

“Repair my house”

Francis, Franciscans and the Church

a lecture

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## 1) Prologue

As you can imagine, the forthcoming Lambeth Conference of bishops and others invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which is meeting next month at the University of Kent in Canterbury, is somewhat pre-occupying our brothers who live in Canterbury, as well as those no doubt who will be part of the Chaplaincy team with Brother Samuel. Just behind the university there stands a church in the middle of a field, the church of Saints Cosmas and Damian in the Blean. Incidentally, Brother Austin as well as now being the Master of Eastbridge Hospital, is now by ancient rights Lord of the manor of Blean and Patron of the parish of Ss Cosmas and Damian.

The little church stands by the ancient track of the Salt Way connecting Whitstable to Canterbury on a site which has been inhabited since Iron Age and Roman times. I suspect it was founded as a 'chapel of ease' by the Augustinian Mission of the seventh century, after the founding of the Cathedral of the Holy Saviour and the monastery of Ss Peter and Paul i.e. reproducing the dedications of the city of Rome from which the mission had set out. The basilica of Ss Cosmas and Damian stands by the Roman forum (and is the headquarters of the Franciscan Third Order Regular) and devotion to the two brothers who were doctors and martyrs of the fourth century was strong at that time.

This fact may give us a clue to the origin of another chapel on a hill, usually known to us as San Damiano, outside another Roman city known to us as Assisi in Central Italy. Before the earthquake in 1997, there were extensive archaeological excavations showing that the little church had been rebuilt a number of times but for our present purposes the repair which we are interested in is the one that took place circa 1205 involving a young man of the city in his early twenties. He had abandoned his ambition to be a knight but still failed to find what God wanted him to do with his life. What happened next is described in the Legend of the Three Companions 5.13 (FA:ED II, 76)

'A few days had passed when, while he was walking by the church of San Damiano, he was told in the spirit to go inside for a prayer. Once he entered, he began to pray intensely before an image of the Crucified, which spoke to him in a tender and kind voice: "Francis, don't you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me." Stunned and trembling, he said: "I will do so gladly, Lord." For he understood that it was speaking about that church, which was near collapse because of its age. He was filled with such joy and became radiant with light over that message, that he knew in his soul that it was truly Christ crucified who spoke to him' "Francisce, none vides quoud domus mea destruitur? Vade igitur et repara illam mihi:"

To slightly paraphrase the words that Francis heard the Crucified Christ speaking to him from the Cross, "Francis, don't you see that my house is falling into ruin? Go, then, and repair it for me."

Apart from drawing your attention to the fact that Christ addresses him by his familial rather than his baptismal name, I want to note that the Latin original uses the two words '*repara*' and '*domus*' i.e. 'repair' and 'house' not as they are often translated 'rebuild' and 'church'.

#### a) Repair

'*Repara*' is part of a word field with a host of meanings:

recreate  
convert  
restore  
return  
reform  
regenerate  
renew  
revive  
relight  
rekindle etc etc !

How much weight you put on any particular meaning depends on the context. In the light of what happened to Francesco Bernadone we can see all of these happening to him personally, the brothers and sisters who would join him, the Church of God throughout Europe and beyond. The task of repair is seen initially as personal and vocational but rapidly developed into one of persons in relationship, sometimes in co-operation, sometimes in conflict: with his father, with the priest of the church, with the townspeople. Fortunately Francis didn't have to deal with the Heritage people! As Joseph Chinicci OFM remarks, "When we are dealing with 'repair' in the context of a holy patrimony, we must be very cautious, taking off our sandals lest we leave unseemly footprints."

#### b) House

The usual translation of '*domus*' as 'church', whilst understandable – after all Francis was being called to repair a crumbling ecclesiastical building – or was he? It is a truism to say, as did various early writers that what he was really being called to was the repair and renewal of the life of the church e.g. by later heartily endorsing the programme of reform that would be initiated by Pope Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. This maybe true but it looks like this is another case of the Church institutionalising the Franciscan intuition.

