

Primary Source Discussion: The Rule of St. Francis of Assisi

Background / Context

- **St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226):** An important religious figure of the 13th century and founder of the Franciscans. He was born to a wealthy merchant but cut ties with his family to pursue his faith.
 - **The Franciscans:** A Catholic order dedicated to living lives of poverty and simplicity. Became very popular and gained approval from the Papacy.
 - **Pope Innocent III:** The Pope who approved the original rules by which the Franciscans lived
 - **Pope Honorius III:** The Pope who approved this Rule and to whom the Franciscans pledged obedience
 - **Historical Context:** The Franciscans arose during a period of urban consolidation in which a growing class of urban poor was becoming disenchanted with the aristocratic monasteries of the time and a distant papacy. Disease and hunger was rampant among these people, and the church was not able to provide much practical help. The Franciscans were able to somewhat bridge this gap and restore some faith in the ability of the church to care for its people.
-

The Rule of St. Francis of Assisi

- Written by St. Francis in 1223
 - Consisted of a series of Gospel precepts espousing piety and apostolic poverty
 - The purpose of these rules was to live in a manner similar to Jesus Christ and his disciples
 - Served as the basis for the Franciscan order, which still exists today
-

Summary of the precepts

- Main tenets:
 - to "observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ"
 - be "gentle, peacable, and kind, mild and humble, and virtuous in speech"
 - obedience and reverence for the Pope and his successors
 - no personal property
 - This restriction loosened with time as the need for stable bases grew
 - chastity
 - To join the Franciscans:
 - Had to be evaluated by a local minister
 - Had to give up marriage and take a vow of continence
 - Were recommended to give up their possessions to the poor
 - Served a year of probation
 - Mandated by the pope: their induction was permanent and irreversible
 - More detail:
 - Lots of prayer, at many times throughout the day
 - Should not receive money, only food
 - Should perform labor for the "necessaries of life"
 - Those who commit sins should perform penance at the discretion of local ministers
 - Penance should be "humbly and lovingly" given
 - Obedience towards an elected general minister
 - Love your enemies
 - Avoid contact with women
 - Must ask permission to leave and preach to infidels
-

Analysis and Connections

- The Franciscans were one of two popular orders that developed in the 12th and 13th centuries, partly in reaction to the growth of the urban poor class
- Their self-imposed poverty, labor, and somewhat forgiving attitudes made them popular with the people and good "PR" for the papacy
 - The Rule tied them to the papacy ceded ultimate authority to the Pope
 - Their spare clothing and distinctive habit made them a noticeable presence
 - The Rule encourages them to preach for the "utility and edification of the people"
 - St. Francis himself was not especially scholarly, and simplicity is one of the central tenets to the Rule
- Franciscans were more involved in urban centers, through labor, preaching, and begging, unlike the more aristocratic monasteries of the past
 - despite this, they were kept somewhat isolated by the Rule
 - avoided contact with women
 - had to seek permission to preach to infidels

Conclusions

- After the Bible, The Rule was the central doctrine to which the Franciscans adhered, and it defined the way they lived their lives
- It was centered around poverty and living life as Jesus Christ had, but its restrictions on owning property and receiving money were loosened with time
- It also tied the Franciscans closely to the papacy
- The distinct lifestyle ordained by The Rule and the charitable actions of the Franciscans were popular among the people, and allowed the Franciscans to act as "PR" for the papacy