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OPTIONS FOR THE POOR IN TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses the lens of the "preferential option for the poor" to examine the unprecedented turn to poverty by religious movements in late twelfth and early thirteenth-century Western Europe. Three movements are selected from the many and various movements espousing poverty: the *Humiliati*, the Waldensians, and the Franciscans. The *Humiliati* developed a communal lifestyle that, in key ways, reflected the emerging urban working class. The Waldensians embraced a radical poverty that rejected all forms of property, but they were progressively marginalized from Catholicism and eventually became targets of the Inquisition. The Franciscans adopted a very similar sort of radical poverty, but their communities ultimately would be assimilated into mainstream Catholicism. The essay places these movements into a dialogue with the contemporary notion of the "preferential option for the poor" in order to discover the ways they might inform and illuminate one another.

I. Introduction

Occasionally within the wide orbit of Christian doctrine and practice, radical movements erupt that are inspired by poverty, or even by the poor themselves. One such movement has emerged in the midst of contemporary Christianity that claims a "preferential option for the poor" as one of its central theological tenets. This theological principle affirms that God has a special concern for the poor because they are the victims of systematic injustice meted out within human structures of power and wealth. In response to this victimization, a liberating God actively subverts the artificial inequalities built into sinful social structures, and continually challenges us to reinvent the world according to a vision of peace, justice, and equality under the Reign of God.

Over the course of decades of development, contemporary liberation theologians have established a relatively clear definition for the theme "preferential option for the poor" in order to differentiate it from

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the concepts of charity and concern for the downtrodden found in mainstream Christianity. The "preferential option for the poor" goes beyond the requirements of charity or even advocacy to the extent that it seeks to empower the poor to take the lead in effecting their own liberation. Unlike other options, it depends on a critical awareness of the oppressive character of many political, social, and economic structures of power. It includes a rejection of those distorted, asymmetrical social relationships that assign great privilege to a few and great misery to the majority. As mentioned above, it is an option that God takes as a necessary corrective to the unfair, unequal, and sinful institutions of human design. The "preferential option for the poor" makes the further claim that the church, in order to be authentically itself, needs to be primarily a church of the poor and not merely a church for and with the poor. In this way, the poor effectively re-evangelize the church by calling us back to our roots in the gospel.¹

One of the many tasks taken up by liberation theologians has been the reexamination of individuals and events in Christian history in order to discern the liberating hand of God throughout the Christian record. Following these examples, this paper is an attempt to clarify and better understand the "preferential option for the poor" by viewing a particular period of European history through the lens of this theme. The thesis of this paper is not a historical but a theological and ethical one; that is, that the "preferential option for the poor" is a genuine insight into the essence of Christianity and therefore can be found, in some form, in the beliefs and practices of exemplary Christian movements. It is an examination of the belief that Christians in many ages have understood poverty and some kind of "option for the poor" as signs of apostolicity and ethical authenticity.

One historical example of a Christian turn to poverty can be found in twelfth and early thirteenth-century Europe. In this time and place, a myriad of Christ-inspired grassroots movements suddenly emerged in Western Europe with a focus on living lives dedicated to poverty, itinerant preaching, and the *vita apostolica*. These movements would inspire both radical renewal by way of the mendicant orders and radical repression in the form of the Inquisition.

This study is a brief historical snapshot of three movements that seem to have been inspired by some nascent version of an "option for the poor." It will focus primarily on a segment in time of European society and a remarkable turn to poverty, with the actual poor, as signs

¹A more complete discussion of this theme in liberation theology can be found in Gustavo Gutierrez [now O.P.], "Option for the Poor," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 235-50.

of authentic Christian witness. It will give an account of some of the popular movements that rallied around a philosophical ideal of evangelical poverty, which took up the cause of the poor as their own cause and eventually instigated social and ecclesial change. It will conclude with an attempt to answer some fundamental questions regarding poverty and the poor in relation to Christian belief and practice.

II. *The Humiliati*

In the late twelfth century, enthusiastic lay Christians espousing radical evangelical poverty began to coalesce into organized mass movements. The pattern for religious enthusiasm until this time had been largely manifested in charismatic personalities whose prophetic missions drew episodic throngs but lacked an organizational structure to ensure a degree of permanence from generation to generation. That pattern was broken in the latter half of the twelfth century, first by the Cathars,² who viewed themselves as a church that was separate from, and inimical to, the Catholic Church, and then by other more orthodox reform movements, like the *Humiliati* of Northern Italy.

The *Humiliati* were a lay pietist movement centered in Lombardy and the Veneto. They espoused a life of voluntary poverty which included rules guiding simplicity in their diet and in the clothes they wore. Their dedication to poverty and simplicity was part of a broader penitential discipline that included prayer and public preaching by both clergy and lay members.³ In union with the growing evangelical awakening across Western Europe, the *Humiliati* tried to embody the *vita apostolica*, referring to it as the *ecclesiae primitivae forma*. They represented the cutting edge—the first of a new breed of religious community that would find its fullest expression in the mendicant orders founded almost half a century later in the early thirteenth century. Like their charismatic predecessors, the *Humiliati* attracted a relatively large number of followers. Unlike the early twelfth-century movements, however, this one integrated its adherents into a structured communal setting with a primitive rule. *Humiliati* communities also maintained relatively close relationships with the rest of the church through clergy membership and friendly relations with local prelates.⁴

Little is known about their origins. The first reference to them in the historical record dates from the early 1170s. This reference assumes

²For more thorough historical treatment of the Cathars, see Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

³C.H. Lawrence, *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society* (New York: Longman, 1994), 23.

