

“History and Context of *Ite Vos*”

It is indeed an honor and pleasure for me to be with you today for this occasion – the United States commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the division of the brotherhood founded by Francis of Assisi. As you may know, this event is part of a larger process organized by an inter-obediential coordination group, which was established by our General Ministers in response to the invitation of Pope Francis in 2013 to them: “you should stay united – walk together and grow in common vocation and mission.” This task force, called “Franciscan Friars in Chapter,” has provided resources for a series of events, one of which revolved round the theme “*Ite Vos*: An inhabited memory for walking together towards the future.”¹ Regis and Jude will focus on the present and directions for the future. It is my task to take us into our memory – what happened 500 years ago?

For most of us, this story is a largely buried and forgotten memory – if indeed we ever really averted to it. Yes, the year 1517 does ring a bell with most friars as the year the Franciscan Order was divided in two: Conventuals and Observants, by the bull of Pope Leo X. But the details of exactly what happened, and more importantly, the why and the how lay buried.

We first must remember the wider historical context. The year 1517 was an eventful one in a troubled and complex period of Western history – and the Pope’s problems with the Franciscans were just one of them. The bull *Ite Vos* was issued on May 29 --- between two important events.² Only two months earlier, on March 16, Pope Leo had concluded the Fifth Lateran Council, summoned five years earlier under his predecessor, Julius II, with the agenda of advancing the “reformation of the Church in head and in members.” Giles of Viterbo, the General of the Augustinian friars, had given an inspiring opening address: “We human beings should be changed by religion, not religion by us human beings” – a recognition that the liberating but challenging Gospel message had been watered down or even corrupted by the weight of Church structures and imbedded practices. However, that Council ended without achieving any substantial results. Its decrees - although heading in the right direction – were relatively modest, and as one modern historian has asserted, “were stifled by the indifference of

¹ See their website: [Franciscan Friars in Chapter](https://ofm.org/blog/franciscan-friars-chapter/) (<https://ofm.org/blog/franciscan-friars-chapter/>).

² See the helpful background article by Luigi Pellegrini, “Deepening Historical and Theological Insights,” included in the online materials for the *Ite Vos* commemoration, pp, 25-35.

the Pope. . . . and the ill will of a Curia unwilling to change its ways.”³ However, we do have to place the decree *Ite Vos* into this context; the Council was very concerned with the reform of the religious orders, and the Papal commission who drew it up viewed it as part and parcel of that broader effort.

The other major event we observed earlier this week. It was on the Eve of All Hallows, October 31, 1517, that another Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, published his famous 95 theses on the doctrine of indulgences. In the end, this of course was much more momentous, as Luther’s act as a concerned professor of theology started a tumultuous chain reaction that would lead to the permanent division of the Church and indeed, all of Western Christian society.

In retrospect, *Ite Vos* seems a relatively small episode in this larger history, an intermural decree that today is pretty much of interest only to Franciscan friars. Moreover, even we friars have been largely content to summarize its major provisions in surveys of Franciscan history. I have to confess that in 30 years of teaching such a course, I have been guilty of this. The general neglect on the part of historians is evidenced by the fact that until the work of the inter-obediential commission last year, *Ite Vos* had never been translated into a modern language! I was very grateful for their work, which I used as a basis to prepare my own annotated translation from the modern critical edition of the original Latin text (available for you today).⁴

Furthermore, we Franciscans also have to admit that when we did dig in to take a deeper look at *Ite Vos*, we tended to approach it from the perspective of our respective “teams.” Even in the 16th century, Observant and Conventual chroniclers provided very different interpretations of the events, which continued right down into the 20th century in the treatments of Heribert Holzapfel (the OFM view)⁵ and Raphael Huber (the Conventual perspective).⁶ I am therefore also very grateful to the monumental study of Fr. Pacifico Sella, which came out in 2001.⁷ His detail and objectivity has provided an escape from these partisan views and given me a very different perspective on the bull’s context than I had previously.

³ Comment by M. Venard, cited in Pellegrini, p. 27.

⁴ Edited by J. Meseguer Fernández, “La bula ‘Ite Vos’ (29 de mayo 1517) y la reforma cisneriana,” *Archivo Ibero-Americano* 18 (1958): 257-361.

⁵ Heribert Holzapfel, *The History of the Franciscan Order* (1909), translated by Antonine Tibesar and Gervase Brinkmann (Teutopolis, Ill., St. Joseph Seminary, 1945).

⁶ Raphael Huber, *A Documented History of the Franciscan Order* (Milwaukee: Nowiny Publishing Apostolate, 1944).

⁷ Pacifico Sella, *Leone X a la definitiva divisione dell’Ordine dei Minori, (OMin.): La Bolla ‘Ite Vos’ (29 maggio 1517)* (Grottaferrata, 2001).

My task this morning is to examine “the history and context of *Ite Vos*.” Its author, Pope Leo, offers us a good deal of help here, as we have only to look at the opening section of the bull itself to discover the broad historical context in which it stands. The title is a line from the parable in chapter 20 of Matthew’s Gospel about a vineyard owner who goes out in search of workers to gather his harvest of grapes.⁸ Here Leo hearkens back to the agricultural image set by Nicholas III in his classic exposition of the Franciscan Rule – *Exiit Qui Seminat* (1279). However, Leo goes on to make his Gospel text – which has the vineyard owner going out at different times of the day - an extended allegory on the previous 300 years of Franciscan history. I first should note that, like his predecessor, the Pope asserts that the Franciscan movement is especially dear to Christ – indeed in a special way closely following in his footprints:

Even though he took care of everyone and managed everything that he did, nevertheless, among his other seedlings, which, through his Father he planted in the ground of the Church militant, there was one that he looked after with such ardent love, that everywhere he would call it his own. . . This is the sacred religion of the Friars Minor . . . that holy and immaculate religion in which we may contemplate the presence of the Redeemer as through a spotless mirror. Through it, one can admire the form of life of Christ and the apostles. It evokes what is divine, angelic, most perfect, and in full conformity to Christ -- so much so that it can justly be called his own. . .

