chapter 5

THE SIGN OF POVERTY

Piers Plowman *(The C Version)*

a bereth þe signe of pouerte
And in þat secte oure saueour saued al mankyde.

—*Patience, in* Piers Plowman *C XVI.98–99*

Et si distribuero in cibos pauperum omnes facultates meas, et si tradidero corpus meum ita ut ardeam, charitatem autem non habuero, nihil mihi prodest. [And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.]

—*1 Corinthians 13.3*

This chapter explores "þe signe of pouerte" in the final version of *Piers Plowman*. My approach follows the procedures of reading practiced in chapter 2 as I traced the poet's treatment of the sacramental sign of the altar. It thus remains immanent to the poem's own order as I seek to describe the dialectical process in which the sign of poverty is constituted and, so I shall argue, superseded—superseded but never forgotten, a constitutive part of the process which generates it. In this mode I hope to show how the powerful orations of Rechelesnesse and Patience, with their Franciscan inflections, are placed and why they are placed as they are. Overall the chapter engages

with Langland's theology of poverty and its relations to a thoroughly troubled inheritance.[1] In doing so its analysis is also directed, as in chapter 2, at the ways in which signs work, and cease to work, in *Piers Plowman*.

The poem opens with a vision of a polity immersed in market relations and the modern Church subsumed to these energies. Even orders vowed to poverty turn preaching, exegesis, and the sacraments to "profit of þe wombe."[2] But this image of a Church which has lost all power of critical resistance to what "þe world ascuth" (Pr.20) is immediately followed by a vision of "Holy churche," the creedal Church which Christians are committed to believe (I.72–75): "Credo . . . unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam."[3] She comments on the poem's prologue as a vision of how "bisy" people are "aboute þe mase" and how unreal to them is any "othere heuene then here" (I.3–9). Rightly enough, Wille (so named at I.5) seeks salvific instruction from her (I.76–80). She responds generously. Her teaching is immensely rich and deploys a wide range of modes. In a number of areas it will take the whole poem, a lifetime's searching for Wille, to unfold the implications of her utterances. This unfolding will necessarily disclose the negations her affirmations assume. And Wille's inquiries will take us down paths which Holy Church does not take. But it will emerge that only thus can we understand the implications her teachings hold in the poet's culture, only thus come to understand "þe mase" from which we begin. Wille himself does not initially recognize the Church that made him a "fre man" and whom he has promised to obey, believe, and love throughout his life (I.72–75). In response to her calling, Wille's memory stirs, and he, for the moment, acknowledges her: "Thenne y knelede on my knees and criede here of grace" (I.76).

Holy Church perceives God's creation (invisible to those absorbed by "þe mase") as divine generosity, divine "cortesye" to humans (I.14–20). The latter are embodied, communitarian spirits. For them, she maintains, faithful worship means living in accord with the virtues that enable a good use of the gifts of creation, however abundant [thow muche] these are. The "formor of alle" intends humans to be at ease [attese] in the material world. This ease, however, depends on cultivating dispositions to live "in mesure." These dispositions are known as the cardinal virtues, and already they are bound up with the means of salvation left to the Church by the risen Christ (Pr.128–33; cf. XXI.274–308).[4] Wille asks Holy Church to say more about "þe moneye of þis molde," the "tresour" desired by most people in the Prologue (I.42–43). Her answer directs him to Christ's statement about relations between God and Caesar, adding that "welthe" should be used with "resoun" and "kynde witte" (I.44–53). Holy Church's approach to the gifts

of creation, to human productivity and exchange, is as free from glorification of riches as it is from glorification of poverty. Despite the vision of the Prologue and despite her engagement with evangelical doctrine ("'Go to þe gospel,' quod she," I.44) she does not even give a nod to the fierce and extensive debates on the status of poverty and mendicancy that had riven the Church in the hundred years before *Piers Plowman* and would continue to do so in different forms for many years.[5] Does her focus change in response to Wille's passionate prayer to learn how he may save his soul (I.76–80)? It does not, despite her meditation on Christ's Incarnation.

In this her response to Wille is significantly different from the response given in a comparable episode where Patience instructs Actyf (*Activa Vita*), an important episode discussed later in this chapter. Holy Church fuses the perspectives she has been cultivating with a Christocentric discourse which brilliantly develops a dense range of scriptural texts. Wille has asked her to teach him how he can save his soul, and she shows that reflection on Christ's Incarnation returns us to concern with just practice in a determinate community (I.81–204).[6] According to Holy Church, truthful practice, in word and deed, flowing from a good will to all, participates in the divine life (I.81–87).[7] Just as Holy Spirit will insist near the poem's conclusion, so Holy Church states at its opening that such practice, participating in the perfections of divine life given to humans, will include dominion and just coercion (I.90–102; see XXI.245–47).

All positions in the battles over poverty and its status in Christian living claimed that they were warranted by Christian Scripture and were following Christ. From a particular model of Christ devotional writers and polemicists read off a version of obedient discipleship and its most perfect form. If writers claimed that Christian perfection consisted in absolute poverty, having nothing in person or in common and consequently pursuing a life of mendicancy, they envisioned a Christ who renounced both personal and common dominion, who taught that absolute voluntary poverty was the highest form of virtue, the cause of infinite goods, the root of all spiritual goods, the pearl of the gospel, the twelve pearls of the apocalypse. The Christ of such Christians, like themselves, pursued the life of mendicancy.[8] When such people addressed the fact that according to Scripture Christ and his disciples kept a purse and had the resources to buy provisions (John 13.29, 12.6), they maintained that this was merely a condescension to the weak, to those unable to pursue the path of voluntary poverty; they also made much of the fact that he who carried the purse was Judas, thief and betrayer.[9] Langland's Holy Church includes an exquisite

lyric on the Incarnation during her instruction of Wille, but it is a very different mode from that of apologetics and polemics in the poverty conflicts. Her attention is on the divine will to heal humans in soul *and* body:

> Loue is þe plonte of pees, most precious of vertues,
> For heuene holde hit ne myghte, so heuy hit semede,
> Til hit hadde of erthe yȝoten hitsilue.
> And when hit hadde of þe folde flesch and blode taken
> Was neuer lef vppon lynde lyhtere theraftur
> And portatif and persaunt as þe poynt of a nelde
> That myȝte non Armure hit lette ne none heye walles.
> (I.148–54)

This dazzling image of divine generosity conveys an extraordinary sense of divine embodiment not as constricting but as charged with boundless energy and joy.[10] The speaker resists conventional late medieval tendencies to focus with massive elaboration on the passion and crucifixion of Christ. Holy Church's focus is on the Incarnation as a plenitudinous release of divine power piercing through imprisoning physical and spiritual walls, foreshadowing the emancipation of hell and the extensive representations of Christ in *Piers Plowman* (XVIII–XXI).[11] From this figuration of healing power in the Incarnation Holy Church turns to Christ's forgiveness of those who killed him and takes this as an example of the unity of power and mercy demanded from human beings who are "riche." She apparently knows of no demands for voluntary poverty in Christian discipleship, however devoted. She teaches that those with possessions must give to "þe pore, / Of such good as god sent goodliche parte" (I.161–80). The first passus ends with her affirmation that virtues uninformed by charity will be "cheyned in helle," that those who are "vnkynde" reject the saving actions of the Trinity (I.181–204). We will meet this cluster of ideas and language once more when encountering Christ as the Good Samaritan, but by then we will have gone down ways to which Holy Church has not directed us, ways in which poverty is construed as a sanctifying sign given by the life of Christ: Franciscan ways.

Like Holy Church, Reason and Conscience show no knowledge of such a sanctifying sign during their struggle to initiate a reform of the polity which would loosen Mede's hold on institutions and individuals (II–IV). Reason does mention St. Francis (IV.117). But he seems to assimilate the latter's order to the enclosed life of monks, a life built on common dominion and possession (IV.116–17). In the light of the poem's conclusion, studied at the end of this chapter, Reason's remark might be a significant hint. But here it constitutes no more than a passing reference without any sustaining context in Passus IV. One might be tempted to say that Reason's is a casual reference which he does not examine. Yet the issues around Franciscan conceptions of poverty, mendicancy, and mobility are of such vexing concern to the maker of *Piers Plowman* that it is difficult to leave one's explication with this. Nevertheless, in the contexts within which Reason mentions St. Francis, this reserve seems necessary.

In the next passus (V), the reformers meet the figure of the poet in an episode which has elicited considerable and wide-ranging commentary.[12] The poet Wille is "yclothed as a lollare" (V.2). This recalls his first entry clothed "as y a shep were; / In abite as an heremite, vnholy of werkes" (Pr.2–3). But he now also claims to be a maker of texts directed against "lollares of Londone and lewede Ermytes," writing as "resoun" has taught him. The apparent self-division ('lollare' against 'lollare') is probably what one should expect of a Christian subject (Romans 7.18–25), but it is of course the particular form that is puzzling. For Langland chooses a term that was already tricky and shifting, as a substantial scholarly literature has shown.[13] He also chooses to defer his own explication of this term until Passus IX, addressed later in this chapter. Passus V begins with the poet as a 'lollare' who has reasoned against 'lollares' and now, in good health, wills "no dede to do but drynke and slepe." In this situation he meets Conscience and Reason (V.1–9). Roaming through his memory, the latter challenges him. Reason is, as Derek Pearsall notes, "the personification of the waking dreamer's own rational self-analysis" as well as being "the authoritative figure of Passus IV."[14]

Reason introduces a word that proves to be extremely important in *Piers Plowman* and plays a major role in its conclusion: the verb *fynden*, the noun *fyndynge*, a word meaning "material provision, material livelihood." He asks the apparent "lollare" to declare the "craft" he contributes to the community in reciprocity for those "þat byleue the fynden" (V.12–21).[15] Although Reason offers the opportunity to define "craft" broadly enough to include singing in a church (V.12), Wille answers as though he has only been asked why he does not do manual labor (V.22–25). Given this provocation, Reason asks whether Wille has landed or noble means "[t]hat fyndeth the thy fode." He observes that this self-declared "lollare" seems to be "an ydel man," "a spilletyme" (time is not only the time of the worker which employers seek to buy and control but God's gracious gift to his creatures;

B. IX.99–102; C X.181–87). Or perhaps Wille is a married mendicant who chooses to beg his livelihood, preferring, as he himself has confessed, "no dede to do but drynke and slepe" (V.26–32, 7–9). If so, Reason determines that Wille would indeed be living the life he is dressed to represent: "lollarne lyf þat lytel is preysed," a life that goes against what will become one of the central understandings of divine demands for justice and love in *Piers Plowman,* the demands that Christians render to others their due (V.31–32a).[16] But rather than judge according to Wille's appearance and self-declaration, Reason asks whether he has some affliction that would necessitate his mendicancy (V.33–34). Wille's answer takes up the term that Reason introduced as he tells a story of how his father and friends "foende" him to a clerical education (V.35–39).[17] The consequence of this education, Wille says, is that he likes a life "in this longe clothes," deploying clerical skills if he has to labor (V.40–43a). He stays with the issue and term of *fyndynge* as he describes a mobile, clerical livelihood, using the tools ("lomes") of his craft for the souls of those who help him, "tho þat fynden me my fode" (V.44–51). Yet Wille himself classifies this way of gaining a *fyndynge* not as "mercede" (III.290–340a) but as mendicancy, although a nonaccumulating mendicancy: "y begge / Withoute bagge or botel but my wombe one" (V.51–52). In defining himself as married (V.2, XX.467–72, XXII.193–98) and clerical, Wille stresses that he acts alone, that he does not belong to one of the Church's mendicant orders, that he is detached from the obedience, collective rule, and practice that constitute these orders, a fact Conscience soon confirms. But as he elaborates his self-defense he seems to claim that he is in the state of "a parfit man." He claims that his poverty and mendicancy manifest a supreme faith that God will provide his *fyndynge:* "*Fiat voluntas dei* fynt vs alle thynges" (V.82–88). His way of life, he is affirming, answers the evangelical call to perfection found in Matthew 6.25–34 and Luke 12.22–34; he thus anticipates Patience's Franciscan teaching on poverty and perfection in Passus XV–XVI.[18] Conscience, however, is profoundly unimpressed by this anticipation of teaching which we will consider below. He takes up Wille's assumption that the life of voluntary poverty and mendicancy is the life of "a parfit man": "it semeth no sad parfitnesse in Citees to begge, / But he be obediencer to prior or to mynistre" (V.90–91). Here Langland introduces hints of arguments which will be explored, dramatically, later in *Piers Plowman*. But now the figure of the poet assents wholeheartedly to Conscience's objections to his choices and acknowledges the justice of Reason's suspicions that his appearance "as a lollare" may betoken "lollare lyf " in which one becomes "a spilletyme":

> "That is soth," y saide, "and so y beknowe
> That y haue ytynt tyme and tyme myspened"
> (V.92–93)

So Reason and Conscience have elicited a confession which leads not into despair but "hope." Wille's new hope is that through this encounter with Reason and Conscience he may be moved, "thorw wordes of grace," towards the treasure so prominent in Holy Church's discourse, the treasure hidden in a field symbolizing the kingdom of heaven (V.94–98a):[19]

