

54. Several Medicant Orders

In chapter 52, we told you about the Roman Catholic Church's sad decline during the Middle Ages. Many took offence at the sinful lifestyle of the clergy. But thousands followed the wicked example of their church leaders. They thought: "If our bishops can live like that, we can too!"

It's no different now. When ministers, elders or deacons set a poor example, there are always people who think they may follow suit!

But they forget that everyone remains personally responsible for their own deeds. That's what it was like at the time of this chapter.

Because of the clergy's sinful lives, indifference increased among the people. But others mourned the fact that such terrible things were happening in the church. Things could not stay the way they were! They tried to find ways to improve the situation.

In the previous chapter, we learnt that the Waldensians were an example of humility through their doctrine and lifestyle. They brought the gospel to the people in their native language and gained much influence.

Another group began in the south of France and greatly influenced the people there. That second group was called the 'Albigenses'.

But that second group was heretical. They taught that there was a good God and an evil god. In chapter thirteen, we discussed Gnosticism. The doctrine of the Albigenses was like that.

The Roman Catholic church persecuted the Albigenses, as well as the Waldensians. They preached crusades against both of them. However, even among the Roman Catholics, many wanted to change the way things were. They wanted to improve the Roman Catholic Church. In this chapter, I will explain how they tried to do this. But remember, these people were *not* forerunners of the Great Reformation. No, these

people became the fiercest opponents of anyone who disagreed with the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. The people we will discuss in this chapter were staunch Roman Catholics. They only wanted to change the wicked conduct in the lifestyle of the Roman clergy. But their doctrine was Roman Catholic through and through.

This chapter will tell you something about the mendicant orders. Mendicant orders? What are they?

FRANCIS OF ASSISI

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, there was a little city in Italy called Assisi.

One night the inhabitants were quietly sleeping when a lot of noise suddenly woke them up. A group of young men were walking the streets shouting and creating an uproar, not caring that they were rudely disturbing the sleep of others. The inhabitants muttered: "There go Francis and his mates again." Then they turned around and went back to sleep. They were right. Francis! Everyone in Assisi knew him! He was not a wicked boy but a rascal full of pranks. He amused himself by playing tricks and having lots of fun that way.

His father was a wealthy clothing merchant who had a flourishing business. Francis helped his father during the day, but in the evenings, he and his friends went out to have fun and try out a few larks. Francis had plenty of friends because he paid all the expenses.



Assisi in Italy

His father was rich enough, so Francis did not have to worry about his spending habits. So, he didn't! His money flowed freely as he and his friends partied till the early hours, and when they finally went home, they woke the entire neighbourhood with their rowdy behaviour.

FRANCIS CHANGES HIS HABITS



Francis of Assisi, founder of the Order of Friars Minor; oldest known portrait in existence of the saint, dating back to St. Francis' retreat to Subiaco (1223–1224) Wikipedia

Many knights were among the customers who came to buy cloth from Francis' father.

They often told stories about their adventures as knights. They recounted their heroic deeds and the glory they had gained in the various wars they had waged. Then young Francis forgot to work and listened to them. Then his eyes gleamed! That

sounded like a great life!

He wanted to experience something like that, too! His heart longed to have adventures like a knight and earn military honour!

One day war broke out between the city of Assisi and another place. Naturally, Francis also marched to the battle, but the enemy took him prisoner. He came home a year later. He was only just home when he became very ill. He recovered, but during his illness, he began to reflect seriously on his life. That previous, larrikin, extravagant lifestyle did not attract him anymore. When his friends tried to get him to come with them again, they were stunned when he refused. They were sorry about that and tried everything to get him to change his mind. But Francis would not budge.

Until now, Francis had lived a life of wealth and luxury. Now, he only wanted to live a life of poverty. His father was furious when he noticed that incredible change in his son. However, all his

efforts to change Francis' mind failed. Finally, his father was so angry that he disinherited his son. If Francis' father had thought this would make him change his mind, he was disappointed. Francis did not care about money at all anymore. He went to live in a dilapidated hut close to Assisi and stayed there for two years as a hermit. He received what he needed by begging. He did not need much and had lots of time on his hands.

Do you know what he did with all that time? He nursed lepers!

In the Bible, we often read about leprosy. This disease was practically incurable. Of course, God could cure it, but almost always, years of suffering ended in death. Leprosy made its victims look hideous. It could also be very contagious. That's why they had to live separately from other people in Israel. They were unclean and had to call out a warning when a healthy person came too close. Leprosy still occurs frequently in Eastern countries.

In those days, people left lepers alone and abandoned them to their fate. Now, several mendicant orders lovingly nurse lepers in institutions and try to alleviate their terrible suffering as much as possible. Capable doctors and nurses help them. These days, leprosy no longer occurs in Europe. But previously, many people in European countries suffered from leprosy. The fate of those poor people was terrible.

No one bothered with them.

