

INSTRUMENTS OF PEACE

A Franciscan Resource Book for Justice,
Peace and Integrity of Creation

- Part 2: Specific Themes of Special Interest
 - 1. Option for the Poor



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PART TWO

THEMES OF SPECIFIC INTEREST

As we said in the introduction to this section, this second part is composed of seven specific themes of great social and ecclesiastical importance at the present time. They could have been more but, not being able to make the book longer, we have selected these as the most apt and of greatest interest for living out our charism.

Each theme has a brief theoretical development that does not claim to be exhaustive but rather makes a presentation of the theme to stimulate reflection and action. This theoretical development of each theme is completed with the experiences and testimonies of friars from all over the world.

The theoretical part of each theme, having been written by a different author, can throw up some repetitions. However, we wanted to leave it this way because this section is not to be read at one sitting but rather each chapter should be consulted and worked on separately.

At the end of each theme or chapter a long questionnaire can be found. The reason, in effect, is to be found in its instrumental character. If these chapters are to be used for meetings on formation, both initial and on-going, or even in meetings of reflection with the laity, the long list of questions will better facilitate the group that is going to reflect.

Themes:

1. Option for the Poor
2. Peacemaking
3. Integrity of Creation / Environmental Justice
4. Life
5. Human Rights: Individual and Collective
6. Women and the Charisms of Francis and Clare
7. Dialogue: Ecumenical, Interreligious and Intercultural

1. Option for the Poor



OFM General Constitutions, Article 97

- 1. The brothers should follow the example of St. Francis who was led by the Lord to go among lepers. Each and every brother should show a preference for the marginalized, for the poor and the oppressed, for troubled and sick people and be happy to live among them and show compassion.*
- 2. The brothers should look at what is happening in the world from the perspective of the poor, in fellowship with all those considered unimportant. They should take pains that the poor themselves become more conscious of their own human dignity that they may protect it and enhance it.*

From the life of Francis ...

His embrace of the leper, the marginalized person within medieval society, was the identified moment of conversion for Francis (Test.). After this experience Francis left the world to live among the lepers, and what before had been bitter now was sweetness and light (Test.). His identification with the lepers was more than pity or a social protest. The leper helped Francis to understand his place in life, his place before God. He saw himself to be a poor man, like every person to be born naked and to die naked, *sine proprio* before God. The brothers of his community were to be known as *minores*, men who lived without appropriating anything to themselves. In effect Francis chose to walk through life with the poor as one of them. He accompanied them and all those who could understand their identity as being utterly dependent on God. No one should lord it over another.

Regret over refusing a beggar while working in his father's shop caused Francis to resolve “never again to refuse anything that might be asked of him in the name of God” (L3S 3). Francis had a deep love and respect for the poor, seeing them as the image of Christ, the son of a poor mother (2Cel 83). When a friar spoke harshly to a poor man, Francis told the friar, “Who curses a poor man does an injury to Christ, whose noble image he wears, the image of him who made himself poor for us in this world” (1Cel 76). When he saw someone in need, Francis was grieved; during cold weather he asked wealthy people for a mantle which he could pass on to a poor person. Francis invited a poor man to bless him when Francis' own father cursed him (2Cel 12). If Francis could not offer material assistance, “he lavished his affection” and affirmed that the poor have a right to alms (LM 8:5). Francis wanted the rich to make extra provision for the poor and those hungry at Christmas (2Cel 200). Francis chastised a friar who spoke uncharitably to a poor man; the Poverello said that the person's poverty and sickness “are a mirror in which we ought to contemplate lovingly the poverty and weakness which our Lord Jesus Christ suffered in his body to save the human race” (LP 89).

Francis' love for the poor did not mean that he despised the rich. Indeed, Francis cautioned his friars not to look down on those “wearing soft or gaudy clothes and enjoying luxuries in food or drink” (RegB c.2). All the members of the brotherhood were equal, no matter what their social or economic background; no one was to cling to office within the brotherhood (LP 83). He called them “the Order of Friars Minor”--of lesser brothers--so that they would be subject to everyone (1Cel 38).

