

**St Francis and his  
Brotherhood: 1209 - 2009**  
*Maurice Carmody*

Innocent III, most powerful of medieval pontiffs, glared at the dishevelled young man standing before him. His ignoble countenance, long beard, unkempt hair and dirty, overhanging brow, repulsed him. The text held out to him was hopelessly idealistic. As for his request to preach, that was laughable. The pope despised his visitor. "Go, brother, and find some pigs to whom you are fit to be compared rather than to human beings. Roll around in the mud and share your rule and preaching with them."

Francis of Assisi, for that was the young man's name, did exactly as Pope Innocent ordered. Covered in filth and undoubtedly smelling to high heaven, he went back to the audience hall and asked the amazed pontiff if he would now grant his petition. Innocent felt sorry for being so cynical. He told Francis to go and wash and then return. Overcome with emotion and perhaps guilt, the pope approved the enthusiastic young man's rule. He could also preach simple sermons, encouraging people to live by gospel principles. The year was 1209. This story, told by an English Benedictine monk, Roger of Wendover, colourfully recalls how Innocent III approved the first Franciscan Rule, eight hundred years ago. He wrote it a few years after Francis' death in 1226.

Other early accounts of this event are not quite so colourful and perhaps closer to what really happened. However, they all agree that the approval of St Francis' rule for his brotherhood in 1209 marked a critically important step in the history of the Lesser Brothers, or Friars Minor as they are also called. Innocent III's recognition meant that the Church now recognised the brotherhood as a genuine religious order. Francis recorded the moment very simply in his Testament: "And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me." This year Franciscans throughout the world celebrate that rule's anniversary.

The Rule of 1209 combined a series of gospel texts, chosen by St Francis as a suitable guide to following as closely as possible in the footsteps of Jesus. This text no longer exists. It was gradually swallowed up in other rules, written by Francis in obedience to church authority. These corresponded with Church law and the practical demands of a brotherhood soon numbering more than 5000 members. The final text, approved by Pope Honorius III in 1223, has remained the official Rule of the First Order of Lesser Brothers ever since.

The First Order as it exists in the Roman Catholic Church is threefold: Conventuals, Friars Minor and Capuchins. Their existence, separate from each other, is the fruit of long and often bitter disagreement over what following in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi really demanded. The debate began during the saint's lifetime and divided those brothers who wanted to live

exactly like Francis and his first companions from those who sought to adapt that way of life to meet the pastoral needs of the Church in a rapidly changing urban society. While the former wished to maintain their status as lay brothers, the latter opted for the priesthood and involvement in the institutional life of the church. The lay brothers emphasised a contemplative lifestyle that included manual work, often living alongside the local people. They wanted to live by the Rule, purely and simply, just as Francis had written it. The ordained brothers preached in churches and helped in parishes wherever the local bishop gave them permission or were involved in missionary activity in distant parts. Intellectuals among them contributed to the development of philosophy, theology and other disciplines in many of the developing universities of the time. Some worked for the pope himself. For the more talented, this meant promotion within the hierarchy. Numbers of them became bishops and a few even popes. With papal approval, these ordained brothers interpreted the Rule in such a way as to facilitate their service of the church wherever they were needed.

Despite the best efforts of St Bonaventure of Bagnoreggio (Minister General from 1257 to 1274) the two groups eventually differed so much from each other that division became inevitable. Bonaventure was convinced that the Order could serve the church while maintaining a simple and poor life in accordance with the ideals of St Francis. Those who seriously disagreed came to be known as Spirituals. In 1294, Pope Celestine V divided the Order for the first time: the Spirituals became the Poor Hermits of Pope Celestine. Although Pope Boniface VIII suppressed the group in 1295, arguments over the true nature of the Franciscan charism never disappeared among St Francis' followers. There have been saints and sinners on both sides. Diversity, sometimes creative, sometimes not, became characteristic of the First Order.

This tendency to reform and division proved to be cyclical. After the Spirituals, the desire to live by the Rule, just as St Francis had written it, gave rise to the Observants whom Pope Leo X separated from those commonly known as the Community (Conventuals) in 1517. By then, the Observants in their turn were deeply involved in the bureaucratic, pastoral and academic work of the church. Predictably, other radical groups, determined to live just as Francis and his companions had done, but destined to follow the same path as their numbers grew, broke away from them: Capuchins, Riformati, Discalced or Alcantarines, and Recollects, for example. In 1897, Pope Leo XIII combined the Observants, Riformati, Discalced and Recollects into a single order: the Order of Friars Minor.

Since the nineteenth century, the Franciscan First Order in the Roman Catholic Church has been divided into three independent groups: the Order of Friars Minor Conventual, the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin. They each owe obedience to the same rule of 1223 but interpret it with different statutes called general constitutions. In recent times there has been a renewed emphasis on brotherhood that includes both lay brothers and priests working together as equals to put Franciscan ideals into practice. Within the Anglican Church, the First Order also reflects the ongoing

discussion about how best to follow in the footsteps of St Francis, living by his ideals in today's world. Known as the Society of St Francis, it includes both brothers and sisters. *f*

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