> So hope y to haue of hym þat is almyghty
> A gobet of his grace and bigynne a tyme
> That alle tymes of my tyme to profit shal turne.
> (V.99–101)

These moving words express a still obscure hope that a crumb of God's grace can begin a time in which even the sad waste of time past can be redeemed. Such would be an "acceptable time [tempus acceptabile] . . . the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6.2).[20] At the moment, however, this is very shadowy: How can there be a new time which can redeem time past as well as the future? Here we are pointed towards the heart of the poem's slowly unfolding meditations on salvation history, ones in which the will for individual autonomy, the will to be "synguler" (VI.36), can be only a disastrous impediment. In accord with this hope, Wille responds to the advice of Reason and Conscience "to bigynne" the beginning for which he yearns by going to the church (V.102–4). This also obscurely foreshadows a distant moment in Wille's journey, truly "at the laste ende" (V.97, XXII.204–16). I will leave this much discussed episode with one further observation. It is, as Lawrence Clopper says, one of the "incidents" in *Piers Plowman* which has "ties to the Franciscan issues of the poem."[21] The "ties" are in the evocation of questions about the form of life appropriate to one who aspires to become "a parfit man" and questions about the relations of mendicancy, "lollarne lyf," and sanctification. Most crucially, in the long run, they are also questions about the kind of *fyndynge* most congruent with the search for the treasure hidden in the "fair feld ful of folk": "Simile est regnum celorum thesauro abscondito in agro" [The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in a field] (Matthew 13.44) (Pr.19; V.98a; I.42–53, 81–82). But the mode in which this episode is written, its extraordinary density and brevity, together with its refusal to make any direct

reference to Franciscanism or friars, shapes its meaning and should shape our interpretation. Wille's self-divisions are emphasized, as we noted. Initially a confident defender of his singular vocation, he is an equally confident assailant of what he takes to be forces undermining feudal hierarchies in the Church and its social world (V.35–83). But through his self-divisions we are shown his strong yearning for a "gobet" of God's grace to make that beginning in which the sad waste of time will become redeemed. Yet the episode refuses to specify what form of life would sustain Wille's repentant longing for grace and his return "to þe kyrke" (V.105). As we are not given, carefully not given, the resources to answer these questions, we are denied the resources to read the signs of poverty. We are thus obliged to suspend judgment about the nature of the episode's "ties" to "Franciscan issues," about the relations between sanctification, poverty, and a *fyndynge*. But even as the episode obliges us to wait, it has given us strong provocations to search further into these issues.[22]

From the episode of Wille's confession the poem moves to a collective confession of vices followed by the apparently churchless, priestless people losing "the way" (V–VII). In this loss the people meet Piers the Plowman, who leads them to plow the half-acre. The ensuing passus (VIII) is devoted to conflicts in contemporary agrarian England and resistance to "lawes" sponsored by "þe kyng and alle þe Kynges Iustices."[23] How should Christian polities organize their *fyndynge*? The task was, after all, God-given: "Go to oure bygynnynge tho god the world made," as Hunger observes, quoting Genesis 3.19 (VIII.239–41a). Holy Church too had made very clear that the task was a central one (I.12–67, 81–100, 171–200). But in Passus VIII the poet does not give sustained attention to issues of Christian perfection and the sanctity of poverty glimpsed in Passus V. Piers has "pitee vppon alle pore peple" but distinguishes those he considers counterfeit poor from the "blynde or brokelegged or bolted with yren"; it is the latter with whom he will share his provisions (VIII.204, 136–45). He and his workers will also "fynde" for ascetic anchorites, hermits, and friars together with the "pore folke syke" (VIII.146–48).[24] But "freres þat flateren" are excluded (VIII.147). This language will have a major role in the poem's conclusion, as we shall see, but at the moment its complex potential is not unpacked. We are not told anything about the conditions of such a *fyndynge* or its bearings on the peculiarly Franciscan identification of Christian perfection with the state of poverty, or its implications for Franciscan claims to live the most perfect form of poverty, or the consequences it might have for fraternal mendicancy. These issues will all be teased out in due course, but

here Piers is preoccupied with work in the production of the community's *fyndynge*. He asks Hunger about those who seem unproductive: "Of beggares and biddares what beste be to done?" (VIII.209).[25] The dialogue with Hunger shows that his mind is on nonreligious mendicants, ones who are making no special claims to Christian perfection (VIII.210–95, 324–28). Among the terms of abuse used in Hunger's comments on "Bolde beggares and bygge" is the word "lollares" (VIII.223–88). This is the term applied to the figure of the poet and to those he opposed in Passus V, but Langland again defers elaboration until the sign of poverty becomes a topic for reflection, in the next passus.

Passus IX involves the "pardoun *A pena & A culpa*" for Piers and "his ayres for euere to ben assoiled" (IX.1–4). This has generated a substantial critical literature on both the B version and its revisions in the C version. I wish to restrict my attention as much as possible to the central issue of this chapter but I will preface my remarks with a *caveat* I have been making since I first wrote on the pardon, one that has not impressed my colleagues.[26] The *caveat* concerns a simple problem the poet sets his readers in all the poem's versions. Let us recall it. When Piers actually unfolds the pardon, it turns out to contain just two lines "and not a letter more" (IX.281–85). These two lines are written "in witnesse of treuthe," taken from one of the Church's creeds, *Quicunque vult*, the Athanasian Creed (IX.286–88).[27] But if the pardon so unequivocally contains only two lines, who is responsible for the preceding 276 lines which gloss the creedal proclamation? What status do they have as a gloss by an indeterminate glossator or glossators? In my view, the massive gloss, for all its passion and distinctions, contains some striking omissions. It fails to note the Trinitarian and Christological contexts of the two lines from the creed "in witnesse of treuthe" (IX.286) and so, inevitably, fails to present a minimally adequate version of the processes of pardon as envisaged within Catholic traditions. These processes, Trinitarian and Christocentric, will be disclosed with great theological subtlety and dramatic power across Passus XVIII–XXI. The fact that the gloss fails to disclose a specifically Christian account of pardon does *not* mean that it lacks serious reflections on many of the issues with which it is concerned, issues that preoccupied the poet and his poem. But still, to whom should we attribute the gloss? In the C version Langland makes clear that it speaks with almost as many voices as T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. For example, at lines 159–61, a comment on "lollares" is explicitly ascribed to Piers ("quod Peres"). Derek Pearsall punctuates his edition to stop Piers commenting at line 161. This decision is followed by George Russell and George Kane.[28] This is perfectly

plausible. But so are editorial decisions not to punctuate so as to end Piers's commentary at line 161.[29] We are actually left to guess where Piers's glossarial voice ends. Other examples: Who is claiming to read glosses "in þe margine" concerning the estate of merchants and its exclusion from the full pardon "*a pena & a culpa*" (IX.22–26)? Who claims to have access to "a letter" qualifying this marginal gloss, allegedly sent by Truth, "vnder his secrete seal" (IX.27–40) and "purchased" by the plowman Piers (IX.42)? What kind of warrant does this indeterminate voice have for claiming a special revelation to writings outside the Scriptures and in extremely obscure relationship to the Church? Certainly Christ the Samaritan makes no reference to any such special deal and "secrete" glosses in his long oration (XIX.83–335). Whose is the prophetic warning voice that seems to irrupt into the gloss at IX.51: "Beth ywar, 3e wis men and witty of þe lawe"? It is a voice we meet in many different parts of *Piers Plowman*, a voice that usually seems an authorial self-presentation, as at the end of Piers's failed attempt to organize collective *fyndynge* in the face of substantial opposition: "Ac y warne 3ow werkmen . . ." (VIII.342). But what is this prophetic voice doing within the pardon and its commentary, and with what authority? If Piers is not still commenting after IX.161, whose is the "Y" in the passages around IX.239 and 247, passages at the heart of the discourse on "lollares," including the etymology of the term in "þe engelisch of oure eldres" (IX.215)? The fact that there is no way of providing any definitely correct answers to the questions I have been asking should at least be acknowledged in commentary on this sustained glossorial writing. What at first seems to be offered as an authoritative account of a revelation from Truth to Piers providing pardon from punishment and guilt for him and his "ayres for euere" turns out to be a multivoiced mixture of often extraordinarily eloquent cultural and ethical reflections whose authority the poet chooses to place in unresolvable question. Having recognized this, I shall temporarily bracket the formal problems while I consider the treatment of poverty and mendicancy in the gloss to the pardon.

The traditional demand that a *fyndynge* and legal help should be given to those understood as poor and dependent is affirmed (IX.34–36, 46–54). Furthermore the poet adds to the B version a passage of extraordinary force telling readers that if we are properly attentive we will find that the most needy people are our neighbors. Most unusually in medieval writing about worthy recipients of alms, Langland concentrates here on able-bodied, hard-working women and men, landless laborers whose wages and unpaid domestic work leave them and their children on the dangerous margins of

subsistence (XI.70–95).[30] As Derek Pearsall observes, the poet "describes in precise and minute detail the lives of those who are employed in the most menial part-time and piece-work jobs — scraping flax, peeling rushes, carding and combing, patching and washing clothes — and who, though employed, can barely scrape together a living."[31] Because I find this passage an important landmark in the C version, as we will see, I will quote from it at some length. These "pore folk in cotes" are

> Charged with childrene and chief lordes rente.
> þat they with spynnyng may spare spenen hit on hous huyre,
> Bothe in mylke and in mele to make with papelotes
> To aglotye with here gurles that greden aftur fode.
> And hemsulue also soffre muche hungur
> And wo in wynter tyme and wakynge on nyhtes
> To rise to þe reule to rokke þe cradel,
> Bothe to carde and to kembe, to cloute and to wasche,
> To rybbe and to rele, rusches to pylie,
> That reuthe is to rede or in ryme shewe
> The wo of this wommen þat wonyeth in cotes
> And of monye oþer men þat moche wo soffren,
> Bothe afyngred and afurste, to turne þe fayre outward
> And ben abasched for to begge and wollen nat be aknowe
> What hem nedeth at here neyhebores at noon and at eue.
> This y woet witturly, as þe world techeth,
> What other byhoueth þat hath many childrene
> And hath no catel but his craft to clothe hem and to fede
> And fele to fonge þerto and fewe panes taketh.
>
> (IX.73–91)

Geoffrey Shepherd observes that this "is probably the earliest passage in English which conveys the felt and inner bitterness of poverty."[32] It certainly does convey the crushing urgency and immediacy of material demands, the literally endless demands of children, the overwhelming reiterations of a host of daily and nightly labors unmediated by the forms of help material resources could provide. But we should note that pervaded with compassion as this wonderful passage is, it does not contain *any* allusion to those strands in Christian tradition which have emphasized the sanctity of poverty, at least of poverty patiently endured. In fact, this powerful passage does not attempt to suggest any sense that the crushing actualities of poverty

should be understood as a sanctifying, sacramental sign. The force and relentless particularization of this poetry is itself extraordinarily disciplined and an unusual act in its culture of discourse. It calls readers to especial and sustained remembrance as they continue down paths of the poem in which they will meet Franciscan ideas and voices.

The gloss to the pardon includes some equally passionate writing about a very different form of poverty, one already met in the Prologue, in the encounter between Wille, Reason, and Conscience and in the plowing of the half-acre. It is enacted under these classifications: unholy; beggar with bags; faytour; waster; lollar; losele; Lorelle; friars that flatter.[33] Passus IX gathers together these terms in a sustained attack on "beggares with bagges þe whiche brewhouses ben here churches," able-bodied "lollares" pursuing "lollares lyf" against divine law and the teaching of "holi churche" (IX.98–104). Those attacked include mendicant hermits drawn to the dwellings of alewives and devoted to avoiding the hard work for which they were prepared by plebeian status and training. These people are categorized as "lollares, lachedraweres, lewede Ermytes" (IX.189–214). At this point, in the margin of the pardon, Langland produces his etymology for the word "lollares" in "þe engelisch of oure eldres." He writes that traditional usage of the term designated someone who was "ymaymed in som membre"—that is, someone lamed; such lolling out of joint is said to be an apt symbol for those who "Lollen aȝen þe byleue and lawe of holy churche" (IX.215–19).[34] But the "byleue and lawe of holy churche" here turns out not to be the "byleue" and "lawe" currently challenged by Wycliffite lollards. Instead it is the law of feudal order and ideology, one allegedly underpinned by "holy churche" (IX.220–55).[35] There is good reason for Geoffrey Shepherd's view that

> throughout the poem we first catch that uncompromising aversion to public beggary which in the post-medieval centuries has remained the normal response of northern Europeans. Beggars are shocking, beggary is somehow obscene. A bond of shame unites public giver and public recipient. Beggars are parasites upon and enemies and betrayers of society, the dangerous drones who according to the prosperous Franklin in *Mum and the Sothsegger* should be nipped out of the busy commonwealth of bees and destroyed utterly.[36]

No indication here that poverty is a state exceptionally conducive to sanctification, a sacramental sign.