⁴Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 77.

the existence of large, thriving, organized communities with communal property and an established way of life. It is obvious that novel religious movements did not arrive on the historical stage so well established and neatly packaged. Most historians therefore agree that the *Humiliati* enjoyed their humble beginnings around the middle of the twelfth century, giving them a generation to mature into the community that is referred to in the 1170s.

The next time the *Humiliati* are mentioned is at their excommunication in 1184 by Pope Lucius III in his bull *Ad Abolendam*, issued together with the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa at the Council of Verona. In this document both the *Humiliati* and the "Poor of Lyon"⁵ (the Waldensians) were cited as egregious examples of heresy. It is probable that both were condemned by the Pope for their insistence on preaching publicly without authorization from the local clergy.⁶ In addition to this primary objection, the papacy also protested the *Humiliati* practice of holding secret meetings in private places. This was a practice they would be compelled to renounce when they applied for official recognition by the bishop of Rome at the turn of the next century. They also participated in the general anticlerical attitudes of the day, just as the Waldensians were doing in France. As a result of the condemnation in *Ad Abolendam*, the *Humiliati* were reluctant to refer to themselves as "*Humiliati*" until the turn of the next century, when they were recognized by Rome as a religious order.⁷

Unlike their contemporaries, the Waldensians and the Franciscans, the communal life of the *Humiliati* was modeled more closely on the cenobitical standards set by the monastic tradition. They had no qualms about shared real property and their commitment to poverty more closely resembled the rigors of the reformed monasteries than the radical renunciation of the world found among the Franciscans and the "Poor of Lyon."⁸ Those who lived in traditional cloisters held property in common; many *Humiliati*, however, lived as lay people at home with their families. They had distinctive forms of religious devotion and refrained from lies, oaths, and lawsuits, much like the Waldensians and early Franciscans.⁹ Their meetings were held in private, a fact that

⁵The Waldensian movement is frequently referred to as the "Poor of Lyon," both by contemporaries and by modern historians, see Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c.1170-c.1570* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3. See also Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans, *Heretics of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 31.

⁶Frances Andrews, *The Early Humiliati* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 41.

⁷In much the same way the Beguines in northern Europe referred to themselves as "Brethren of Penitence" during the thirteenth century. See Wakefield and Evans, 55.

⁸Andrews, 55, 61.

⁹In fact, it would be their rejection of oaths rather than unauthorized lay preaching

attracted Catholic suspicion, but they preached in public. Even their lay members did so in defiance of papal prohibitions. The movement included priests and other clerics, but the majority of members were lay. They had a cordial, even supportive, relationship with many bishops in northern Italy—especially in the Milan area.¹⁰

The *Humiliati* community had a number of important distinguishing features that made them both important and unique. For instance, they were the first religious community in the Catholic Church of the West to have a rule for lay people living outside a conventual structure. The *Humiliati* became the model for the so-called Third Order. This helped the church rein in religious enthusiasm in the next century and would become the model for the Dominican and Franciscan Third Orders.¹¹ The early *Humiliati* appear to have been particularly attractive to women, who enjoyed an active role and even in some cases were named as superiors of communities.¹² Like the Waldensians and Franciscans who followed, the *Humiliati* preached against heretics. Opposition to heretics was, in fact, part of their original commitment.¹³ Like the Waldensians and Franciscans the *Humiliati* drew their membership primarily from the emerging middle classes. They formed their members into working communities who engaged in manual industrial labor for mutual support.¹⁴ Their main work was the manufacture of textiles; but they were also renowned administrators and financial experts. Many *Humiliati* were in high demand in these roles in the northern Italian city-states.¹⁵

Pope Innocent III saw the potential of the *Humiliati* to help in his growing war against the heretical Cathars, so in 1201 he announced their rehabilitation after examining their doctrine and practice. Although unauthorized lay preaching had originally go them into trouble, it was obviously not an abiding concern less than two decades later when lay preaching among them was approved.

In many outward appearances, First and Second Order *Humiliati* would have looked very much like reformed monks to the casual observer. The differences were that these communities embraced lay people as equal members of the community and that these lay members could take on active preaching roles in the same manner as their cleri-

which would become the litmus test of orthodoxy for the *Humiliati* in their hearings before Pope Innocent III in 1201 (Andrews, 101-02).

¹⁰Andrews, 59-60.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 137: "... The emergence of the third order and its acceptance by Innocent III marked a key stage in the evolution of the Church's response to lay religious enthusiasm."

¹²*Ibid.*, 150-52.

¹³*Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁴Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 74.

¹⁵Andrews, 242.

cal brethren. The *Humiliati* were positioned far better than the reformed monasteries to address popular religious enthusiasm for the *vita apostolica*, owing to their acceptance of lay members who were commissioned to preach publicly against heresy. They attracted to their communities significant numbers of the poor and lower classes of Italian society, and so, these communities modeled some of the egalitarian elements of a "church of the poor." The *Humiliati* were also the first popular mass movement dedicated to the ideals of radical poverty and the *vita apostolica* to receive papal blessing under the new administration of Innocent III. The next movement to be discussed in this study would not so easily be received into the arms of a more welcoming church; but this should not be surprising. Its radical modeling of gospel values resembled no other entity in the church at that time.