No one tried to alleviate their terrible suffering. On the contrary, they were shunned and avoided by everyone!

But now Francis devotes himself to nursing those poor lepers.

He washes and bandages those ulcerated, painful wounds. He does whatever he can to relieve their severe suffering. And that under such poor conditions!



St. Francis of Assisi. Painted by Philip Fruytiers



House where Francis lived. Wikipedia

Who would follow such an example?

But eventually, this work did not satisfy Francis either. He felt called to the ministry. Soon he was walking the streets with bare head and feet, calling on the people to show remorse and repent. This earnest preaching made a powerful impression on the people. He quickly gained quite a following. They also travelled two by two through the land.

The pope began to show an interest in them because Francis had asked the pope to recognise his new order. The pope realised that this new mendicant order of preaching monks could be an excellent means to break up the influence of the Waldensians. He united Francis' followers into a new monastic order and placed it directly under his supervision and command. They supported themselves by begging from the ordinary people. That's why their order was called a *Mendicant Order*. Mendicant means begging for your upkeep.

They were named *Franciscans* after their leader, Francis.

The pope had also tried to unite the Waldensians into a monastic order, but they had declined that 'honour'. They did not want to be under the supervision of the pope and lose their independence. However, the Franciscans did. They thought it quite an honour that the pope became their protector!

THE FRANCISCANS

We know that the *Waldensians* disagreed with many errors of the Roman Catholic Church. They warned the people against them. But the *Franciscans* did not preach against a single error of the Roman Catholic Church! They remained thoroughly Roman Catholic in everything! They only opposed the luxurious and wicked lifestyle of the other monastic orders. Those other monks had also made a vow of poverty. They had no *personal* property. But their many monasteries *did* have possessions and were very wealthy. Often they owned vast estates. They had joint properties, and because of that, they could live in luxury and excess.

The Franciscans also had no personal possessions but didn't have estates or joint properties either. They founded many monasteries, but those were also poor. The Franciscans did not want joint possessions; therefore, they lived in the greatest poverty. That was the main difference between the other monastic orders and the Franciscans. By living the way they did, the Franciscans gained enormous influence with ordinary people. That's why the pope saw them as an excellent means to break the influence of the Waldensians.

Although these Franciscans were happy singers, they lived strictly disciplined lives.



Pope Innocent III approving the statutes of the Order of the Franciscans, By Giotto, 1295–1300



Monastery of Assisi. Travelblog.org

They carefully kept all luxury out of their homes and monasteries. They furnished their churches very simply. They had very few images and ornaments. That did not mean they opposed image worship but considered many images a luxury.

The Waldensians were opposed to image worship. Their churches didn't have any at all! They preached *against* them!

The Franciscans *did* allow some images in their churches, and they did not preach against image worship at all! They agreed with it.



A cross, Christ's arm and Saint Francis's arm, a universal symbol of the Franciscans. Wikipedia

Many Franciscan monks slept between sharp iron points. They often ate their food raw and repeatedly beat themselves until they bled. They considered that as self-chastisement, which belonged to their 'good

works.' They did not believe the words of Scripture: "By grace you have been saved". They had to do something towards their salvation too! They wanted to help the Lord Jesus a bit. What foolishness!

They worked in the growing cities among the ordinary Roman Catholic people. They went from house to house and had daily contact with many people. Their work was having personal conversations with those people. They also acted as public preachers; many devoted themselves to

nursing the sick. All those things were good in themselves, and yet...

The Franciscans were *not* forerunners of the Great Reformation. Quite the opposite! The pope used them to try to *stop* the influence of the Waldensians!

Weren't they sincere, then?

Perhaps some of them meant well. I cannot judge whether there were truly sincere monks among them. Only God knows their heart. He alone knows why they did what they did. Beyond this, let us not judge because we could be mistaken while God is never mistaken.

But I *can* say one thing. The Franciscan order has done everything in its power to stop the influence of the Waldensians.

They didn't oppose a single heresy of the Roman Catholic Church but promoted and believed all those errors. They wanted people to lose their appreciation and respect for the Waldensians.

The Franciscans spread all over Europe. After one hundred years, they already had 1500 homes.

The Franciscans also did a lot of mission work. They even travelled to China and Japan, to America and India. Sure, in themselves, they are praiseworthy deeds, and yet...

In general, they have been the greatest enemies of the Reformation. Their order has done more evil than good because their basis was not Scriptural.

The Franciscans were not the only Mendicant



Basilica of Saint Francis. They started building this church in 1228. Francis was buried here. Very popular pilgrimage church in Italy. Wikipedia

Order. Many different ones followed, so many that they became a plague for Europe. I won't even think of describing all those mendicant orders. I will still tell you something about one large mendicant order, namely the mendicant order of the Dominicans.