But for the gloss on the pardon in its C version Langland added the frequently discussed account of "lunatyk lollares" (IX.105–40).[37] These are "men and women bothe" who although appearing to be in good health actually "wanteth wyt": "madden as þe mone sit," indifferent to all weathers they "aren meuynge aftur þe mone," people who are "witteles." Compelled by the movements of the moon they are veritably "lunatyk" and, in their mobile dependency, "lepares aboute"; they are "lollares" (IX.105–11, 137). Because they lack "wyt," their dispositions driven by the moon, they *unequivocally* lack the resources to a *fyndynge*.[38] Their undemanding (IX.121) and *involuntarily* needy presence should, we are told, encourage those with access to a *fyndynge* to share this with the "lunatyk lollares" (IX.124–26, 134–40). The "riche" are exhorted not to give anything to "lollares" with their wits, even if they should die for hunger. But they are told to welcome these witless "lunatyk loreles" (IX.98–101, 134–37).

These utterly indigent women and men belong to the poem's categorization of the deserving poor, traditionally elaborated from Luke 14.21 and Matthew 25.34–40.[39] As such they belong to that group of people medieval Catholics viewed as one of God's main contributions to the salvation of the rich. On this Geoffrey Shepherd observed, "[T]he rich need the poor as much as the poor need the rich."[40] The poverty of the poor is given to elicit charity from others, to catalyze sanctification in those who possess the dangerous goods of the world (Luke 6.24, 18.25). The relation between poor and rich supposedly enacts, to the illumination of both groups, an analogy of the gracious abundance of the Creator's plenitude in a world still scarred by lack and grievous need. But the poor who participate in the analogy, the deserving poor, must be utterly unthreatening, undemanding, and monumentally patient. To remain deserving, they must not take action against policies or persons responsible for exacerbating their sufferings. They would not, for example, join the rebels of 1381 to resist unprecedented burdens and forms of taxation or to resist the burdens of serfdom.

The "lunatyk lollares" plainly belong to those classified as deserving and unthreatening poor, but they are unusually complex figures. We are told that in their "witteles" and "moneyeles" mobility, walking through "mony wyde contreyes," they resemble Jesus's apostles (IX.109–12, 118–20a). As such they are "munstrals of heuene / And godes boys, bourdyors" and God's "mesagers" (IX.126–38). Understandably enough, this analogical language has persuaded some readers to identify "lunatyk lollares" with a far more exalted version of poverty than the one endured by our own neighbors "þat most neden" (IX.71–97) and those evoked in Luke 14.13–14 as the due

recipients of alms. This more exalted account of poverty is Franciscan and its presence here and elsewhere in the B and C versions of *Piers Plowman* has been widely recognized.[41] The most unqualified convergence of "lunatyk lollares" with Franciscan ideology has been made by Lawrence Clopper. He argues that these people "are not madmen. . . . They are not lunatics" because they "follow or manifest the apostolic life and the Franciscan ideal." Although they are admittedly not "designated as regular members of the order," Clopper maintains that "they are (perhaps nostalgic) images" of Francis and "may also include those friars who follow the *Rule* in strictness." They reflect the "Franciscan perspective" of the poet's own "Franciscan agenda."[42] But if they were to "follow the *Rule* in strictness" these "lunatyk lollares" could not be "witteles." They could not be compelled by the movement of "þe mone," "lunatyk," lacking "wyt." Yet the poet says that this is exactly what they are. So one cannot assimilate these figures to a "Franciscan agenda" without some major reinventing of the text. Such rewriting is essential for another aspect of a straightforwardly Franciscan reading. Since St. Francis follows the path of voluntary poverty, Langland's "lunatyk lollares" must be "the humble voluntary poor," those "who chose voluntarily to live a life of poverty."[43] To make such voluntary choices one plainly needs options (the choice not to live the life of poverty) and intellectual faculties capable of meditating on the available choices and determining to follow one path rather than others. Such agency could not be driven by the moon, could not be lacking in "wyt," could not be "witteles." But there is no indication in Langland's description of "lunatyk lollares" that they are "voluntary poor." As we have seen, they lack the means to a *fyndynge* and are not shown making a "voluntary" act of any kind, let alone having possessions they choose to abandon in pursuit of the perfection that proved too difficult for the virtuous, rich young man of Matthew 19.16–22.

Another difficulty with an unqualified Franciscan reading of these figures is an absence that the poet names: "þey preche nat" (IX.112). They are "as" the apostles in certain ways (IX.110–38): mobile, destitute, apparently nonviolent minstrels of God whose presence summons those with possessions to charitable and salvific action (Mathew 25.31–46). But despite these affinities they do not preach. Clopper notes this: "they do not have the office to preach." So if they include friars, they are "mendicants not licensed to preach."[44] This is doubtless true, but Langland gives not one hint that these women and men have any knowledge of offices and licenses: they are "lunatyk lollares," "lepares aboute" who do not display customary respect for status and hierarchy but are apparently not at all punished for this (IX.122–23a). We are simply told that they do not preach, although often "hem happeth / To profecye of þe peple" (IX.113–14). Nor are we given any reason to confuse "lunatyk lollares" with any form of Wycliffite lollard, to confuse these nonpreaching, "witteles" women and men with those for whom the activities of preaching, scriptural reading, and ecclesiastical reformation were constitutive of their mission. The fact that they do not preach also separates them as decisively from the apostles of the early Church as it does from St. Francis and Franciscan tradition. In a text used in the justification of fraternal orders, Jesus called his apostles and "sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick" (Luke 9.2). And as Clopper himself has noticed, Bonaventure says in the *Legenda Major* that when Innocent III approved the rule, he gave friars a mission to preach repentance [dedit de poenitentia praedicandi mandatum] and conferred clerical tonsure on all the laymen [laicis] among the companions so that they could preach the word of God freely [ut verbum Dei libere praedicarent].[45] Just as the elimination of preaching from the apostolic ministry would have transformed the identity and mission of apostleship, so the elimination of preaching from medieval Franciscans would have transformed the identity and mission of Franciscanism.

These nonpreaching "lunatyk lollares" are thus extremely peculiar messengers of God in Christian traditions. Their lack of "wyt" and their moon-drivenness does not match the language of "foolishness" which Paul used to describe his *preaching* of Christ's gospel to the Corinthians, language sometimes aligned with Langland's "lunatyk lollares." Paul makes clear that the gospel of Christ's cross is "foolishness" only to those who reject it, "to them indeed that perish," whereas "to them that are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God." He emphasizes that "it pleased God, by the foolishness of our preaching, to save them that believe." Evangelists "preach Christ crucified: unto the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness: But unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." As for lack of loftiness of speech or wisdom in Paul's proclamation of Christ, "[M]y speech and my preaching was not in the persuasive words of human wisdom, but in shewing of the Spirit and power; That your faith might not stand on the wisdom of men but on the power of God" (see 1 Corinthians 1.17–31; 2.1–16; 3.1–2, 18–23; 4.6–13). Langland's "lunatyk lollares" are God's minstrels and messengers, but unlike Paul they do not proclaim Christ's gospel, do not proclaim his Incarnation, life, death, harrowing of

hell, resurrection, and ascension; nor do they talk about Christ founding the Church with its sacramental gifts. Not only are they unlike Paul in this, they are unlike the Christocentric poet of *Piers Plowman* (XVIII–XXI; see also chapter 2 of this book).

The invocation of Peter and Paul in the passage describing the activities of "lunatyk lollares" suggests other important differences even as it invites us to search for affinities. After the passage on the "foolishness" of the gospel of Christ compared to "the wisdom of this world" that we have just considered, Paul reminds his readers that the apostles, "fools for Christ's sake," actually "labour, working with our own hands" (1 Corinthians 4.10–12; see too 1 Corinthians 9.6–27). We are also shown Paul laboring at his trade, tent making, in Acts 18.3 (see too Acts 20.34). Furthermore, in texts endlessly regurgitated in antifraternal polemic (with a long life ahead of them in the Reformation), he not only stresses that he labors for a livelihood but demands that all Christians do the same (1 Thessalonians 2.9, 4–11; 2 Thessalonians 3.7–8).[46] In *Piers Plowman* itself, Langland has one of the most authoritative speakers ("Cristes creature . . . in cristes court yknowe wel," XVI.165–71) bring Paul and Peter together in a manner that bears on the present discussion:

> Paul aftur his prechyng paniars he made
> And wan with his handes al þat hym nedede.
> Peter fischede for his fode And his fere Androwe;
> (XVII.17–19)

Not only does Liberum Arbitrium recollect that Paul worked for his livelihood and that Peter and Andrew did the same, but he inserts the latters' work into the nexus of monetary exchange: "Som they solde and som they sode and so they lyuede bothe" (XVII.20). These apostolic forms of life are strikingly remote from the quasi-apostolic ministry of the "lunatyk lollares" of Passus IX.

The latter undoubtedly carry the sign of poverty and summon those with possessions to almsgiving. But the passage hints at potential difficulties in reading the sign. These able-bodied "lunatyk lollares" are "in hele as hit semeth" (IX.105). It might thus seem that they are not to be classified among the deserving poor (Luke 14.13; cf. VIII.136–47). But appearances are deceptive because these women and men "wanteth wyt," are "witteles" and compelled by the moon's cycles (IX.106–8). They are thus also not "in hele" and, as I observed above, cannot provide their own *fyndynge*. They

are "beggares" (IX.105). But they do not beg: "beggeth they of no man" (IX.121). The sign of poverty even when borne by "messagers" of God (IX.136) poses tricky hermeneutic work for those who encounter it in the poet's culture. Nor are we allowed simply to set aside these hermeneutic problems, even though some strands in Christian tradition, including some represented in *Piers Plowman*, found acts of discriminating almsgiving contrary to evangelical teaching.[47] Passus IX instructs readers to distinguish between those leading "lollarne lyf," counterfeiting neediness to avoid work, and "lunatyk lollares." The rich must interpret and act on their interpretation. As we noticed, they must withhold alms from the former, not caring if they die in consequence, and they must welcome the latter (IX.98–101, 134–52).[48] So interpretation will have practical consequences. If the sign of poverty is to be a sanctifying sign, we are already discovering that it generates extremely sharp hermeneutic and theological difficulties. When inventing "lunatyk lollares," the poet undoubtedly invoked elements of Franciscan discourse. But simultaneously he negated these. The "lunatyk lollares" do not preach Christ's gospel, and they are not voluntarily poor. Passus IX leaves open a host of hermeneutic, ethical, and theological questions around the sign of poverty and its relations to Franciscan sources. But it has forcefully brought these into the poem's dialectical explorations, and *Piers Plowman* will pursue them tenaciously.

Poverty, however, has not yet been represented as a state of perfection in which the theological virtue of charity most flourishes. Rather it has been treated as the potential cause of charity in others. The allusions to Franciscan discourse could have introduced a different model, but, as I have shown, these were effectively negated. Indeed, the C version strengthens the B version's negation of these elements. Langland, famously enough, deleted the scene in which Piers tears the pardon and promises to stop his sowing "& swynke no3t so harde" (B VII.119–23). In the B version he cites Jesus's commands that disciples should not be solicitous for their lives or for what they eat or wear. Following Jesus's words, he promises to take as his model God's provision of a *fyndynge* for birds that neither sow nor reap (B VII.119–35; see Matthew 6.25–34 alongside Luke 12.22–31; cf. B VII.115–43 with C IX.289–93). In the B version this scene represents a rupture with major tendencies in B VI and B VII, tendencies which could generate a work ethic congruent with the material self-interests and legislative innovations of the tiny minority of people who constituted the governing classes. A plowman who renounced his customary work would be rejecting "þe statut" (B VI.320), turning himself into one of the very people castigated

by contemporary labor legislation and petitions as underminers of the commonwealth. In this rejection of the political disciplines encapsulated in "þe statut," Piers introduces a vision of evangelical poverty propagated by St. Francis and his followers.[49] In the C version, however, Piers neither tears the pardon nor invokes Jesus's teaching from Matthew 6.25–34 and Luke 12.22–31. All we are now told is that a priest and Piers "of þe pardon iangelede" (IX.294).[50] Readers who knew and recalled the B version would experience this rewriting as the negation of a powerful moment which had opened out a Franciscan vision under the authority of a converted Piers. Readers who had not read the B version would still have been able to experience the invocation and negation of Franciscanizing ideology and iconography in an extensive gloss of elusive status, as I have argued above. All readers have been shown that controversial and vexing issues around the sign of poverty are very much on the poet's mind.