III. The Waldensians

Contemporaries of the *Humiliati*, the Waldensians met a fate that many later believed they did not deserve. Their founder's story seems to parallel many elements in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, whose movement's verbal defense of Catholicity against the Cathars helped inspire Domingo Guzmán, founder of the Order of Preachers. For good or ill the Waldensians were a generation ahead of their time with regard to their beliefs and practices. At one point condemned along with the *Humiliati*, the Waldensians were never brought back into the fold of the church. This may have been the result of their near-exclusive reliance on the authority of the Gospel. Their more radical embrace of poverty and powerlessness was also probably a contributing factor. Eventually, the Waldensians would evolve away from the Catholics and become a target of the Roman Inquisition of the thirteenth century. To the same degree that the story of St. Francis elicits awe and admiration, the story of the Waldensians elicits compassion and regret for what could have been, both for the Waldensians and the Catholics.

The foundation of the Waldensians begins with the story of Vaudès,¹⁶ a wealthy twelfth-century merchant who lived with his wife and children in the city of Lyon, an important commercial city on the River Rhône. He handled investments for the local archbishop, whose alleged corrupt practices included usury against the poor.¹⁷ One day (possibly during the famine of 1176 and in response to the scandal that wealthy clergymen presented to the people of Lyon), while Vaudès was passing through the town he heard a preacher telling the popular leg-

¹⁶His name has many variations depending on which historian is telling the story: Vaudès, Vaudesius, Waldo, Waldes. All are various derivatives of the same name.

¹⁷Audisio, 9.

end of St. Alexis, who gave up his great wealth in order to live the life of a beggar.¹⁸ Upon consulting with a priest about the legend of the saint and finding it to be true, Vaudès experienced a sudden conversion. In it he gave all his property to his wife and sold the rest of his possessions, giving the proceeds to the poor.¹⁹ He did this in order "to strip himself bare of all possessions to follow a bare Christ."²⁰ He interpreted the parable of the rich young man in the Gospel of Matthew 19:21-24 both radically and literally as a passage directed at himself and his peers, whom he exhorted to follow his example.²¹ So began the Waldensians, known variously at the time as the "Poor of Lyon," "The Brothers," or the "Poor of Christ."

It was through radical poverty that the followers of this movement ultimately established their unique identity.²² While evangelical poverty was nothing new to twelfth-century Europe,²³ the followers of Vaudès took this ideal to a level never witnessed before. Their ideal of

¹⁸St. Alexis is said to have been the son of two wealthy and powerful members of the fifth-century Roman nobility. According to legend, on the night of his marriage, and with his wife's consent, he sailed to Syria and settled in the town of Edessa; there he lived for seventeen years as a beggar, dying in a hospital ca. 430. At the end of this time a vision of the Virgin Mary appeared to the inhabitants of the town, saying, "Seek the Man of God!" Alexis, realizing that he would be discovered, took ship for Tarsus but, because of bad weather, found himself back again in Italy. He returned to Rome and discovered that his parents were still living, so he presented himself at his father's house in the guise of a beggar, asking that he might be allowed to live under the staircase; this petition was granted, neither of his parents recognizing him for their son. Here he remained for a further seventeen years, living a life of great austerity, begging his bread and being ill-treated by his father's servants. His identity was discovered only at his death. Pope Innocent I, while celebrating Mass before the emperor, heard a voice telling him to seek the Man of God in the house of Euphemian. The pope and emperor obeyed and, arriving at the house, discovered the body of Alexis beneath the staircase. A parchment was found on the body, giving details of the saint's name and history. (The legend of St. Alexis can be found in various forms at many sites on the internet; e.g.: <http://www.cin.org/saints/alexis.html>. One should not confuse this St. Alexis, known as "the Beggar" with St. Alexis Falconieri, the thirteenth-century founder of the Servites.)

¹⁹Audisio, 10. The inquisitor Bernard Gui has this to say about Vaudès: "He was rich but having given up all his worldly goods, he set about observing a life of poverty and evangelical perfection, following in the steps of the apostles. He had the holy Scriptures and other books of the Bible translated for his own use into the vernacular. . . . [He] usurped the function of apostles and dared to preach the gospel in the streets and in the town squares. . . . [He] encouraged a number of accomplices of both sexes in this presumption, sending them out to preach as disciples."

²⁰Euan Cameron, *Waldenses: Rejections of Holy Church in Medieval Europe* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 12.

²¹Audisio, 12. An anonymous account applies this passage to Vaudès' own conversion.

²²Ibid., 11. See also Cameron, 12.

²³Henry of Le Mans, Peter of Bruys, and Arnold of Brescia, to name only a few of the many charismatic heretics of the twelfth century, attempted to embody some version of an aesthetic ideal in their personal character—exhorting others especially the clergy to follow their example. The vow of poverty taken by monks and nuns is another example of a well-established version of evangelical poverty in medieval Europe.

poverty was based on the theory of the unencumbered preacher. According to this theory, wealth and its trappings paralyzed preachers of the gospel through the unbearable burden of their many possessions. A literal interpretation of the gospel led some to believe that they must give up all their possessions and live lives of preaching the gospel and begging on the streets. Mendicancy on the streets of medieval Europe brought with it many risks; one of which was being identified as a professional idler.²⁴

Immediately after his conversion experience, Vaudès had the gospels translated from Latin into the vernacular so that they would be more accessible to himself and his audience.²⁵ Vaudès was literate in the vernacular of his region but not in Latin, something typical of a person of his class and status. Vaudès' preaching is described by contemporaries as "repeating in public what he had learned by heart from the Bible translations."²⁶ The followers of Vaudès interpreted Scripture literally and applied it to all aspects of their life. In addition to the story of the rich young man, the Waldensians embraced a literal interpretation of the passage: "Go therefore and teach all nations . . ." (Mt 28:19-20), the inspiration of their preaching vocation. Catholic opponents viewed Vaudès' preaching ministry as a usurpation of the proper role of the clergy by the laity.²⁷ All of this was occurring at a time when the boundaries between the clerical and lay states were being more sharply defined.