Option for the Poor

Throughout the centuries Franciscans have been challenged to make their own the words of Francis: “The rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of their own, and in chastity.” While each vow has offered its particular difficulties, it is undoubtedly safe to say that poverty has generated the greatest amount of debate and the sharpest polemic. Over the years the controversy has centered on the question of whether or not it is possible to live the radical poverty of Jesus Christ as espoused by Francis and his earliest followers. The intellectual discussions paid little attention to the concrete situation of the poor because the issue was not seen as essential to the controversy.

Contemporary developments, however, have made it vitally important to include the poor in the reflection on the meaning of our vow of poverty. The insistent cry arising from the Third World, which served as a catalyst for various documents of the Second Vatican Council and several papal pronouncements, makes us aware of the dehumanizing poverty that is characteristic of the situation of so many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. The Order of Friars Minor has been moved by this clamor and is presently in the process of redefining its life and its mission in terms of the least of God's people.

In the General Constitutions promulgated in 1987, the Order highlights the need to make the poor an integral part of our lives and our works. Article 66:1 states: “The brothers should adopt the lifestyle of people considered unimportant in society, and live among them as lesser brothers. From this place in society, the brothers make their contribution to the coming of God's reign. In this way they pursue more closely the Savior's self-emptying and witness to it more clearly.” Article 78:1 declares: “Exercising the freedom

the Rule affords in the choice of work, the brothers should prefer those works in which the witness of Franciscan life is most evident. They should take into account the needs of different times and places. They should prefer especially works that express solidarity with the poor and service to them.” Article 97: 1 and 2 affirms: “The brothers should follow the example of St. Francis who was led by the Lord to go among lepers. Each and every brother should show a preference for the marginalized, for the poor and the oppressed, for troubled and sick people and be happy to live among them and show compassion. The brothers should look at what is happening in the world from the perspective of the poor, in fellowship with all those considered unimportant. They should take pains that the poor themselves become more conscious of their own human dignity that they may protect it and enhance it.” In many other places the Constitutions exhort the friars to be aware of and to include the poor in the elaboration of our life together. Contemporary terminology has labeled this inclusion of the poor a “preferential option for the poor.” What is this “option” that has become so central to the Franciscan project?

In *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought* (Liturgical Press, 1994), Donal Dorr treats the topic of “preferential option for the poor.” He asserts that such an option is a commitment to “resisting the injustice, oppression, exploitation, and marginalization of people that permeate almost every aspect of public life. It is a commitment to transforming society into a place where human rights and the dignity of all are respected.” It is generally made by those who are not poor and who have come to realize their relative wealth or prestige. They choose to forego at least part of this wealth or prestige and to become identified with the underprivileged. Such a choice is most often based on a deeper understanding of the Christian faith. It includes a political dimension as well since individuals come to see the inequities that exist in society and opt to take the side of those who are relatively powerless. Once the friars see that this option is made in favor of those who are relatively powerless, it is a small step to extend concern beyond those who are strictly speaking the “poor,” that is, the economically deprived, to all those who are deprived of fundamental political, cultural or religious rights. In this definition we can include women, the victims of racial discrimination and all those who suffer structural injustice.

Dorr points out that individuals who make this option for the poor do so in a spirit of compassion. It demands first of all an attitude of solidarity with the poor in their sufferings. Practically, it has to do with our lifestyle: “the kind of food we eat, the clothes we wear, the way our homes are furnished.” But even more importantly it touches on the questions of “the area in which we live, the friends we cultivate, the kinds of work we undertake, and the attitudes and style we adopt in doing all these things.” Compassion also demands a commitment to action that seeks to overcome structural injustice. Effective action includes careful analysis of a situation, a conscious distancing of oneself from those guilty of injustice plus planned and concerted action at the political level to challenge the injustice and then the elaboration of realistic alternatives. Finally, in the process of opting for the poor, great care must be taken that the poor do not become the objects of our actions, no matter how well-intentioned they might be. The struggle is that of the poor; they must be the subjects of this struggle. Our role will always be defined in relation to this central reality.

Francis as Model

Franciscans have always turned to Francis as a source for inspiration and renewal. As

we seek to integrate the “option for the poor” into our approach to life and ministry, the question arises as to whether Francis can serve as a model for our search. The answer, simply put, is both yes and no.

