

Renovation in Spirituality: A Voegelinian Interpretation of Saint Francis

Copyright 2010 Nicoletta Stradaoli

In the second volume of the *History of Political Ideas, The Middle Ages to Aquinas* Voegelin examines the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226) and the revolutionary action that he exerted on the medieval political order. The study of the Saint is an essential part of the Voegelinian analysis of the Middle Ages, which becomes a metaphor of this historical period which, between the XII and XIII centuries, undergoes its complete development and at the same time glimpses its future crisis. From the XII century the political ideas of the Western world were no longer connected to the Roman-Christian categories. New political-religious forces enter the scene of the medieval *christianitas*, seeking recognition of their status: «the transcendental order of God was supplemented by an intramundane order of the forces filling the realm».^[1] Moreover, in the XIII century the first signs of the modern State, that was about to rise, become manifest. The combination of the *sacerdotium* (papacy) and the *regnum* (empire) was progressively weakening, due to the «crescendo of ideas incompatible with the structure of the *sacrum imperium* and symptomatic of immanent new evocations».^[2] The medieval equilibrium linking temporal power and spiritual power revealed its instability to a world where the social, the political and the religious elements, linked in a complex way, no longer recognized themselves in the empire and in the papacy.

The great movement of ideas during the XII century was a religious one with a twofold characteristic: it was popular and secular. Its source was in the social community and aimed, with indecision and hesitation, at stealing the sacred things from the hands of the clergy.^[3] From this perspective, a fracture between the ecclesiastical institution and evangelical Christianity dominated the public scene and expressed itself in the will to strengthen the church by restoring the primitive spiritual existence. The core of the religious reform was the monastic world which aimed at reaffirming discipline and purity in the clergy. This movement to renew the church risked disintegrating the clerical state and the medieval political order as well. As a matter of fact, the religious institution did not succeed in absorbing completely the transformation taking place in society. If the attempt to disrupt the religious world had been successful, it would have changed the government of the church once and for all.

Voegelin examines the narrow limit that separates reform from revolution, taking into consideration «the reforms that originated in the orders and the reforms that originated in the movements proper. The first type originated socially in the feudal and rural society; the second type originated in the town society. The two lines overlapped and finally merged in the thirteenth century».^[4] In this sense, it is especially enlightening

that the history of the Franciscan order which, from its beginning to the first years of the XVI century, is characterized by a complex texture of intellectual creativity, human suffering and conflicts which reveal a winding road running parallel to the path undertaken by the Western Christianity. Thus, the history of the Franciscan Order is a paradigm with which to interpret the crisis of the Western world. In this context, according to Voegelin, some religious figures take on a decisive role, since they represent the spirit of the new age. Among them Saint Francis, the Saint of the Middle ages *par excellence* and the one who incarnates the Italian spirit of the XIII century, stands out.^[5]

For the author, Francis of Assisi is «the decisive figure inaugurating a new epoch of Christian history».^[6] Voegelin recognizes the purity of the Franciscan religious experience, «his convincing sincerity, his exemplary personal realization of the ideals he taught, his charm, his humility and his unwordly naïveté»,^[7] but he also observes that the Umbrian saint indirectly realizes in history the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202). The advent of Francis of Assisi integrates the millenarian preaching of the Calabrian friar: «[Saint Francis] tried to carry out what Joachim of Fiore had projected: to establish a new order of the spirit in the world».^[8] The paradigm of perfection elaborated by the Saint and the miracle of the stigmata convinced the contemporaries that Saint Francis was the *alter Christus*. Therefore, the Umbrian saint seemed to carry out the Joachite prophecy and the Franciscan Order seemed to represent the perfect Order predicted by the abbot of Fiore. «The appearance of Saint Francis has seemed to fulfil [Joachim's] prediction of the *dux* of the new age»,^[9] translating in history the charismatic personality who would have inaugurated the Third Age.

