

Celebrating the Earlier Franciscan Rule ***Paula Pearce SFO***



This year Franciscans are celebrating the eighth centenary of the orally approved Proposed Way of Life of the early Brothers, from which the whole Franciscan movement has evolved. How can a Rule of Life excite interest? Much to my surprise I have developed a love and fascination for one and I am delighted to have the opportunity to share why.

The Earlier Rule is dated 1209-1221, in 'The Saint' ('Francis of Assisi: Early Documents', Volume 1), meaning that the text we have today, is a final version of a work in progress throughout that period. The ER has been studied extensively in the Franciscan tradition. It is now recognised as an important and significant source of information concerning the primitive community and this is why I came to get to know and love it.

The ER consists of general principles reflecting lived experience of the fundamental principles and this is what attracted me. I have come to appreciate that its articles would have been agreed at Chapters: the primary aim of these gatherings was for the brothers to be re-united with Francis and with one another, to exchange and build upon lived experience, to seek correction and direction and to celebrate and encourage one another. From their lived experience the brothers reached agreement about diverse aspects of how they should live as Lesser Brothers in the context of the times.

It is a long text of 24 chapters and I do not recommend sitting down to read it at a session. One way to explore it is by scanning it focussing on a Franciscan characteristic, for example, minority, poverty, fraternity, obedience, or preaching. The relevant sections are scattered throughout the text so choose one and reflect on what it tells you. I have taken the example of minority:

ER chapter IX, 1-3:

Let all brothers strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ and let them remember that we should have nothing else in the world except, as the Apostle says: 'having food and clothing we are content with these.' They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and powerless, the sick and the

lepers, and the beggars by the wayside. When it is necessary, they may go for alms.

It goes on to exhort the brothers to thank God when "people revile them and refuse to give them alms" (IX n 6).

Here you find a mixture of "we" and "they"; a scriptural text key for living the apostolic life; the attitude to be shown to different marginalised groups among whom some of the brothers were expected to live; they only sought alms when they needed them and evidently some brothers found this a shameful thing to have to do.

Chapter VII gives examples of work that the brothers, as a result of experience, came to realise clashed with the principle of minority, such as being treasurers and overseers. "Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house" (VII n 2). From the same chapter, we come to know that the brothers were to keep tools and instruments, used in their work before joining the community, in order to help the Brothers to survive by using their individual skills in familiar trades. They could be paid in goods useful for survival and simple living provided they refused monetary payment.

Other parts of the text show that minority was realised in terms of meeting need rather than want, rejecting any attitude of ownership and belonging with the lesser, the "nobodies". Minority required service to other brothers, respect for their mutual equality rather than division according to clerical status, and concern to preserve the bonds of fraternity. (See chapters IV, VI, IX, X and XI)

No-one was to be called prior and the model for service among the brothers was Christ washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper.

So Minor Brothers can be understood as follows:

Fratres: equal brothers of one another of the same fraternity.

Minores: at the humble service of one another, subject to all.

Even a cursory look through the ER will make the reader aware that it includes prayers, such as the beginning of Chapter 23 and reflections (chapter 22). For the Brothers this was a living text and they carried it with them, sometimes in their hearts. Some parts would have been learned and recited or sung as they travelled on their missionary journeys, reminding them of agreed beliefs and providing pointers to guide them when they were exhorting the people who gathered to listen (chapter 21).

Chapter XVI is inspirational for me, "Going among the Saracens and other Nonbelievers": This includes the observation, "One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake."

I hope that this gives a flavour of the rich diversity within this text. It is a rule of life and contains some instructions and directives but it is so much more. Now I believe we are extremely fortunate to have this source from the time of Francis, and it has brought home to me some facts that I did not know or regard with much importance, but I remember the reluctance with which I initially read this long medieval Rule text as homework for a class on the Writings of Francis.

The Later Rule (1223) was written with the influence of Pope Honorius III, Hugolino (Cardinal Protector, later Pope Gregory IX), some brothers and Francis. This was the Rule finally sealed and approved for the brothers, known as the Later Rule or Regula Bullata. It was an essential instrument of government for a large Order. It reflected changes in work, mainly pastoral and clerical, and accommodation, as many brothers lived in settled places. The brothers had become the Order of Friars Minor, there was a system of government and there were distinctions between the Ministers Provincial and the Minister General. The text is much shorter, more orderly and clearer. *f*

Paula Pearce is Course Director, Franciscan Studies' Certificate Programmes, at the Franciscan International Study Centre, Canterbury. The text of this article was the basis of an address given at the Formation Conference held at Hilfield in January 2009.