In *Francis of Assisi* (Crossroad, 1992), Arnaldo Fortini lays out in painstaking detail the social structure of the world of Francis. The era was one of monumental change, with the structures of feudalism slowly giving way to those of rising capitalism. Feudalism was characterized by the *maiores* and the *minores*, the greater and lesser. These Latin terms were used to measure and classify the power, virtue, nobility and authority of the various members of society. The lords held sway through access to land and formation of large estates meant that most people became enslaved to the land. Even the free farmers needed to turn to the lord for protection. But with the greater importance of cities and trade as well as the inexorable growth of the money economy, the lords found themselves increasingly preoccupied with the rise of the *minores*, including merchants, artisans and workers in the fields. These lower classes opposed both the tolls levied by the *maiores* and the hated system of forced labor. Francis belonged to a well-to-do middle-class family in Assisi, with its fortunes tied to the cloth trade. As such, in his youth Francis participated in the social upheaval of the time. In 1198, when he was sixteen, Francis witnessed the fall of the Rocca Maggiore, the fortress that symbolized feudalism in Assisi. The following decade was one of bloodshed and violence as the *maiores* struggled to retain their dominance in increasingly difficult circumstances.

It was at this time that Francis heard the call of God to follow the true Lord. As he attempted to discover what it was that God wanted of him, all of the biographies attest to the fact that Francis showed special tenderness to the poor, with priority given to the poorest of the poor, the lepers. In *Saint Francis, A Model for Human Liberation* (Crossroads, 1984), Leonardo Boff states that the first conversion of the saint was to the poor, the crucified of society and then afterwards to Jesus Christ crucified. In various passages of his *Lives*, Celano attests to the compassion of Francis for the poor and his tender care of the lepers; Celano adds that the first friars followed in the footsteps of their founder. The path of Francis led him to challenge the feudal structures in two ways. First, he refused to accept the wealth and privilege attached to being part of the *maiores*, and instead threw in his lot with the poor who were hated and oppressed, and with the lepers who were loathed, segregated and then neglected by society. Francis looked at the poor not from the viewpoint of the rich, but through the eyes of the poor themselves, thus allowing the discovery of the value of the poor. Second, in his approach to communal living he sought to break the feudal hierarchy by treating all members as “brothers.” In 2 Celano 191, Francis made it known that in his group he would like the *maiores* to unite with the *minores*, the wise to unite with the simple. His style was not theoretical, but affective, and he expressed opposition to class distinctions by making all his followers “brothers” on an equal footing.

However, as both Fortini and Boff make amply clear, Francis' option for the “*minores*” of his time was not an option for the *minores* who were forming as a new social grouping. The *minores*, as noted above, included the merchants, artisans and workers in the fields. As a social class they were just as avid as the *maiores* to participate in the accumulation of wealth and in the power that comes with wealth. In this vein, Fortini, in chapter 8 of his book, advises caution in dealing with the relationship of the Franciscan movement and the growing movement toward establishment of a commune in Assisi. First, in commenting on the social pact of 1210 that ended years of hostility

between the different classes in Assisi, Fortini asserts that it did not come about as a result of a spirit of harmony inspired by Francis and his first followers, but was rather designed to increase the power of the commune. Second, he says that it is just as wrong to see the Franciscan movement as a result of the revolt of the *minores*. Rather: “The new communal society arises....from a desire for commercial expansion. It sees in war the means of obtaining it. It opposes the pride of merchants to the pride of the feudal lords. It bases its major social force on wealth and on industry. It sanctions the vendetta against those who offended it. It was cruel in meting out penalties and punishments. This society of greedy, violent, quarrelsome, ambitious, brutal people was the perfect antithesis of Franciscanism, as Francis was the antithesis of Pietro Bernardone.” So Francis' use of “minors” to describe his brothers did not come from the name of a class or a faction, but it rather came from the adjective that indicates “the lowest, the inferiors, those who take orders rather than give them.” Boff adds that Francis chose to change his social class, moving from the position of being a rich burgher to that of living with and as the poor.