Emphasizing the historical, social and spiritual role of Saint Francis, Voegelin shows that the Umbrian friar was an exceptional figure in the history of the church and the exponent of a type of religiosity that was, on the one hand, authentic and on the other dangerous, because it poured into the public scene intramundane forces. Voegelin does not deny the personal and genuine religious inspiration of the spiritual experience of Saint Francis. Undeniably, the deep intimacy of his devotion, his passionate and innocent faith, the richness of his spirituality suggests to Voegelin that the Franciscan ideal is extraordinary. As a matter of fact, this type of religiousness distinguishes «Saint Francis from other sectarian leaders, and made him a saint instead of a heresiarch».^[10] Moreover, his submission to the church demonstrates the purity of Franciscan spirituality. Between 1209-1210, Francis of Assisi asked Innocent III (1198-1216) to consent to his Order and his *Rule*. The pope granted it orally. The official legitimation was granted by pope Honorius III (1216-1227) and this recognition was vital for the survival of the church itself: «if we consider the appeal of Saint Francis, the rapid spread of the order, and particularly the mass influx into the Tertiary Order, it is hardly imaginable what forms the social revolution would have taken if the church had not absorbed the movement through the person of Saint Francis and integrated it into its organization [...]».^[11]

Through complete submission to the church Saint Francis was able to play an important role in the ecclesiastical institution. He becomes the spokesman of a spiritual (and political) ideal, more noble than the one of the clergy of his time which, in fact, was involved in the political ups and downs of temporal power, attracted by mundane prosperity instead of preaching to the people, converting and consoling them. The

seraphic Father decides to fight the plagues of the church acting as the “herald of the holy Gospel”, following the evangelical perfection of Christ. In the first *Rule* of the Franciscan Order, which outlined the basic principles of Franciscan life, the Umbrian friar stressed the crucial importance of practicing and preaching the precepts of Jesus. The heart of the Franciscan *religio* and of the Franciscan mysticism is the effort to live in conformity with the life of Christ. This individual mission, which through the apostolate becomes even a social duty, implies imitation of the virtues of the Saviour and foremost the practice of *poverty*. The practice of poverty was not a new idea in the history of the church but the Franciscan recovery of apostolic poverty was an extraordinary social message of moral revolution that touched many consciences.

Voegelin interprets the Christocentrism and the pauperism of Saint Francis as the symbols of a religious faith that can degenerate into an immanent doctrine. Therefore, if on the one hand Francis of Assisi shows the way for a new religiousness, different from the one embraced by other monastic orders, on the other hand the Umbrian saint introduces three fundamental ideas in the Christian model he lives: *the conformance with Christ, the life of poverty, the Ecclesia of the Laymen*, which constitute «the irruption of intramundane forces»,^[12] jeopardizing the political symbolic equilibrium of the *sacrum imperium*. In particular, «the idea of life in conformance with Christ as a style of existence»,^[13] exalts the suffering Christ of the cross and so «Christ the King in his glory»^[14] becomes less important. If Saint Francis with the miracle of the stigmata reaches perfect conformity with the life of Christ, it is also true that no other human being «can conform his life to the Messiah».^[15] As a result, the image of the Son of God is adapted to the human possibilities creating an intramundane Christ which, in the Franciscan ideal, is the Christ of the poor and of the humble. «The function of Christ as the priestly-royal hierarch had to be neglected; the Christ of Saint Francis is an innerworldly Christ of the poor; he is no longer the head of the whole *corpus mysticum* of mankind».^[16] Christ is no more the guide of the «differentiated body of Christianity»,^[17] but the symbol of specific social forces which claim a privileged relationship with God. In the Voegelinian interpretation, the force of the Franciscan faith is grounded in the closeness of Saint Francis to the people and Saint Francis emerges as he who indirectly supports the demands of the needy persons. In this way his religious message has also a political and economic meaning: the Franciscan *paupertas* dictates specific economic and political behaviour which can be codified in juridical terms. In this way, the religious and existential preaching of Francis enters everyday life and implies a reform of political life. Although he asserts complete obedience to the ecclesiastical institution, his doctrine has a revolutionary content which leads to a conflict with the authority of the church.

