

# The Catholic Radical

—A Catholic Newspaper for a Divided Age—

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## WHAT ST FRANCIS DESIRED

Peter Maurin (1934)

According to Johannes Jorgenson, a Danish convert living in Assisi,

1. St. Francis desired that men should give up superfluous possessions.
2. St. Francis desired that men should work with their hands.
3. St. Francis desired that men should offer their services as a gift.
4. St. Francis desired that men should ask other people for help when work failed them.
5. St. Francis desired that men should live as free as birds.
6. St. Francis desired that men should go through life giving thanks to God for His gifts.

Francistide—a short little season celebrated by Franciscans all over the world every year in early fall—begins September 17th with the feast of the stigmata of St. Francis and ends October 4th with the same saint's feast day. Francistide gives the Church, and especially Catholic Workers everywhere, an extended chance to contemplate a world turned on its side by the life of this remarkable man whose unity with Christ was marked by his sharing the same wounds.

Yes, St. Francis chose a life of voluntary poverty. Yes, through that poverty, he was freed to wonder at, see, and embrace God's creation in a wholly intimate and sensual manner—one foreign to the typical, anxiety-ridden experience of our modern techno-industrial society. And yes, Francis is held aloft today as an inspired ideal of

social action. But, as Servant of God Dorothy Day once remarked, "Don't call me a Saint; I don't



want to be dismissed that easily," so too, we would do well not to hoist this peculiar saint up on an unreachable pedestal. Yes, St.

Francis was a "radical," but as this paper has argued, Catholic radicalism is about getting back to the roots of the Gospel, particularly Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. St. Francis shows us all the way.

But Saint Francis isn't our only exemplar in the season of Francistide—a season rich with celebrations of Catholic faithfulness. Consider just a handful: September 21st, Feast of St. Matthew; September 29th, Feast of Sts. Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Archangels; September 30th, Memorial of St. Jerome; and, October 1st, Memorial of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus. In this issue, we hope the various pieces throughout put on display the deep interior faith of these exemplars, which both anchor and necessitate exterior actions that turn the world on its side.+

## ST FRANCIS AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

By the Maurin House

St. Francis of Assisi is best known as a garden gnome. Yet no serious Catholic actually thinks the Church canonized this man, who has been called the greatest of saints after Our Lady and the Apostles, for loving animals and being nice to everyone. Francis grew up in middle class security, traded it all to espouse Lady Poverty for the sake of the love of Christ, and attracted thousands of other people to marry her as well. He founded the "Order of the Lesser Brethren", taking the phrase from Christ's words that whenever you housed or fed or visited the poor (the "Lessers") you did it to him (Matthew 25:31-46). So, in a move of ingenious Scripture application, Francis renounced all possessions, becoming a beggar, so that he might give others the opportunity to meet Christ.

Francis also founded the Third Order, officially called the Order of Penance, for lay and married people, who wanted to imitate Francis' joyful renunciation of the world while remaining in their families, homes, and communities. They committed to a discipline of liturgical prayer, fasting, simplicity of life or voluntary poverty, Christian fellowship, and the regular practice of the works of mercy.

Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement often called attention (as in the Easy Essay "The Third Order", printed in this issue) to modern papal teaching encouraging the gathering of a new

army of Third Order Franciscans as the best antidote to the evils of our time. In particular Benedict XV's *Sacra propediem* urges Catholics "to affiliate themselves with eagerness" with the Third Order, which "today responds marvelously to the needs of society" (1). What is so essential, Benedict says, is that the Third Order holds out the call to all Catholics, not just the religious and ordained, to "grasp the true moral physiognomy of St. Francis" (3), and to take up a life "characterized by the same simplicity of life and the same spirit of penance" in order "to cause the religious life to be practice by all" (5).

In the same letter the Holy Father emphasizes that in a time of horrible wars, civil discord, and class conflict (12-13), members of the Third Order, by their special marks of "fraternal charity" (10) and their observation, as far as possible, of the evangelical councils (16) of poverty, chastity, and obedience, can be special agents of the peace of Christ. Strikingly, Benedict is suggesting that it is not changes in the external, formal structures of society that promise a better future—changes in government, better education, more social services, votes for this or that candidate, transparency or better programs. Rather, he stresses that a new world is only possible by individual conversion: the reformation of the passions whence all conflicts

arise (15). Social reform requires penance, and this lay Franciscans do themselves, and model for others, and it is this that has a "marvelous efficacy" (15) on society. The Pope is saying, in other words, however unpopular it may be, that God knew what he was doing in giving us the Gospel, and not any kind of social engineering, for the betterment of the world. It really is, at bottom, the most attractive and relevant "program" there could be, and the most, nay the only, effective one for ushering in the New World Order, which of course is called the Kingdom of God.