When the next passus sets up a dialogue between Wille and two Franciscan friars, readers have reason to expect some elaboration of the issues raised in Passus IX. They might be especially expectant as Wille invites the mendicants to discuss virtue [Dowel], drawing on their own calling (X.1–17). But the friars' responses do not contain a word about poverty or mendicancy (X.1–60). Given the centrality of these to the order's history and understanding of Christian virtues, this is a striking silence. But what kind of silence? The absence of Franciscan teaching on poverty in this context seems another negation of the kind we followed in the previous passus. A reader might wonder how much longer an articulation of Franciscan ideology will be deferred, but for the moment the critical question concerns the teaching Wille does receive from the Franciscans and whether there is anything the poem identifies as specifically Franciscan about it.[51] I think the poet has chosen these religious mendicants to exemplify an attitude towards the consequences of sin which the poem has already exposed as utterly frivolous. The mendicants assume that falling into sin, seven times a day, leaves one with an unequivocally "fre wil and fre wit" always able to repent and rise up from sin (X.41–43, 51–53; cf. 21, 49–50). But the intractability and effects of sin figured forth in the poem so far give the lie to this comfortable picture. One should remember the extreme difficulties facing even those who have apparently managed to repent under the guidance of Reason, Conscience, Repentance, and Hope (V–VII). Crying to Christ and his mother for grace to go to Truth, they soon find themselves thoroughly lost:

> Ac þer was wye non so wys þat þe way thider couthe
> But blostrede forth as bestes ouer baches and hulles
> (VII.155–60)

This model accords with the brilliant account of the gradual enchainments of the sinning will in Augustine's *Confessions*.[52] But the friars confidently ignore this understanding of the consequences of sin, ones which include our tendencies to ineradicable selfishness, our self-deceptions, our addictive compulsions. These all make unqualified talk about "fre wil and fre wit" worse than bland. The Franciscans only know sin without the consequences of sin, sin that somehow does not fall from charity (X.42–43).[53] They apparently know nothing of the realities of our situation disclosed so vividly both earlier in *Piers Plowman* and in the gripping images which herald the dramatic entry of Christ the Samaritan:

> Bothe abraham and *spes* and he mette at ones
> In a wide wildernesse where theues hadde ybounde
> A man, as me tho thouhte, to moche care they brouhte
> For he ne myhte stepe ne stande ne stere foet ne handes
> Ne helpe hymsulue sothly for semyuief he semede
> And as naked as an nedle and noen helpe abouten.
> (XIX.53–58)[54]

In contrast to this haunting model, the Franciscan masters are confident that "fre wil and fre wit foleweth man euere / To repenten and arise and rowe out of synne" (X.51–52). The introduction of these Franciscan teachers with a version of sin's consequences so different from the one Christ encounters leaves us with at least two questions. What kind of confessors and spiritual guides will such masters make? Does their complacent misrepresentation of sin's consequences, within the souls of sinning subjects and within their communities, have any bearing on Franciscan teaching about perfection and poverty? Such questions are not addressed in Passus X, but they are carefully taken up in later explorations of poverty.

Meanwhile Wille continues his search for a fuller and more concrete grasp of Christian virtues. The five instructors he encounters after the Franciscans (Thought, Wit, Study, Clergy, Scripture) are not concerned with composing "þe signe of pouerte," but it is still worth noticing how poverty is treated in this sequence. Wit (the figuration of that which "lunatyk lollares" lack) has no pride in clothing but "no pouerte noythere" (X.117). His

account of virtue offers a Christian anthropology in which "inwit" is a divine gift, treasure from God enabling a human "to fynden hymselue" and to help those who cannot provide a *fyndynge* for themselves. In such a community of virtue, where friendship and the Church act as they should, Wit sees no reason for mendicancy (X.174–91). It is not a form of life he envisages as a way of praising the Creator's gifts to humanity. Christ himself is not presented as absolutely poor, absolutely devoid of possessions and rights: "The catel that Crist hadde, thre clothes hit were; / Thereof was he robbed and ruyfled" (X.194–95). Wit himself does not elaborate this image and its terms, but within the century-old contexts of disputes about Christ's form of poverty the statement conjures up a distinctively non-Franciscan model.[55] Although Wit shows no concern with such disputes, he does introduce a term that becomes prominent when the C version of *Piers Plowman* gives full attention to the sign of poverty and its Franciscan affiliations. The term is *rechelesnesse*. This will become the name of one of the two speakers who are most enthusiastic about Franciscan ideology. But for Wit "rechelesnesse" is an unambiguous mark of sinful inattention to God's commands (X.213–19).[56] Of course, Wit's voice is just one stage on an unfolding path, but it is by no means a trivial or insignificant one, despite Study's objections to his readiness to teach Wille, whom she initially, and too hastily, associates with those unteachable swine who trample holy pearls under their feet before turning with violence on their teachers (XI.5–10; Matthew 7.6).

Study complains that those to whom God has given "most goed" fail to support the "nedy pore," leaving "þe carfole" crying and quaking at their gates, "afyngred and a furst," dying for lack of provisions (XI.23–51, 61–77). Hers is a traditional statement of rich people's obligations to give alms, "as puyr charite wolde" (XI.63). Such giving is to be discrete (to the "nedy pore") and an acknowledgment that the wealthy are chosen mediators of God's gifts (XI.26–28). She knows nothing of poverty as a special sign of Christian perfection, nothing of any urgent pressures on the wealthy to identify with the poor in any remotely literal manner, and nothing of any dangers to those who receive God's material gifts and help the "nedy pore." As for friars, her perception of them is twofold. They are linked with "faytours"—that is, those whom the poem consistently depicts as counterfeiters of the need to beg, those who could achieve a *fyndynge* but prefer mendicant life.[57]And they are held especially responsible for undermining Christian faith among the "folk," both "riche and pore" (XI.50–58).

Although the Franciscan friars of Passus X had nothing to say about poverty, we observed that they displayed a Pelagianizing disposition towards the consequences of sin in the quest to do well. Whether the poet might discern Pelagianizing tendencies within Franciscan ideas about poverty and the state of perfection was a question raised but not addressed. In the B version of *Piers Plowman*, Scripture briefly turns to the issue of poverty. She asserts that those who follow poverty patiently gain heaven "by trewe riȝte" whereas the rich arrive there "but of ruþe and grace" (B X.344–48). This overlooks the need to specify what makes patience distinctively Christian.[58] The oversight here seems to prepare the ground for the bizarre Pelagianism of the assertion that those who are patiently poor are saved by "riȝte."[59] This again raises the possibility that discourses on the power and perfection of poverty lived patiently might encourage Pelagianizing attitudes towards the consequences of sin. But Langland's decision to delete such an inadequate theological utterance from Scripture's conversation means that the C version simply sets that question aside for the moment.

This brings us to the poem's most sustained composition of the sign of poverty and its most sustained deployment of Franciscan ideology on the state of poverty (XI–XVI).[60] Wille meets Rechelesnesse when he yields up moral questions in "wo and wrathe," in a despair through which he is "rauysched" by Fortune into "þe lond of longyng" (XI.164–68, 193–98). Rechelesnesse wears "ragged clothes" and encourages Wille, as Wit's use of this term anticipated, in his abandonment of his quest for Christian virtues and salvation: "Folowe forth þat fortune wole" (see XI.193–95). He also presents the despairing dreamer with a brash and extraordinarily superficial theology of predestination which manages to sideline Christ, the Incarnation, and the sacraments of the Church (XI.202–27). This is the context established by the poet for Rechelesnesse's oration on poverty.

Lawrence Clopper argues that Rechelesnesse, "while personally a failure in attaining the ideal, defines and defends Franciscan 'rechelesnesse,' the absence of solicitude that marks the calling of the Franciscan order." His "'raggede cloþes' [XI.193] are intended to identify Rechelesnesse as a Franciscan friar," serving as "a sharp reminder of the poverty of the order's beginnings" and "recalling the Franciscans to the calling, the poverty, to which they had been called." However lapsed Rechelesnesse's practice may be, according to Clopper it cannot undermine the speaker's cogent "statement of the Franciscan ideal," one to which the poet himself unequivocally adheres.[61] To examine the force of Clopper's claims we need to read Rechelesnesse's oration on poverty (XII–XIII). Having done so, we will then need to see how the positions maintained in the oration fare in the dialectical processes which still have a long way to go in *Piers Plowman* and which

still await the poem's most authoritative figure: Christ, the still hidden one who draws Wille on (I.78).

Rechelesnesse certainly does present a model of poverty as a sanctified state especially favored by the divine presence (XII.97–106, 117–26). Indeed, he announces that Christ is "neuere in secte of riche" (XII.132–33). This confident *neuere* will be decisively undermined later in *Piers Plowman*, as we shall see (XVI.337–69). But for the moment the assertion seems thoroughly evangelical (see Luke 6.24, 20). Rechelesnesse develops the evangelical register by quoting from Jesus's teaching on absolute renunciation in Matthew 19.16–29 and Luke 14.26, 33 (XII.152–67a). These words were especially congenial to Franciscan claims that the form of poverty constituted the state of perfection practiced by Christ and his apostles: "*Si vis perfectus esse vade & vende, & c.*" [If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, etc.] (XII.167a; Matthew 19.21).[62] Rechelesnesse's aim is to defend the characteristically Franciscan claim that the supreme Christian virtue is patient poverty: "pacient pouerte prince of alle vertues" (XII.177). He pursues this argument without discussing the relations between this allegedly supreme virtue and the theological virtue of charity. Charity is certainly patient, as Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 13.4). But many kinds of patience have nothing to do with charity and can be enacted in causes inimical to charity. That is why Christian theology specifies distinctions between Christian and other versions of patience.[63] But instead of any such specification, Rechelesnesse equates his Franciscan version of patience with ones found in non-Christian cultures (XII.174–77; see similarly XII.140–44). It is not surprising that in his devotedly Christocentric vision the poet decided to ascribe such a "rechelesse" construal of the sanctifying sign of poverty to Rechelesnesse.[64]

The exploration of this sign through the figure named Rechelesnesse continues into Passus XIII. He offers an extended simile to illustrate the advantage of "þe pore pacient" over "þe ryche" (XIII.29–99). The aim is to reassert that "pore and pacient, parfitest lyf is of alle" (XIII.99). But here the Franciscan composition is done in a manner that has already been called into question. For Passus IX has already produced the most realized, focused writing about the crushing daily and nightly pressures of endless work endured by so many poor people living on the margins of subsistence (IX.70–97, discussed above). Despite this, Rechelesnesse, like Patience after him, represents poverty as a life of "merye" emancipation from the burdens under which the rich labor. The poor are like a messenger who is "ay merye and his mouth ful of songes" (XIII.59, see 33–98a). The bland images of poverty propagated by Rechelesnesse clash both with the passage on "pore folk in cotes" in Passus IX and with Study's representation of the poor dependent on alms in Passus XI.[65] By clashing these earlier representations with Rechelesnesse's, Langland suggests the potentials of Franciscan ideals of poverty to become sentimental abstractions which dissolve the material *and* spiritual realities of lives lived on the margins of subsistence outside the institutional supports experienced by religious mendicants. It is helpful to compare Rechelesnesse's approach here with Aquinas's approach to the defense of voluntary poverty in the *Summa contra Gentiles*. He writes that riches are "necessary for the good of virtue; since by them we support our body and give assistance to other people." So riches are good as a means to an end according to which they and their use are to be measured. "Hence, it happens to be a good thing for some people to possess riches, for they use them for the sake of virtue, but for others it is a bad thing to have them, for these people are taken away from virtue by them, either through too much solicitude or affection for them, or also because of mental pride resulting from them." Simultaneously, poverty is a good "according as it frees man from the vices in which some are involved through riches." Insofar as it removes "the solicitude which arises from riches" it is useful, at least to those "disposed to busy themselves with better things"—that is, "to divine and spiritual matters." Aquinas notes, however, that poverty "is harmful to others," often enough to those who become poor voluntarily. All externals, abundance or lack, "are good to the extent that they contribute to virtue, but not in themselves."[66] I will return to Aquinas later in this chapter, but these remarks from the *Summa contra Gentiles* point towards the kinds of distinctions *Piers Plowman* is beginning to compose, even if Rechelesnesse is not interested in them.

Before Rechelesnesse leaves the poem he initiates an argument that could subvert his own identity. Having asserted that the most perfect state of life is in poverty patiently endured, he demands that "a parfit prest to pouerte sholde drawe" (XVI.99–100). Congruently with his Franciscanism, he says that perfect priests should not hold money: "han no spendynge suluer" (XIII.101). If they hope in God, work and trust God, they will not lack "lyflode." This is the Franciscanizing position that Piers announced in the conclusion to the pardon scene in the B version, the conclusion whose deletion from C IX I discussed earlier. But Rechelesnesse then merges this position with one that seems dependent on a very different model. Priests, he says, should be ordained only if the bishop guarantees them "wages." Rechelesnesse illustrates this situation (one based in canon law) with an analogy to the making of knights. Nobody should be knighted without

adequate material and social resources being given to him. Just so, priests, however perfect, should rely, not on receiving "lyflode" in absolute poverty, but on material resources guaranteed by the Church. Without these, priests are likely to take "siluer for masses" (XIII.100–116). This is an argument for a guaranteed *fyndynge* to protect poor priests (however perfect their state) from the overwhelming difficulties of living in absolute poverty without any material security whatsoever. The argument does not support the one from which Rechelesnesse set out. It has potentials to undermine the Franciscan ideology he represents. We do not yet know whether the poem will actualize these potentials or whether it will negate them. Not yet. We are probably also not yet able to determine how damaging Rechelesnesse's "rage" against Clergie and Scripture (XIII.129–30) is to the Franciscan ideas he "defines and defends."[67]

Ymagenatyf emerges after Rechelesnesse and addresses some of the difficulties his oration has generated (XIII.218–XIV.217). Although issues concerning poverty and Franciscan ideology are largely deferred for later treatment, Ymagenatyf does brush up against these when discussing the Nativity. In accord with his concentration on "clergie" (against whom Rechelesnesse's rationalizing "rage" had been directed, XIII.129), he focuses on the shepherds and wise men, both of whom (*pastores* and *magi*) figure priests and "clerkis." Having derisively betted that no "frere" would be found among the *pastores* and *magi* worshipping Jesus, he seems to reject those traditions which emphasized the severe poverty of the circumstances in which Christ was born (see Luke 2.7): "in no cote ne Caytyfs hous crist was ybore / Bote in a burgeises hous, the beste of þe toune" (XIV.90–91; see XIV.84–102).[68] Such a bourgeoisified image of the Nativity, together with the dismissal of friars, seems incompatible with Franciscan versions of Christ's birth and poverty. It goes against Rechelesnesse's vision, but the passage is brief, and Ymagenatyf does not have the last word on any of the topics he addresses, as we observed in chapter 2.

