

1221-2021. 800 YEARS FROM PROCESSING OF THE MEMORIALE PROPOSITI

1st CONTRIBUTION

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HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

The age of St. Francis (1182-1226) is included in the vast phenomenon of social, economic and religious renewal and rebirth that runs through the XI-XIII centuries, during which the feudal society enters into crisis and slowly a new order is formed, more communal and civil, accompanied by new and interesting religious ferments.

In the Church, reasons of corruption and worldliness have long been present at various levels: the interference of political power (emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, starting from Charlemagne - IX century) in the appointment of bishops and the Pope had contributed heavily to pollute the degree of morality in many members of the ecclesiastical institution.

1. Reform movement of Benedictine origin.

The phenomenon that has gone down in history as the "Reforming Movement" of the Church began with the Monastery of Cluny (France), founded in 910 with the purpose of returning the Church to its evangelical origins, facilitating the return to the Rule of St. Benedict, as it was originally. The strength of this monastery, which soon became a center of high spirituality, depended on the fact that the Papacy had made the abbot directly dependent on the Holy See, removing him from the bishop's jurisdiction, a "revolution" with respect to the customs of the time, when it was common for the dignity of the bishop to be elevated people who were welcomed by the political power or indicated by it.

Following the example of Cluny, the monastery of Camaldoli (founded by St. Romualdo in 1012), of Vallombrosa (by St. Giovanni Gualberto, in 1036) and other monastic institutions such as the Carthusians (St. Bruno of Cologne, 1030-1101) and the Cistercians (St. Roberto from Molesme, 1024-1111 and, above all, St. Bernardo from Chiaravalle, 1090-1153).

2. European revival

The contribution of these monastic orders to the intensification of awareness for a return to the evangelical spirit, combined with new perspectives of life joined to the nascent phenomenon of the "European rebirth" after the year 1000, would have been remarkable.

A rebirth determined by several factors: from the end of the barbarian invasions, from the considerable demographic increase, from the decline of feudalism as a political system, from the expansion of cities, from economic and cultural development and, indeed, from the movement of reform of the Church, which was burdened by two widespread evils: simony (the acquisition of ecclesiastical offices) and concubinage (the violation of ecclesiastical celibacy). These evils were strongly linked to the politics of interference in the life of the Church, both on the part of the imperial political power and on the part of secular feudalism.

Two figures of popes emerge in the struggle that the Church undertook to escape the imperial power and recover its freedom: NICHOLAS II (980-1061) and above all GREGORY VII (around 1015-1085).

Nicholas II launched a strong action aimed at removing the election of the Pontiff from the clergy, the Roman people and the approval of the emperor: only the college of cardinals would elect the Pope (Synod of 1059). The contrast sharpened with Pope Gregory VII and Henry IV emperor. They were the main protagonists of the so-called "Struggle for Investitures", a phenomenon that lasted for several decades to end

in 1122 with the Concordat of Worms, a compromise, a source of future discord, but which meanwhile marked the recognition of the papacy's autonomy.

3. From monastic spirituality to the birth of a new lay spirituality

Monastic orders have been mentioned. At the basis of their proposal for a Christian life was the belief that earthly reality was a source of spiritual danger and that only the individual relationship with God, lived in the renunciation and austerity of life in a monastery, could open the way to salvation. A vision, of course, opposite to that found in the simoniacal and concubinary clergy, dedicated to worldly interests. And in any case, even if the action carried out by monasticism also maintained in its structure elements of contact with the feudal system (the origin of many monks from noble families, the birth of abbeys often financed by great lords ...), this ideal for a long time fed a great religious fervor capable of attracting many people.

However the great changes taking place in society after the year 1000 had repercussions also on the way of living the religious dimension on the part of the laity: a new conscience is emerging, a more authentic sensitivity, closer to the primitive Church, which wants to bring the Gospel to daily life, the Church to the world, and the idea that even the laity can live the Gospel message in their daily lives. A truly new thought compared to what believed that it was possible to reach Christian perfection only in the "contemptus mundi" (disdain for the world), adhering to monastic or eremitical life, with the rejection of society and worldly concerns.

The strong desire for a return to the spirit of the Gospel, however, in some cases produced polemical attitudes, of opposition to the Church and to the corruption of that part of her hierarchy which had worldlyized her mission. Movements such as the Cathars, the Waldensians, the Arnaldists, the Umiliati were born as a protest against this state of affairs, but they went much further, coming to support doctrinal positions considered heterodox and condemned by the Church as such (Council of Verona, 1184).

4. The penitential tradition and its evolution after the year 1000

In the history of the Church the penitential movement has very ancient origins. It included those who, after choosing to be baptized, intended to conform their lives to God's will. However, consistency was not always respected: for those who continued to commit serious sins forgiveness was possible, provided that really changed their interior life and daily behavior by doing penance, which consisted of prayers, abstinence, alms ... Entering the "penance" meant expressing one's will during a public ceremony in the presence of the bishop, accepting the new condition of visible life to everyone: the seat at the back of the church, the kneeling position, a worn-out habit, the shaving of the hair, the long beard ... Only after having served the time established for penance, it was possible to be admitted to the category or Order of Penitents, whose lifestyle, in addition to providing for miserable clothing (tunic), had to comply with the refusal to carry out work that could be harmful for one's soul, for example commercial and financial activities, as well as participating in popular festivals and shows. It was also forbidden to carry weapons and participate in wars.