The bull continues, with the same apocalyptic imagery used by Bonaventure in his *Legenda Major*, to argue for the privileged role of Francis in the history of salvation:

To cultivate this vineyard, the Master of the Household sent, *early in the morning*,⁹ *from the rising of the sun, an Angel ascending from the east, with the sign of the living God*,¹⁰ the blessed Francis, who, along with companions of admirable sanctity, laid the first foundations of this vineyard.

However, we quickly see that the work of these holy founders apparently did not endure. The bull continues:

In the third hour, religious men, led by blessed Bonaventure, succeeded them; with the power and help of the Holy Trinity, they repaired the walls of this vineyard already threatening to fall into ruin

“Already threatening to fall into ruin”? What happened? Ironically, we in 2017 might actually be in a better position to answer this question than the writers of *Ite Vos*. This is because fifty years ago the Second Vatican Council, in the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, told religious men and women that the “up-to-date renewal” of their congregations depended on their first returning

⁸ Precisely Mt 20:4: “Ite et vos in vineam meam” – “You also go into my vineyard.” The final version of the bull left out the *et* (“also”).

⁹ Mt 20:1.

¹⁰ Rev. 7:2. Bonaventure applies this passage to St. Francis in his *Legenda major*, prol. (FA:ED 2: 527).

to “their primitive inspiration,” . . . “faithfully acknowledging and maintaining the spirit and aims of each founder.”¹¹ This set in motion an unprecedented historical retrieval of our early Franciscan source, ultimately yielding the massive three volume *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*. What we discovered in so doing is that the simple formula of “going back to the sources” did not yield clear results and indeed involves some fundamental tensions. As Irish Franciscan Colin Garvey put it, “If the Franciscans are to go back to their roots, the question arises immediately, “What roots?’ Are they to try to recapture the life-style of Francis and his first followers, from about 1209 to 1219? . . . or the life-style of the main body of the Order [in the 1220’s], as it was developing under the ministers?”¹² What I am getting at here is that this “threatening to fall into ruin” of Francis’ brotherhood of which *Ite Vos* speaks was not simply a matter of the friars’ failing to live up to their Rule. Rather, it involved a significant transformation of the way they conceived of that Gospel way of life – a transformation in which the Papacy itself played a major part.

Five years ago, Fr Michael Cusato wrote a fine essay on Francis and the Early Franciscan movement. He concluded¹³:

The charism of Francis and his [first] brothers would continue in the life of the Franciscan family. However, the understanding of that charism, at least since the chapter of 1220, was no longer uniform among the friars. Already by the general chapter of 1230, significant controversies were beginning to arise over the precise understanding of the wording used in the definitive Rule and the intention of Francis. Indeed, the seeds of the future controversies over the observance of evangelical poverty were already sown in this famous chapter. Franciscan history from this point forward will forever be marked by the unease and co-existence of these two, quite different, forms of Franciscan life and work: each challenging the other to remain faithful to the founding charism or to be open to the needs of the Church at any given time. For both aspects were in some way, already present in the person of Francis.

What was this “founding charism” of which Cusato speaks? – what Francis called “a life according to the form of the Holy Gospel?” Those of you who have taken my course in Franciscan history will remember that I isolate four main elements of that charism. Two are contained in their very name: *Fratres Minores*.

First, they were brothers. This identity was primary. The word “brotherhood” describes what they had created among themselves – a group of men, from all walks of life, each moved by the

¹¹ *Perfectae Caritatis* (28 Oct 1965), 2.

¹² Colin Garvey, OFM “Twisted Roots and Muddied Sources,” *The Cord* 24 (1984): 68-83. This article is still worth reading today. The quote is from

¹³ Michael Cusato, OFM “Francis and the Franciscan movement (1181/82-1226,” *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael Robson (Cambridge: University Press, 2012), p. 32.

inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who accepted each other for who they were, bonded together in a network of relationships, characterized by mutual love, care, and support.

Moreover, they were “lesser” – their brotherhood was created by the fact that each of them had taken to heart the first Gospel text the first brothers found when they were discerning their way of life: Jesus’ advice to the rich young man to “sell everything you possess and give it to the poor; then come and follow me.”¹⁴ The brothers had taken this radical step of “leaving all things.” Consequently, as their Rule stated – they lived “without anything of their own.”¹⁵ They supported themselves through their daily work, hiring themselves out as day laborers, or begging when they did not find work. As payment, they accepted the necessities of life – food, clothing, a place to live – but not money. As “little people” in society having a precarious economic status, they were also “simple and subject to all.”¹⁶

Third, the vitality of that brotherhood depended on their desire to seek, above everything else, “the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity.”¹⁷ This meant not simply a commitment to the liturgical prayer of the larger Church but, more importantly, creating the inner space to be attentive to the working of the Lord in their daily life – continually calling them to deeper levels of conversion. The early brotherhood therefore had a strong eremitical component – with the brothers withdrawing as the Spirit moved them to remote places for prayer and contemplation.

Finally, their brotherhood had a mission: “sent into the whole world to bear witness to the Lord’s voice in word and deed and bring everyone to know that there is no one who is all-powerful except him.”¹⁸ A key text here for the brothers was Luke 10 – the third Gospel text they found when discerning their way of life – Jesus’ sending out of the seventy disciples. As Michael Blastic observes: “This text, which is embodied in the fourteenth chapter of the early Rule, assumes that the brothers are itinerant, and that as they go about the world, they meet people where they find them, engage them in honest conversation in the homes that are opened up to

¹⁴ Mt 19:21; Lk 18:22. This story is first related in AP 2.10-11. See Michael Blastic, “Our Franciscan Evangelical Way of Life and Ministry in the Twenty-First Century,” *The Cord* 59 (2009): 259-280, here pp. 263, 268, 270-272.

¹⁵ ER, 1.1-2, LR 1.1.

¹⁶ Test, 19.

¹⁷ LR, 10.8.

¹⁸ LtOrd 9.

them, eating and drinking what is set before them, promoting peace, and in and through this encounter, pointing to the nearness of the kingdom of God.”¹⁹

These characteristics of the early fraternity’s life and mission describe a group predominantly composed of penitent laymen. We really do not see here any focus on formal church ministry exercised on behalf of the institutional Church. However, this picture rapidly changed. After 1220 more and more zealous young clerics were attracted to this vibrant evangelical movement, who naturally wanted to employ their education and pastoral skills as Franciscans. Their desires dovetailed with those prelates – including Popes Honorius III and Gregory IX – who wished to enlist the Lesser Brothers in the church’s pastoral mission --- especially the agenda set by the Fourth Lateran Council to provide a dedicated corps of preachers and confessors for the People of God.