There was no identifiable organizational structure to the Waldensian movement. Like Francis of Assisi, Vaudès was merely the founder of the movement; he never exercised a hierarchical role or wielded special power within the community. In retrospect one can only guess that Vaudès' reason for neglecting such a role was similar to Francis' own, namely one based in his commitment to radical poverty and his rejection of the will to exercise power over others. The only canon of the Waldensians was to live like the apostles through their preaching and poverty. Obedience was owed to the ordained clergy so long as it did not contradict the primary mission of the movement to go and preach to all nations.²⁸

From the beginning, the Waldensians believed that one of the tar-

²⁴Cameron, 30: "For most of the people who saw the Waldensian preachers at work, their doctrine—which was in any case mostly that of the official Church—would have been less distinctive and less memorable than their way of life. In the generation before the mendicant friars, traveling poor preachers would have made as much of an impression by their conduct as their message."

²⁵Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 71.

²⁶Cameron, 15.

²⁷Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 71-72.

²⁸Audisio, 16.

gets of their preaching mission should be the errors of the Cathar heretics.²⁹ Open conflict with the clergy began soon after the "Poor of Lyon" started preaching against the Cathars. Some Waldensians, like many of their Catholic contemporaries, were anticlerical and refused to seek permission to preach. Also, some were mistaken for clergy, raising the ire of the actual clergy who turned, in increasing numbers, to their local bishops with complaints of Waldensian usurpation of clerical privileges. The Waldensians tended to draw Catholics away from parish priests as a result of their more compelling preaching and more disciplined lives of poverty. Adding fuel to the fire was the fact that some of the Waldensian preachers were women.³⁰ The egalitarian philosophy of Vaudès' movement was so genuine and so complete that virtually every form of domination had been exorcized from their practice. The sight of popular lay preachers enraged some Catholic priests and brothers but the sight of popular women preachers would have been intolerable for nearly any member of the clergy in this society.³¹

Open conflict with the hierarchical authorities began soon after a new archbishop of Lyon came to power who was not as tolerant of unauthorized preaching as his predecessor. He demanded that the "Poor of Lyon" stop preaching, and Vaudès refused, citing a New Testament passage that he thought affirmed his authority to preach. Refusal to comply with the order met with immediate condemnation of the movement which was driven out of the area and into southeastern France to the area known as Languedoc.³² Here the legacy of the popular dissident movements of the early twelfth century—those led by Peter of Bruys and Henry of Lausanne—was theirs to collect.³³ Condemnation of the Waldensians was officially pronounced by Pope Lucius III at the Council of Verona in 1184, where they were marked as "schismatics," not heretics, by the writ of excommunication.³⁴

The Waldensians continued to preach against the Cathars, hoping that the excommunication would be lifted. Early in the next century, a small faction of Waldensians led by Durand of Huesca would reconcile

²⁹Joseph Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusades* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 38.

³⁰Cameron, 31.

³¹*Ibid.*: "Throughout the middle ages, religious single women tended to be more strictly enclosed than men; there was no accepted role-model for the single, undomesticated woman, let alone one who taught in public. The presence of female as well as male preachers among the early Waldensian societies stimulated predictable accusations of sexual disorder, justified or not."

³²Audisio, 15-16.

³³Wakefield and Evans, 35. The Waldensians became a catchall movement that absorbed many from the often-disparate dissident movements like the Henricians, *Humiliati* and Arnoldists.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 16.

itself with the episcopacy. In 1207, at the Council of Pamiers,³⁵ this group of Waldensians was brought back into the fold of the church under the name the "Poor Catholics."³⁶ A few years later, a second faction of the Waldensians from northern Italy was reconciled with Rome under the name of the "Poor of Lombardy."³⁷ This would leave the remaining majority of Waldensians to appear intransigent in their disobedience.

Progressive marginalization of the "Poor of Lyon" led to a hardening of their positions and to their embrace of beliefs and practices otherwise held by heretical movements. Eventually the Waldensians were anathematized at the Fourth Lateran Council as heretics and were driven underground in 1229 when the Roman Inquisition began in earnest. The movement would reemerge from hiding three centuries later during the Reformation and proclaim itself a Protestant Church.³⁸

In almost every way, the Waldensians were immediate forerunners of the mendicant orders. The only appreciable difference was that the exclusive object of Waldensian loyalty was the Gospel, which did not leave enough room for obedience to the authority of the Catholic Church.³⁹ The Waldensians took up the legacy of the Petrobrucians, Hericicans, and Arnoldisti,⁴⁰ and transformed this idiosyncratic heritage of charismatic preachers into a mass movement of small, efficient, egalitarian cells that boldly sent out evangelists two by two with nothing more than a tunic and a pair of sandals. Their success was clearly

³⁵Ibid., 220. The Waldensians might have also been influential in the formation of the Dominicans since Dominic of Caleruega, a cathedral canon of Asma, had the opportunity to witness the preaching of the Waldensians during the counter-propaganda campaign in Languedoc sponsored by Innocent III and spearheaded by Diego, bishop of Osma with whom Dominic lived poorly among the Cathari. During the campaign, Durand of Huesca and his companions returned to the Catholic Church and formed the preaching order of the Poor Catholics whose mission was strikingly similar to that order founded by Dominic a short time later.