In the next two passus the sign of poverty becomes prominent (XV–XVI). Through the figure of Patience, a virtue, Langland provides his most sympathetic representation of Franciscan ideas about poverty, as many readers have observed.[69] Our task is to analyze the particularities of this representation so that we can follow the way the ideology it encapsulates fares during the rest of the poem.

Passus XV opens with a return to the scene in which the mobile, mendicant Wille was challenged by Reason and Conscience, a challenge which led to penitent prayer and tears in "þe kyrke" (V.1–108, XV.1–136). Now

Wille's penitential moment is incorporated within a contrasting, impenitent meal eaten by a mendicant "maister" who is a doctor of divinity and canon law (XV.38, 84).[70] Reason, Conscience, and Clergie have Scripture bring the bread of repentance and the drink of perseverance prepared by Contrition for Patience and Wille, both mendicants whose status as such, in this context and its allegory, poses no problems to Reason or Conscience (XV.39–62). The fraternal mendicant, however, rejects the spiritual food and drink, choosing unallegorical sustenance. This displays a sharp split between a public ideology of penitential poverty and a practice of worldly consumption which incenses Wille (XV.64–93).[71] The scene invites us to compare the practice of poverty with the ideology of poverty among those whose profession is to bear the sign of poverty in the modern Church, to compare fraternal practice with the personification Patience. But what ecclesiastical affiliations will be ascribed to the latter?

Patience is certainly a mendicant in poverty. Furthermore, he is willing to cry out for alms and actually to handle money, unlike St. Francis.[72] He is also said to be "Ilyke peres the ploghman, as he a palmere were" (XV.32–35). It is hard to see exactly in what sense he is like Piers because, as we saw, the C version of the poem deleted Piers's renunciation of material production and deleted the Franciscan rhetoric in which the B version composed it (IX.293–94; cf. B VIII.119–44). Where Piers briefly becomes a speaking presence later in Passus XV (137–49), he celebrates patient love, what Derek Pearsall describes as "the ruthlessness of perfect love: 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5.44, Luke 6.27), the revolutionary core of the sermon on the Mount."[73] Certainly Patience is far more like Piers in this respect than Rechelesnesse, whose disposition is described as "rage" towards "clergie," not love. But Piers does not say anything about mendicant poverty or about voluntary poverty being the most perfect Christian state of life. The mendicant Patience, however, does.

The discourse on poverty in Passus XV is wittily set up by bringing together *Activa Vita*, or Actyf, and Patience (XV.181–231). The former is associated with Piers the Plowman, the agricultural producer and overseer of labor whom we followed in Passus VIII. He identifies himself as "Peres prentys þe plouhman," and he works "alle peple to conforte." He states that he labors for Piers, "his man, þat ydelnesse hate" (XV.193–94, 212–13). So in *Piers Plowman*, *Activa Vita*, Actyf, is the way a community achieves the *fyndynge* which sustains its embodied existence (XV.197–201, 214–16). He represents the human cooperation and labor which enables mendicants like Patience to demand "mete for a pore man or moneye" (XV.35).

Patience, however, challenges Actyf with what he presents as a *rival* account, picking up the language of *fyndynge:*

> Hit am y þat fynde alle folke and from hunger saue
> Thorw the helpe of hym þat me hyder sente
> (XV.235–36)[74]

Seeking to silence Actyf ("Pees!" XV.232), Patience presents the "lyflode" (XV.237) he offers as a displacement of Actyf's claims that his labor is for the community's essential *fyndynge*. We have already been told that the food Patience carries in his bag is sobriety, simple speech, and true faith, comforting food in "hungry contreys" where "vnkyndenesse and coueytise" dominate (XV.185–88). Allegorical food. He now offers another example from his bag ("his poke," XV.246). This is a piece of the "paternoster": "*fiat voluntas tua* þat sholde fynde vs alle" (XV.247–49). Patience assures Actyf and Langland's readers that this will deliver one from all potential afflictions, whether hunger or cold or imprisonment or lordly oppression (XV.246–53). This is confidently proclaimed. But although Patience is a powerful and sympathetic figure, representing the authority of patient poverty in the poet's Christianity, he was actually introduced to us begging for far more carnal sustenance, "mete" or "moneye" (XV.35). That is, Langland carefully introduces him in his dependency on the productive, material labor of Piers's apprentice, Actyf. The poet then shows Patience soon forgetting this fact as he claims to be quite independent of such labor. Patience attempts to defend this alleged independence from Actyf's *fyndynge* by appealing to God's miraculous provision of food to his chosen people (XV.263–69).

But this displacement of Actyf's *fyndynge* is inadequate. My reasons for this judgment are predominantly theological and in no way question the reality of divine miracles. I also think the theological reasons put forward below are congruent with theological processes unfolding in *Piers Plowman*. In his zeal Patience has slipped into a polarization of his relationship to Actyf, a dichotomization which occludes what the poet himself has showed us: namely, that Patience in his poverty and dependence begged for material food and money, the very products of Actyf's labor in a world where we have seen both Mede flourishing and the crushing lives of those laboring "pore folk in cotes" (IX.73–91). In his dichotomy Patience assumes that Actyf's work and the attention it demands to material and social relations entail the "solicitude" forbidden by Christ (Matthew 6.25–26).[75] But we have no good reason to assume that *all* concern, *all* attention to a *fyndynge* for oneself and others is forbidden by God as "solicitude" incompatible with faithful Christian discipleship. As Aquinas observed in the *Summa contra Gentiles:*

> Indeed, every act requires solicitude. So, if a man ought to have no concern for corporeal things, then it follows that he ought not to be engaged in corporeal action, but this is neither possible nor reasonable. In fact, God has ordained activity for each thing in accord with the proper perfection of its nature. Now, man was made with a spiritual and bodily nature. So, he must by divine disposition both perform bodily actions and keep his mind on spiritual things. However, this way of human perfection is not such that one may perform no bodily actions, because, since bodily actions are directed to things needed for the provision of life, if a man fail to perform them he neglects his life which every man is obliged to preserve. Now, to look to God for help in these matters in which a man can help himself by his own action, and to omit one's own action, is the attitude of a fool and a tempter of God. Indeed, this is an aspect of divine goodness, to provide things not by doing them directly, but by moving others to perform their own actions, as we showed above [III.77]. So, one should not look to God in the hope that, without performing any action by which one might help oneself, God will come to one's aid, for this is opposed to the divine order and to divine goodness.[76]

Aquinas, as usual, takes our embodied and social nature seriously. Our embodiedness within a community is part of the divine disposition, part of the proper perfection of our life which combines "a spiritual and bodily nature." In this perspective Patience's invocation of divine miracles to displace and dismiss Actyf's productive labor could seem the utterance of a "tempter of God." It undoubtedly involves a serious abuse of divine miracles. How this is so is brought out with great clarity by the Dominican theologian Hervaeus Natalis in his reflections on solicitude and voluntary poverty written for John XXII. Objecting to Franciscan uses of Matthew 6.34 ("be not therefore solicitous for tomorrow" [Nolite ergo solliciti esse in crastinum]), he argues that providing for the future does not diminish personal perfection—that is, love of God and love of neighbor. In fact, God created us as the kind of creatures who need temporals and need to give these attention. Total lack of solicitude is, as Aquinas maintained, incompatible with the life God has given us to live on earth.

Even contemplative life would be impossible without a *fyndynge*, he argues. One is actually obliged to make provision for necessities in the circumstances in which God has placed one. As for the appeal to divine miracles of provision, such as Elijah experienced (3 Kings 17), to which Patience appeals, Hervaeus observes that while no one denies God's power to feed people miraculously, the miracles done for a few do not make a common rule. Many holy people, he recalls, have never received such help.[77] There can be no coherent objection to this line of argument.

And Patience does add two lines that come from a rather different paradigm from the one he has deployed against Actyf, a paradigm eloquently drawn on by Holy Church in Passus I. Changing tack, he proclaims that if Christians lived "as mesure wolde," Christian communities would experience no "defaute" (XV.270–71a). But what Patience does not appreciate, unlike Aquinas or Hervaeus Natalis, is that for this thoroughly desirable state to exist, Actyf has to give great attention and time, "solicitude," to the production and distribution of the requisite material *fyndynge* about which Patience has been so briskly dismissive. Were Patience to acknowledge this, his turn to allegorical, spiritual food would have to become far more complex than it has been, and his appeal to divine miracles far more theologically careful. But his lack of such nuanced reflections is intrinsic to his enthusiastic espousal of the Franciscan ideology and vocabulary of poverty, an enthusiasm the poem is exploring.

Immediately after this passage Langland gives Patience two questions from Actyf. In the first, he asks, "What is properly parfit pacience?" (XV.272). This is dealt with briefly, in four lines. Patience defines the fulfillment of the virtues he represents in terms of a unifying humility which is led "to our lordes place" by love, "þat is charite, chaumpion chief of all vertues" (XV.274–75). Here Patience acknowledges that his completion depends on the supreme Christian virtue, charity. But he does not conclude his first answer with this. He goes on to gloss charity, "chief of all vertues": "þat is pore pacient alle perelles to soffre" (XV.276). Charity undoubtedly "is patient" and "beareth all things" [omnia sufferet] (1 Corinthians 13.4, 7). But not all "pore pacient" is necessarily identical with the theological virtue of charity, a gift of divine grace.[78] The poem has a great deal more work to do in its exploration of the relations between charity and poverty. In the second question, Actyf asks: "Where [whether] pouerte and pacience plese more god almyhty / Then rihtful rychesse and resonablelyche to spene?" (XV.277–78). This elicits a much longer answer whose exploration of poverty and wealth leads into the most explicitly Franciscan declaration in *Piers Plowman* (XVI.98–113).

Patience sets out with great confidence:

> "ʒe? *quis est ille?*" quod pacience; "quik, *laudabimus eum!*
> Thogh men rede of rychesse rihte to þe worldes ende
> Y wiste neuere renke þat ryche was þat whan he rekene sholde
> When he drow to þe deth that he ne dradd hym sarrore
> Then eny pore pacient; and þat preue y be resoun."
> (XV.279–83)

The quotation with which this passage begins comes from Ecclesiasticus [Liber Iesu Filii Sirach] and deserves to be set in its context:

> Blessed is the rich man that is found without blemish: and that hath not gone after gold, nor put his trust in money nor in treasures. Who is he, and we will praise him [Quis est hic? Et laudabimus eum]? For he hath done wonderful things in his life. Who hath been tried thereby, and made perfect, he shall have glory everlasting. He that could have transgressed, and hath not transgressed: and could do evil things, and hath not done them: Therefore are his goods established in the Lord, and all the church of the saints shall declare his alms. (Ecclesiasticus 31.8–11)[79]

As Derek Pearsall notes, Patience's extraction of a sentence from this passage is to suggest "ironically that rich men such as Active mentions will be hard to find."[80] Such irony may be a little too impetuous, in theological terms, perhaps a little too impatient. For the passus has already quoted a statement by Christ that should make us pause: "*Nemo bonus*" [None is good] (XV.135a; Mark 10.18). *Nemo bonus:* rich or poor. If Patience ignores this warning he is likely to reproduce the Pelagian tendencies in Rechelesnesse's oration and in the teaching of the Franciscan friars in Passus X. If he does so, when moving into his most determinately Franciscan utterances, then it would seem that the poet is again asking whether Franciscan accounts of the supreme sanctifying perfection of poverty may encourage such theological and psychological Pelagianism.