We see at work here the second dynamic that Cusato identifies in Franciscan history: the Order wanted “to be open to the needs of the Church at any given time.” This commitment to meet the pastoral needs of the Church – by popular demand and the friars’ own wishes - steadily accelerated during the 1220’s and 1230’s. In fact, by 1237, Pope Gregory IX could define the very purpose of the Order as meeting the pastoral reform agenda of the Fourth Lateran Council.²⁰ To accomplish this, however, the Order underwent a transformation. By 1240, the mainstream of the community had rapidly become, as historian Duncan Nimmo puts it: “clerical, educated, urban and conventual. Each characteristic spelt modification of the fraternity’s primitive pattern.”²¹ Clerical: the principal work of the Order was increasingly identified by both the hierarchy and the laity as doctrinal and moral preaching and the administration of the sacrament of confession. Educated: preparation for this ministry demanded that friars be trained in theology, and so we quickly see them developing an organized study system. Urban: Franciscans increasingly abandoned the places on the margins of society they frequented in the early years, instead moving into towns to afford them the maximum public availability. Conventual: this new style of life meant that the friars’ gave up the free-wheeling itinerant life-style of the early years,

¹⁹Blastic, 273. Blastic makes a point of distinguishing this account in Luke 10 from the account in Luke 9, where Jesus sends out the twelve apostles. Luke 10 contains the greeting of peace and the freedom “to eat what is set before you.”

²⁰ *Quoniam abundavit* (6 April 1237). The Pope refers to the “office of preaching, for which they (the Franciscans) are assigned by virtue of their profession.” FA: ED 1, 575-577.

²¹ Duncan Nimmo, *Reform and Division in the Medieval Franciscan Order* (1226-1538) (Rome: Capuchin Historical Institute, 1987), 55.

instead settling down in fixed residences (“convents”) following the structured routine typical of other religious orders.

It is also very important to recognize that the Papacy played a critical role in this transformation: the first Papal bulls of 1219 and 1220 encouraging bishops to permit the Lesser Brothers into their dioceses focused on their preaching ministry, in 1220 also, the Papacy demanded the friars adopt a more structured way of life in the bull *Cum secundum consilium*. Most important here was the decree *Quo elongati* (1230), which offered a definitive interpretation of the Francis’ Rule itself, stating the friars were not bound by Francis’ *Testament* and creating a mechanism for them to accept the monetary alms of lay benefactors, assuring them a greater financial stability to exercise their ministries.

But what would happen to the primitive values in the process? Brotherhood – would exercising a professional ministry lead to clerical elitism? Minority? – We have just mentioned that larger houses and a professional ministry required a more secure income. And the eremitical dimension? – would the demands of maintaining a conventual routine and a demanding pastoral ministry stifle the free moving of the Spirit? Fr. David Flood’s verdict is harsh – his description of the transformation of the Order in the 1220’s and 30’s is entitled “the movement waylaid” and does not hesitate to use the word “betrayal.”²² We see that by the 1240’s, some friars who remembered the early years began telling stories about Francis and the primitive brotherhood, implicitly criticizing the way the Order was developing - in Cusato’s terms “reasserting the charism.” These stories occupy an important place in Volume Two of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*.

In large measure, Bonaventure tried to maintain a balance between these two poles. On the one hand he enthusiastically accepted and indeed strenuously defended the apostolic ministry of the friars in the Church; on the other, he demanded fidelity to certain core Franciscan values – as those who have read his scathing encyclical letters to the friars know! The general constitutions of Narbonne were meant, as he said, to provide a “hedge” to assure that the friars would remain “in bounds,” faithful to their life as poor Gospel preachers. If their ministry in the Church were to be successful, it would have to be founded on the authenticity of their life. Nicholas III’s constitution on the observance of the Rule, *Exiit Qui Seminatur* (1279), canonized Bonaventure’s

²² David Flood, *Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Movement* (Quezon City, Philippines: The Franciscan Institute of Asia, 1989), 148-167.

teaching, defending evangelical poverty as an indispensable foundation for the Order. Following *Quo Elongati*, Nicholas differentiated sharply between ownership and rights of use. He clarified that other people had to own the things the friars used and that their rights to use them could not smack of luxury or excess.²³

We have seen then, what, happened during the third hour of Franciscan history. What about the sixth hour? After Bonaventure's death, the precarious equilibrium he sought to achieve broke down. The fact that more and more friars either could not or would not maintain the official standards of *Exiit*, especially with regard to poverty, caused a strong reaction in the celebrated Spiritual movement. As you can read in the sources printed in *Volume Three of Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, the Spiritual spokesmen boldly denounced the current state of the Order in apocalyptic terms, some of them being the first to advocate the alternative of seceding from what they viewed as a diseased body. Although most of the Order's leaders did all they could to quash their movement, the Spirituels managed to gain the ear of Pope Clement V who found much of their case against current conditions in the Order to be justified. The arguments of both sides were aired before the Council of Vienne, and the resulting decree *Exivi de paradiso* (1312) established that the brothers were bound to certain 'strict or poor uses' of things by virtue of their Rule.²⁴ This was the "sixth hour" referred to by the prologue to *Ite Vos*.

But the drama did not end there for the Franciscans. Pope Clement's successor, John XXII, found himself dealing with renegade friars who refused to accept the legitimacy of any Papal declarations. The subsequent debate over the nature of the poverty of Christ ended up with the John denying the assertion made by *Exiit Qui Seminavit* and the entire previous Franciscan tradition that by renouncing all his possessions, Francis was perfectly imitating the life of Christ and his first disciples. Furthermore, on a legal level, the Pope absolved the Holy See of its responsibility of holding in trust the goods of the Franciscans, eliminating the office of the lay apostolic syndic who accepted donations and managed the friars' goods in the name of the Papacy.²⁵

This decision meant that friars now often had to manage their own property; they increasingly accepted landed estates, entering the economic system of buying and selling things

²³ *Quo elongati* (14 August 1279), FA:ED 3: 737-764.

