

Foundations of Franciscan Fraternity and *Fratelli Tutti*

By Dominic V. Monti, OFM

At the beginning of his new encyclical on fraternity and social friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis tells us that he was inspired by the figure of Francis of Assisi. But other than the famous incident he shares where Francis met the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil during the Fifth Crusade in 1219, exactly what role did the type of fraternity the Pope speaks of play in the life and thought of his thirteenth century namesake?

Perhaps surprisingly, it is only relatively recently that the theme of fraternity has emerged to prominence in the story of Francis. For centuries Franciscans themselves viewed their life as one in which they committed themselves to follow the Gospel radically by ob-

servating the Rule with its three religious vows. According to the hagiographic tradition, Francis was inspired to write the Rule; his brothers and Clare and her sisters were simply his “followers.” Francis’ visit to the Sultan, which Pope Francis views as key, if mentioned at all, was viewed as a heroic but unsuccessful story of Francis trying to convert the Sultan to his faith. A popular treatise on Franciscan spirituality from the 1950s, *Union with Christ*, by Leo Veuthey, OFM Conv.,¹ has chapters on prayer, Mass, poverty, humility, chastity, obedience, mortification, and acceptance of suffering, all approached from the perspective of the individual religious on the road to perfection. A communal or interpersonal dimension is not mentioned (except a brief mention of the Mystical Body in the chapter on the Mass).

¹ Leo Veuthey, *Union with Christ* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1954).

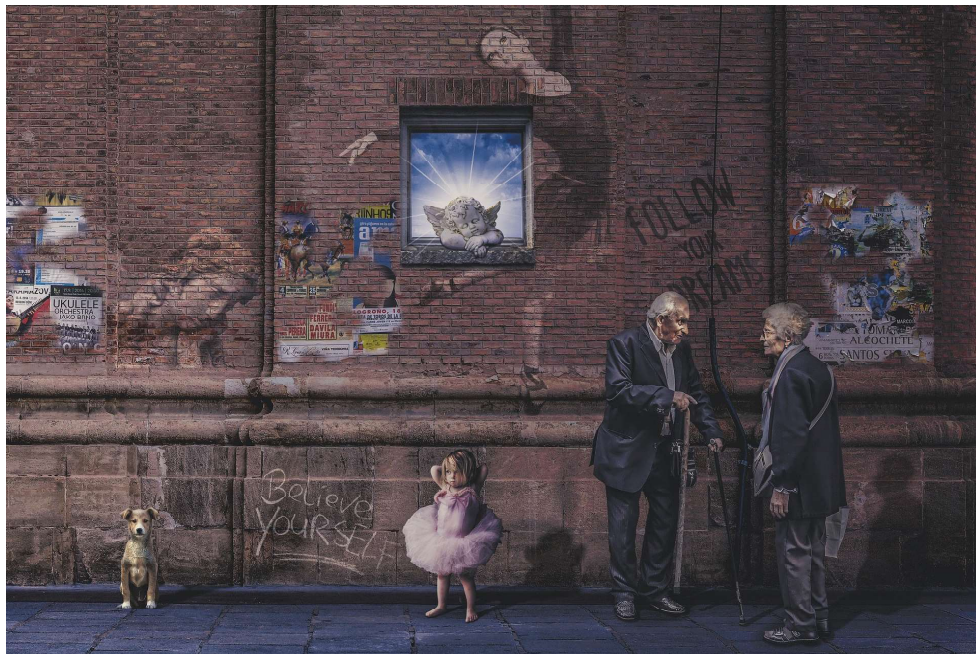
This only began to change as scholars began to isolate Francis’ genuine writings from other stories that had been attributed to him over the centuries; this effort was spurred by the command of the Second Vatican Council that religious communities should renew themselves by returning “to the original spirit of the institutes.” Convinced that “each institute has its own particular characteristics” (charism), the Council asked that “their founders’ spirit and special aims be set before them.” In the Franciscan movement, this sparked scholars to provide new critical editions of the writings of Francis and Clare of Assisi and well as their early biographies.

As a result, we have come to recognize the essentially relational nature of Francis’

(and soon Clare’s) way of life. This is now reflected in my own Order’s official self-understanding: “The Order of Friars Minor, founded by St. Francis of Assisi, is a fraternity.”² Everything else one might say about our committed way of life, the work we do, must begin with this fact.

