Action and contemplation in early Franciscan writings
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One of the great tensions in the life of Francis of Assisi was between his sense of being called to act in the world for the benefit of souls and his desire for withdrawal and contemplation. His biographers were eager to stress that he was able to balance the two aspects of his existence. Thomas of Celano related: "It was his custom to divide the time given him … and to spend some of it to benefit his neighbours and use the rest in the blessed solitude of contemplation" (1 Cel. II.2).

However, there are indications that he found the relationship more complicated and more troubling than this praise of his time-management skills would suggest. The active life exposed him to worldly temptations that he dreaded, while the allure of the contemplative life took him away from his leadership role within his order and could make the demands of those around him seem intolerable. Conversely, some of his early biographers suggested that his withdrawals from public life were partly motivated by despondency over the directions in which the order was developing. At such times, it seems to have been frustration that made him turn to contemplation, and then, perhaps, conscience that drove him to involve himself once more in the affairs of his brethren.

We can see similar patterns of withdrawal and return in the lives of some of his most prominent followers. Anthony of Padua was perpetually torn between the demands of the active life and the joys of the contemplative and devoted periods of his life to each. "The active man," he wrote, "like a fish, traverses the paths of the sea so as to be able to come to the aid of his neighbour who suffers need. Meanwhile the contemplative, like a bird, is lifted into the air upon the wings of contemplation" (Sermons for Sundays, 21). It was evidently impossible for a man to be a fish and a bird simultaneously: the best that could be hoped was to be each in succession. After his election as minister general, Bonaventure retreated to Mount Alverna "there to satisfy the yearning of my soul for peace" and to reflect on "the rising of Saint Francis into contemplation" (Itinerarium mentis in Deum - Journey of the mind into God, Prologue). He was then obliged to descend from the heights and immerse himself once more in the demands of the world. Judging by his subsequent writings, this time alone had given him the opportunity to reflect deeply on the meaning of the saint's life in ways that informed his running of the order. For the three men, periods of contemplation served as spiritual refreshment, enabling them to carry out the duties of the active life.

The mendicant orders formed during the thirteenth century were something of a novelty in the history of the Church. Unlike the members of monastic orders, the friars did not physically leave the world and separate themselves from its affairs. Their vocations were almost entirely active. Their extraordinary success meant that they were in demand in many areas of public life. Yet as professed religious, they needed to maintain their detachment from the world and their focus on God. We know relatively little of how this worked in practice. Most of the surviving sources from the early
decades of the order were didactic or exemplary in intention and were not intended to convey a realistic picture of how ordinary friars managed to balance the active and contemplative elements in the religious life. A fascinating exception is provided by the letter-collection of Adam Marsh (c. 1200-59), recently edited and translated by C. H. Lawrence. It is one of the richest, and under-exploited, sources of information about life as a Franciscan in England in the middle decades of the century.

Adam Marsh, although little-known today, was an influential figure in his own society. He was widely regarded as one of the greatest theologians and intellectuals of the time. He was the intimate friend of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln and was the first Franciscan to serve as lector at the Oxford convent. He was an advisor to Henry III, Simon de Montfort, their families and other members of the nobility; as well as to bishops, archbishops, abbesses and abbots, and particularly to the ministers of his order and his brethren. He was involved in royal diplomacy, episcopal visitations, the ecumenical council of 1245 and the politics of his own order. He corresponded with scholars across Europe. All these enterprises were united by his fierce desire to bring about a reform of the Church and to protect and guide the souls around him. His was, in many senses, as active a vocation as can be imagined. Yet, like so many monks and friars drawn by their abilities and consciences into the affairs of the world, Adam longed for peace and quiet, but does not seem to have been granted it.

Unlike many of the surviving early sources for the order, Adam's writings were not concerned with forging an image of St Francis. He did not, indeed, mention the saint by name in any of his surviving letters. Yet the chronicler, Thomas of Eccleston, tells us that Adam entered the order "from love of most high poverty" and that he was one of the friars who begged that the Rule might be left just as it had been written down by Francis "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit". Although historians of the order have spent over a century debating whether Francis meant his followers to be involved in the universities, the ecclesiastical hierarchy or the affairs of princes, there can be no doubt that many of them played important roles in all three areas. Given the misgivings expressed at the time, and to the present day, about this worldly engagement, it is worth looking to see why the friars felt that it was necessary.

Adam's letters convey vividly his horror at what he perceived to be deadly failings in the pastoral care provided by the clergy of his day. His letters protested against the abuses of absentee priests, unsuitable men given care of souls, incessant litigation and corruption at every level of the church and the apparent inertia of its leaders. He took every opportunity to warn those responsible that they would be held to account for it by God and tried to show them a better way of managing things. His many letters to Simon de Montfort, for example, encouraged the earl to be a worthy instrument of the divine will, to avoid pride, and to govern well, with regard for the souls of his subjects. Adam frequently described his crushing anxiety, his sleepless nights, his distress and agitation, as he reflected on "the world's astonishing and headlong descent into ruin" - "my poor mind is overwhelmed and rendered
dumb by the immensity of this catastrophe", he wrote to Grosseteste. He believed that the final judgement was imminent and imagined God's wrath over the "ruin of souls" that he saw all about him. These fears - together with the demands of his contemporaries - engendered his incessant activity and would not let him rest.

Against these heavy responsibilities, Adam set images of peace and rest, time for the studies in which he delighted and that would draw his soul to God. His greatest comfort seems to have come from reflecting upon the tranquillity, transcendence and illumination that the faithful could find in Christ, particularly after death, but also in life. A number of his letters implored that he might be spared from the onerous duties that the king, the bishops and his own superiors imposed upon him. His vow of obedience made it difficult for him to organise his life as he wished and he was occasionally reduced to threatening his superiors with the prospect of his early death through overwork if they did not release him from some particularly distasteful task. He confessed to Grosseteste that "a perpetual sadness" weighed upon him: "a fear that, amid the various turmoils of life, my desire for the higher way and happiness of speculative philosophy may be frustrated and stolen from me at the end by the weakness of old age".

It is interesting to see this tension between the need for the active life and the desire for the contemplative life running through the experiences of the early Franciscans. It is not as though opportunities to live a fully contemplative life were lacking in their society. A number of Adam's letters touched on "the tranquil profession of the monastic life". It is clear, however, that those who became friars had a different calling, and that the moral role of the Franciscans, as preachers, reformers, confessors, teachers, and much else, demanded that the active life be prioritised in the hope that as many souls as possible might, in the end, enjoy the glories of heaven. 

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