Peter Maurin used to say he wanted to get the monks out of the monasteries. By this he did not mean that he wished for any change in the way professed religious lived as much as for the laity currently living in the world to take their vocation to the supernatural life of the Sermon on the Mount seriously. This theme was restated years later by Pope Benedict XVI, then Joseph Ratzinger, in his doctoral dissertation. Writing about St. Bonaventure, the great Franciscan Doctor of the Church and "theologian of St. Francis", Ratzinger shows how, for Bonaventure, Francis, in all his radicality, represents the Christian norm broken into the middle of the Church's history, as it were from both ends. From one end, Apostolic times, the first Christians sold what they owned and laid it at the feet of the Apostles, spending

their time in the Eucharist, the prayers, community life, and caring for the sick and the poor (see Acts 2). From the other, in the last days, says Bonaventure, the same Franciscan form of life will have to return, for only this will be able to sustain the ardor of faith in the midst of the opposition it will then face.

Whether, then, we are living in those last days, or we have some sort of new Christendom ahead of us, St. Francis appears more relevant than ever.+

## THE THIRD ORDER

By Peter Maurin (1934)

1. "We are perfectly certain that the Third Order of St. Francis is the most powerful antidote against the evils that harass the present age." —Leo XIII.
2. "Oh, how many benefits would not the Third Order of St. Francis have conferred on the Church if it had been everywhere organized in accordance with the wishes of Leo XIII." —Pius X.
3. "We believe that the spirit of the Third Order, thoroughly redolent of Gospel wisdom, will do very much to reform public and private morals." —Benedict XV.
4. "The general restoration of peace and morals was advanced very much by the Third Order of St. Francis, which was a religious order indeed, yet something unexampled up to that time." —Pius XI.

## RENUNCIATION

By Thomas Merton

The way to contemplation is an obscurity so obscure that it is no longer even dramatic. There is nothing in it that can be grasped and cherished as heroic or even unusual. And so, for a contemplative, there is supreme value in the ordinary everyday routine or work, poverty, hardship and monotony that characterize the lives of all the poor, uninteresting and forgotten people in the world.

Christ, Who came on earth to form contemplatives and teach men the ways of sanctity and prayer, could easily have surrounded himself with ascetics who starved themselves to death and terrified the people with strange trances. But His Apostles were workmen, fishermen, publicans...The surest asceticism is the bitter insecurity and labor and nonentity of the really poor. To be utterly dependent on other

people. To be ignored and despised and forgotten. To know little of respectability or comfort. To take orders and work hard for little or no money: it is a hard school, and one which most pious people do their best to avoid.

Nor are they to be entirely blamed. Misery as such, destitution as such, is not the way to contemplative union. I certainly don't mean that in order to be a saint one has to live in a slum, or that a contemplative monastery has to aim at reproducing the kind of life that is lived in tenements. It is not filth and hunger that make saints, nor even poverty itself, but love of poverty and love of the poor.

It is true, however, that a certain degree of economic security is morally necessary to provide a minimum of stability without which a life of prayer can hardly be learned.

But "a certain degree of economic security" does not mean comfort, the satisfaction of every bodily and psychological need, and a high standard of living. The contemplative needs to be properly fed, clothed and housed. But he also needs to share something of the hardship of the poor. He needs to be able to identify himself honestly and sincerely with the poor, to be able to look at life through their eyes, and to do this because he really is one of them.

This is not true unless to some extent he participates in the risk of poverty: that is to say, unless he has many jobs he would rather not do, suffer many inconveniences with patience, and be content with many things that could be a great deal better.

Many religious people, who say they love God, detest and fear the

very thought of a poverty that is real enough to mean insecurity, hunger, dirt. And yet you will find men who go down and live among the poor not because they love God (in Whom they do not believe) or even because they love the poor, but simply because they hate the rich and want to stir up the poor to hate the rich too. If men can suffer these things for the venomous pleasure of hatred, why do so few become poor out of life in order both to find God in poverty and give Him to other men?+

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## CONSIDER A FRIENDSHIP WITH THE MAURIN HOUSE

The Maurin House is an emerging Catholic community rooted in the prayers of the Church and the works of mercy in Northeast Minneapolis, MN. We see ourselves as being a practical, but often humorous, attempt at putting the spirit of this publication to work on the ground.

The easiest way you can get involved is to donate money (we're not afraid to beg). Right now, our two families pay the mortgage, utilities and upkeep for the hospitality house, and many months this stretches our modest finances pretty thin. You can make a one-time donation or, even better, a monthly pledge. No one gets paid in any form, and all donations are used directly for the works of mercy of one kind or another.