Thus, for Voegelin, the Franciscan *religio* has potentially risky contents: the imitation of Christ and the abnegation of all property, interpreted in a fundamentalist way, can be the means «of social and political transfiguration».^[18] Moreover, this system of beliefs can be explosive if fused with Joachim’s doctrine which, in fact, exerts a strong influence on the Franciscan Order, corrupting the spirituality of the Umbrian friar.

Before examining the elements of Franciscanism in which the eschatological tensions and the Joachite influence are evident, it is fundamental to emphasize that Saint Francis was adverse to any kind of

eschatology. His spirituality was always directed to the transcendental God and, even if some legends attribute to him the visions of a future terrestrial perfect realm and of a time to come filled with tests and errors for the Franciscan Order, he never really conceived a religious-political collective solution to end the unjust and decadent present world. If Joachim of Fiore had announced the imminent coming of the Third Age of the Holy Spirit, Saint Francis, with realism, committed himself and his friars to the practice of the apostolic life. The “poor life” of the Minors is a type of existence that did not intend to denounce a world in ruin nor state an apocalyptic palingenesis. The Franciscan asceticism speaks with sympathy to the common Christian men who live an ordinary life. The true religion is the apostolic one of the Spirit which speaks to the heart of all men to reawaken the divine presence in their conscience. Thus, Francis does not construct a theological theory to build a charismatic spiritual society for initiates. As a matter of fact, in the Saint’s works there is no evidence of apocalyptic expectations. The Gospel which regulates the life of the friars is not a bizarre and futuristic “eternal revolutionary gospel” but the canonical, ancient and traditional one. The seraphic Father does not describe Christ as the Judge of the Apocalypse. He contemplates the Saviour conceived by Holy Mary and who died on the cross. St. Francis’ spirituality is far from preaching any kind of millenarian prophetism and it does not describe any visionary state. He does not intent to subvert the hierarchical ecclesiastical government. On the contrary, his *Fraternitas* fits completely into the ecclesiastical institution and it cooperates with the church, acknowledging the authority of the clergy. Furthermore, it is well-known that the Umbrian friar thoroughly refused any theological controversy, giving preference to a practical life lived as a shining example of virtue instead of a science cultivated for terrestrial fame. The joyful spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi clashes with the pessimistic attitude of the Joachite tradition towards the current reality and the present church, which were considered beyond any possible moral repair.

Though, the teaching of Francis did not urge his brothers to become prophets or apocalyptic preachers, Joachim’s doctrine plays a significant role in the Order, in particular in the radical wings of the Franciscans. From the time of the death of St. Francis (1226) many conflicts rose within the Order, culminating in the split between Spirituals and Conventuals (the so called friars of the “community”). The wing of the Spirituals favoured the scrupulous observance of the practice of poverty and mendacity, with a return to the pauperism of the first companions of St. Francis. The Conventuals preferred a practical accommodation of the practice of poverty and were generally supported in this by the papacy. At the end of the XIII century, there were numerous and intense conflicts between the fluid world of the Spiritual and the friars of the Community. Two worlds faced each other, through words and violent actions. At stake was the memory of St Francis and the rule of the first fraternity which became the paradigm for the authentic practice of poverty. The Spirituals thought they represented the original *Rule* and *Testament* of Francis; they defended the purity of the Franciscan origin and apostolic poverty became the mark of their identification as the real “spiritual men” who were to run the Christian church.

The weighty inheritance received from the seraphic Father was hard to manage and the numerous quarrels inside the Order forced deep reflection regarding the theory of poverty, on the one hand, and the role of the Franciscans inside the church, on the other hand. In particular, the pope was asked to intervene various times to resolve the conflict inside the Minor Order but the papal involvement in the conflict provoked an excessive interference in the matters of the Order itself. In fact, the papacy assumed a leading role in defining the authenticity of the Franciscan doctrine, the genuine core of the Franciscan rule, establishing the

compatibility between Franciscanism and the theological and ecclesiological tradition.^[19] The opposition between the Spirituals and the Conventuals almost disintegrated the Order and, above all, produced a salient chapter in the history of eschatological expectation. This story can be seen through the life and the works of some of the most prominent Spiritual leaders, Peter Olivi (c.1248-1298), Angelo of Clareno (c.1245-1337), Ubertino of Casale (c.1259-1330). In the Spiritual wing it is evident the Joachite influence and the eschatological tension towards a future renovation of the spirituality able to realize a new perfect State. In synthesis, the analysis principally takes into consideration the figure of Peter Olivi, who is the most notable spiritual leader, an acute thinker who reflects, in his active but prudent participation in the events of his age, the drama of the Franciscan Order.

