the radical wing of fourteenth-century Franciscanism, may be admitted—but with a literally vital qualification. His was a radical Franciscanism bereft of the ideal of poverty.

1 Walsh, Scholar, 349.

2 For a review of the development of FitzRalph’s concerns on the pastoral issue, see Michael J. Haren, ‘Richard FitzRalph and the friars: the intellectual itinerary of a curial controversialist’, in Roma, Magistra Mundi Itineraria culturae medievals: Mélanges offerts au Père L.E. Boyle à l’occasion de son 75e anniversaire, 1, Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Etudes Médiévales, Textes et Études du moyen age 10, i (Louvain-la-neuve, 1998), 349–367.

3 See Walsh, ‘Friars’, 239.
The preoccupation with poverty is a relatively late development in Fitz-Ralph’s outlook. An important point of reference for his earlier attitude is constituted by three sermons preached by him to the Franciscans of Avignon during his long second sojourn at the papal Curia from 1337 to 1344, litigating as dean on behalf of his cathedral church of Lichfield. In that delivered on the feast of St Martin of Tours, 1338, he describes the strict poverty practised by the saint and challenges his hearers on how well they imitate him. He reflects approvingly on the merit of work—this must in context include poverty—conducted under a vow, a merit attaching to the essentially voluntary nature of the obligation arising.4 His final sermon to the Franciscans was on 4 October 1349—the feast of St Francis—just months before his epiphany as a controversialist on the issue of pastoral privileges, in his proposition, Unusquisque, delivered before the papal consistory on 5 July 1350.5 Though not without edge, the tone of the sermon is highly respectful. The preacher has distinguished in the city around him four kinds of men: those who love the world and whom the world loves, even if in pretence; those who love the world and whom the world despises; those who hold the world in disregard and whom the world, although in pretence, loves; and those who hold the world in disregard and whom the world in turn holds in disregard. These last are, above all, the devout friars of the (sc. Franciscan) order, observing the Gospel counsels in all respects. St Francis was of this state, which is compounded of three elements, obedience cum humility, penitence cum chastity and indigence or highest poverty. St Francis, more than anyone else of the world, fulfilled the command to take up his cross, ‘in highest poverty’ (in altissima paupertate). Peace and mercy be upon those who have followed this Rule. The cardinals present in the audience are enjoined ‘to succour from your abundance them above all, since they rejoice, and above all, in the prerogative of greater poverty’.6 From the perspective of the order’s history, FitzRalph’s commendatory references to poverty are an exercise in ‘Newspeak’: the poverty is idealized as understood within the developed Franciscan structure and the parameters laid down by John xxii. This position stands, nonetheless, a remarkable intellectual distance from the point at which FitzRalph had arrived by the opening of his final campaign against the friars in 1356.

4 Oxford, St John’s College, ms. 65 [J], fol. 130r (b).
5 A text of the four sermons is in preparation for publication.
6 ‘Ita domini hic presentes ut quia prerogativa maioris paupertatis gaudent et pre ceteris, de vestra habundancia succurratis illis pre ceteris, ut vestra habundancia suppleat eorum inopiam.’ j, fol. 145v.