If we stick with our word 'house' rather than 'church' I think we are led into a much wider field of possibilities. I'm not saying these were in Francis' mind and heart in 1205, he was more bothered with "where am I going to get the stones from?" but that as 'things turned out' we can see at San Damiano the foundations being laid for a whole variety of constructions.

For example, it is now generally accepted that the painted cross of San Damiano is a visible manifestation of the story of the Passion in the Gospel of John e.g. the glory is seen in the crucifixion, not just the suffering, the linking of crucifixion/resurrection/ascension/gift of the spirit, the figures around the cross, particularly Mary & John and the pouring out of blood and water. In an era when the figures of authority of Peter and the Apostles were in danger of eclipsing the figure of Jesus in the Church, the beloved disciple (then identified with John the apostle) seems to represent every disciple of all ages who, united with the Mother of Jesus, makes a new house for God to dwell in on earth as in heaven. Interestingly, Francis in his Earlier Rule places John the Evangelist before Peter and Paul and also says: 'Let us make a home and dwelling place there for Him who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (ERXXII.27 FA:EDI.80) In John's Gospel the Word makes his home/house/household in this world. Even if the world destroys the physical temple or house of his body, Jesus says it will be rebuilt via his resurrected body the church, and indeed all creation (Jn.3.19-22)

In the ancient world, the term 'family' in our sense didn't exist, it was replaced by the term 'household' (*beth* in Hebrew, *oikia/oikos* in Greek) and, of course, it normally lived in a house either as a single or group of buildings around a courtyard (c.f. '*insula*' dwellings known as the 'House of Peter' at Capernaum). Here lived the extended related family, the servants and the slaves.

Michael Crosby in his recent book 'Finding Francis, Following Christ' applies this idea of 'repairing the house' (*oikia/oikos*) to every level of the world: persons, relationships and resources.

- 1) the individual and personal *oikia/oikos* of the self.
- 2) the world of interpersonal and business relationships – '*oikonomia*' from which we get our word economics. i.e. the ordering (nomos) of human relationships and their resources.
- 3) The whole inhabited world of persons, relationships and resources, '*oikumene*' – unfortunately 'church speak' has reduced this to being only about inter-church relationships and co-operation, or the lack of them!
- 4) The fourth level is the whole created universe, what Crosby calls the *oikologia* – the total household of all things brought into being by the Word, the logos of God who is *oikia tou Theou*, the household of God: The 'I am', 'Thou art', and 'We are' of the Godhead whereby all the resources of the one are fully available for the others.

For Francis (see Earlier Rule 23,1 FA:ED I 81-82) if all things spiritual and corporal have been made to image this God, then they do it more fully when they become equal to each other in their relationships, hence his emphasis on fraternity and resistance to hierarchy among the brothers. This ensures the fullness of freedom for all and equity in the way the resources of this commonwealth are shared. This fraternity, originating in the household of the Triune God, is to be mirrored in the brothers and sisters of a common household, a situation which extends, as Francis'

life experience and understanding grows, to all Christians and everyone on earth (cf ER XXIII). Ultimately, as the Canticle of the Creatures lyrically puts it, all creatures are members of a common household – all are gifts of God. When Francis commanded his brothers on coming to a house to say “Peace to this house” (ERXIV.2 FA:EDI.73) this was no ‘pious ejaculation’ but an assertion of the infinite value of those brothers and sisters who formed that particular household.

## 2) ‘Church’ in the writings of Francis

Theophile Desbonnet’s book entitled ‘From Intuition to Institution’ sums up the historical process whereby the inspiration of Francis of Assisi eventually took a Christian and ecclesial institutional form with an increasingly conventual and clericalised form of religious life. I think this is both true and not true (typically Anglican view!). Yes it is true, in that the first decades of what, in my view, is better described as a Franciscan movement in which there were different groups, but not three sharply differentiated ‘Orders’. The Earlier Rule of 1221 brought together by Francis the diverse experiences of that movement. Certainly, that Rule didn’t satisfy those who were looking for something more defined, more canonical, more clear about what kind of Order this rapidly growing movement was and could be.