The idea of the church that the Provençal Franciscan elaborates is fundamental to understand the ecclesiological doctrine of the friar. It refers to Joachim of Fiore's theory of history without abandoning Christian orthodoxy. He develops a history of the church, in which the ecclesiastical institution goes through seven ages, the last one representing a peaceful and perfected future status. Moreover, Olivi's history of the church is characterized by a «theology of pain».^[20] The seven periods are constituted by a mixture of good and evil, but especially at the end of the fifth age and at the beginning of the sixth there is an aggressive presence of sin, vice and iniquity. During the fifth period the church builds monasteries and wages war against the infidels. However it experiences a time of external peace. Despite this, a dangerous internal enemy threatens the church: the laxity of morals. If, on the one hand, the Provençal Franciscan believes in the Roman church and is faithful to the hierarchy of the ecclesiastical institution, on the other hand he condemns the clergy for its mundane behaviour and for forgetting the meaning of poverty, humility and charity.

According to Olivi, St. Francis brought back to the world the evangelical perfection, formulating a *Rule* rooted in the Gospel. In fact, in the sixth period the church experiences the Franciscan evangelical renewal which is at the basis of the new church to come. The sixth age, which in Olivi's doctrine plays a prominent part, represents the first step towards the realization of ecclesiastical perfection, the glorification of Christ (*sollempnizatio*), even if evil is not completely defeated. The seventh age sees interior peace and spiritual understanding; the *completion ecclesiae* is achieved.

It is fundamental in the doctrine of the Spiritual friar the distinction, already described by Joachim, between the *ecclesia carnalis*, the *Babylon*, the body of evildoers within Christendom and the *ecclesia spiritualis*, the true church of Christ, the true followers of poverty and of the Gospel. Olivi's carnal church is not the Roman Curia: the invectives of Olivi are not directed against the charismatic and jurisdictional aspects of the ecclesiastical institution but against the moral and spiritual values of the clergy which has forgotten the exemplary life of Christ. For Olivi, it is necessary to demolish the mundane church before erecting the new spiritual one. However, before reaching this goal, many persecutions have to be suffered by the true believers. In fact, the Provençal Franciscan also expressed the belief in a Mystical Antichrist, a false pope who would attack the Franciscan Rule. However, regards this, the friar is extremely prudent: he does not identify the figure of the Antichrist with any historical figure. In Olivi's perspective the humble and poor church will stand up against the carnal church and the Mystical Antichrist which represent the age of pain and of suffering. The spiritual church symbolizes the life of Christ that the fervent Franciscan wants to reconstruct. Thus, the new age is characterized by pain and joy, like the other periods of the history of the church but,

unlike the previous ages, the opposition between the carnal and spiritual church, on the one hand, and the Antichrist and the Saviour, on the other hand, is absolute and complete.^[21]

Although Olivi takes inspiration from Joachim's doctrine he does not fix with certainty the beginning of the new age of the church. On the contrary, he describes a state of perennial waiting which tends towards the fulfilment of the spiritual church. Thus, the age to come is neither today nor tomorrow but is part of the Christian eschatological view of history. Spiritual renewal is essentially a resurgence: the recovery of the evangelical perfection of the primitive church. The renaissance of the ecclesiastical institution consists of living according to the Gospel, it is not a radical overthrowing of the existing religious community nor a revolution that will sweep away all obstacles to the imminent perfect spiritual state. Central to Olivi's thought is the inner conversion of the hearts and minds of the men who govern the church. In this way, the eschatological figure of St Francis is incorporated in the historical course of the church itself and the renewal of the church is regulated by the papacy. Thus, the clerical state will gradually experience and put into practice a crescendo of virtue.^[22]