Patience continues in a manner that encourages this line of questioning. He seeks to prove his argument about the status of rich and poor at the

Last Judgment "be resoun" (XV.285). He argues that "þe pore" (he does not specify the poor graced with the theological virtues) "dar plede and preue by puyr resoun / To haue allouaunce of his lord" and that "by þe lawe he hit claymeth" eternal joy (XV.285–86).[81] The speaker's enthusiasm for the state of poverty lures him into a strange forgetfulness about a fallen condition that never was r estricted to the wealthy. *Nemo bonus.* Or, in Paul's words, "[A]ll have sinned" (Romans 3.23); "I am carnal, sold under sin. . . . I do not that good which I will; but the evil which I hate, that I do" (Romans 7.14–15). Patience's conviction that the poor "dar plede and preue by puyr resoun" an entitlement to salvation is not warranted within orthodox Christian traditions.[82] Patience's enthusiasm for the virtue he represents in mendicant poverty may be leading him into theological difficulties, but the passus ends with an implicit and moving correction to the passage I have just been considering. Instead of claiming rights of salvation, he reflects on the distribution of visible blessings and material "defaute" among God's creatures. This leads him to say that in such a universe beggars may "aske" for a bliss to redeem the "languor and defaute" they have suffered (XV.287–97). Prayer replaces the proclamation of rights. Furthermore, there is no hint here that Patience's allegorical *fyndynge* is a superior, spiritual *alternative* to Actyf's material and social *fyndynge*. He acknowledges miserable "defaute" that is not transcended, let alone dissolved, by the food in Patience's "poke" (XV.185–88, 246–53). The poetry recreates the mode in which Langland had earlier represented lives of those that "most neden," landless "pore folk in cotes" (IX.70–97):

> Ac beggares aboute myssomur bredles they soupe
> And 3ut is winter for hem worse for weetshoed þey gange,
> Afurste and afyngered and foule rebuked
> And arated of riche men þat reuthe is to here.
>
> (XVI.13–18)

What these people lack is access to Actyf's *fyndynge*, and that is now included in Patience's compassionate prayer. As Aquinas habitually observed, we are made "with a spiritual and bodily nature."[83] The implication in Patience's comments here is that the rich should be distributors of Actyf's *fyndynge* to those living the kinds of life Patience describes. What Patience has not addressed is how the material *fyndynge* he wishes the rich to share with those in "defaute" can be produced in a way that is compatible with his Franciscan understanding of the commands to eschew solicitude for one's life (Matthew 6.25). He is overwhelmed by his evangelical sense of the immense dangers of wealth: "Allas þat rychesse shal reue and robbe mannes soule / Fro þe loue of oure Lord at his laste ende" (XVI.1–2). In the power of the response there is no suggestion of any such way. Patience's vision seems to put Actyf in a double bind.

Perhaps he glimpses a way beyond this in the proposal that Christians should be "in commune ryche, noon coueytous for hymsulue" (XVI.42). The abandonment of personal dominion while retaining common dominion and possessions seems to extend monastic and Dominican ideas of the best possible arrangement of Christian living to the whole community. But this would involve a rejection of the Franciscan version of the most perfect life as abandonment of both individual and common dominion. It also leaves the questions raised before: How can a Christian community attend to just modes of production and distribution without contravening Patience's Franciscan understanding of "solicitude"? And how is this suggestion of Christian communism compatible with his earlier celebrations of a purely allegorical *fyndynge* supported with divine miracles? Patience does not pause to address these issues. Instead he moves on to defend the familiar position that material poverty makes everyone safe from the "seuene synnes" (XVI.43–97).

Part of the problem with this position on the benefits of involuntary poverty, as I pointed out when discussing Rechelesnesse's oration, is the poem in which it is set. We recall that Langland chose to represent the seven deadly sins in practices which were largely free from "rychesse," largely free from dominion, land, and wealth. Indeed, they were often presented as conspicuously poor (V–VIII; IX.98–104, 189–214). *Piers Plowman* itself has thus shown that the lack of wealth and power does not necessarily encourage virtuous living. Nor is this theologically surprising given the understanding of our condition as fallen creatures in Christian tradition: "*Nemo bonus.*" So when Patience asserts that the poor are less prone to anger, one is not left to wonder whether the poet has considered the provocations to wrath generated by the acute lack of material resources and social power that constitute poverty. The poem itself has shown that Wrath dwells among "alle manere men" and has provided the image of Wrath smiting "with stoon and with staf"—that is, with the weaponry of those who are distinctly lacking in wealth and status (VI.105–7). We find similar problems with Patience's claims about Gluttony (XVI.71–78). Patience argues that because the poor cannot afford "ryche metes" they are less prone to this deadly sin. But he himself acknowledges that ale is desired and drunk by the poor in a manner

that is "glotonye" and "grete synne." How could he not acknowledge this, given the memorable scene at "Betene hous the brewstere" and its aftermath? (VI.350–435; see too VIII.122–26, 324–40). The same can be said about covetousness. Patience claims that because "pouerte is bote a pety thing" it tends to escape the clutches of this vice (XVI.79–84). But the poet's representation of Couetyse has not supported this line (VI.196–285a; see too 308–14). He displays this deadly sin among those who could certainly not be classified as "þe ryche" and are often depicted as living in poverty. For example: Couetyse confesses to having been a servant of "symme at þe style," apprenticed in a service that entailed deception for his master's profit (VI.206–14). He offers other similar figurations: thieving from merchants' bags (VI.235–36); secretly stealing from a neighbor's purse or house, or encroaching on the margins of his land (VI.264–71). These are hardly figurations of the rich and powerful. In them we are carefully being shown that covetousness is a disposition of "will" (VI.272–75). And we see Wille, a poor beggar, being overwhelmed by "coueytisie-of-yes" (XI.164–75, XII.3–4). Pride and Envy (the latter omitted by Patience) also go across classes and explicitly include the poor (VI.14–102). The final sin considered by Patience is Sloth (XVI.94–99). He recognizes that poverty may be accompanied by this sin. Nevertheless, he claims that wretchedness [Meschief] is always [ay] an instrument that compels the poor person [maketh hym] to acknowledge God as his greatest help "and no gome elles." Patience also asserts that the wretchedness of slothful poverty compels the subject to acknowledge that he is always God's servant "and of his secte bothe."[84] This is a fascinating assertion. We are told that poverty in itself and necessarily generates the remedies to a deadly sin. It allegedly compels the slothful to recognize what Rechelesnesse had proclaimed: "god, as þe gospel saith, goth ay as þe pore" (XII.101).[85] But to recognize "god" in Jesus, the poor Christ, let alone to follow him as his servant, is an act of faith, and faith is a theological virtue, a gift of God's grace.[86] Here Patience, like Rechelesnesse, fails to acknowledge the utter paralysis of the will in the deadly sin known as sloth, so close to despair (see VII.55–80), itself related to Rechelesnesse (XI.196–98).[87] Patience fails to see that someone in a state of sloth *cannot* exercise the virtues of faith and discipleship. Sin resides in the habits of the will, and the will is thus enchained.[88] It is, as *Piers Plowman* will dramatize, against the Pelagian or "semi-Pelagian" wishes of many voices within and without the poem, *semyuief* (XIX.57; Luke 10.30). Neither poverty nor wealth can free such a will. This kind of failure to grasp the consequences of sin for the freedom of the will and the practice of the Christian virtues is traditionally designated

Pelagianism. As in Rechelesnesse's case, the motivation for such insouciance is the zeal to persuade us of the immense ethical and spiritual benefits of involuntary, material poverty.

At this point Patience may perhaps indicate an awareness of the serious difficulties informing his position. For he prefaces his next proposal with a statement disclaiming the relevance of his previous argument to the one he is about to offer. It makes no difference to the latter, he says, whether the slothful poor are or are not servants of Christ who think that God is their help: "And where he be or be nat, a bereth þe signe of pouerte" (XVI.98). He follows this preface by declaring that the poor "bereþ þe signe of pouerte / And in þat secte oure saueour saued al mankynde" (XVI.98–99). This echoes Rechelesnesse's emphasis that, "god, as þe gospel saiþ, goth ay as þe pore" and that Christ has often been known in the "likenesse" of the poor (XII.101, 122). But even Richard Fitzralph acknowledged that Jesus lived a life of poverty, and the issue was always the contexts in which this observation was set and the consequences drawn from it.[89] Patience's conclusion is that because Christ was poor he constituted "þe signe of pouerte" which makes the will of the poor person irrelevant to the efficacy of the sign. His implicit model seems to be the classic teaching on sacramental signs. They are divinely instituted, and their sanctifying powers are not diminished by the inadequacies of the ministering priest. So the poor person's sloth is said to be irrelevant to the force of the sign. But no theology of the sacramental signs maintained the total irrelevance of the adult recipients' dispositions. Could any theologian forget Paul's threatening words about the sacrament of the altar: "whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord. . . . [H]e that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11.27, 29)? Patience, however, seems so certain about the sanctifying power of the sign of poverty in itself that he is prepared to set aside the subject's dispositions. In accord with this line, he returns to the language of rights:

> Forthy alle pore þat pacient is of puyr rihte may claymen
> Aftur here endynge here heuenryche blisse.
> (XVI.100–101)

Since I have illustrated the dire theological difficulties with this kind of claim, there is no need to rehearse the analysis. Even Patience's addition of the qualifier "pacient" to poverty does not mitigate the problems of asserting

a claim on eternal life by "pure rihte." Such a claim is simply incompatible with orthodox Christian traditions and their complex discourses of human "merit." We are once more left with the Pelagianizing assumptions encountered earlier in Patience's speech and in Rechelesnesse's.

The poem now moves from involuntary poverty to voluntary poverty and its most explicitly Franciscan passage:

> Moche hardyore may he aske þat here myhte haue his wille
> In lond and in lordschipe and lykynge of body
> And for goddes loue leueth al and lyueth as a beggare.
> (XVI.102–4)

Unlike "lunatyk lollares" or other involuntary poor, these people could have sustained life among the wealthy but chose to renounce "al" to become mendicants, "for goddes loue." Because Patience believes that the involuntary but patient poor may claim eternal joy "by puyr resoun," "by puyre lawe" and by "puyr rihte" (XV.283–86, XVI.99–100), it is not surprising that he believes the voluntary poor living as mendicants can make such claims even more securely. He speaks with the kind of assurance we find in the fourteenth-century Franciscan manual *Fasciculus Morum*. There we read that the "standard" of God the eternal king "is the sign of poverty, to which he had given special preference" [vexillum signum est paupertatis quam ipse specialiter preelegit].[90] Patience himself reiterates the unique status of "þe signe of pouerte." Since patient poverty is "syb to crist sulue and semblable bothe," the voluntary poor enact a Francis-like marriage to poverty (XVI.111–13).[91] This is the heart of the poem's reconstruction of a Franciscan understanding of "þe signe of pouerte" as a sanctifying sign, especially efficacious for those voluntarily espousing it in a mendicant life. And it is forcefully done. But serious questions in Patience's oration, to which I have drawn attention, remain unaddressed. This Franciscan marriage to poverty, "syb to crist hymsulue," is not, by a long way, the poem's last word on the sign of poverty.

Langland continues the exploration by allowing Actyf to respond. Patience, after all, was answering his questions about the theological evaluation of poverty and licit wealth reasonably spent (XV.277–78). Far from being impressed with Patience's Franciscan answers, Actyf is thoroughly irritated. He now asks "al angryliche and Arguinge as hit were" just what "pouerte" is (XVI.114–15). The poet wants to give still more space to the Franciscan voice articulating "þe signe of pouerte." Actyf's resistance invites the

teacher to expatiate. It provides an opportunity to get a little more specific about the issue Aquinas and Hervaeus Natalis so cogently saw as central to disputes over evangelical poverty, namely, the issue of "solicitude," of anxiety in the production, acquisition, and consumption of a *fyndynge*.[92]

But Patience is unable to take this opportunity. Instead, he defines poverty in an encyclopedic and aphoristic mode which largely recapitulates his earlier emphasis on the immense advantages of material poverty, including involuntary material poverty (XVI.116–57; see XVI.48–97). His praise of poverty and its role as a powerful device against sin merely raises many of the questions we considered in his earlier statement of this view. Perhaps it is worth recalling, once more, that the pressure to put such questions to Patience's speech comes from *Piers Plowman* itself. For example, Patience tells Actyf that poverty is in itself a removing of cares [*Remocio curarum*] and a subverter of pride (XVI.116–22; see XVI.48–65). However, if we remember the poet's powerful images of the crushing and endlessly demanding poverty shaping the lives of families living on the margins of subsistence as landless laborers (IX.70–97), this assertion will seem, at best, smugly ignorant. We have been shown such poor people striving to meet the demands of "chief lordes rente" and told about the crying of their children who "greden aftur fode" that the family lacks despite working endlessly. This is not a "*remocio curarum*," material or spiritual. Nor is it "*sanitatis mater*," mother "of mannes helthe" (XVI.137–38a). In fact, *not* to be crushed by such poverty in the midst of unending patient labor would require the theological virtues which are the gifts of divine grace and emphatically not the necessary consequence of any such social state. The poem itself works strongly against tendencies to reify the sign of poverty in the oration of this Franciscanizing speaker. And its critical exploration of the relevant issues still has a long way to go.

