

St. Francis' poverty often misunderstood, priest explains

By Carl Bunderson

Berkeley, Calif., Mar 24, 2013 / 06:03 pm (CNA).- Saint Francis of Assisi's concern with poverty was secondary in his life and stemmed from his utter reliance on and love for God, a priest familiar with the saint said.

"The usual image of Francis and poverty is skewed...poverty is important, but it is secondary to something else for Francis, which is absolute dependence on God," Dominican priest Father Augustine Thompson told CNA March 21.

While many associate the 13th century saint with poverty, he wrote little about it and when he did, he was pointing to the humility of the Incarnation and the death of Christ, said the Berkeley, Calif.-based priest.

"The one time he talks about poverty itself – he mentions it very rarely in his own writings – he gives as the perfect example of poverty that the second person of the Blessed Trinity became a human being and took on the lowliness of the human condition, and then offered himself on the cross, and offers his body to us in the Eucharist."

"The Eucharist and poverty for St. Francis are two parts of the same thing," said Fr. Thompson, author of the 2012 book "Francis of Assisi: A New Biography."

While believing in service to the lowest of the poor, St. Francis also "sees the Eucharist as worthy of the utmost respect, as it is itself the greatest act of humility and poverty when God gives himself as food to ordinary people."

Thus the saint "had very strong opinions" about "proper celebration" of Mass, and also "was concerned that the chalices, corporals and altar cloths be fitting and beautiful."

Rather than being offended by the use of precious materials in relation to Mass and the Eucharist, Saint Francis actually wanted to ensure that his friars would have silver vessels to bring to priests "who didn't have suitable things to keep the Eucharist in."

Fr. Thompson explained that "there's no evidence anywhere in any of the early writing about Francis, or in any of his own writings, that he was critical of the papacy for having big buildings, for example. His ideas about poverty are not political in that sense, and they're often made that way today."

It was in this context that Fr. Thompson explained how he understood Pope Francis' comment to media representatives March 16 saying, "how I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor."

"I think that's his gloss on the title 'servus servorum Dei.'"

This title – usually translated as 'servant of the servants of God' – originated with Pope Gregory the Great around the year 600. Fr. Thompson said that a better translation of 'servus' is the more radical "slave."

"The slave is the poorest, the lowest you can get; and Christians, no matter what their material resources are, are called to be ultimately slaves of God. St. Paul says this, that freedom comes from being a slave of Christ, being subject in every way to him."

"That's how I think Pope Francis understands poverty, and he wants to be slave of the slaves of God. He's using Franciscan-style language, but I think it's just a gloss on how he understands one of the papal titles."

"I don't think it means something like he's going to sell the Vatican art collections, although I suspect he'll feel very uncomfortable living in a building built by the Renaissance Popes."

Father Thompson concluded that "if there's anything about Pope Francis' entire life, it's his attempt to put himself at the service of others, and that expresses itself in his simplicity of life too."

For St. Francis, the reason for embracing poverty was not poverty itself, but that with no resources of your own, you are "totally dependent on God."

He explained that "human poverty can only reflect the great condescension of Jesus, who is God and yet dies for us, and then offers his body."

Fr. Thompson said that for St. Francis, "poverty and service are part of a subordination of himself to God, through the service of others."

St. Francis' encounter of service to lepers was "the point that changed his life, not giving up his property," Fr. Thompson explained.

In his Testament, which he dictated on his deathbed, St. Francis said that "when I was in my sin, just to see lepers was very bitter for me. And the Lord himself took me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And on leaving them, what had seemed bitter to me had turned for me into sweetness of soul and body."

Brother Charles Sammons, a priest of the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor who serves in the order's General Curia, agreed that this passage shows that "Franciscan poverty isn't only about money."

"So for Francis poverty was also about going to the place of social poverty and serving, accepting that one might himself be rendered unfit to rejoin respectable society," Brother Charles told CNA March 21.

"In this way it was also for him a following of the poor and humble Christ...the poverty of Christ is a footstep to follow," explained the Capuchin Franciscan.