²⁴ *Exivi de paradiso* (6 May 1312), FA:ED 3: 767-783.

²⁵ For these documents, see FA:ED 3:783-790.

like any other religious community. Many local communities received privileges and dispensations legitimating these practices. Franciscans were also caught up in the general social turmoil of the 14th century and the impact of the Black Death. Like other religious orders at the time, we see a general breakdown of discipline among the Franciscans: a tendency for friars to go on for higher studies to gain “perks” afforded to a friar elite, to secure their own private sources of income, and to obtain “outside jobs” to escape the demands of community life. We find the mystic and reformer Brigid of Sweden sternly accusing the Franciscans, “saying the devil had turned many of them ‘from humility to pride, from reasoned poverty to greed, from true obedience to self-reliance.’”²⁶

And yet, that same 14th century witnessed small groups of friars being inspired by stories in the unofficial sources like the popular “Deeds of Blessed Francis and his Companions” – and its Italian translation, the *Fioretti*. Furthermore, as the century came to a close, Bartholomew of Pisa’ massive compendium, *The Conformity of the Life of St. Francis with the Life of the Lord Jesus*, by was officially approved by the Order in 1399 and thus disseminated widely in Western Europe, serving as a vehicle to spread otherwise lost stories about the early days – the “founding charism” - of the Order among the friars.

A humble friar in Foligno, Italy, Paoluccio of Trinci had a desire to follow the Rule “to the letter,” and received permission in 1368 to retire to the remote hermitage of Brugliano with a few companions. Their way of life revived many of aspects of the “founding charism” that had been sacrificed in the name of ministerial effectiveness: a focus on contemplative prayer, equality among lay and ordained friars, and a genuinely poor life. The movement spread, and by the time of Paoluccio’s death in 1391 there were some twenty friaries in Central Italy of what was being called the Observant Reform. Just about the same time, we see this retreat to desire to retreat to rural hermitages also emerging in Spain.

Reform currents also springing up in France in the early 1390s. In contrast to the Italian and Spanish reformers, however, the French Observants did not have an eremitical focus; rather, their goal was to take an existing urban friary engaging in active ministry and reform it, following the Rule according to the old official standards of the Order. Since these friars of the “regular observance” were explicitly reacting against the “non-observant” conditions they felt dominated

²⁶ Cited in Gert Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2016), p. 286.

their provinces, they wanted to obtain a degree of autonomy from the provincial leadership in order to insure their goals. In 1407, the Avignon Pope, Clement XII, heeded these desires and gave the observant friaries in each of the French provinces the authority to elect their own vicar provincial to manage their affairs. However, when France switched allegiance to the “Pisa Pope,” Alexander V, a few years later, this privilege was revoked. The French Observants refused to accept this decision, however, and took their case to the theology faculty of the University of Paris, which sided with them. Therefore, when the general Council of Constance was called together as the supreme authority in the Church in order to end the Great Western Schism and work for the “reformation of the Church in head and in members,” the Observants appealed directly to the Council.

In 1415 the Council granted their request, allowing the observant houses in three of the French provinces to elect a vicar provincial, who would be only nominally subject to the provincial minister. Furthermore, these vicar provincials could then elect a vicar general with the same power as the minister general. Any individual friar or house within the province would have the ability to accept reform and pass from the authority of the provincial to that of the vicar.²⁷

This decree created the dynamic for the “ninth hour” spoken of in *Ite Vos*. By the time the Council ended in 1417, the Italian Observants, led by figures such as Bernadine of Siena [singled out in *Ite Vos*] and John of Capistrano, were leaving their hermitages and plunging into active ministry. Returning to the older practice of popular itinerant preaching, they built up a solid following among the laity, meanwhile spreading their vision of what Franciscan life should be. These leaders found an ally in Pope Martin V, who had been elected by the Council of Constance to carry out an agenda of reform. The Pope wrote to the general chapter of 1421 deploring laxity in the Order; when reform measures failed to gain much traction, he issued a flurry of Papal licenses allowing the Observants to found new houses all over Italy. In 1428, he annulled John XXII’s decree of 1322, saying the Papacy would again assume ownership of the Order’s goods, thereby placing the management of the friars’ temporal affairs into the hands of a lay apostolic syndic. Martin’s efforts culminated at the chapter of 1430. There the Observants agreed to give up their autonomy under their vicars in return for the entire Order’s adopting a set of reform constitutions. Largely drawn up by John of Capistrano, they called for all friars to observe the

²⁷ *Supplicationibus personarum* (23 Sep 1415).

Rule and live in common, setting a minimum standard of poverty which entailed divesting themselves of income-producing property and prohibiting the use of money. This was the “ninth hour” referred to in *Ite Vos*.²⁸

The story of moving from this point to the “eleventh hour” – a space of almost nine decades - is a complicated and dreary one. The first major event was the failure of the constitutions of 1430 to gain general acceptance; only several months after the chapter the general minister had to approach Pope Martin, who issued a bull legitimizing the right of houses to own property and enjoy fixed regular incomes.²⁹ This move doomed the hope for uniform Franciscan standards; in response, the disgruntled Observants demanded that the new Pope, Eugene IV, restore their provincial vicars. Eugene still hoped that the Order’s leadership would embrace a thoroughgoing reform; it was no secret that at the chapter of 1443 he favored the election of an Observant, Albert of Sarteano, as Minister General. When this attempt failed, he appointed two Vicar Generals for the Observants, who were given wide powers to organize the Observant friars in their regions. Three years later, with the bull *Ut Sacra*,³⁰ he made this arrangement permanent. In effect, Eugene organized the Regular Observants as an autonomous congregation within the larger Order; the Cismontane vicar provincials and their Ultramontane counterparts would meet in their own general chapters to elect a Vicar General for themselves and draw up their own general constitutions; the Minister General only enjoyed the right to confirm these elections; once in office, the Vicars General could operate pretty much independently from him.³¹ This large congregation created by the bull *Ut Sacra* are the Observants “of the Family” referred to in *Ite Vos*.