So what did Francis actually believe about the Church? Whilst the lives of Francis produced after his death, with varying degrees of official authority, give us plenty of material, much of it is, of course, not impartial, even the forms of Thomas of Celano’s writings about Francis are written to the formulae which were thought to be ‘proper hagiography’ whose model goes back to the biography of Martin of Tours centuries before.

The obvious place to look is in those writings of Francis which have come down to us and are recognised as authentic; a few were written by Francis personally, the majority probably by dictation, some had some light ‘editing’ to get into the form we now have them.

The Writings of Francis fall into three categories:

- 1) A complete vision of Christian life :
  - Letters to the Faithful
  - Rules for the Brothers.
  - Two Testaments
  - Admonitions
- 2) 14 Prayers – which reveal the image of God and Christ which Francis formed and the relationship he had with them.
- 3) Writings for specific occasions/persons: the Testament and all the Letters except those which are addressed ‘to all the Faithful’.

## Vocabulary

If we look at the words used by Francis about the Church which he assumed he and his fraternity were a part of, there are two kinds of words which are titles for the

Church, the ‘what’ if you like. The second category are the names of different types of people – the ‘who’ of the Church.

a) Titles for the Church - the ‘what’ (numbers refer to number of occasions mentioned)

There are three main words: Church, Catholic, Christian.

Church – 22 :      13 the society bearing this name  
                              8 the material building  
                              1 used symbolically (SalBVM.5)

The noun Church is nearly always used with an adjective :

10 holy  
2 Mother  
5 Roman  
1 Catholic  
1 Apostolic

I’m not sure how significant it is but if we compare Francis’ use of the word Church with other words he commonly uses in his writings :

Lord	410
Brother	306
Christ	83
Body	85
Soul	77

So Church at 22 comes between ‘poor one’ -27 and ‘little poor one’ – 16  
The term catholic appears 13 times, almost always in relation to faith or life rather than an organisation. It is basically about faithfulness e.g. in the phrase ‘in a catholic manner’ though this is asserted in opposition to those to those who believe and behave differently, not surprising in a historical period both before and during Francis’ lifetime, when there were numerous movements counted as heretical and both beyond (e.g. Cathars) and within the Church (e.g. Waldensians, Humiliati etc)  
Christian is used 4 times – mainly in relation to Muslims (ER XVI.7)

b) Different types of people which make up the Church – the ‘who’

These terms are much more frequently used than in the preceding section

priests	32
clerics	28
religious	14
laity	12
pope	9
bishop	8
prelate	7
apostolic see	2
canons	2

cardinals 1  
 theologians 1  
 roman curia 1

‘priest’ and ‘cleric’ are used more than Church.

For someone who declared himself as *‘simplex et idiota’*, that is someone with no intellectual training, it is surprising the variety of terms he uses. Yes it is clerical but it is more presbyteral than papal.

One text of Francis which gives us a better balance is the famous ChXXIII of the Earlier Rule. This chapter is like an elaborate Eucharistic Prayer (and has been adapted for this purpose – I have copy of one from the Clares at Arundel). After a thanksgiving to God and invoking the Son and the Spirit and the Saints there comes this wonderful procession beginning with the clerics and ending with the whole of humanity!

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
|                   | 1) orders of priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, lectors, porters and all clerics.  |
| Ecclesial         | 2) all religious men and women<br>3) all lay brothers and youths [oblates of monasteries?]   |
| social            | 4) the poor and needy [n.b. precede the kings etc.]<br>5) kings and princes<br>6) workers and farmers<br>7) servants and masters [n.b. servants precede masters] |
| gender            | 8) all virgins as well as chaste and married women [n.b. women precede men]<br>9) all laity, both men and women  |
| age               | 10) all children, adolescents [n.b. children precede older]<br>11) the young and the old   |
| health            | 12) the healthy and the sick   |
| recapitulation    | 13) all small and great [n.b. small precedes great]  |
| universal         | 14) all people, races [n.b. people precede groups of human beings]   |
| ethnic/linguistic | 15) tribes and tongues   |
| national          | 16) all nations and all people everywhere on earth   |
| in time and space | who are or will be.  |

For Francis the Church is an immense crowd where the poor, the little, the children are privileged, along with the hierarchy and those of social distinction.