Olivi cites and refers to Joachim's works. However, he does not agree unconditionally with his thought. Olivi's Joachimism has to be reassessed. In fact, the history of the church of the Provençal friar is based on a Christological vision of history instead of a Trinitarian one.^[23] The core of Olivi's speculation is Christ himself. Past events and past experiences as a whole refer to Christ who supports and judges them according to the providential plan.^[24] Moreover, characteristic of the Franciscan spiritual is his emphasis on the role of St. Francis as the initiator of the period of renewal. On this point, another distinction between the Calabrian abbot and the Provençal friar emerges. If for Joachim the third epoch of the Trinitarian vision of history is an order of monks (the elected and charismatic ones) for Olivi, in the new final epoch, St. Francis, the *alter Christus*, converts and gathers together all believers regardless of their conditions or social positions. However, the true believers are distinguished from the wicked, for whom the words of the Angel of the Sixth Seal (Saint Francis) have no significance. From this perspective, the interpretation of Peter Olivi emphasizes the division between the *ecclesia carnalis* and the *ecclesia spiritualis* once more.^[25] Nevertheless, the historical plan of the Franciscan spiritual Christological theology implies a concretization of reality. The symbol of the Third Age is part of the history of the church: it is not a theophanic unique manifestation of a Person of the Holy Trinity but a phase of the providential plan in which things that already happened can take place again according to a dialectical process characterized by the contrast between the exemplarity of Christ and the weakness of human beings.^[26]

The realism and capacity to plunge into history represent the innovative elements of Olivi's speculation and they constitute a significant aspect in the transformation of Joachim's doctrine. As a matter of fact, the new age, which for the abbot was static in its perfection, is for the Spiritual friar open to a possible dynamic evolution that, thanks to its ability to adjust itself, is inclined to be moulded by historical events.^[27] Olivi's apocalyptic understanding of reality is more balanced than appears: he wishes to censure the fanatical and fervent Spirituals who compromise the religious attitude of the "regular" ones.^[28] A superficial reading

of Olivi's *Lectura super Apocalipsim* gives the impression that the Provençal Franciscan follows the same logical pattern of Joachim of Fiore. Actually, deepening the doctrinarian form of his theory, it is possible to grasp the innovative elements of his thinking. He wants to explain the connection between events which constitute the richness and variety of history. In this perspective, Christian providence is more than the divine director who indicates his role to each individual: it represents a rational dynamic force which unites the action of every single man.^[29] Furthermore, Franciscanism is not only a system of religious ideas, but above all an energy that concretely acts in history.

Peter Olivi is a paradigmatic figure of Franciscanism who shows how complex and multifarious was Joachim of Fiore's thought. The influence of the Calabrian abbot's ideas exercised a strong effect in the Middle Ages and later, even if their content was sometimes deeply transformed, the expectations about the "End" continued to persuade a vast number of religious and humble persons, leading them against the hierarchy of the church to support the ideal of an evangelical spirituality. The dissatisfaction with the present and the religious excitement about the proximity of a perfect kingdom on earth, where the real spiritual men will triumph, dominate the consciousness of the age which is also proven by the osmosis between the religious and the political world taking place during the medieval age and during the Renaissance. As is known, the Voegelinian studies penetrate the relationship between ancient, classic and modern political ideas which have shaped the modern world and characterized the totalitarianism of the XIX century. Without taking into consideration a well-known segment of Voegelin's speculation, it is significant to remember how the author gave new life to the theme of *renovatio* fundamental for understanding the birth of modernity. In particular, some topics (such as "the new epoch", "the advent of the Antichrist", "the coming of the Messiah",...) display cultural, social, and political meanings: the apocalyptic expectation is a way in which political and social events are given religious validation and so the coming of the new age, in religious terms, is an agent of political change. Referring to the studies of Burdach, Voegelin emphasizes some essential topics and myths and the fusion between religious and political attitudes without omitting – and this is vital – the historical context in which they existed. Thus, Voegelin masters the mission of the historian and of the political scientist: he does not separate the political ideas which he examines from the specific historical situation and he does not lose sight of the various and sometimes opposing functions of political ideas.