Lets’ move now to the second section of the prologue of *Ite Vos*. As Pope Leo attests, ever since Pope Eugene’s decision, a strident opposition formed between the two parties.

Just as among the workers of the vineyard in the Gospel parable, when the ones who came later were treated as being equivalent to the ones who arrived earlier, a great clamor arose, as kings, princes, communities and peoples attest. News has reached us that serious contentions, quarrels and clashes are occurring among the friars of this religion, over [alleged] superiority and higher degrees of perfection, incidents that have been increasing day by day throughout the world.

²⁸ “Then, *at the ninth hour* . . . the Lord stirred up the spirit of a youth, or rather a few friars, who under the guidance and authority of the blessed Bernardine, the herald of the Name of Jesus, and trusting in the support of the Council of Constance, revived the Order, which had languished, indeed, was almost dead.”

²⁹ *Ad statum* (23 Aug 1431).

³⁰ *Ut Sacra* (11 Jan 1446).

³¹ Eugene had made a symbolic statement of his preference the preceding year, transferring the friary of Aracoeli, since 1250 the Roman headquarters of the General Minister, to the Cismontane Vicar General.

By the latter decades of the 15th century, these “quarrels and clashes” between the Conventuals and the upstart Observants became ever more acrimonious, as the two branches competed for vocations and public support. The Conventuals, who held the official leadership of the Order, defended their position by emphasizing the bonds of fraternity. Francis had commanded all the brothers to be obedient to them, the legitimate General Minister and provincial ministers. The Observants, by demanding their autonomy, were divisive. The Observants, on the other hand, replied that they were only attempting to observe the Rule; since the leadership of the Order were allowing friars to break it, thus allowing the body to become corrupt, they demanded the freedom to live what they viewed as the authentic Franciscan life under their own superiors.

There were also two other important factors at work in this period that are reflected in the text of *Ite Vos*. First, not mentioned in the prologue, but evident in the various provisions, is that the movements of reform among Franciscans had multiplied. Besides the Observants “of the Family,” there were a number of reformed friars living “*sub ministris*” (under the authority of the leaders of the Order). The largest of these were the so-called “Colettans.” This group stemmed from the desire of St. Colette of Corbie, reforming leader among the Poor Clares, to have small communities of friars sympathetic with her ideals attached to her monasteries. In 1427 the Minister General appointed Henry of Baume, who was already an advisor to Colette, as his commissary to organize friars for this purpose. Living by distinctive statutes, this movement spread, well beyond the Colletine monasteries, and by the early 1500s were almost as numerous in France as the Regular Observants. Elsewhere in France and Germany there were also a number of friaries who had agreed to follow the “Martinian” constitutions of 1430.

And then, there were three smaller reform groups under the Minister General which enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy under their own vicars. The first, the “Amadeans,” was a reform congregation founded near Milan the late 1460’s by a Portuguese nobleman, Amadeo Menez de Silva (+ 1482); by the late 1400s they had about 30 houses. The second were the “Clareni,” the progeny of the Spiritual leader Angelo Clareno, who had rebelled against church authority in the early 1300s; later in the century, however, they had been reconciled to the Church, living under the authority of local bishops; in 1473, they asked to be received back into communion with the rest of the Order but allowed to elect their own vicar general. The third group – variously called the “Discalced,” the “Friars of the Holy Gospel,” or the “Friars of the Capuche,” owed their origins to some hermitages established in Spain by Juan de Puebla and recognized in 1489. After

Juan's death, a disciple, Juan de Guadalupe, wished to lead a life of the "strictest observance," gaining exemption for his group in 1496. In 1500, then, the Order of Friars Minor in 1500 was an organizational nightmare, with a proliferation of governing documents and a splintered authority structures.

The second factor evident from the text of *Ite Vos* is the prominent role that lay rulers were increasingly playing in this Franciscan controversy. Pope Leo states that "kings, princes, and communes" have been besieging him to take action, citing a veritable litany of the crowned heads of Europe.³² By and large, these rulers favored the Observants or other groups of "reformed" friars, but regardless, were of one accord that something had to be done. The vigor and authenticity of the reformed friars had captured the popular imagination; especially important here was the return of the Regular Observants to popular itinerant preaching which brought them into close relationship with local governments and even some monarchs.³³ Key here in Italy was the support of the Observants for the *monti di pieta*, an early form of credit union, where the working poor could take out loans. The most prominent of civil governments favoring the Observants was Spain. There the Observant Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros was named the confessor of Queen Isabella in 1492; three years later, she nominated him as Archbishop of Toledo and inspector of all religious orders in the country. With the clout of the government behind him, he applied tremendous pressure on Conventual friaries to join the Observants or face civil penalties or even suppression.

The Papacy too recognized the growing popularity of the Observants among the people; in the wake of the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Pope Callistus III specifically commissioned the Observants as apostolic preachers to go about Central and Eastern Europe to raise crusading armies in response to the Turkish threat to the Balkans and Hungary.³⁴ Likewise, Sixtus IV, who had been Minister General of the Order and therefore naturally sympathetic to the Conventual party, nonetheless turned to the Observants again in 1480 to recruit troops against new Turkish advances. This made it natural that Leo X himself, in the very years leading up to *Ite Vos*, would also turn to Observant preachers for another great task: that is, raising funds for the "fabric of St.

³² ". . . especially from our beloved sons in Christ, the Emperor-elect Maximilian; and the illustrious kings, Francis, the most Christian (king) of France; the Catholic Charles of Spain; Henry the VIII of England; Manuel of Portugal and the Algarves; Louis of Hungary and Bohemia; Sigismund of Poland; Christian of Denmark. . . "

³³ On these developments, see Sella, pp. 203-221.

³⁴ One immediately thinks of the key role of John of Capestrano in this regard.

Peter,” to finance the construction of the vast new basilica begun by Julius II. This year, as we recall Luther’s protest against the Dominican preacher of indulgences, John Tetzl, we should realize that the other orders were comparative “small fry” in comparison with the vast sums raked in by the Observants. During the year 1514-15 the Observant Franciscans raised 8150 ducats, in comparison to 4.793 from all other sources; in 1515-16 the Observants brought in 11,624 compared to 8723 from other sources. And, in the year 1516-17, precisely when the Papal commission was considering what to decide about the Franciscans, the Observants mounted an all-out effort, pulling in some 26,041 ducats, in comparison to 8740 from all other sources (of which 1200 came from Conventual Franciscans).³⁵ Not only were kings sympathetic to the Observants; the Papal Curia realized they were a major funding source for its operations.