In the middle of Passus XVI Patience is succeeded by Liberum Arbitrium, Actyf's "ledare." This leader is introduced as "*liberum arbitrium*," one who knows Conscience and Clergie well. He is "cristes creature" and well known "in cristes court" (see XVI.159–72).[93] From this moment Patience never reappears. Nor is he ever recalled and referred to as an authority. These facts set us the task of grasping just what kind of succession is involved here and just how Patience's teaching in poverty and perfection relates to those who follow him.

The transition from Patience to Liberum Arbitrium is made with the latter agreeing that land and lordship are debilitating for anyone "at his partynge hennes" (XVI.160–61). But the model of virtue and salvation that he

develops is significantly different from Patience's (XVI.158–XVIII.180). At the center of his discourse Liberum Arbitrium binds together the contemporary Church, "persones and prestes and prechours of holy churche," and the theological virtue of charity (XVI.231–85; see too XVII.41–321). Virtue is inextricably bound up with the Church, the divinely given root through which people are to become sanctified (XVI.242–55). "*Si sacerdocium integrum fuerit tota floret ecclesia; Si Autem coruptum fuerit omnium fides marcida est*" [If the priesthood is sound, the whole church flourishes; if however it is corrupt the faith of all is rotten] (XVI.273).[94] Instead of contexts set by the questions "What is properly parfit pacience" and "Where pouerte and pacience plese more god almyhty / Than rihtful rychesse and resonablelyche to spene" (XV.272, 277–78), the search is now explicitly for charity. Wille tells Liberum Arbitrium that he has yet to find charity except "figuratyfly" (XVI.286–97). His searching question is, "Where may hit be yfounde?" (XVI.287). Liberum Arbitrium begins an answer "as holy churche witnesseth," outlining the qualities and disposition of charity (XVI.298–315). Langland then gives Wille the question to which his poem constantly returns, the question of *fyndynge:* "Ho fynt hym his fode?" (XVI.316). As Wille had remembered that his father and his friends "foende" him to school (V.36), so now he asks whether Charity's *fyndynge* comes from "frendes" or rents or other forms of "richesse to releue hym at his nede?" (XVI.316–17). Wille thus links Charity with issues of *fyndynge* and material *nede*. In this, he serves his maker's preoccupations.

At first it seems that Liberum Arbitrium is simply going to repeat the strategies of Rechelesnesse and Patience over the issue of *fyndynge*. This involves allegorizing the *fyndynge* into spiritual food so as to displace the need for Actyf's labor and invoking saints whose bodily needs were met by divine miracles. Liberum Arbitrium tells Wille that Charity has a friend "þat fynd hym" every day. Like Patience he quotes Scripture: "*aperis-tu-manum*" [Thou openest thy hand: and fillest with blessing every living creature] and "*Fiat-voluntas-tua*" [Thy will be done] (Psalm 144.16; Matthew 6.10) (XVI.320–21; see XV.246–49). He may also be alluding to Rechelesnesse when he says that Charity never "reccheth" of rents or wealth (XVI.318–21). But unlike his predecessors he actually has no intention of substituting allegorical for material *fyndynge*. He tells Wille that Charity actually pays for the food and clothes of poor people and prisoners. Liberum Arbitrium thus *combines* unequivocally material comfort with a spiritual comfort which centers on preaching about Christ's suffering and visiting "fetured folk and oþer folke pore" (XVI.324–30). Patience had been shown begging for material food and money, as I highlighted (XV.34–35), while failing to acknowledge this, let alone to examine its significance, in his speeches to Actyf. Liberum Arbitrium, however, recognizes that Charity is involved in a market where food becomes a commodity acquired by monetary exchange. If Charity is to pay for food he must have social resources that the poor do not have while still maintaining his identity as Charity. Perhaps remembering the Franciscan assumptions of Rechelesnesse and Patience, Wille asks whether the "clerkes" of an endowed "holy churche" can know Charity (XVI.339).

Liberum Arbitrium does not deny that "clerkes" can know Charity but says that the one who knows Charity "most parfitliche" is Actyf's master, Piers the Plowman (XVI.339–40a). In the previous passus Piers briefly appeared to proclaim the love of enemies and the material endowment of this love "with thy catel" and with "kynde speche" (XV.137–46). Here the supreme form of Christian love plainly has material resources which Piers does not present as an impediment to perfect love, let alone as a danger to salvation. Liberum Arbitrium tells Wille that one cannot discern Charity by clothing or by words. It is, after all, a theological virtue perfecting the subject's will. But although God alone sees people's thoughts, we learn that we may discern Charity "thorw werkes." Liberum Arbitrium quotes John 10.38: "*Operibus credite*" [believe the works] (XVI.340a–42a). His approach begins to unravel a pervasive assumption in the speeches of Rechelesnesse and Patience: namely, that external poverty is a decisive sign in the quest for sanctification. It delegitimizes Patience's assertions about the relations between involuntary poverty and the deadly sins. The unraveling continues.

Liberum Arbitrium insists that Charity is found anywhere: "in russet," "in gray," and in the hallmarks of the extremely rich and powerful, "in grys and in gult harneys." He is also found among monarchs and ecclesiastics (XVI.345–49). We see that Charity can indeed "paye" for the food of the poor and provide material *fyndynge* for them. And "them" includes the vociferous mendicant Patience (XV.34–35). The answer to Wille's question, "Ho fynt hym his fode?" (XVI.316), has now been given: Actyf does. This was not Patience's understanding. Liberum Arbitrium finds Charity almost anywhere and everywhere. He has seen Charity as priests, as ecclesiastics, as those wealthy enough to ride horses, as those "in raggede clothes," as the extremely rich and as those in the king's court giving true counsel (XVI.350–61). The poor are of course included in this vision, but there is no knowledge of poverty as a special sanctifying sign. Indeed, the speaker explicitly *precludes* mendicants from identification with Charity: "Ac biddyng

als a beggare byhelde y hym neuere" (XVI.352). Most striking about this utterance is Liberum Arbitrium's refusal to make customary distinctions between different kinds of mendicancy (beggars with bags, beggars without bags, witless "lunatyk" nonbegging beggars, counterfeit beggars, religious beggars).[95] He simply "neuere" sees Charity as a mendicant. Surely he has, like us, seen Patience clamoring for food and money (XV.34–35)? If he has, and how could he not, he is questioning Patience's gloss of his own mendicant poverty as, necessarily, charity (XV.275–76). It seems that the sign of poverty, so lovingly composed by Rechelesnesse, Patience, and their author, is now being superseded. Even a brief concession to Franciscanism contributes to this supersession as Liberum Arbitrium remembers that Charity has been found in the clothing of a religious mendicant but only "ones," and then long ago, "in franceys tyme" (XVI.355–56). Now he walks "in riche robes rathest" (XVI.353).

In this context Liberum Arbitrium corrects the use Patience has made of a text in his arguments with Actyf: Ecclesiasticus 31.8–11 (XVI.358–59a, XV.279). The Old Testament text (quoted earlier in this chapter) praises the virtuous rich man and promises that his material goods will be "established in the Lord." Patience, however, took one verse from its context to suggest the immense unlikeliness of any rich people pleasing God anything like as much as the patient poor (XV.279–83, discussed above). Liberum Arbitrium has just developed an account of Charity which rejects the simple dichotomy and the ideological model which generates it. Having done so he reaffirms that Charity commends rich people who live "lelelyche" in love and faith. In this he quotes from Ecclesiasticus 31, taking the verse preceding Patience's: "*Beatus est diues sine macula*" (XVI. 359a): "Blessed is the rich man that is found without blemish: and that hath not gone after gold, nor put his trust in money nor in treasures" (Ecclesiasticus 31.8). As Aquinas says of this text, this kind of rich man "has done a difficult thing. . . . [T]hough placed among riches, he did not love riches" (*ST* II–II.186.3, ad 4).

At the end of Passus XVI, Liberum Arbitrium states once more that Charity does not beg. Charity, he maintains, considers all begging a vice (XVI.372–74). His supersession of the Franciscanizing sign of poverty and the elaborate casuistry of mendicancy it encouraged does, however, offer a qualification Wille takes up in the next passus. One kind of begging *is* practiced by Charity: begging directly to God. This is in obedience to Christ's instruction: "*Panem nostrum cotidianum & c.*" [Give us this day our daily bread] (XVI.374a, Matthew 6.11; see XVII.1–2).

Wille opens Passus XVII by commenting that at "som tyme" every human must beg, "be he ryche or pore" (XVII.1–2). If Wille means that the survival and development of any human involves complete dependency on others, he is unquestionably correct. But if he hopes that because human beings beg from God, as Christ taught (XVI.373–74a), Liberum Arbitrium will withdraw his condemnation of modern mendicancy, his own form of life (V.44–52, XV.3–4), then he is to be disappointed. Having "neuere" seen Charity living as a beggar (XVI.352), Liberum Arbitrium now confirms this claim and returns to Patience's invocation of divine miracles to replace Actyf's form of *fyndynge* (XV.246–71a). In accord with the nuanced approach of Hervaeus Natalis, Liberum Arbitrium carefully restricts the scope of Patience's claims. God has indeed miraculously fed certain people. The ones Liberum Arbitrium mentions are solitaries enclosed in cells or living in isolation from human communities.[96] They are not mendicants and they illustrate what he means by begging only from God (XVII.4–16, 21–31). Explicating the implications of his argument, he turns to apostles who pursued Actyf's mode of *fyndynge*. Paul, after he preached, worked for his livelihood: "wan with his handes al þat hym nedede." Peter and Andrew not only fished but also, according to Liberum Arbitrium, "solde" fish for their livelihood (XVII.17–20).[97] Twice in this passage Liberum Arbitrium insists that these holy people lived "[w]ithoute borwynge or beggynge" (XVII.8, 27). But by observing that Paul, Peter, and Andrew worked and produced commodities while God fed certain holy hermits by divine miracles, Liberum Arbitrium does not mean that the modern Church has no place for *nonmendicant* holy hermits. He proclaims that the latter should have a *fyndynge* provided for them: "trewe man alle tymes sholde / Fynde honest men and holy men" (XVII.33–34).

Liberum Arbitrium has thus done a number of things in this passage. He has decisively reiterated his view that Charity "neuere" chooses mendicancy as a way of life in the modern Church (XVI.352). He has carefully corrected and restricted Patience's broad appeal to divine miracles. He has corrected Patience's displacement of Actyf's form of *fyndynge:* nonmendicant hermits serving God are to be fed from Actyf's *fyndynge* and are not to rely on Patience's allegories or divine miracles.[98] Indeed, he tells the rich that charity begins at home, with their "kyn." This precedes giving to the religious or priests or pardoners. After one's "kyn" the obligation is to those in "moest nede." Such is charity in obedience to Christ (XVII.56–64). The Church can and should (but doesn't [XVI.242–80; XVII.69–85, 206–40])

act on similar principles. It can do so because it has a material *fyndynge* from which it should minister to those "in defaute" (XVII.68). This material *fyndynge* Liberum Arbitrium designates, traditionally enough, as "goddes goodes" and "Cristes tresor" committed to "pore peple" (XVII.67–70). Like Holy Church in Passus I, this teacher envisages the Trinity as a Creator calling, not for starkly ascetic lives but, even in a fallen world, for "plente and pees" (XVII.91–96). Such a gracious and abundant God is praised in just and generous division of resources.

Liberum Arbitrium insists that Holy Church, the creedal Church, *is* Charity, as he himself has been explicating this virtue (XVII.125–29).[99] But he laments the failure of the contemporary Church's mission to "Sarraysens" and Jews (XVII.122–24, 132–300). His sadness and frustration at this takes a Wycliffite turn. Because the Church's failures include alleged abuses in its material endowments, Liberum Arbitrium sees the latter as a poison destroying clerical powers and perfection (XVII.220–32). His solution is to call in the lay elite as physician. Its remedial "medecyne" is coercive disendowment of the "heuedes of holy churche and tho that ben vnder hem." This coercive political action, according to Liberum Arbitrium, is charity: "Hit were charite to deschargen hem for holy churche sake" (XVII.227–31). Charity thus includes not only wealthy ecclesiastics and the powerful elites symbolized by gilt armor (XVI.346, 353–54) but also the coercive action of the laity to disendow the modern Church, "for holy churche sake." Who speaks for "holy churche" against its embodiment (or disfiguration) in the modern Roman Church, and by what authority? Liberum Arbitrium fails to address such vexing questions but draws on a distinctively Wycliffite understanding of charity, as W. W. Skeat and many others have noted.[100] Once they have taken "londes and ledes, lordschipes and rentes" from the Church, the lay powers are exhorted to provide a *fyndynge* for the clergy through "dymes [tithes]" (XVII.216–28). One implication of such an arrangement is that no path will be reopened to the mendicant life discredited by Liberum Arbitrium as inimical to Charity. It is precluded by the *fyndynge* he envisages in a move that foreshadows the poem's final reflections on the reformation of the friars (XXII.380–84).