Thus Francis can be a model for us today as we choose to make a “preferential option for the poor.” He was able to “liberate” the poor in that he gave them a renewed sense of their dignity and worth as human beings. His intuitive choice of the poor as the privileged place to meet the crucified and poor Jesus Christ plus his understanding of how poverty helps us to clear our minds and hearts to better receive both God and one another, stand as timeless inspiration to us who would follow in his footsteps. Yet we cannot expect of Francis a contemporary consciousness of the issues surrounding this option. Although Francis was able to see the consequences of the social divisions characteristic of feudalism and was able to catch glimpses of the meaning of the rise of the *minores* in the communes, his was not a consciousness of “structural injustice,” nor was he able to make a “political” commitment to redress such injustice. In the spirit of Francis we, who are capable of making these distinctions, are called to dedicate ourselves to understanding the causes and the workings of structural injustice and in the process to make a “preferential option for the poor”, who stood so close to hearts of both Jesus Christ and Francis of Assisi.

Franciscans and a Renewed Call to Opt for the Poor

Even during the lifetime of Francis, the question of poverty had become controversial among the friars. It is not surprising, then, that little more than thirty years after the death of Francis, when Bonaventure was elected Minister General of the Order, he was soon embroiled in the controversy and found it necessary to defend the virtue that was so near to the heart of his spiritual father. In his first encyclical letter, Bonaventure called the friars to task: “Brothers are all too eagerly invading the area of burials and legacies. The residences of the brothers are being changed frequently and at great expense...(which) denotes capriciousness and compromises our poverty.... Finally, expenses are rising to an outlandish level.” In his *Instructions for Novices*, Bonaventure reminds his readers that poverty is “the primary foundation of the whole spiritual edifice.” He further encourages the friars to “embrace poverty, then, with all your strength, for as Scripture testifies, she is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy [Prov 3:18]. Thus, if you maintain holy poverty to the end, you will enter the kingdom of heaven, for the Truth himself has promised: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [Mt 5:3].”

But for all his concern, Bonaventure differed from Francis in treating the question of

poverty. Francis' conversion was effected through contact with those who were most despised by society, and his vocation was sustained by constant encounter with the crucified and poor Jesus Christ in and through the poor of the world who were likewise crucified. His was a relational approach to poverty, one in which those who suffered the effects of concrete poverty in their lives played an essential role. By contrast, the poverty defended by Bonaventure was more of an entity-in-itself, one that could be measured without reference to the poor of the world. It lent itself to scholarly discussion, and the stage was thus set for centuries of debate about the concept of poverty with little regard to those who, in fact, were poor and lived it in the flesh.

Today there is a new urgency for Franciscans to reconsider the issue of poverty or, expressed in a more contemporary manner, to make a “preferential option for the poor.” We Franciscans, faced with the enormous poverty of masses of our brothers and sisters throughout the world, are challenged to renew the spirit of Francis in our midst. We are invited to take this step by the cries arising from places like Latin America, Asia and Africa, by the teachings of Church leaders like John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II, and by many of the documents elaborated by our Order. Francis responded to the condition of poverty in his day with a literal and immediate embrace of those who were poor. We are called to do no less.

How might we fashion this contemporary “option for the poor?” One possible model is that of “accompaniment.” In *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God* (Dennis, Nangle, Moe-Lobeda and Taylor: Orbis, 1993), the authors contend that our best response to the conditions of poverty that exist, to the rage and mourning that they incite, to the grace and goodness that we find among the poor, to the need for analysis and alternative structures, might best be summed up in the word “accompaniment.” In their words that means: “to deviate from other pathways for a while (and then forever), to walk with those on the margins, to be with them, to let go. Through this encounter with Christ at the margins, we, who with Francis once saw the poor only as the 'other,' the feared one, the object of dread, then pity, then charity, can, as individuals and societies, experience a profound, ongoing, Spirit-led conversion of heart, soul, and mind. Slowly our centers of gravity move outside of ourselves and we find ourselves suddenly dancing with the Poverello and his despised friends in unknown places and with great joy.” For Francis, the decision to come down off his horse to embrace the leper, to accompany those who inhabited the margins of society, was a difficult and protracted one. Once made, however, it oriented the rest of his life and brought him into contact with the source of Life. A decision on our part to walk with the outcasts of society will likewise bring us into contact with the suffering Jesus who brought life through his death on the cross, and will reanimate our desire to follow in the footsteps of the Poverello.

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Examples from the lives of the friars...