Pope Leo’s little allegory of Franciscan history finally brings us to the immediate background for *Ite Vos*: “lately, in these last days, almost to the last hour, other men have appeared, zealots for the house of Israel.” This chiefly refers to the reforming efforts of Giles Delfini, Minister General from 1500 to 1506. Under his leadership, the chapter of 1500 had drafted a set of statutes designed to enforce higher standards of observance. Giles devoted his time as general travelling around the provinces, trying to enforce these regulations, but also attempting to curb the autonomy of the Observants. He saw as a model the *reformati sub ministris*, especially the Colettan friars in France.³⁶ Despite his valiant efforts, Giles failed in his attempts to bring reform to the entire Order and urged Pope Julius II to call a “most general” (*generalissimum*) chapter, of the leaders of all major groups in the Order in 1506. This chapter unfortunately ended in a stalemate - but two things were becoming clearer. First, Giles’ efforts showed that the fundamental divide in the Order was no longer really between Conventuals and Observants, but between “reformed friars” - both Observants “of the Family” and the various groups of reformed Conventuals “under the ministers” - and a block of Conventuals opposed to reform efforts. Second, it was now evident to everyone that the Franciscans were incapable of resolving their problems: a solution could only come from the Holy See.

Julius II did not provide much leadership in this regard. Finally, however, with the Fifth Lateran Council itself urging the Pope to take action and appeals that grew ever more insistent from rulers, Leo X finally decided to move on the matter. Early in 1516, he set up a commission

³⁵ See Sella, 279-286.

³⁶ Pellegrini provides a good description of Giles’ efforts (pp. 29-30).

to “investigate diligently the causes and origins of the quarrels and divisions” in the Order of Friars Minor” and “to explore thoroughly appropriate remedies to settle these disputes.”³⁷ This commission consisted of four cardinals, including Domenico Grimani, Cardinal Bishop of Albano, the Cardinal Protector.³⁸ Four friar advisors were also named: John Glapion, a Flemish Observant and close confidant of the future Emperor Charles V; Boniface of Ceva, brilliant advocate of the “reformed under the ministers”; Alfonso Lozano, procurator general of the Cismontane Observants in the Roman Curia; and Juan de Costa, procurator general of the Ultramontane Observants. It should be noted that none of these friars belonged to the “unreformed” Conventual party. The first recommendation of the Commission was that the Pope should summon another *capitulum generalissimum* (“most general chapter”) in Rome at Pentecost, 1517, bringing together not only the usual provincial ministers and representative custodian from each province, but also the leaders of all the various reform groups within the Order. Leo accordingly issued the decree, *Romanum Pontificem*, on July 11, 1516, summoning all parties to Rome the following year.

Meanwhile, the Commission continued working on what they viewed as the “appropriate remedies” for resolving the disputes in the Franciscan Order. We have already seen that the prologue of the draft document, explaining the historical context for the bull, definitely reflected a reformed agenda. Also, the various provisions they proposed did not contain anything really new: most of their solutions simply restated the reform proposals advanced to Giles Delfini in 1503-1505 by the Vicar of the Ultramontane Observants, Marcial Boulier.³⁹ The draft bull apparently was completed by Christmas of 1516; its rumored content was known to Giles of Viterbo, Prior General of the Augustinian Friars in January 1517, and we know that at least the Portuguese ambassador obtained a copy in April, which he sent to King Manuel to give him a “heads-up” on what was going to occur.⁴⁰

However, in the final weeks before the Chapter was due to open, a body of resistance to the draft began to emerge among some Cardinals in the Roman Curia, while letters continued to

³⁷ *Ite Vos*, prologue 2.

³⁸ The others were Lorenzo Pucci, personal secretary to the Pope; Bernardino de Carvajal, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia; and Pietro Accolti.

³⁹ Sella, 288.

⁴⁰ Sella, 287-294.

arrive from various governments until literally the last moment. These would affect the final version of the bull.

Let us now turn to the solution that Pope Leo offered with the promulgation of *Ite Vos*. Toward the end of May, a crowd of several thousand friars had massed in Rome to be present for the excitement of the chapter – Pentecost was to fall on May 31. On May 25, a commission of seven cardinals was appointed to manage the discussions with the chapter delegates on behalf of the Pope. The following day, all the delegates gathered at St. Peter’s basilica in consistory with most of the cardinals in the presence of the Pope. The interventions that day showed both sides had not moved beyond the impasse of the last “most general chapter” eleven years earlier. That day was significant, however, as that morning the Pope had received in audience the ambassador of the Doge of Venice, urging him not to interfere with the current conditions of the two groups of friars, but simply separate them into two independent orders. On May 27, a hint of what was going to happen emerged when the Pope and the Papal commission heard the two groups separately: the Minister General, Bernardino Prati, stated that the Conventuals were not prepared to give up their privileges; in response the Pope gathered the Observants and asked their Vicar Generals if they would be willing to work with the reformed Conventual faction. They replied yes. Later, the reformed Conventuals were called in; they also signaled their willingness to cooperate with a solution.

When all the delegates were gathered again on May 28th and 29th, it was clear that the position of the main body of the Conventuals had hardened; they wished to maintain their privileges; in response, the Observants said they were not willing to accept another unreformed General Minister. While these discussions were going on, on May 29th, the Pope made his decision – first he cleared the deck for the election of a new Minister General by “kicking upstairs” the incumbent, Bernadino Prato, nominating him titular bishop of Athens. He also signed the definitive version of *Ite Vos*, which reflected the discussions that had taken place over the previous days.