Francis' Church is open to all people who are or whoever will be. Nothing is said about their responsibilities other than that they "wish to serve the Lord God within the Church". This is a universalist vision of the meaning of 'Church' which parallels that evergrowing vision of Francis of the meaning of the 'house' which he and his brothers were being called to 'repair'.

### c) The Structures of the Church

Not surprisingly the Lord Pope (Innocent or Honorius) is the one to whom he promises "obedience and reverence" (ER Prol.3, LR I.2, Test 15) and he desires to have a cardinal of the Holy Roman Church as "governor, protector and corrector of this fraternity" (LR XII.3). Francis envision the General Minister as the one giving obedience directly to the Pope and the Cardinal Protector on behalf of all the brothers rather than being like the clergy primarily under the obedience to the local bishop - a conception which was to lead to a great deal of future conflict. Bishops are hardly mentioned, although Anthony of Padua is given the title 'bishop' as an honorific! (EpAnt 1).

It is the priests (32) and Clerics (28) who are most frequently mentioned both positively and negatively.

The latter features strongly:

"even though they may be sinful" (Adm XXVI.1)

"if they are sinners" (2EpFid.33)

"I do not wish to consider sin in them" (Test.9)

"pitiful priests of this world (Test.7) and persecutors of the brothers" (Test.6)

However, Francis, urges both the brothers and the faithful to show them respect using words like 'venerate' (ERXIX.3, 2EpFid II.33), 'reverence' (2EpFid 33), 'honour' (Test.8), 'love' (Test.8), 'fear' (Test.8).

One must hold them "as our Lord" (ER XIX.3, Test 8.9), "and never enter into conflict with them" (Test 6.25). Nevertheless Francis addressed a letter to the clergy (EpCler) which exhorted them in no uncertain terms to correct themselves before the judgement of God (EpCler 9.10,14).

Other categories include religious (ER XIX.3) and theologians those administer "the very holy divine words" (Test13)

### d) The functions of the Church

#### i) A place of faith and evangelical conversion

Again Chp XXIII of the Earlier Rule spells out the role of the Church, to be a place where it is possible to live "in true faith and penitence" (ER XXIII.7) Faith is the gift of what the "holy and just Father" has achieved for humankind which is appropriated through radical change "who have known you and have adored you and have served you in penance" – these are the qualities of those he describes as "the happy ones" (ER XXIII.4-7)

The church exists to make this possible – this relationship of praise and adoration by the immense crowd of humanity offered to God who has entered history through Jesus and by the Spirit.

ii) The presence of the Son of God

“no one can be saved except through the holy words and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2EpFid II.34). It is in the written words and the eucharist that we are able to see the Son of God corporally:

(Test.10) “I see nothing corporally of the Most High Son of God in this world except His Most Holy Body and Blood”

and parallel (EpCler3) “and the words through which we have been made and have been redeemed from death to life”

It is because of this that Francis has such reverence for priests and theologians whatever their failings, faults and sins. In this emphasis, Francis is carrying out the aims and practices of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 with its programme of reform initiated by Innocent III both as regards the clergy and the administration of the sacraments. The other background factor is that most of the radical movements which ended up as being reckoned as heretical, rejected or severely limited the sacramental life of the church and were strongly anti-clerical, not surprisingly faced with the low standards and corruption of bishops and priests.

