

Assistance to the Assistants

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Our Franciscan vocation, in living the Gospel in the spirit of St. Francis, introduces us as a counter-cultural presence in today's society. Living a virtuous lifestyle was a concern in Francis' day, as it is in ours. I send this as a reflection for you personally, as well as a reflection you might want to share with your brothers and sisters in your region. I was fascinated with this author having read his first volume, "Francis and Islam". It is my hope that this will be just as appealing to you as it was to me.

"Paradise Restored", Social Ethics of St. Francis

by Jan Hoeberichts, Franciscan Press 2004

A synopsis from the Prologue

The Salutation of the Virtues has not received much attention in the English speaking world. This is not surprising as the title is not very appealing to people of our time. An author like Raoul Manselli does not help much to change this situation when he describes *The Salutation of the Virtues* as a "devotional outpouring," nor does Regis Armstrong, who characterizes *The Salutation of the Virtues* as the writing that "is perhaps most clearly influenced by chivalry or the troubadour tradition."¹ Alasdair McIntyre, who in his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* pleads for a renewed interest in the virtues, and more concretely for the establishment of communities where people strive together to find the way towards a virtuous life in the midst of the world and its structures, was not able to awaken an interest in Francis' *The Salutation of the Virtues*.²

However, on closer examination the *Salutation* appears to be an important document to obtain a deeper insight in the spirituality of Francis and the early Franciscans. For it was composed by Francis at a time when the brotherhood went through a crisis of identity. At this crucial moment Francis used also his poetic skills to remind the brothers of the virtues, the values, that are foundational to the Franciscan brotherhood and its evangelical mission of peace in the world.

The Salutation of the Virtues can therefore be characterized as a poetic reminder or even a poetic testament which Francis composes so that the brothers may take to heart and never forget the virtues, God's holy forces, that are to shape the brotherhood in its continuous struggle to build an alternative society against the forces of evil that are threatening the brotherhood and its original ideals.

Reading *The Salutation of the Virtues* in this context, i.e. the historical context of Francis and his early brothers, it is clear that *The Salutation of the Virtues* is not in the first place an ascetico-spiritual document supporting the individual brother in his striving for personal holiness.³ Rather, it must be understood as a socio-political document encouraging the brothers to stand firm in their struggle for social transformation, i.e. their struggle for a world which is governed, not by sin and evil, but by the virtues, led by Queen Wisdom. For as these virtues proceed from the most holy God, they will confound the forces of evil and thus be instrumental in establishing God's kingdom, God's lordship on earth: paradise restored.

As such, *The Salutation of the Virtues* can be described as a Franciscan social or political ethics, which challenges Francis' followers at the beginning of the third millennium in their commitment to the realization of God's reign on the basis of the virtues that constitute the very heart of the Franciscan way of life according to the form of the gospel which the Lord, and no one else, revealed to Francis.

¹ R. Manselli, *St. Francis of Assisi*, Chicago, 1988, 300; R. Armstrong, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings of a Gospel Life*, New York, 1994, 191.

² Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London, 1985.

³ See D. Flood, *Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Movement*, Manila, 1989, 1173. "We may not reduce Francis' doctrine of the virtues to a personal ascetical attitude. We must allow the entire project of life of Francis and his first brothers as it found expression in the Rule, to resonate as background. In the first brotherhood poverty and humility also have a social significance. As a community the brothers wish to unmask, to expose the ideals of their society as a false way of salvation. Their concrete life as brothers, that is their social choices regarding labor, salary, position and housing (RegNB 7), was meant to demythologize the new merchant society that was developing in Assisi." A. Jansen, "Lofza ng op de Deugden II;" *FL* 75 (1992) 173.