THE DOMINICANS



*Coat of arm of
the Dominican
order. (Order of
Preachers)
Wikipedia*

The name of the founder of the Dominican order was Dominic. He was born in Spain. His parents were from a noble family.

During his youth, Dominic studied. Later he travelled extensively. On one of his trips, Dominic went to Southern France and saw how the Waldensians preached and how many

people followed them. A strict Roman Catholic, Dominic decided to combat the Waldensians with everything he had.

Did the Waldensians live a simple life and oppose all excessive luxury? Well then, the Roman clergy must also start to live in poverty.

Did the Waldensians gain popularity through their preaching?

Well then, those Waldensian preachers must be replaced by ardent Roman preachers. His policy was to fight the heretics with their own weapons.

The Franciscans preached and worked among the Roman Catholic church people.

The Dominicans would go and preach among the heretics themselves.

No, Dominic would not begin by using force because that did not help anyway. He would live by example. Begging and barefoot, he travelled through the areas where the Waldensians lived. He got lots of followers. Then he asked the pope to recognise his order, and the pope gladly did so. "Beautiful! Fantastic! That's the way to go!" thought the pope, "the Franciscans working with

the Catholic people and the Dominicans working with the heretics. It couldn't be better!"

The pope smiled contentedly. The Dominican mendicant order came under the direct supervision of the pope.

Watch those Dominican monks mingling with the Waldensians!

With well-considered arguments, they debate with these plain people. *They'll* bring those wicked heretics back to the care of the Roman Catholic Church! They try with leniency and patience. They believe that it won't be too hard or take very long. But when they begin discussing with those 'poor, illiterate people,' it soon becomes clear that those 'stupid, illiterate Waldensians' know more about the Bible than they do! Those ignorant people are no match for them!

That was the great advantage of the Waldensians. They knew their Bible thoroughly. So did the *young* Waldensians. Oh, if only it were still like that today! Many of our children, both boys and girls, are terribly ignorant. Who of us still knows a chapter of the Bible by heart? The Waldensians could recite entire *books* of the Bible by heart! What a humiliating example for us! Let us appreciate that we still *have* God's Word. Let us often and prayerfully search that Word. The Holy Spirit accompanies that genuine study and that Word will become 'a power of God unto salvation' for us. Then we won't stand ashamed before our opponents, but we will be able to answer them. How often don't we keep quiet because we don't know how to reply?

The Waldensians did not have that problem. The Dominican monks came to them. They talked and talked, but they were no match for the Waldensians.



*Saint Dominic (1170–1221),
portrayed by Fra Angelico.
Wikipedia*



Saint Dominic's room at Maison Seilhan, in Toulouse, is considered the place where the Order was born. Wikipedia

And then, it was as if the devil entered the Dominicans. If talking does not help, they must *feel* it! They must be delivered up to the Inquisition, to that terrible Roman 'court of faith.' If nothing else helps, the torture chamber and the rack must be used. Surely, *that* will help!

It was primarily Dominican monks who were the leaders of the Inquisition. Remember the abominable cruelty with which they did that work? They did not shrink back from any means, no matter how cruel or devilish it was. Remember the pathetic whimpers of the infants in their cradles, high up in the freezing, inhospitable Alps? They showed no pity.

Their slogan was: 'If leniency does not help, exterminate them.' That's how the Dominicans worked.

Here we again see something of the great struggle between Christ and Satan, the constant battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God made 'The Light' shine in the darkness, but the prince of darkness, who could not endure that light, summoned his troops to extinguish that light as quickly as possible.

That 'Light' was not allowed to shine! Those Dominican monks have the blood of thousands on their conscience. That's why the history books also call this mendicant order '*The Hammer of the Heretics*.' That name speaks for itself.

QUESTIONS

1. Summarise the early life of Francis of Assisi.
2. What changed the direction of Francis' life?
3. What type of life did Francis now live? What practical tasks did he do to aid society?
4. Why did the pope approve of his preaching? Why did he unite Francis and his followers into one monastic order?
5. What is a mendicant order?
6. What attitude did the Franciscans have towards the Roman Catholic Church? Did they approve of all of the Church's practices? Explain.
7. What is a vow of poverty?
8. Why did the pope consider the Franciscans a suitable means to stop the growing influence of the Waldensians?
9. Why did the Franciscans chastise themselves? Why is this practice against God's Word?
10. Who was Dominic?
11. What was the aim of the Dominican order?
12. Why is this order called the 'hammer of the heretics'?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Show from God's Word that the way the mendicant orders received their daily bread was unscriptural.
2. Explain how Proverbs 6:6-11 would apply to the errors of the mendicant orders.
3. Is a person required to take a vow of poverty, resolving to have no personal possessions? Read 1 Corinthians 13.
4. The Franciscan and Dominican orders reflect the need for a counter-reformation in the Roman Catholic Church. How can each of these movements be labelled a reform movement?
5. Why did the Franciscan order involve itself much more readily in mission work than the Dominican order?