Or, you can think of us when you go to the store. With three or four large men occupying the house at any one time, we're always running out of food and toilet paper and the like. You can just leave it on the step or you can come in and put it away in the kitchen for us. It won't go to waste.

Finally, you can start to get to know us in more personal ways. The obvious things are to come by as regularly as you'd like for Evening Prayer and/or dinner (5:30pm on Mondays and Fridays). People do this fairly regularly. Or, if you're handy, you can give us a buzz and see what projects around the house we have going on. We also have gardens and chickens to tend and lawns to mow and compost piles to turn over and workbenches to build and chainsaws to sharpen and meals to cook. We have found that shared work is a key component to building friendship. And so, in whatever way you may be so moved, we'd be delighted to hear from you. Check us out at [www.maurinhouse.com](http://www.maurinhouse.com) to learn more about donation opportunities and our common life with the poor.+

## THE LITTLE WAY OF POVERTY

By Malcolm Schluenderfritz

Contrary to popular belief, the Gospel calls us to embrace voluntary poverty. This external, material poverty is only valuable, however, insofar as it leads to or flows from the poverty of spirit that gives access to the Kingdom of God, and vice versa. (Mathew 5:3)

The "Little Way" of St. Therese can guide us as we seek true interior detachment. The poor in spirit are those who have surrendered themselves completely to God's loving mercy. We are all totally dependent on God, whether we like it or not; but the poor in spirit have enthusiastically embraced their dependence. According to St. Therese, what God loves about us is precisely our weakness and littleness. If we let him, he can work in and through our weakness; by contrast, prideful insistence on our own strength will lead to failure.

Jesus said that the sick rather than the healthy need a physician's care. This doesn't mean that only some of us need God's help; we are all weak and sinful before God. Instead, it means that God can only help those who realize that they are weak. In this way, the realization of one's weakness can become a hidden strength, while those who see themselves as strong remain trapped in their own weakness.

In describing our dependence on God, St. Therese used the analogy of a child who is carried up a steep set of stairs by a parent. Our goal is to climb the "stairway of perfec-

tion", but we aren't able to do so on our own. Striving for virtue is an integral part of the Christian life. Our focus, however, should be on God's mercy rather than on our own efforts. A focus on our own efforts turns our religion into a contest of respectability rather than an ardent relationship with God.

Dependence on the mercy of God also helps us to avoid the trap of scrupulosity and despair. Scrupulosity leads people to become overly focused on their personal spiritual struggles. They think they have to achieve sanctity through their own efforts; when they fail in this impossible quest, they become discouraged.

The presumptuous, self-righteous Christian and the scrupulous Christian are actually examples of the same spiritual problem: excessive interest in personal salvation and a desire for control. The Little Way's surrender of control to the "right now" demands of the Gospel is determinative of the spirituality of material voluntary poverty and the materiality of spiritual detachment. The accumulation of material

wealth is an attempt to achieve personal security in this life. And it also, the Lord tells us, comes at the expense of the rejection of the always-on-offer provision of the Lord which would effect the security sought. "The Lord knows you need all of these things." So the wealthy buy expensive insurance policies and build up savings ac-

counts, at the expense of charity to those in need today, to assure themselves they will be cared for in the midst of future crises. Yet no amount of money, like no amount of good deeds, is sufficient in its ultimate goal of warding off suffering, and both the scrupulous and the covetous know this by their persistent worry that they do not have enough. As such, the illusion of and insistence on future control breeds fear, anxiety, greed and covetousness in both the spiritual and material realms.

In fact, counter-productively, this pursuit of personal security through wealth leads to the misery of social isolation. To the hoarder of personal wealth, real, non-contractual relationships are liabilities; they might lead to demands upon one's precious and limited resources that would then lessen the hard-earned "security" of the possessor. The miser is a classical and extreme example of the isolating effects of wealth, but examples of this isolation can be seen everywhere in our affluent, lonely, overly-litigated society.

By contrast, voluntary poverty moves the focus from our own personal security to the well-being of the wider community. Building up a strong community provides a different kind of security, one based on mutual self-giving.

Traditional communities have always practiced this sort of mutual "insurance" by caring for those

who fall on hard times. Building on and expanding these traditional practices, the followers of Christ built up a community in which nobody was in need. (Acts 4:32-35) When everyone shares, no one is hungry.

In the spiritual life, poverty and surrender also have communal implications. Self-righteous Christians tend to pass harsh judgments on their neighbors, while the scrupulous are too obsessed with their own spiritual state to care about others. We are called to "Seek first the kingdom of Heaven"—and the kingdom of Heaven is Christ himself, along with his mystical body, the Church. Casting aside worldly wealth makes room in our lives for others, and spiritual poverty cuts through the engulfing fog of our own concerns. It allows us to accept God's mercy, and in turn to bestow on others the merciful love we have received.+

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