As Francis said in his *Testament*: “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.” This Gospel life was above all a life in relationship with brothers. After he had brothers, Francis was never again alone. The brothers always went out at least two by two; even when Francis went apart to pray in a hermitage, other brothers accompanied him. Francis defined himself as a brother, always identifying himself as “brother Francis” in his own writings. And he was

² *General Constitutions and Statutes* (2017), n. 1.





the first founder to call his new community a “fraternity” in preference to the more common canonical terms “religion” or “order.”

The relationship between the Gospel life and the fraternity is even more profound, however. Going back to Francis’ reminiscence in the *Testament*, it was only when “the Lord gave Francis some brothers” that “the Lord revealed the pattern of their life according to the Gospel.” This was evident even at the beginning: the first four brothers opened a missal at random to let the Spirit reveal the key Gospel texts on which they would base their life. We should no longer see the figure of Francis as the sole charismatic source of the movement. Over many years now, the studies of David Flood on the Early Rule have shown that the brothers discerned together how the Spirit of the Lord was working in their lives. “Franciscan history is not the story of one man, whose Christian story others share. In truth, it follows the origin and development of a brotherhood. . . They listened to one another and each to the Spirit. . . Their vita (Rule) grew out of their common effort to make Christian sense out of their lives. . . [Yes], Francis of Assisi plays a central role in the story. In a few years he becomes the spokesman and foremost voice of the brotherhood. [Speaking] in the first person singular, however, he is wholly in the service of his brothers.”³

We can see the way this process operated if we look at Francis’ “Letter to a Minister,” which concerns the way the brothers should treat one of them who has slipped in his following of the Gospel. After counseling the minister in question to take the path of mercy, Francis concludes by saying, “During the Chapter of Pentecost, with the help of God and the advice of the brothers, we shall make one chapter such as this from all the chapters of the Rule that treat of mortal sin. . . .” Then he suggests a piece of legislation. It is interesting that Francis does not simply “lay down a law.” If it is to be part of the brother’s way of life, it involved a matter of common discernment. And the resulting chapter in the Later Rule (chapter 7) shows that other hands had a part in the final version.

One helpful distinction Flood introduces is that between catalytic and charismatic leadership: “In the former, the leader draws into light values and aspirations of his followers. In the latter, the leader makes new meanings which establish the bond with his followers. . . . A catalyst allows others to act, he stimulates them to trust in themselves...”⁴ Francis released the energy of his brothers so together they could forge a new way of life. “He got a do-it-yourself organization on its feet. A brotherhood in sum. By theory and practice there was room for the contribution of everyone,

according to one’s gifts and the movement’s needs.”

Women also had an integral part in this story. Clare did not leave her home to found a new religious community for women in 1212, a “Second Order”; her intention was to join the fraternity of Francis and his brothers in their Gospel way of life. Although medieval convention demanded they live in their own accommodations as distinct from the brothers, they saw themselves called to a common vocation (and in fact a community of brothers lived adjacent to the sisters’ dwelling at San Damiano). When Clare finally wrote her own Rule for her sisters, it contained some key phrases and ideas from the Rule of the brothers but is also enriched by the insights Clare gained after forty years of communal living at San Damiano. She shared Francis’ own approach to leadership: everything was to be done with consultation and consensus (RegCl 4.11, 16).⁵

One point that should be emphasized in a truly Franciscan fraternity is that it values the uniqueness of each sister or brother. For Francis, not only is each person a precious creation of God, but when they are open to “the Spirit of God and his holy operation,” they can bring God’s manner of working into the world in their own unique way. This is evident in Francis’s famous description of the “perfect friar” (*Mirror of Perfection* 85). Francis did not give an abstract definition of perfection according to the Rule; he did not hold himself up as the exemplar of life according to the Gospel. Instead, he pointed out those unique qualities the brothers around him embodied: “the faith and love of poverty which Brother Bernard most perfectly had; the simplicity and purity of Brother Leo. . . ; the courtly bearing of Brother Angelo. . . the friendly manner and common sense of Brother Masseo. . . the mind raised in contemplation which Brother Giles had even to the highest perfection; the virtuous and constant prayer of Brother Rufino. . . the patience of Brother Juniper. . .” and so on down the line. He saw in the fraternity the gift of irreplaceable persons who enfold the working of God in their own distinctive way.

Some years later, the Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus would argue for a principle of individuation which is intrinsic, unique, and proper to each thing in creation, which he called *haecceitas* (“this-ness”), making a being not simply one instance of a generic type, but *this* concrete, individual being.⁶ This inner dimension of created things is not accessible to the rational intellect but through intuition, which grows as our relationship with that thing deepens.