³⁶Cameron, 52.

³⁷Ibid., 38.

³⁸During the course of these three centuries of repression and hiding the movement had been transformed organizationally and doctrinally. For obvious reasons having to do with their repression, the Waldensians were no longer itinerant urban preachers who lived lives of abject poverty and fought against heresy in the streets. They had formed into small rural clandestine cells "preaching" in secret to one another in the relative safety of member's homes. While these later Waldensians had little in common with Vaudès and the earliest communities, one could easily say the same about any of the other movements that survived beyond their first few generations.

³⁹Wakefield and Evans, 36-37; "Until his insistent evangelism overrode the papal and archiepiscopal prohibitions on preaching, Waldes appears in every respect as a forerunner of Francis of Assisi; willingness to obey authority was the fundamental difference between them" (200).

⁴⁰For more information on popular dissent see R.I. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

linked to the authenticity of their witness to the *vita apostolica*, which, in turn, was linked to their radical version of voluntary poverty.

The main difference between the Waldensians and the *Humiliati* was the way in which the church responded to these similar dissents. While the *Humiliati* were ultimately absorbed into the existing structure, the Waldensians were progressively marginalized from it. The official assimilation of the *Humiliati* resulted in an easily managed religious order, essentially supportive and contributive to the existing *status quo*. The official marginalization and persecution of the Waldensians, on the other hand, resulted in an unmanageable *sub rosa* movement that fundamentally and clandestinely undermined the ecclesial *status quo* in areas of France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria to which they migrated. Future charismatic movements that stressed evangelical poverty, personal holiness, lay involvement, and preaching the Gospel would also face suspicion and resistance from the church. However, most of these movements, and certainly the most popular, the Franciscans, would encounter the church's successful campaign to absorb and assimilate some of these nonconformist doctrines and practices. The Franciscans and other mendicant orders emerged from a spirit that, in many fundamental ways, was indistinguishable from that of the original Waldensians.

One of the reasons that church authority was able to reconcile with the *Humiliati* and not with the Waldensians was the relative openness of the former to hierarchical structure. From the beginning the *Humiliati* had a kind of organization that would leave it open to restructuring according to a model that could be integrated into existing ecclesial structures. Waldensian radical egalitarianism was largely unstructured during its first half-century, providing little opportunity for restructuring by the Roman Church. In the case of the Waldensians, the church would have been forced to invent a new structure for the Waldensians in order to integrate this movement into its apostolic hierarchy of bishop, priest and deacon. This, of course, was not something the free-spirited Waldensians were likely to tolerate. In fact, after their separation from the mainstream Waldensian movement, the Poor Catholics immediately structured themselves according to the emerging mendicant model. From the perspective of the Western Church, the remaining Waldensian factions were more than simply a diverse and variegated mass of lay people, they were also hopelessly disorganized and anarchic. Even if the church intentions had been entirely beneficent, it might still have failed to integrate the larger Waldensian movement within its hierarchy. Ironically, after the Roman Inquisition drove them into hiding, the Waldensians would ultimately become an organized hierarchical body.

The Waldensians came closer to a genuine identification with those who were truly poor than did the *Humiliati*. Unlike the qualified and institutionalized poverty of their endowed contemporaries, Waldensian destitution was as complete as their trust in the divine power that would somehow look out for their needs. In a rapidly urbanizing culture,⁴¹ the Waldensians took their message onto the streets, becoming a mirror image of the new urban poor who also lived on the streets of medieval cities and begged for their next meal. It is difficult to determine how the Waldensians interpreted their own commitment to radical poverty because no theological texts written by early members have ever been recovered. Was there a theological underpinning lurking behind their practice of voluntary destitution that was anything like the "preferential option for the poor and oppressed" in contemporary liberation theology? Owing to the poverty of available sources, there is no definitive answer to this question. Nevertheless, the secondary sources that are available do strongly suggest that basic elements of such an option did inform the practice of the earliest Waldensian movement.

IV. *The Franciscans*

The stories of the life of St. Francis of Assisi and the movement he founded are so well known that this study will take a more cursory approach to these details and spend most of its energy evaluating this early thirteenth-century religious and social phenomena. Nevertheless, an outline of his life and the movement that accrued so rapidly around him will help establish a foundation for an appraisal.