As a matter of fact, the interpretation of St. Francis and of Franciscanism, in particular the references to the Spiritual party, shows the religious and political functions of a vision of the world that can take different forms: other-worldly or inner-worldly, individual or collective, temporary or absolute. Actually, the Joachite tradition provided a powerful paradigm for the critique of the church of the time and for the later radical political phenomena. Joachim's potent myth of the structure of history and the coming of "spiritual men" was extremely effective, on the one hand, for the Spirituals who believed in their world-shattering role in history and, on the other hand, moved and influenced other courses of action which wished to renew the socio-political reality. In this perspective, St. Francis has a twofold quality: on the one hand his personality represents the perennial human concern to understand history and the special significance of the present and on the other hand his figure represents a pure authentic religious experience which was strengthened by the simplicity and spontaneity of his mysticism.

Francis' mysticism reveals the need for an authentic spiritual renewal which finds expression either in

an active or contemplative way of life. The Umbrian saint seems to abandon an existence built on an exclusive intimate dialogue with God preferring the apostolic life. However, the contemplative life plays a significant role: Francis' opening of his soul towards God is a collective and individual union with the divine where spiritual access to the godly reality is achieved through a kind of poetic and inspired prayer. The hymns and the spiritual poetry of the friar derive from a mystical inspiration in which there is a passionate surge of love for God who is the only subject of the verses. The reaching for the divine of St. Francis is so spontaneous that the Saint gets lost in God in solitude but he feels inadequate to praise and express gratitude to God all by himself. Thus, he gathers around him other people to participate in the mysterious transcendence of the Creator.

The *Praises of Creatures* is a singing symphonic poem which represents a form of meditation that combines joy and sacrifice. These verses which represent the first religious Italian poem reflect Saint Francis' attitude towards nature which is imagined as a mutual fraternal interconnection among all the elements of the created world. The devotion to nature expressed in the poem reveals, in an unconventional way, the bond between the human order and the cosmic one and discloses a world which is a unique harmonic theophany of God. The *Canticle* conveys a theophanic mysticism of nature in which the presence of God becomes luminous, real and experienced in the totality of the elements of the cosmos, each one representing the plenitude of God.^[30] In this perspective, the mysticism of the Umbrian saint echoes, on the one hand, Saint Augustine who, in *The City of God*, expressed the possibility of experiencing God everywhere and in everything and, on the other hand, Scotus Eriugena's idea of the world as a theophany of God.

A mystic form of knowledge which is more spontaneous and corporeal than the previous one is evident in Saint Francis. The mystical line is founded on an active apostolate, on nature interpreted as a step of elevation towards God and on the material identification-imitation of Christ and His passion. Furthermore, the combination of action and contemplation characterize Franciscan mysticism as democratic and secular. The immediate awareness of the presence of God is possible for all Christians and not only for the ecclesiastics. Moreover, the ascetic life is no more a prerequisite to get in touch with God, the Creator can be met in daily experience, too.^[31]

The simplicity of the mystical faith of the Umbrian saint suggests investigating the differences and the affinities between Francis' mysticism and Eckhart's. Starting from the theological and philosophical tensions between the Franciscans and the Dominicans and taking into consideration «[the] struggle of the Franciscans against Eckhart»,^[32] it is interesting to penetrate the religious relationship linking the two friars. [In the process of heresy against the Dominican the Minors played an active part. This can convince that the Franciscans were the zealous instigators of the charges against Eckhart. However, even if between the two Orders at stake was the control of university education, the preaching and the care of the souls, the suspicion of heresy against the German theologian took place in his Order]. As a matter of fact, Eckhart expresses a religious position open to all the varieties of the Christian mysticism and, in particular, he cites San Bonaventure and speaks with respect of Saint Francis. Certainly, this is not sufficient to define the Eckhartian mysticism nor to characterize his spirituality as a deepening of the mystical contents of the Franciscan theology. Eckhart's spiritual position is more complex and erudite than that of the Umbrian friar. It combines

theology, philosophy and metaphysics, shaping his mysticism into multiple (and sometimes conflicting) forms. However, between the different mystical conceptions of the two friars a common outline can be found.