Over the course of several weeks in 1219, the poor little brother from Italy and the powerful Sultan came to grasp something of each other’s “this-ness” — they came to recog-

³ David Flood, OFM, *Francis of Assisi’s Rule and Life* (Phoenix: Tau Publishing, 2015), 1-2.

⁴ David Flood, OFM, *Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Movement* (Manila: Franciscan Institute of Asia, 1989, 132-33.

⁵ On Clare, see Margaret Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993). Clare often uses the expression: “I, together with my sisters...”

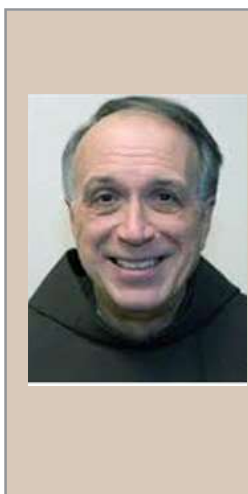
⁶ Mary Beth Ingham, *The Harmony of Goodness*, 2nd ed. (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2012), 33-39.



nize that beneath all the cultural particularities that separated them, they shared a common love of God and search for goodness. Francis saw that the attitudes he brought to creating a brotherhood in Europe among diverse people who had committed themselves to follow the person of Jesus Christ could also bear results among all people of good will. This is Pope Francis' intention in this new encyclical: "It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Fraternity between all men and women" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 8).

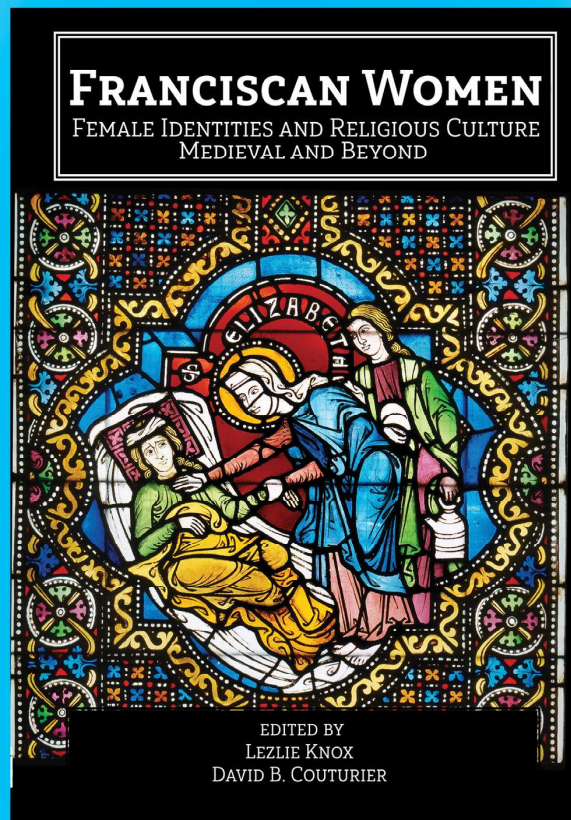
Reading this encyclical, I was continually reminded of so many emphases of our Franciscan tradition that Pope Francis probably was not even aware of: above all, his continual emphasis that any talk of constructing peace among the peoples of the earth must respect the diverse voices of all local cultures and traditions. To illustrate this tension between the universal and the particular, Francis invokes the geometric model of a polyhedron, which he first suggested at the beginning of his pontificate in *Evangelii Gaudium*, in 2013: "Our model is not the sphere, but the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness" (EG, 236).⁷

With Francis and the Sultan as a model, the Pope wishes to stimulate "the art of encounter between peoples, working to create a multi-faceted polyhedron, representing a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations" (FT, 215). The approaches learned from the story of the early Franciscan fraternity can help advance us on the path to Pope Francis' goal: "a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all" (FT, 94).



Dominic Monti, O.F.M., is a distinguished professor of Franciscan research in the Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University. He made his profession in the Order of Friars Minor in 1965. Dominic received his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago Divinity School; for more than 30 years he taught Franciscan history during the summer program of the Franciscan Institute. He has written a popular history of the Franciscan friars, "Francis and His Brothers" (Franciscan Media, 2009).

**NOW
AVAILABLE**



 **FRANCISCAN
INSTITUTE
PUBLICATIONS**
www.franciscanpublications.com

Archives of GREY FRIARS REVIEW
Now Available
www.franciscanpublications.com