Francis was born in 1181 in the central Italian town of Assisi to a prosperous cloth merchant of the family name Bernardone. He was named John at his baptism. Francis was brought up in an urban setting and was being groomed as a partner in the family business. In young adulthood he was so well dressed that fellow townsfolk called him "Il Francesco," the Frenchman. His level of educational attainment was standard for his location and class: he understood and wrote Latin crudely; and he spoke an early version of French and his native Italian; but he could not be characterized as bookish or scholarly. Early in his adult life he went to war for Assisi against Perugia, a neighboring commune, where he was captured and imprisoned. After his release he went on another military campaign, and on his return home, in the town of Apulia, he heard the call of Christ in a dream. This proved to be a conversion experience for Francis, who renounced his patrimony,

⁴¹For more information on the political economy of medieval Europe see N.J.G. Pounds, *An Economic History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Longman, 1974).

family, home, friends, and the frivolities of wealth and prestige. He adopted a solitary life of penance and prayer, living in caves and abandoned chapels. He supported himself by begging from door to door and gradually adopted various elements of an ascetic life. Scholars are uncertain regarding the various other movements that might have influenced Francis during this formative period; however, "it is probable that in the course of his travels on business he had encountered exponents of the apostolic life such as the *Humiliati* and the Waldensians who devoted themselves to preaching and lived by begging."⁴²

Although initially drawn to the eremitic ideal, Francis ultimately opted for the cenobitic life of religious fraternity. However, Francis' communal ideal was not modeled on the classical monastic community but rather on one that was actively evangelical outside monastery boundaries. Eventually, Francis began accepting followers, who were compelled to sell all of their possessions and give the proceeds to the poor in much the same way as the Waldensians.⁴³ Initially this was a movement peopled by members of the new medieval middleclass, which apparently addressed some of the embryonic needs of this new dynamic economic phenomenon.⁴⁴ Like the Waldensians, who also tended to draw their membership primarily from the emerging middle class, the Franciscans viewed their poverty as an imitation of Christ's earthly life. Their renunciation of both personal and corporate property made the new evangelical's poverty more radical than the monastic form, which included only a renunciation of personal property.

Franciscan poverty was one component of a broader orthopraxy involving the *vita apostolica*. A description of the Franciscan ideal is an almost perfect match for the Waldensian version of the evangelical life in that both groups felt compelled to model their lives after Christ and his disciples as they are depicted in the gospels. Franciscan poverty at the start was radical and uncompromising like its depiction in the gospels among Jesus and his first followers.⁴⁵ The early friar's (i.e., brother's) interpretation of the Bible was simple and literal. They believed it could be directly applied to all of life's problems. The Franciscan mission was simply to teach the Gospel through the example of their lives and in their itinerant preaching. The early Franciscans were

⁴²Lawrence, 30.

⁴³Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 65. Many sources claim a very close tie between the Waldensians and the early Franciscan movement. "Some insist that the priest of the little chapel of the Portiuncula, who accepted the recently converted Francis, was a Waldensian."

⁴⁴Lawrence, 34: "Francis himself and those of his companions whose antecedents can be traced were all children of well-to-do merchant or knightly families of the town of Assisi."

⁴⁵Francis' devotion to the ideal of poverty was expressed poetically in his sonnets to "Lady Poverty," with whom he claimed to be in love.

part of a lay movement that offered their members more direct religious experiences that frequently did not require the leadership of men in holy orders.

Like the Waldensians, the earliest Franciscans had no hierarchical structure, and their respective founders resisted the clerical state and any attempts to place them into authoritarian roles. The egalitarian ideal of Francis led him before long to embrace women as equals in the evangelical mission. His close associate Clare, a high-born woman of Assisi, behaved as a mendicant herself, but her "sisters" were compelled to hold property in common and live a conventual life because of the social pressures of the medieval Western church. A gradual erosion of the initial radical spirit among the men would eventually apply to other aspects of Franciscan life.

Like their counterparts, the Waldensians, the early Franciscans were often opposed by the secular clergy who often experienced a significant reduction in their spiritual authority and income when the Franciscans entered their parish boundaries. The popularity of the friars and their meteoric rise to prominence in the church was bound to create tensions with the interests of the *status quo* clerical establishment. Unbound by property and diocesan borders, although unlike other "poor men" they always asked local bishops for permission to preach, the new order quickly became a second force working alongside and sometimes in competition with the secular clergy. "Their success as popular preachers and confessors siphoned congregations away from parish churches, and with them, of course, went the flow of offerings into trust funds administered for the friars."⁴⁶

As time passed, even within Francis' own lifetime, the ideals of the original movement can be seen to be eroding. Wealthy lay benefactors eager to display their beneficence through the donation of large and ostentatious churches and convents (friaries) wore away at the ideal of the poor itinerant preacher. Franciscan buildings eventually resembled the grandeur of some Benedictine monasteries. The order which had originally been populated by laymen became increasingly clerical. Francis himself had to resist vigorously entry into the clerical state. The order became increasingly vested in the nascent universities, creating a movement that was not merely adequately educated but also was the home to some of the most renowned scholars in Europe. Eventually the Franciscans would become more like the Dominicans founded contemporaneously, who imposed educational qualifications on their postulants—some of which Francis himself would not have been able to meet. An educated core arose in the friaries situated near the universities of

⁴⁶Lawrence, 152-53.

men who pursued higher studies. Some who had lectureships in the universities were given special treatment like private rooms and personal libraries. All of these trends eroded fraternal bonds while they challenged and compromised the founding ideals of poverty, simplicity, and egalitarianism. As early as the decades immediately following Francis' death contradictory ideas on what the vow of poverty demanded within the order and schisms within the church.⁴⁷

Leonardo Boff is convinced that Francis was a revolutionary, not a reformer. "The reformer continues to be an agent of the system, reproducing it by means of the correction of abuses and the introduction of reforms."⁴⁸ While it might have been true of Francis himself, his movement was quickly compromised and became merely reformist. Even the image of Francis himself could never be thoroughly painted as revolutionary, given his own overriding concern for obedience to authority in the church.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Francis clearly was the antithesis of a conformist, and his original movement contradicted the mainstream social and ecclesial culture of his day. Clericalism, domination, monastic wealth, learned culture, legalism, paternalism, patriarchy, and other such aspects of mainstream European church life stand in stark contrast to the teaching and example of the earliest Franciscans. In this way, it is legitimate to speak of Francis as a cultural revolutionary.