On May 30th, the Vigil of Pentecost, the Pope’s decision was announced to the conclave by one of the cardinals: that the body of reformed friars would henceforth be regarded as the Order of Friars Minor, and that only their representatives would have the right to elect the new General Minister. This startling announcement called an uproar in the basilica. With it, the “most general chapter” effectively came to an end, as the Conventual friars, hearing they would be excluded from

the election, withdrew from the assembly and gathered at their church, the basilica of the Twelve Apostles, and proceeded to elect their own General, Antonio Marcello. Meanwhile, Christopher Numai, the Vicar General of the Cismontane Observants, proceeded with the solemn reading of *Ite Vos* in the presence of the Pope.

Exactly what was stated in the bull? Here you should refer to the translation of *Ite Vos* accompanying this talk. This translation, following the critical edition of Meseguer Fernandez, has nine sections or titles. We have already examined the first section, the preamble; this is divided into two parts. The first, as we have seen, lays out the broad historical background; the second, the immediate context, the disputes going on within the Order.

The second section deals with the immediate matter at hand, that is, the stipulations for the election of the General Minister. *Ite Vos* begins by re-stating the ideal contained in the Rule, which the Conventuals had always emphasized: “that that there should be one Minister General of the whole Order with full powers over all individual friars of the same Order. Each and every friar is bound strictly to obey him in all those matters that do not go against God, their soul, or the Rule.”⁴¹ It would seem there is nothing new here. However, as the bull continues, we see a dramatic reversal of past practice: from now on, the election of the Minister General will be entrusted to the reformed provincial ministers and custodians. For this purpose, the provincial vicars of the Observant friars were now recognized as the true ministers of their provinces. Further, the Pope specified that “no friar shall be elected if he is not leading a reformed life.”⁴²

The next day being the feast of Pentecost, no session was held, but on the following day, June 1, the Observant delegates and the representatives of the various reformed Conventual groups gathered at the church of Aracoeli; the bull was again read aloud. The cardinal presidents then certified the eligible capitular delegates according to the provisions of the bull, who then proceeded to elect Christopher Numai, the Vicar General of the Cismontane Observants, as Minister General of “the whole Order of Friars Minor.” The outgoing General, Anthony Marcello, was ordered to turn over the seal of the Order to Numai. In addition, this new provision on the General Minister, reacting against the common tendency to keep re-electing the same friars to office,⁴³ strictly limited the Minister General to a six-year term. Furthermore, to

⁴¹ *Ite Vos*, 2.1.

⁴² *Ite Vos* 2.4.

⁴³ For example, Francesco Nanni, called ‘Samson,’ held the office of general minister from 1475-99.

assure a geographical balance in the highest leadership, the office had to alternate between a Cismontane and an Ultramontane friar.

The next provision (section 3) of *Ite Vos* would actually work against maintaining a unified command in the newly reconstituted Order. However, the friars on the Papal commission who drew up the draft document took for granted the significant differences between Cismontane and Ultramontane friars that had developed over the preceding century. Reform efforts in Spain, France, and Germany had quite different origins than the Italian Observants and thus had developed their own regional customs; these differences were accentuated by the practice of the Ultramontane and Cismontane friars to hold their own general chapters and develop their own legislation. Thus, to insure a respect for local conditions, and given the difficulty of communications at the time, the office of Commissary General was established. If the General Minister were a Cismontane friar, he was asked to delegate his authority to a Commissary General who would represent him in the Ultramontane zone. This Commissary General was to be elected in a general chapter of the friars in his own zone. In effect, this meant the Order would have two more-or-less equal heads, one of whom enjoyed the title of General Minister for six years, which would then switch to his counterpart, would lead the Order.

Section 4 deals with the provincial ministers. It spells out what had already been stated in section 2, that is, in those provinces where the provincial minister was not a reformed Conventual (that is, the vast majority of provinces), “the vicars of the friars of the Observance . . . are henceforth and forever the undoubted ministers of those provinces.” It emphasizes that each and every friar is to be fully subject to them, including friars who had previously been members of a distinct reform group. In addition, this provision limited the provincial minister to a term of three years.

Section 5 finally gets around to determining exactly what friars are to be included under the term “Reformed,” or “those who observe the Rule of blessed Francis purely and simply.” These are the Observants “of the Family” and the Reformed “under the ministers,” including the distinct groups of the Amadeans, the Colettans, the Clareni, and the Discalced. Here the definitive version of the bull differs from the draft considerably, as the draft had gone on to specify that to be considered “reformed,” a friary must renounce property and fixed incomes in a manner established by law. The definitive version is content to mention the names of the various groups that will form the reconstituted reformed Order. From now on, they are to abandon these

previous designations, and be all known from now on as “Friars Minor of St. Francis of the Regular Observance, together or separately” – that is, “Friars Minor,” or “Friars of St Francis (i.e., Franciscans) of the Regular Observance.”

Meseguer Fernandez’s edition of *Ite Vos* then continues with a Section 6, which, as you see, consists of only one sentence: “The Conventuals then, who live according to privileges, should be subject to and obey the same Ministers General and Provincial, in the ways that will be established when our forthcoming letters are published.” Why have this one sentence be a separate section? It could just as easily have been tacked on to the preceding section which had spelled out who were the “reformed” friars of the newly reconstituted Order. The reason a separate section is distinguished here was to indicate that this one sentence is all that remains of a series of provisions in the draft of *Ite Vos*. The paragraphs in the draft eliminated in the final document would have consigned the unreformed Conventuals to gradual extinction. The Papal commission who drew up the document had envisioned placing all the friaries in each province who were not “reformed” – that is, who had not renounced the ownership of property and fixed incomes – under the care of a commissary provincial appointed by the Observant provincial minister. This commissary was to work toward getting these houses to accept the reform; if they failed to do so in good time, they could not accept new vocations or ordain more men to the priesthood. All that is remains of these harsh provisions is the simple statement that the Conventual friars will be subject to the (Observant) Minister General and provincials in ways that will be determined in a forthcoming document.

That document came almost two weeks later in the bull *Omnipotens Deus* (12 June 1517). With this bull, Leo effectively organized the Conventual friars who wished to keep their privileges and possessions as a separate congregation. They were permitted to elect their own Master General and their own provincial masters. These were to be subject to the parallel Observant leadership in the same way as the Observant vicars “of the Family” had previously been subject to the Conventual general and provincial superiors – that is, simply to seek confirmation of their election. Otherwise, the two groups were to work totally independently of each other; the Minister General “of the whole Order” could not interfere in the Conventuals’ autonomy; he or a minister provincial could only make a fraternal visit to a Conventual if he happened to be in the area. However, in all ceremonies the Observants were to take precedence over the Conventuals.