Francis in contrast looks behind the human failings and asserts “I discern the Son of God in them” (Test 9).

iii) The church as the source of true faith and conduct

Francis chooses to be Catholic and that his brothers and the fraternity to be “steadfast in the catholic faith” (LR XII.4) they should be catholic, “living and speaking in a catholic manner”. Indeed they will be examined by the Ministers on entering (LR II.2).

Francis uses the term ‘mandate of the Church’ (1 EpCust.4) to make clear the fidelity of his fraternity (in contrast to other contemporary movements) not least in relation to the liturgy of the Roman Church both in relation to the Eucharist (EpOrd 30) and the Office (LR III.1) which he forbids the brothers to alter (Test 31).

iv) Francis and his fraternity and the Church

Of the 15 surviving prayers addressed by Francis to God, only one is in the singular (interestingly the prayer before the crucifix of San Damiano – composed before he had brothers?). Twelve are in the ‘we’ form, not an individual’s conversation with God but part of the prayer of the Spirit in the Church.

Despite Francis' emphasis on loyalty to the institutional Church, he is quite clear in his Testament that his conversion was due to God alone "the Most High Himself revealed it to me" (Test 14) for "no-one showed me what I should do". Directly inspired by God he composed a Rule, the Form of Life, of the little fraternity and then he took the initiative to get the Church's blessing in the form of Papal approval.

Always there is a balance between observing the gospel as the ultimate criteria of fidelity and the need to be part of and obedient to the institutional church. Francis bound himself and his successors to obedience to the Pope and the brothers were obedient to Francis (ER prol 3, LR I 2,3) "that steadfast in the Catholic Church, we may observe the poverty and humility and the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (LR XII 4).

v) The mystery of the Church

I imagine Francis' 'Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary' is reasonably familiar but the translation that we have used (and is in the Daily Office SSF) is not completely accurate. It is now generally accepted that it should read "Virgin made Church" (SalBVM. FA:EDI.163) and as far as I know, this phrase is unique to Francis.

Hail, O Lady,  
Holy Queen,  
Mary, holy Mother of God,  
Who are the Virgin made Church,  
chosen by the most Holy Father in heaven  
whom he consecrated with His most holy beloved Son  
and with the Holy Spirit the Paraclete,  
in whom there was and is  
all fullness of grace and every good.

Hail His Palace!  
Hail His Tabernacle!  
Hail His Dwelling!  
Hail His Robe!  
Hail His Servant!  
Hail His Mother!

And hail all You holy virtues  
which are poured into the hearts of the faithful  
through the grace and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit,  
that from being unbelievers,  
You may make them faithful to God.

The praises are addressed to Mary and she is given five titles: Lady, Queen (titles of honour), Mother of God (theological), Virgin (based on the Gospel mystery) and Church (Mary as an icon of what the Church is called to be).

Here Church is used both of the Christian Community and of the church building.

Mary, Virgin made Church is first chosen by the Father, then consecrated through the Son and the Spirit, thereby becoming a dwelling place containing “all fullness of grace and all good”

Francis used the consecration imagery of a church building for the Christian community and puts it in the context of the Annunciation.

The following verses are six salutations, all beginning with *Ave* and all the symbols combine the idea of ‘containing’ and ‘home’: palace, tabernacle, home, robe and we then return to the Annunciation with ‘handmaid’ and Mother’.

All of this is rooted in a primarily Trinitarian understanding: the primacy of the Father, who chooses and consecrates Mary through the Son and with the Holy Spirit. Mary is the pattern of the disciple / Church. The Church too is to be servant, humble, dependent on God and mother and carrier of the Word and the means of embodying the Body and Blood of Christ. As Francis said in 2EpFid 51-53 “Christian believers are spouses, brothers and mothers of Christ”.

So, for Francis the mystery of the Church is rooted in the life of the Trinity, exemplified in Mary, and filled with the presence of the Most High and contains “all riches.....to sufficiency” (Laud Dei 4).