The new culture to which he was a witness has a relative in the contemporary theological theme of the "preferential option for the poor."⁵⁰ The church of Europe that Francis was born into was a charitable, paternal defender of and provider for its poor. The mendicant family within the church that Francis created behaved more like an empowering community that made the cause of the poor its primary concern.⁵¹ For Francis, radical poverty was a commitment to restore balance to a world that had been disordered and distorted by power, wealth, and privilege. His refusal to carry arms or take oaths, like the Waldensians and *Humiliati*, was a rejection of the systems of loyalty and protection upon which medieval society was based. Francis aban-

⁴⁷Wakefield and Evans, 41. By the late thirteenth century the split between those who believed in the rigorous application of the ideal of poverty and the mainstream, which was more forgiving, came to a climax with public conflicts and open disobedience. The rigorists, known as the Spirituals, were condemned by the Pope, summoned to Avignon by the Curia, charged with heresy, and imprisoned. Those who persisted in their "error" were handed over to the Inquisitor of Provence. In May 1318 four of them were burned in the town of Marseilles.

⁴⁸Boff, 92.

⁴⁹Ibid., 111.

⁵⁰Ibid., 58: "This option is not exclusive, but rather preferential (Puebla, nos. 1134, 1165). The Church does not deny its essential universality, but defines the place from which it would like to begin to realize that catholicity, that is, from the poor, and afterwards, the others."

⁵¹Ibid., 59.

doned his status as a *maior* in order to become a *minor*, a "little" brother in Christ.⁵² He resisted pressures for his brotherhood to become a clerical order so that they could become a *fratres* (*fratelli/suori*) to each other and to all.⁵³

For Francis, poverty was not an end in itself, but a means to knowing the suffering Christ. It was only in his union with the forgotten and suffering of this world that Francis believed he could experience union with the forgotten and suffering Christ. Radical poverty for Francis "was more than solidarity for the poor; it was a search for identification with them, a living with the poor."⁵⁴ In the person and early movement of St. Francis of Assisi, the trajectory of the twelfth-century movements espousing poverty had reached their apogee. At no other time before or since had anyone so perfectly incarnated this spirit of the *vita apostolica*.

V. An Evaluation

Radical poverty was a disruptive force in medieval society because it established a model of poverty against which the institution of the Western church could only hope to compare. It became a standard of purity that undermined the credibility of the powerful and the wealthy in an institution that espoused the same Scriptures that these new lives of poverty were founded upon. The mendicant friars and sisters followed upon the twelfth-century Waldensians and to a lesser degree the *Humiliati* in introducing medieval European Christendom to a model of evangelical poverty that was qualitatively different from that found in monasticism. The innovative religious movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought evangelical poverty out of the cloister and onto the streets, and, in so doing, transformed the religious vow of poverty by bringing it into closer juxtaposition with the actual lived reality of the poor. The poverty of the vowed religious could now be challenged and compared to the lived reality of beggars and peasants throughout Europe. This dialogue would undermine the illusions that could arise in the popular mind of a relative isolated life concerning the degree to which the vow of poverty corresponded to the lived realities of the poor majority. The parish clergy of the era in mountainous and other villages lived lives as poor as the people they served but it was a

⁵²Michael Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 123: "In naming the order he founded, Francis deliberately chose a word commonly used in his day to refer to the lower strata of society: Minores (or Friars Minor, Minorities), which carried pejorative connotations of dependency and legal incapacity."

⁵³Boff, 68.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 67.

poverty enforced by circumstances not voluntarily opted for. Mendicant life was a reproach to those clerics who were able to live well. It was the engaged poverty of these radical movements that would reconnect the church and its message with the poor majority of medieval Europe, portions of which had become increasingly anticlerical in response to the alliance of a numerous higher clergy with a corrupt and decadent aristocracy.⁵⁵

When analyzing the poverty of these movements the question of solidarity naturally arises. Was this medieval turn to poverty a genuine act of solidarity with the poor and suffering on the part of these movements? The answer to this question is qualified by a number of historical considerations. First of all, during this historical period a very different awareness of economic and social class was operative relative to the one that dominates twenty-first-century western Europe and the bulk of North America. A consciousness of poverty and the "poor" as an economic class distinguishable from the rest of society was only beginning to emerge in medieval European society, and then, only in urban settings.⁵⁶

Secondly, the motivations behind this turn to radical poverty generally seem to be driven by the desire to obey a divine command as recorded in Scripture. From this perspective, poverty was embraced in response to divine fiat. The "poor" often seem to factor into this equation as mere objects of evangelical enthusiasm, rather than as subjects who should be loved for their own sake. Because the actual poor were not and still are not recognized unambiguously as subjects of their own destiny, it follows logically that these movements would have lacked theology of empowerment and liberation. The poor as such were not normally the focus of leaders in these movements, nor did the poor constitute a significant percentage of the membership of these early movements. They were, for the most part, drawn from members of the emerging middle class who were determined to live lives of evangelical poverty. While charity was not entirely foreign to their methods of outreach, their ideal of poverty had more to do with establishing and maintaining an aura of Christian holiness untainted by wealth and worldly concerns.