To the outsider, the figures of St. Francis and St. Clare embody perhaps more clearly than any other church figures the concept of becoming one with the poor while sharing in their life experience. “Il Poverello,” as Francis is still known in Italy, and the founder of the Poor Clares were controversial characters in their own day because of their identity as *minores*, and their openness to those--like the lepers--considered to be of

least value to society.

The issue of poverty has consistently been a point of renewal and division within the Franciscan family. Francis and Clare discovered the freedom that accompanies a life lived *sine proprio*. Their poverty was not a commitment to frugality, but it was a choice, a passion of soul that freed them to live generously within God's creation, not claiming anyone or anything as his or her own property. Francis' commitment to this way of life was motivated by the poor Christ.

Today too, that radical option for the poor continues to be a controversial choice -- both in the context of an increasingly materialistic and success-oriented society and within the Franciscan family itself. As friars, sisters and seculars struggle to follow in the footsteps of their founders, they are faced with the complex questions of how far they can or should identify with the poor of today's world. Some friars see their mission to remain within traditional community structures where they can work best on behalf of the poor. Others believe they are called to work alongside the poor, providing vital services in shantytowns, slums or isolated rural areas. Still others opt to identify with the poor in every way possible, sharing in their life situations, their oppression--and even their death.

In some countries radical options for the poor have been forced upon the friars by governments or circumstances beyond their control. In Vietnam for example, all the friaries were confiscated by the communist rulers who took over the country in 1975. Many friars now see such apparent hardship as an act of providence, obliging them to give up their "comfortable" lifestyle and make a conscious decision to share in the life of the people there. By handing over larger friaries to the government and joining manual work brigades, the friars became more aware of certain Franciscan values and were able to witness to them in a new way. Today the Church in Vietnam is facing the renewed challenge of how to best serve the people in a country making radical moves towards modernization and a free market economy. ALEXIS TRAN DUC HAI, Minister Provincial of the province of St. Francis in Vietnam, was ordained in 1975, the year of the communist "revolution" and is increasingly concerned about the role Franciscans can play in his rapidly changing homeland. As the country moves towards modernization, he says, "I am convinced that the Church in Vietnam can compete with other sectors in society, not by establishing a prosperous facade but by strengthening the moral and human dimensions of our people."

Among the friars who have decided for this most radical of options we find DIEGO URIBE who joined up with a group of guerrillas who fought to liberate their country from injustice and social inequalities. Always working with a desire to serve the people and to remain faithful to his vows, Diego came to occupy a high rank in the hierarchy of his guerrilla group before being assassinated by the military in Columbia on 2nd December 1981. Even before solemn vows he was greatly disturbed by the extreme poverty and the injustice that he saw around him when he was studying theology in Bogotá and compared this with the privileged life enjoyed by those who lived within convent walls. Inspired by the profound changes of attitude introduced by the II Vatican Council, Uribe and some other Franciscan students decided to leave their comfortable quarters in the seminary and move to one of the poorest areas of the city. After his ordination he was sent to work in the western coastal region, one of the most humid and inhospitable enclaves of the country. This region is still populated by descendents of

the African groups brought there some two or three centuries ago as slaves to exploit the ancient gold mines, now exhausted, and many still continue today living and working as virtual slaves. During the course of time Diego began to question even more deeply the existent structures of society and the meaning of his own mission. In 1974 he returned to work in one of the peripheral zones of Bogota where for the first time he came into contact with members of the National Liberation Army. *"Diego was a very humble and lovable person"*, says his brother Fernando Uribe who now teaches in the Antonianum, Rome. *"We were eight children, five boys and three girls and he was the most lovable of us all. But his gentleness did not stifle his deep sensitivity to the misery of the poor people and, in his desire to do something effective for the poor, he believed that the armed struggle was the only way to free them from oppression"*. Fernando says that the National Liberation Army to which Diego affiliated towards the middle of the 70's went through a fierce evolution during the last ten or fifteen years, especially in regards to the methods employed to finance and advance its cause. Fernando was the first to know the decision of his brother to join the group - *"always respected, but never shared."* He also was the only one to go to the mountains at the end of December 1981 to identify the body of his brother. *"Diego and another of his companions were assassinated when they were holding a work meeting along with two other members of the group in a farm located on a high mountain. The survivors of the group and the inhabitants of the house, including the children, were tortured. At the time, the actions of Diego were the cause of controversy among the Franciscans of Columbia, but the General Administration in Rome, taking into account the particular situation of the country, respected his personal options"*.