Other characteristics of the penitent's life were **fasting**, according to what the ecclesiastical dispositions established, in particular in the three annual Lent: at Easter, after Pentecost, at Christmas; **voluntary flagellation** was also considered a punishment that replaced others; **pilgrimage**, that is going to distant places of considerable religious importance, was a form of penance practiced in every century. Another penitential condition, which could be chosen by both monks and laity, was **hermitism**, isolation from the world in order to seek only God.

5. The laity towards the "Fraternities"

Reflections of the great economic and social transformations also occurred in the evolution of the "penitential state": no longer an "escape from the world" in individual terms to pursue the Christian ideal, but a "being in the world" putting the Gospel at the center with the purpose to imitate the poor and humble Christ.

This tension towards such a high ideal put together many lay faithfuls, who in some realities gave life to groups or "fraternities" of married and celibate people who, even without necessarily living together, adopted the same commitment to penitential life, the same "Propositum vitae" (Cf. *Fr. RIVI, Francis of Assisi and the laity of his time*, Series TAU / 2, Rimini 2004, p. 64). The wisdom of Pope Innocent III (1160-1216) to

welcome the new lay movements within the Catholic Church, favored the penitential movements: it was him to reopened the case of the Humiliated and to approve them with a letter dated June 1201. It contained the *Propositum* with which the state of life of the Humiliated was regulated: humility, patience, charity, fastings and prayers were its inspiring principles. We can therefore consider the Third Order of the Humiliated, a form of life that somehow precedes the Franciscan Third Order.

It will be the extraordinary human and religious experience of Francis of Assisi that will bring to an end the long process of renewal of the penitential state. "In him it is possible to grasp at the same time the summit of the most authentic human and Christian aspirations of the laity and the most luminous proposal for a solution ..." (*Fr. RIVI, Francis of Assisi ...* p. 72). His example, his words will nourish an impressive flowering of men and women who, under different forms, will undertake the path of Christian perfection.

6. Francis penitent

When Francesco comes to understand that the seductions of the world (money, the dream of fulfilling himself as a knight, participating in the experiences of the cheerful brigade of his companions ...) are not able to give a profound meaning to his life, he begins an interior journey in search of a new lifestyle that will lead him to discover and live the centrality of the Gospel.

At the beginning of his new religious experience, Francis feels the call of penitential spirituality, as he himself writes in his *Testament*:

The Lord gave me, Friar Francis, to begin to do penance like this: when I was in sins it seemed too bitter to see lepers, and the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And as I moved away from them, what seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of mind and body. And after that, I stayed a while and walked out of the century.

But the expression "I came out of the century" should not be understood as an escape from the world to retire to a monastery or to live in a wood or on a hermit's upland: the isolation in which Francis and his first companions live is "generally moving that does not at all exclude the contact with the world ..." and his desire to "model himself according to the form of the holy Gospel could only move him in the direction of an apostolic life, that is, a more active life among the people" (G. CASAGRANDE, *An Order for the laity. Penance and Penitents in the thirteenth century, in Francis of Assisi and the first century of Franciscan history*, Turin, 1997, p. 238).

It is Thomas of Celano himself in *Vita Prima* (35) who emphasizes that Francis was conscious of having been sent by God to lead to Him the souls for which He had died, and if we are to believe in the *Actus-Fioretii* (chapter XVI) Francis was certain of this by resorting to the advice of Friar Silvestro and Saint Claire. But Innocent III also encouraged him to carry on with preaching, as Thomas of Celano narrates (*Vita Seconda*, 17) who writes:

Then Francis, using the faculty granted him, began to sow seeds of virtue, preaching with greater fervor all around, in cities and villages.

A preaching addressed to all: men and women, young and old, healthy and sick, workers and peasants, nobles and commoners ..., a message of conversion and penance to live the Gospel consistently. The theme of "penance" is central in the life of the Saint and in his preaching. What is its content?

The two versions of the *Letter to the faithfuls* can be considered the core of his "norms of life and salvation" (A. FREGONA, *The Secular Franciscan Order* cit., p. 83) which, starting from love for God, become concrete in love of neighbor and enemies, in mercy, charity, humility, purity, simplicity, contempt for the body and its vices, frequency in confession and Eucharistic communion ... These are indications of life that Francis and his first companions offer in their contact with people, in the preaching that transmits serenity and optimism, capable of increasing a growing number of people, married and celibate, who choose to live as penitents remaining in their own homes, without giving up their family, their work.

Conclusion

The state of voluntary penance, therefore, existed since ancient times and was a form of life that the Church recognized for those lay people who intended to embrace it and which could be expressed in different forms. Different, new and original was the "form of life" indicated by Francis for the laity, which was at the basis of the intense revival of the penitential movement, especially in central-northern Italy: a phenomenon so considerable that it was taken into consideration by the Roman Curia.

We thus come to the issue of the **Memoriale Propositi** of 1221.