While an unqualified identification between these medieval movements and the contemporary concept of the "preferential option for the poor" is not without its problems, these movements, do embody core

⁵⁵For more background on the church's relationship to the medieval economy see Robert Ekelund et al., *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵⁶For a detailed discussion of the poverty in the Middle Ages, see Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

elements of such an option, both in their practices and foundational beliefs. For instance, the medieval identification of authentic apostolic witness with a life of genuine material poverty—not merely some spiritualized rendition of such—is closely paralleled by contemporary theological reflections on the “church of the poor.” For these early movements material poverty was a powerful sign of both the sinful nature of human society and of Christ’s presence as the church in the midst of that sin. A life of poverty was embraced, not only because Jesus demanded it in the gospels, but also because the members of these movements reported an unparalleled closeness to the Savior precisely as a result of their espousal of a life of poverty. For these reasons, poverty took on sacramental dimensions as the members of the communities became *alteri Christi* for one another, to the extent that they adopted the life of poverty, a term originally coined to describe all the baptized.

These strong and startling convictions about Godhead made manifest through lives of total poverty had ecclesial ramifications as well. Even those movements that maintained their status within Catholicity often functioned as rival institutions to the local Catholic establishment whether parochial, diocesan, or university. A church of the poor which it was in fact fundamentally contradicted the practices of a church formed by and for the privileged classes of medieval European society. These contradictions are especially evident in the egalitarian practices of these movements. All of the movements had radical egalitarian structures and practices in contrast to the prevailing ecclesiastical milieu. All of them tended to be far more inclusive of women as equals with men, and in some cases women served in key leadership roles. They also successfully integrated lay people into the movements, occasionally as equal partners to the clerical members. The “church of the poor” modeled in these communities tended toward more inclusive and participatory modes of organization, much like the tendencies witnessed modern times when communities have attempted to embody the “preferential option for the poor.”

Within these movements there were fewer obstacles to full participation by the poor than were found within the Church at large. Also, the members of these movements of radical poverty lived an actual, existential form of poverty rather than a contrived form of “poverty” based on ascetic practices. Traditional conceptions of poverty in monasteries of men and women were motivated largely by the desire to share possessions and property in common, not individually. The wealth amassed by major and minor nobility and occasional bishops and abbots was sometimes administered well but more often badly. The new religious movements embraced poverty as part of an overall rejection by its members of the entire economic system, both the feudal

system that was passing away and the commercial system that was beginning to emerge in its place.⁵⁷ Also, as these movements matured chronologically through the twelfth and into the thirteenth century, their sensitivity to horizontal forms of solidarity with the poor increased. For instance, identification with the poor themselves did not become an operative theme among those who embraced radical poverty until Francis and the early Franciscan movement.⁵⁸

Borrowing terms and conceptualizations from liberation theology, it could be argued that orthopraxy preceded orthodoxy in all the movements of radical poverty that arose in twelfth and thirteenth-century Europe. In other words, the participants in these movements believed that they had to first live the Gospel they were preaching in order to be heard correctly and to affect conversion in the heart of the hearer. A good object lesson from the historical record was learned during the early stages of the Catholic missions against the heretics. The missionary norm of this period was to have the clergy arrive in the villages on horses the poor did not possess and engage the heretics who were often living poor, ascetic lives in debate. Many clergy left these debates convinced beyond a doubt that they had vanquished their foes and that support for the heresy soon would vanish in that area. What the Catholics discovered in these debates was that actions speak louder than words or learned argumentation. The church in many areas won the intellectual debates but lost the war for the hearts and minds of an unlettered populace, who recognized Christianity in the tangible witness of the *vita apostolica* lived by the mendicant friars but often could not discern the heresy of sectarians on the nature of the Church. The exemplary lives of preachers like the early *Humiliati* were taken to be proof of the inauthenticity of a church whose higher clerics lived no such lives.

The unique medieval turn to poverty among the most important religious movements had significant consequences for church and society. These movements reinvigorated religious enthusiasm on both a practical and theoretical level at a time when cynicism and anticlericalism among the rank and file were jeopardizing the credibility of the church. These movements embodied the Gospel for the people of their time and place by demonstrating integrity, purity, concrete love, peace and moral strength. All of them influenced, in one way or another, the balance of authority within society and the Church.

These movements had a profound impact on medieval social and ecclesial order. The church's experience of these movements espousing

⁵⁷M.D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 256.

⁵⁸Mollat, 125.

poverty, lay inclusion, simplicity, holiness, and gospel preaching ultimately had the effect of broadening the intra-ecclesial political spectrum. No longer was the church merely made up of the haves and have-nots—the aristocracy with whom some clergy identified and lay peasants. These “contemplatives in the world” made more widely accessible many of the social and ecclesial resources that were once reserved for the few: the scriptures with the slow increase of literacy, the preaching heard by all, the liturgy when well celebrated, and popular education. By the middle of the thirteenth century there began to come into being a new class of Christian that was neither perfectly elite nor perfectly powerless but something other and in between. There was a rebirth, or rediscovery, of what could be fairly described as the “church of the poor.” The medieval religious movements espousing radical poverty represent a significant step forward toward a “preferential option for the poor.”

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