The friars of Columbia are still committed to the poor and oppressed who continue even today to be victims of serious abuses of their human rights that are not always highlighted by the press. The statistics compiled by the Inter-Congregational Commission for Justice and Peace of Columbia show that in 1995 the victims of violence reached the number of 9,500 approximately. The 1996 report of the American Department of State on the abuse of human rights in Columbia show that the armed conflict and indiscriminate killings continue to destroy society -- the police and the armed forces being responsible for the greater part of this violence.

In many countries around the world, making an option for the poor also means standing on the side of the persecuted. In the Holy Land today that means running the risk of being caught in the crossfire of the violent conflict which has pitted Arabs against Jews since the state of Israel was founded half a century ago. Under Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip, almost a million Palestinians have had to leave their ancestral homes and move into squalid and overcrowded refugee camps where many of them survive in subhuman conditions. They are in need of everything from fresh food to medical supplies, from basic education to employment. Above all they are in need of lasting political solutions throughout the region that will bring hopes for a better and more peaceful future. The Franciscans have been present in the Holy Land since the time of Francis himself, making them the oldest legally established organization in the region. Over the centuries they have found themselves caught in the center of the many "holy wars" which have devastated the region. Traditionally they have been the custodians of the holy shrines, providing a constant witness of Christian charity amidst the power struggles that have raged around them. "This is still the most visible aspect of the Franciscan presence today", says GIUSEPPE NAZARRO, former Custos of the Holy Land. Yet, behind the scenes, more than 300 friars from some 32 different

countries are working in many different ways to improve the lives of the poor--Christians and non-Christians alike. Their mission extends throughout the areas where the refugees have settled--Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus and Rhodes. They run some 16 schools and colleges for over 10,000 students, as well as orphanages, clinics, workshops, homes for the aged and parish centers for young people, offering them an alternative to the violence they have experienced since childhood. In an effort to stem the constant flow of Christians away from the Holy Land, the friars also provide virtually free housing for hundreds of families, as well as educational grants to encourage young people to continue their studies in the Middle East.

In Italy the option for the poor pioneered by Francis and Clare has remained a characteristic of the friars' work throughout the centuries. In Tuscany, in central Italy, Franciscans were responsible for the setting up of the first money lending schemes to benefit the poor. These early pawnshops, known as *Mons Pietatis*, were begun by two friars in particular, BERNARDINO of Feltre and BARNABA of Terni, as early as 1462. Despite opposition from many sectors of society, including other religious Orders, the friars provided a secure means of lending money at low interest rates, thus enabling the poor to pay their debts without falling into the hands of usurers. In 1515 these self-supporting loan shops were granted official papal recognition by Leo X following the Fifth Lateran Council. Similar credit unions began to spring up, first in northern Italy and then throughout the country, precursors to our modern banks.

More recently, the Italian friars have been raising concerns about the problems of poverty at international level. In 1991 the Conference of Ministers Provincial of the Italian Friars Minor (COMPI) took the innovative step of publishing *Global Challenges of Economic Ethics*, a document calling for greater awareness of the international debt problem and the way it directly affects the lives of the poor.

Another method of exposing the problems of the poor in different areas of the world today is that of exchange visits, whereby Franciscans in one country can share firsthand in the efforts and experiences of communities in other nations. During one such exposure trip, a group of seven Korean friars visited some of the poorest areas around the Filipino capital of Manila. Reflecting later on their experience, the Korean friars said they were particularly impressed by their Filipino brothers and sisters living in poverty with the people in such urban areas. Hundreds of thousands of families struggling to survive in the shantytowns around Manila are faced with the daily threat of eviction and forced demolition of their makeshift homes under government plans to restructure the area. Similarly in the United States, the formation program of the province of California includes time in Guatemala, where friars can experience firsthand the life and the suffering of some of the poorest people in central America.