First of all, Eckhart's spiritual thought is democratic. The German theologian, like Saint Francis, maintains that God can be met everywhere and by everyone. In fact, the sermon is the specific instrument of mystical teaching: the *sermo mysticus* is able to build a spontaneous community in which mental and verbal words are intimately united, in a way similar to the lyric poetry of Francis.

Secondly, Meister Eckhart believes that the highest form of mystical union must be searched for in the combination of action and contemplation. It is necessary to exercise a contemplative action and an active contemplation to offer man what has been learned from the Scriptures. For Eckhart, being and doing go hand in hand as for Saint Francis. Eckhart emphasizes that the mystic experience lived in solitude is egoistic. If, on the one hand, the human being has to experience a form of union with God that does not exclude actions and works, on the other hand these last must come from spiritual men, that is from a soul detached from mundane things and so able to love God completely.

In this perspective, poverty also plays a dominant role in Eckhart's mysticism. But the Dominican friar deepens its meaning. In order to join God, man must be totally detached, devoid of everything, as he was before he was born. This means that divine plenitude is experienced in the radical emptying out of the soul, because only a naked, poor and free soul can reach God. Poverty and detachment are the essential conditions for tending towards God. Thus, for Eckhart these virtues are more valuable than humility, love and mercy, which, for the German friar, reveal an egoistic inclination.^[33] In this sense, the total detachment from the world of creatures and the total renunciation of property is more radical in Eckhart than in Saint Francis. However, the detachment from the world does not imply a flight from material things nor a separation from reality. Rather, one must learn to penetrate things and find God there.

Man's renunciation of any will in order to become poor and empty and, therefore, full of God distinguishes Eckhartian mysticism from the Franciscan love-centered one. For Franciscanism the mystic union with God is so rooted in love that the intellect must surrender to love itself, because it is the *affectus* that enables the union with the Creator. In Eckhart this affective idiom is not present. His sermons are devoid of this language of love and his mysticism is not affective mysticism. Eckhart's language is that of a metaphysician and so his mysticism is a speculative-intellective one which «describes the descent of the soul into its created state».^[34] The soul is able to return to God by means of intellect because this is the image of God in human nature. Thus, «intellect is Eckhart's term for the ground of the soul, beyond sense and reason, by which it knows God directly».^[35] Poverty, detachment and intellect are the keys to reach the union with divinity.

In this sense, Saint Francis and Meister Eckhart represent two modes of the opening of the soul towards God: two forms of union with and knowledge of the divine reality. Despite the perils of an intramundane faith present in Franciscan religion and the charges of heresy and the spiritual exchanges with the sect of the Free Spirit that Eckhart's spirituality undergoes, both represent the meditative search for the divine incursion into reality. Applying a Voegelinian analysis to the contemplative faith of the two friars, both of them articulate a human response to the Highest Reality which they experienced. Thus, both of them in

different ways reveal a mystical religiousness which constitutes the decisive step in structuring politics and history. If the mysticism of Saint Francis is less differentiated and so participates in divine encounters in a more corporeal way, a reflective distance is more evident in Eckhart. Saint Francis' mysticism expresses a more compact consciousness of the tension of existence towards transcendental perfection in which the soul experiences in its entirety the imitation of Christ and the fundamental importance of living according to the example of Christ, while Eckhart's mysticism goes a step further grasping the divine reality through a more conceptually articulated awareness of the transcendental pole of reality. However, both of them realized the function of mysticism in a time of social disorder (or great social changes as those in which they lived) that would illuminate the soul about the presence and perfection of God and communicate man's state of imperfection and provoke a human response in order to resist and answer the social, religious and political disarray of the times.