Section 7 of *Ite Vos*, in a “ban against name-calling,” attempted to assure harmony among the friars. It forbade them, under penalty of excommunication, to refer to each other by offensive terms or even by the titles of their former group. It went on to say that no Reformed friar in the newly constituted Order could leave the obedience of his minister to dwell in an unreformed house. On the other hand, as specified in the follow-up bull *Omnipotens Deus*, an individual Conventual friar could always transfer to the Observants. However, no Conventual house could be transferred to the Observance by any secular power; this could occur only by a 2/3 vote of the friars themselves. Also, section 7 strictly forbade any friar to introduce a new “sect” or reform in the Order without the express consent of the Minister General or the provincial minister concerned.

The provisions conclude with Section 8, mandating that new general constitutions be drawn up to spell out the way of life of the newly unified Order. Then, there was a final section 9, containing legal clauses concerning the publication and enforcement of the document.

On the surface, the bull *Ite Vos* represented the vindication and the triumph, institutionally speaking, of the Observant position; at the time, they were filled with jubilation at Leo’s decision. Their Minister General was the titular head of a body of reformed Friars Minor, possessing the seal “of the whole Order,” a judgment which Leo confirmed in a follow-up bull, *Licet alias*, of December 6, 1517:

Given that the very brothers of the Observance and Reform have always been true and certain brothers of the Order of blessed Francis and his Rule . . . without any interruption or division, from the time of the publication of the Rule on the part of blessed Francis until today. . . we decree and command that from every point of view they should be held and considered as such and must be called such.⁴⁴

The Conventuals, in contrast, were bitterly disappointed by Leo’s decision. However, as the dust settled, it became increasingly clear that Leo had given neither group all it wanted. In that sense, *Ite Vos* struck a *via media*. Going into the “most general” chapter, the Conventuals, once they saw the ways the winds were blowing, saw, as their best-case scenario, a division of the Order into two totally independent congregations under two General Ministers. They failed to attain this in 1517 – Leo’s decision, expressed in *Ite Vos* and *Omnipotens Deus*, still maintained, on paper at least, the ideal of one Order of Friars Minor. The Conventuals were seen in some

⁴⁴ Cited in Grado Giovanni Merlo, *In the Name of St. Francis: History of the Friars Minor and Franciscanism until the Early Sixteenth Century*, trans. Raphael Bonnano (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan University Press, 2009), p. 427.

way as still subservient to the Observants. On the other hand, the Observants wanted a united reformed Order, which meant condemning the “unreformed” Conventuals to gradual extinction, as had been proposed in the draft of *Ite Vos*. This they did not achieve.

In some ways, Leo’s split decision reflected his own personality. He was a good-natured man who shrank from conflict and desired peace at all costs. He was also very shrewd. Ludwig von Pastor, in his famous *History of the Popes*, writes:

“It took him indeed weeks, and even months, before he could make up his mind. . . but more revolting than his indecision are the want of straightforwardness, nay the falseness, the double-dealing, by which the policy of Leo X, as a true statesman of the Renaissance, was almost actuated. The plan of ‘steering by two compasses’ became second nature to him. Quite unabashed, he acted on the principle that for the sake of being ready for every event, the conclusion of a treaty with one party need offer no obstacle to the conclusion of another in an opposite sense with his opponent. . . “⁴⁵

What was the significance of *Ite Vos*? In almost every way, its “failure was obvious from the from the start”⁴⁶ It was envisioned as a “bull of union,” but it never achieved that goal. Leo’s two bulls of 1517 had envisioned that the Conventuals would be largely autonomous, but in some way still part of the larger Order. Their superiors – called “masters,” would still have to be confirmed by the Ministers General and Provincial. In fact, this provision would never be enforced, and the Popes who succeeded Leo reverted to the older terminology, referring to the “Minister General” of the Conventual Franciscans. So the Conventuals and Observants would be totally independent of each other, two separate Orders.

But, more importantly, Leo’s goal of uniting all the various reformed groups into “one single body,”⁴⁷ renouncing all distinctive titles and peculiarities in dress, was a failure almost immediately. The problem was that the Regular Observance which dominated the reformed Order did not satisfy those friars who still sought a life of “stricter observance.” In their desire to “meet the needs of the Church” in the 1400’s (going back to Cusato’s dialectic), the Observants had become domesticated. Other than their renouncing the ownership of property and the use of money, there was not a significant difference between the Regular Observance and the Conventual position. Right from the start, Juan Pascual, who led the small Spanish congregation of Discalced Friars, refused to accept the union, and petitioned to keep their former position as a

⁴⁵ Ludwig Pastor, *The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages*, vol. 8, edited by Ralph Kerr, 3rd ed.(London: B. Herder, 1950), 84-85.

⁴⁶ Pellegrini, p. 34.

⁴⁷ *Ite Vos*, section 5.

distinctive observance under the Conventual General. The Amadeans also continued in their old position as an autonomous unit under the Conventuals. But more significantly, friars continued to create new ways of “reasserting the charism,” much like Paoluccio of Trinci had done in the early days of the Observance. However, *Ite Vos*, in its attempt to build up a unified observance, contained a strong prohibition against new “sects” arising in the Order.⁴⁸ This explains the harsh reaction of their provincial, John of Fano, against Matthew of Bascio and the Tentaglia brothers when, in 1525 -1526, they attempted to start a new reform movement. The bull *Religionis Zelus* of 1528 legitimized these “Friars Minor of the Eremitical Life,” placing them under the umbrella of the Conventual friars to protect them. And even more congregations of “stricter observance” – the Reformed, Recollect, and Discalced Franciscans, would later in the century gain autonomy under the Observants.

Yes, *Ite Vos* failed to meet Leo X’s objectives. It did succeed in one thing, however: it permanently divided the Order of Friars Minor. We here today are all brothers, sons of Francis, but are not in the same fraternity. It is ours to seek a way to walk together into a new future.

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⁴⁸ *Ite Vos*, 7.4.