In Japan a radical option for the poor by PIO (Tetsuro) HONDA continues to cause controversy among many of his confreres. It was during his time as Minister Provincial that the Order held its Plenary Council in Bahia in 1985, an event which made a deep and lasting impression on Pio. With the fervor of a new convert, he dedicated his efforts to ensure that the friars of the province could live a prophetic life with the poor. His enthusiasm was contagious for some friars and a serious difficulty for others in the province. After a stormy term as minister provincial, Pio went to work in an area called Kamagasaki, in Osaka city, as a day laborer, one of the most deprived groups of people in this outwardly prosperous and successful nation. Kamagasaki is just one of Japan's

four biggest collecting points for such unemployed laborers, thousands of whom have migrated there as Japan has moved aggressively from an agricultural to an industrial- and a technology-based society. Those who are fit enough gather at about 4am each morning in the hope of earning a day's pay doing often dangerous and difficult jobs. For years these laborers were seen as the safety valve of Japan's booming economy, providing a constant source of manual labor with no obligations to employers. As the economy has suffered, so have the day laborers, with statistics showing a dramatic drop in the number of such jobs available. More and more men are forced out of their small rented rooms and onto the streets, depending on handouts for their survival. Even those who are able to afford the cost of a room have to face harassment from police and local authorities who "often treat the men like animals," according to local residents. Medical care for these workers is notoriously bad, despite the alarmingly high number of work-related casualties. Today Pio continues to live among the poor of Kamagasaki with other friars who have started a day center where unemployed men can come for a meal, a free haircut or simply to socialize in a welcoming environment.

In European countries too, friars are increasingly making the option to live alongside the poor they are trying to serve. For many friars this commitment has also been conditioned by the events of history. During the Second World War in France, the majority of priests and religious were forced to work in factories and industrial plants. Many of these so-called religious laborers found that daily contact with their co-workers--often disaffected Christians who had left the Church--to be very rewarding. A social gospel came alive and was reflected in a renaissance of faith among many of the workers. At the end of the war, many of these religious workers continued their ministry by living the gospel and evangelizing in the marketplace as "Worker Priests." Before his death in 1997, PIERRE ALLART spent four decades as an active worker priest living among the urban poor. He and two other friars lived on the outskirts of Paris where they were increasingly concerned with the problems of new immigrants from African nations. In Germany, KARL MÖHRING and JOACHIM STOBBE also live as worker priests. Like Pierre, they see their chosen lifestyle as a witness to the charism of Francis and believe that collaboration with other Franciscan communities and like-minded partner organizations is an essential component of their ministry. Pierre gives the example of his community's involvement with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and says that in partnership with others, the voice of the poor is given greater credence.

In the United States many older parishes have redesigned existing structures to deal with the new problems of the urban poor. At the turn of the century these large parishes flourished with immigrant Catholic families, but they have gradually been deserted as families moved out to the wealthier suburbs. In cities from New York to San Francisco, from New Orleans to Detroit and Chicago, friars working in these parishes now offer a wide variety of services for alcoholics and drug addicts, the homeless and those living with HIV or AIDS.

When JOE NANGLE left New York for Peru in the 1970's, it was the beginning of a conversion experience that would change his heart and his way of life. During his years working in an upper middle-class parish, he came to see the glaring disparity between the rich - where most of the church's work was focused - and the poor living in the most inhuman conditions. A decisive moment for Joe came when the Latin American Bishops gathered in Medellín, Colombia and released their final statement on the church's radical

option for the poor. Today, Joe lives in Assisi House at the heart of an economically depressed area of Washington, DC. He helped to set up that small Franciscan community of men and women, religious and lay people actively pursuing justice and peace--a testament to poverty and shared living. Joe is the Director of the Franciscan Mission Service, (FMS) an organization which places special emphasis on the role of "reverse mission," which takes place once its volunteers return to the United States.