[1] E. VOEGELIN, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. II, *The Middle Ages to Aquinas*, CW. 20, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1997, p. 109.

[2] Ivi, p. 108.

[3] P. SABATIER, *Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi*, Milano, Mondatori, 1978, p. 32.

[4] E. VOEGELIN, *History of Political Ideas, Renaissance and Reformation*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1998, p. 149.

[5] P. SABATIER, *Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi* cit., p. 34.

[6] E. VOEGELIN, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. II, *The Middle Ages to Aquinas* cit., p. 135.

[7] Ivi, p. 138-139.

[8] Ivi, p. 137.

[9] Ivi, p. 135.

[10] E. VOEGELIN, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. II, *The Middle Ages to Aquinas* cit., p. 138.

[11] Ivi, p. 139.

[12] Ivi, p. 142.

[13] Ivi, p. 137.

[14] Ivi, p. 142.

[15] *Ibidem*.

[16] *Ibidem*.

[17] *Ibidem*.

[18] D. WALSH, *Editor's Introduction* in E. VOEGELIN, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. III, *The Later Middle Ages*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1998, pp. 14-15.

[19] G.G. MERLO, *Nel nome di San Francesco. Storia dei frati Minori e del francescanesimo sino agli inizi del XVI secolo*, Padova, EFR-Editrici Francescane, 2003, p. 233.

[20] R. MANSELLI, *L'Attesa dell'età nuova ed il gioachimismo*, in, *Convegni del Centro di studi sulla spiritualità medievale*, III, *L'attesa dell'età nuova nella spiritualità della fine del Medioevo*, Todi, 1962, p. 166.

[21] Ivi, p. 167.

- [22] P. ILARINO DA MILANO, *L'incentivo escatologico nel riformismo dell'Ordine francescano*, in, Convegni del Centro di studi sulla spiritualità medievale, III, *L'attesa dell'età nuova nella spiritualità della fine del Medioevo*, Todi, 1962, pp. 309, 312.
- [23] R. MANSELLI, *La Terza età, Babylon e l'anticristo mistico*, «Bullettino dell'istituto storico italiano per il medioevo e archivio muratoriano», 82, 1970, p. 49.
- [24] Ivi, p. 51.
- [25] Ivi, p. 60.
- [26] *Ibidem*.
- [27] Ivi, p. 61.
- [28] In this perspective, Peter Olivi's religious position differs from that of Ubertino of Casale. Ubertino, a devout disciple of Olivi, was a fervent preacher of evangelical truth. He identifies the papacy with the *ecclesia carnalis* and the pontiff with the Antichrist. Such a rigid position was due to the strong disappointment caused by the resignation of Celestine V from the papacy, who, for his previous life as hermit and for his reputation of holiness, seemed to be capable of realizing the renewal of the Roman curia that the Spirituals desired. The succession of Boniface VIII to the papal throne confirmed the identification of the pope with the Antichrist. For Ubertino, Boniface VIII wanted to build a powerful temporal church, forgetting the way of life of the apostles. The identification of the papacy with the Antichrist implied serious religious consequences: the condemnation of ecclesiastical hierarchy and the denial of the pontiff's authority.
- [29] R. MANSELLI, *La Terza età, Babylon e l'anticristo mistico* cit., p. 78.
- [30] B. MCGINN, *Storia della Mistica Cristiana in Occidente. La Fioritura della Mistica (1200-1350)*, Genova, Marietti, 2008, pp. 86 e 88.
- [31] Ivi, p. 18.
- [32] E. VOEGELIN, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. IV, *Renaissance and Reformation*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, p. 184.
- [33] Love is egoistic because the individual decides to join God, replacing God's decision; humility expresses the attitude to subordinate itself to all creatures, unlike detachment that fulfils itself. Finally, mercy helps someone needs, so it is a surge of affection, while detachment is impervious to any kind of sentimental unrest because it consists of union with God.
- [34] D.E. LINGE, *Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart*, «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», 46, 4, 1978, p. 476.
- [35] Ivi, p. 477.