### 3) Epilogue

Let us return to one of the places where all this began, to the little ruined church of San Damiano on the hillside below Assisi. Let us kneel with the young Francesco and again look up at the cross hanging above the altar – and remember that here cross and altar, sacrifice and sacrament are intimately related.

#### a) The cross is surrounded by sea shells representing baptism.

Like Francis and Clare, each Christian has entered the Christian community by baptism and so has been stigmatised within by the marks of Christ’s death and resurrection. Like the shells, the many individuals are incorporated into the one Body, losing neither their individuality or their fragility.

#### b) The cross of the Church has the risen Christ in its midst surrounded by people in relationship.

In the Franciscan world, the cross of the Church is not dominated by hierarchical structures but by people in fraternal relationship. Here are both men and women, devout Jews and pagan Gentiles, apostles and disciples. They are all on the same horizontal level and in the midst is the incarnate and crucified and risen Christ. Vertically, he is above them and yet he is one of them. He is in the foreground, they are in the background; he is above, they below. Each one's posture and position is determined by their relationship to him: he is in front of them, above them, standing in their midst.

The Johannine Christ of San Damiano standing in the midst recalls two verses from the Fourth Gospel at its beginning and end:

Jn 1.26 "There is one standing among you, whom you do not recognise"

Jn 20.19 " Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them,  
"Peace be with you"

S. Bonaventure, commenting on a verse from Ecclesiasticus in the Vulgate, 'In the middle of the Church the Lord shall open his mouth, and shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding and shall clothe him with a robe of glory'; says that this place of the king being 'in the midst' has the following characteristics:

- i) It is a place of humility, following the humble Christ,  
'I am among you as one who serves.' (Lk 22.27)  
'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I  
in the midst of them.' (Mt 18.2)  
' He called a child over and placed it in their midst.' (Mt 18.2)
- ii) It is a place of community, where the Lord loves all equally:  
'In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.' (Acts 10.34)
- iii) It is a place of unity, where extremes are united in the middle:  
'he is our peace, he who made them both one and broke down the  
dividing wall of enmity, through his own flesh.' (Eph 2.14)
- iv) It is a place of stability fixed in the middle of the earth:  
'No one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there,  
namely Jesus Christ.' (1Cor 3.11)
- v) It is a place of accessibility, open to all who seek:  
'So that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and  
find him, though indeed he is not far from any of us. For 'in  
him we live and move and have our being''. (Acts 17.27)

Where and when Jesus stands 'in the midst' then the Church is characterised by humility, community, unity, stability and accessibility. Needless to say neither the Church in Francis' or Bonaventure's time was full of these characteristics. Nor, of course, the Church of our own time but it shouldn't stop us trying to encourage both

ourselves, the Anglican Communion or the wider Church to exhibit more clearly these characteristics.

On the evangelical way of life, there is no model of the repairing of the life of the Church which is divided and dividing other than being a community of those who love God, self and neighbour and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Then we and the Church might be living the paradoxes of the Gospel that the last will be first, that those who lose their lives will gain them, that the poor are blessed and that the gentle will inherit the Kingdom, or as Brother David Stephen used to say “they (and we?) talk a lot about Jesus but do they do what he said ?”

If we allow the vision of Francis and his followers, drawn from that Cross above the altar in the midst of ruin, to draw together all who seek courage and energy to repair the house of God in its multitude of forms; which stretch from our innermost being to the limits of creation and beyond into the nature and being of the God of love himself, then we will indeed have heard the Franciscan message “Go, repair my house.”

#### A. Acknowledgements

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#### B. Abbreviations for Francis’ Writings

Adm.	Admonition
Ep Ant.	Letter to Antony of Padua
Ep Cler.	Letter to Clergy
Ep Cust.	Letter to Custodians
Ep Fid.	Letter to The Faithful
Ep Ord:	Letter to the entire Order
ER	Earlier Rule / Regulata non Bullata
LR	Later Rule / Regula Bullata
Laud Dei	Praises of God
Sal BVM	Salutation of The Blessed Virgin Mary
Test.	Testament