Friars in the Great Lakes region of Africa continue to provide vital support for those who have lost everything in the ethnic conflicts that have plagued Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire. Their presence among the refugees is an eloquent witness to their commitment to live among these poorest of the poor. VJEKO CURIC recounts a moving example of solidarity that took place in Rwanda during one Christmas holiday: "Over Christmas we had thousands of refugees who were returning from Tanzania. The diocese used all its vehicles to help transport the most exhausted to their homes. A medical team from our hospital was always on the move and a number of women gave birth in the trucks or on the side of the road. We saw extraordinary acts of solidarity as people gave what little food they had and the clothing off their own backs. Some of our workers gave money that they had received in advance for their Christmas pay. The bishop himself frequently went to talk to people in the street to assess their situations and offer whatever aid he could. The most important international organizations like the U.N., the Red Cross and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees were absent at this scene of abject misery. The entire road from Kigali to Kabgayi and Butare was choked with people on the move. But the Christians there had a sense that it was Jesus walking along that road; each gave food, clothing or money at the Christmas Mass. Afterwards representatives went out to distribute the offerings. The most beautiful gifts as always were those from the children: they had collected so many things (candy, avocados, sweet potatoes, beans, peas and firewood for cooking or heating) to offer to those children less fortunate than themselves." Vjeko was shot to death in Rwanda in 1998.

ANASTÁCIO RIBEIRO is one of the many friars who work with the landless peoples of Brazil. He has lived for the past two decades in rural areas and over the last seven years he has been working in several states in northeastern Brazil, assisting over two thousand families to occupy and eventually take legal possession of fallow land. The process is long, difficult and often dangerous but it has become one of the keys to the struggle for liberation by the poor in Brazil. Just as the Jews of the Old Testament were led to a new land where they would find salvation, the friars seek to lead the landless people to a new home where they can raise and educate a family and learn to take part in the democratic structures of society. Regularly these groups which "settle" on a piece of unused land are shot at, frequently chased away and sometimes killed. They move on to another piece of land and occupy that. Eventually they manage to start raising some crops and begin a long and fiercely contested legal battle to have the government confiscate the land and distribute it to the landless. Anastácio has regularly been harassed, arrested and threatened with long-term imprisonment by Brazilian authorities. International campaigns on his behalf have helped to keep Anastácio free.

JUSTUS WIRTH, who lives in Texas close to the Mexican border, exemplifies another way in which friars can support the poor in their struggle for a decent standard of living. He has written innumerable articles for a variety of publications aimed at highlighting the plight of people throughout Mexico and surrounding areas of North and South America. Recently, he has been hard at work raising awareness of the harmful effects of the North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) upon the people of northern Mexico. Justus also provided essential documentation for the inter-Franciscan delegation at the United Nation's World Food Summit held in Rome in November 1996. He focused on the plight of some fifteen million Mexicans displaced from their traditional farmlands (mirrored by parallel urbanization problems throughout Latin America) to encourage the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization to continue its policy of supporting self-reliance of developing nations in the production of basic foods. To provide accurate documentation from the people with whom we are living is a key component of advocacy work at the international level, compiling well-documented information that governments are often unwilling to provide.

References to the General Constitutions

Other references: articles 8,1-3; 32,3; 34,2; 66,1-2; 72,1-3; 78,1-2; 87,1 and 3; 93,1; 132.

Discussion Questions

1. Who was the last poor person to affect your life significantly? What was the effect?
2. Have you ever felt marginalized? What did that teach you about yourself? the brotherhood? your society?
3. Does our local community have a direct relationship or involvement with poor people? If not, how could it?
4. How do we treat the poor who come to our door or call on the phone?
5. Is our community supporting provincial initiatives regarding our option for the poor? economically? moral support?
6. Has working with the poor shaped our provincial identity? In what way?
7. Have you ever protested the mistreatment of the poor in newspapers by expressing your views in magazines or other media? Through your voting?
8. Has your option for the poor ever put you into conflict with members of your own family? How did you handle this difficulty?
9. At what stage do we find ourselves, at both personal and community level, in our relation with the poor? What concrete measures would help us towards deepening and developing that relationship?
10. In our fraternal living (prayer, mission, conversation, lifestyle), what real weight does our option for the poor have?
11. In our local fraternity, what can we already do to assimilate the principle of insertion or preference for the poor and marginalized?
12. At a personal and fraternal level, what is our attitude towards consumerism?
13. Is it reasonable to ask that friars be aware of the political and social structures that cause situations of injustice in our world, or is it enough to be engaged in direct service to the poor?
14. Was it easier for Francis to make a radical option for the poor in the thirteenth century than it is for us today on the verge of the twenty-first century?
15. Do you know any contemporary friars who have made a preferential option for the poor? What sustains their work? What do you think of them and their ministry?