But this fact does not mean that on every issue Liberum Arbitrium reaches the poem's final determination. He is powerful and authoritative, well known in Christ's court and "cristes creature," as we observed (XVI.165–70). But his arguments and passionate ecclesiological proposals belong to a process which he is making but which he does not contain: adapting the language with which Chaucer ends *Troilus and Criseyde*, he is circumscribed by

that which he cannot circumscribe or grasp. The poem's Christocentric explorations of charity and Church certainly do not end with Liberum Arbitrium's Wycliffite image of ecclesiastic reform in Passus XVII. He himself moves to rather different meditations in the next passus, where he introduces the tree of Charity. His very authority as a Christian teacher is displayed in the way he leads Wille and us to figures of indubitably greater authority: the Samaritan Christ, Christ in the poet's *vitae Christi*, Christ in the harrowing of Hell, Christ resurrected, the Holy Spirit and Piers as the divinely appointed mediator of the work of Christ in his Church (XVIII–XXI). Through these figures the poem enriches its understanding of Charity and Church, of what it means to proclaim that "Charite" actually "is holy churche" (XVII.125). Any reading that identifies Charity and reform of the Church with Liberum Arbitrium's Wycliffite moment is in error. Just as the poem composed the Franciscan perspectives of Rechelesnesse and Patience within a process where their positions were essential moments but ones whose full unfolding was still to come, so the poem composes a Wycliffite moment in an authoritative figure's attempt to envisage a practical response to his conviction that the modern Church has allowed itself to be assimilated by the lures of possessions and dominion generalized as "the world." This Wycliffite moment is a forceful response to the situation as perceived by Liberum Arbitrium, an understandable response to his frustration with what he sees as a lack of reforming energies within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. It encourages his readers to think seriously about the potentials of a Wycliffite reformation to address, charitably, the sources of Liberum Arbitrium's frustration, namely, the Church's current failures of evangelism in the poet's country and far beyond its shores and traditions.

Yet this Wycliffite moment stimulates a range of questions which Liberum Arbitrium fails to address: How exactly would the wealthy laity's expropriation of the Church's collective material wealth enhance the evangelism Liberum Arbitrium demands? Would the will of this lay elite be informed by charity as it took "here londe"? Langland's treatment of the virtues and the will in *Piers Plowman* makes it plain that if the expropriators' will were not already informed by the theological virtue of charity, then Liberum Arbitrium would be wrong to assume that "[h]it were charite to dischargen" the common wealth of the Church into the hands of the lay ruling classes. It would, obviously enough, be the deadly sin of covetousness, probably accompanied by the deadly sins of pride, wrath, and envy. Do the poem's own representations of the lay elites do very much to give Liberum Arbitrium good reason to think that their appropriation of the Church's material

goods would be an act of charity? They do not (see, for example, XI.21–51, XXI.459–76). Nor do the poem's representations of the broader Christian community suggest that the elites' cupidity and lust for dominion would be significantly tempered by other social groups. Liberum Arbitrium himself claims that "the peple . . . contraryen now cristes lawe and cristendoem dispisen" (XVII.250–51). So we are shown how profound theological, ecclesiological, and political questions are evaded in Liberum Arbitrium's Wycliffite assertion that charity and coercive lay disendowment of the Church are one (XVII.231).

Furthermore, a Wycliffite reformation would utterly subvert traditional understanding and practice of the sacraments and priesthood, just as it would transform traditional understanding of how, and through whom, "holy churche" speaks and is interpreted. Yet Liberum Arbitrium does not attack the traditional ascription of spiritual and sacramental powers to the priesthood. On the contrary, he consistently maintains that all that is good in a community comes from the priesthood (XVI.242–47, 252–53). The other side of this exalted evaluation of the priestly office is that if the priesthood [sacerdocium] is sinful, then the whole people is turned to sin (XVI.273). These views assume a traditional sense of the priesthood and its power in Christian communities. Immediately after the passage on disendowment he reiterates that were the priesthood more perfect, led by the pope, then pope and priests would bring all lands to Christ's peace and love (XVII.233–40). This approach to the priesthood is congruent with the poem's pervasive concern with the *sacrament* of penance, a concern which has nothing in common with Wycliffite desacerdotalization and desacramentalization of penance.[101] The final two passus of the poem will not encourage anyone to pursue Liberum Arbitrium's momentary turn to Wycliffite ideology, its ramshackle ecclesiology, or its regal politics.[102]

The poem moves from Liberum Arbitrium's longing for a thriving Catholic evangelism (XVII.238–321) to its dazzling treatment of salvation history and the means of grace which flow from Christ's Incarnation, death, and resurrection. This treatment involves as profound an achievement of specifically Christian allegory as the tradition has produced.[103] The transition to the tree of Charity is made by Wille's hope that Liberum Arbitrium will tell him and teach him "to charite" (XVIII.1–2).[104] He is not to be disappointed, nor is the reader.

But the complex disclosures of charity and salvation history in Passus XVIII set aside the sign of poverty. Given Patience's Franciscan claims about the sign and its role in Christian perfection, this is very striking. Does it signify the supersession of the sign of poverty as the poem concentrates intensely on charity and Christ? Two moments in Passus XVIII seem particularly relevant to this question. The first is in the elaborate depiction of the fruits on the tree of Charity (XVIII.53–102).[105] The first fruits are of one kind (charity) but include three degrees ("weddede men and wedewes and riht worthy maydones") classified into two "lyues": "lyf of contemplacion" and "*Actiua* lyf."[106] The former is illustrated by "monkes and monyals, men of holy churche." Here all traces of Wycliffite ideology have been erased. This life also includes widowed people who forsake their own wills and live chastely. Those pursuing *contemplatiua vita* are the fruit of charity situated at the top of the tree and soonest ripened by the sun—that is, "þe hete of þe holi goest" (XVIII.58–82a). In this model of charity and perfection there is no mention of poverty, no identification of its special status. Yet we are being given one of the poem's major images of Christian perfection. Furthermore, the representation of the tree's fruit explicitly revises one of Rechelesnesse's most striking pieces of exegesis. In proclaiming the special sanctity of the poor, the "beste" and most perfect state, he took the story of Martha and Mary (XII.117–77; see Luke 10.38–42). We remember that Martha "was busy about much serving" while Mary, sitting "at the Lord's feet, heard his word." When Martha complained that her sister left her alone to serve, Jesus replied that Martha was "troubled about many things," whereas only "one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part." This well-known story was traditionally read as an allegory of relations between the lives of contemplation (and/or consecrated virginity) and the active life.[107] But Rechelesnesse imposed a different allegory, tailored to promote the role of poverty. He glossed "the best part" not as contemplation or holy virginity but as "pouerte": "pouerte god potte byfore and preued for þe betere: / *Maria optimam partem elegit que non auferetur ab ea*" [Mary hath chosen the best part which shall not be taken away from her] (XII.141–41a; see 129–41a). In the tree of Charity episode we find no support for this exegesis and its ideology. The shift here is eloquent. The relations between poverty and charity are not quite as Rechelesnesse and Patience imagined.

The second moment of particular relevance to the issue of poverty is the representation of Christ's life. This emerges from the vision of the tree of Charity, dramatically and with great theological coherence. Through Christ's Incarnation the poet discloses the source, survival, and fulfillment of charity in all its forms (XVII.117–76).[108] Other lives of Christ are composed

in the following passus (XIX–XXI). Langland shows a remarkable intensity of purpose in excluding some of the most pervasive conventions in late medieval Christian culture from his representation of Christ. As I showed in *Powers of the Holy*, he sets aside the dominant figurations of Christ's humanity, with their concentration on infancy and passion narratives, the latter replete with details of the torn, tortured, naked, bleeding body of Christ.[109] This decision is congruent with the supersession of specifically Franciscan ideology of poverty and distinctively Franciscan iconography of Christ's life. Langland's representations of Christ focus on the power of Jesus, spiritual and bodily. Even in his infancy he is "Byg and abydyng, and bold in his barnhoed / To haue yfouthte with þe fende Ar fol tyme come" (XVIII.133–36). His incarnate ministry displays his divine power. He is an omnipotent physician. Instead of authorizing Franciscan forms of *identification* with lepers, so graphically illustrated by Angela of Foligno, he *cures* them.[110] Instead of embracing and exalting ascetic rigors of poverty, he feeds people (XVIII.137–44, 152–54). His ministry includes prophetic assertion and dominion (XVIII.155–60). As Conscience later explains to Wille, Jesus's ministry is that of a conqueror (XXI.96–139). Even the passion and crucifixion are briefly narrated in modes that eschew conventional forms imbricated with Franciscan iconography and ideology (XX.26–112a, XXI.140–53).[111] The crucifixion is figured as a joust culminating in the triumphal liberation of souls imprisoned in hell. Langland's displays of divine compassion are inseparable from divine power and energy (XX.74–112a, 269–475). Without polemic or fuss, the iconographic and theological foundations of a Franciscan sign of poverty have been effectively removed.

Are they reconstituted? I will now address this question, beginning with the representation of the three theological virtues as Abraham, Moses, and Christ himself as the good Samaritan (XVIII.181–XIX.336). Abraham arrives on "a myddelenton sonenday," stepping forth from its epistle, Galatians 4.22–31. This text celebrates the transition from the law of the flesh to the promise of liberty in Christ. As Derek Pearsall notes, this is "one of the many N[ew] T[estament] texts in which the life of Abraham is taken as the model of the life of faith under the old dispensation."[112] But it is worth recalling that the figure Langland chooses to symbolize the theological virtue of Faith is a figure called by God to perfection (Genesis 13.14–17; 17.8, 22). Rechelesnesse himself acknowledged this (XIII.5). Not surprisingly, Abraham became a figure much invoked in medieval disputes over the status of poverty. For example, in *De Perfectione Vitae Spiritualis* Thomas

Aquinas reflects on Abraham's call ("esto perfectus" [be perfect]) after considering the famous invitation of Christ to the young man with great possessions ("si vis perfectus esse . . ." [If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven. And come follow me], Matthew 19.21).[113] For the Dominican theologian there is no conflict between God's call to Abraham, whose wealth multiplies in his calling, and Jesus's call to the young man, invited to sell all he has, for the poor, and to follow Christ. This is because Christian perfection does not consist in renunciation itself but in a *way* of perfection [quasi quandam perfectionis viam], a way which consists in following Christ. So someone possessing riches may certainly be on the way to perfection, obediently following Christ and informed by the theological virtues, just as Liberum Arbitrium maintained in *Piers Plowman*. We see how Abraham, the possessor of immense riches, was perfect. He was not ensnared by wealth but joined to God in love. He was, that is, faith perfectly informed by charity. Christ's point in Matthew 19.23–26, according to Aquinas, was not that wealth cannot enter the kingdom but that it does so with great difficulty.[114] In the *Summa Theologiae* he argues that voluntary poverty should be regarded as an emancipatory stage on the way to the perfection which is charity, while involuntary poverty is likely to be a state of torment. Once more he insists that Christian perfection does not essentially consist in poverty but rather consists in following Christ. Poverty must be, not fetishized, but regarded as "an instrument or exercise for attaining perfection" [sicut instrumentum vel exercitium perveniendi ad perfectionem]. As for wealth held in common, "solicitude" for this actually pertains to the love of charity [sollicitudo quae adhibetur circa res communes, pertinet ad amorem caritatis]. To hold money or any other goods in common for the sustenance of the religious community or any poor people, to hold a *fyndynge*, is unquestionably compatible "with the perfection Christ taught by his example" [est conforme perfectioni, quam Christus docuit suo exemplo]. He notes too that after Christ's resurrection his disciples, the source of all models of religious life, kept the price of lands that were sold [pretia praeditorum conservabant], distributing to each according to his need (Acts 4.34–35).[115]

Whether or not Langland had in mind such resonances when he selected Abraham to exemplify faith, he has Abraham articulate an account of Christian belief in the Trinity and a statement of "holy churche" as the mother of "childrene of charite" (XVIII.184–256, 206). Faith never utters a syllable about the place of poverty in the fulfillment of such charity. Not that

the *involuntary* poor are absent here. Abraham holds the beggar who lay at the rich man's gate, "a lazar" (XVIII.269–74; Luke 16.19–31). But the passage here has nothing to do with the sign of poverty and its putatively salvific qualities. On the contrary, Lazarus lies in Abraham's lap with "patriarkes and profetes," still bound by "þe deueles power" until Christ liberates him and them, rich and poor. Such is the liturgical time in which Wille encounters Faith/Abraham, time present, time past, and time future contained in time past yet redeemable through Christ's agency in time. The dreamer lives in a time after the harrowing of hell yet to be envisioned (XX), a time that is nevertheless, like Abraham's, a time of waiting and absence. He responds to what he is shown, in his present, with appropriate intensity:

> "Allas!" y saide, "þat synne so longe shal lette
> The myhte of goddes mercy that myhte vs alle amende."
> Y wepte for his wordes . . .
>
> (XVIII.286–88)

Wille's tears are tears shed in the acknowledgment of apparently boundless material and spiritual suffering. They are Christocentric tears of penitential yearning which know nothing of any alleged perfection in the state of poverty, voluntary or involuntary. And these tears, with the words they seal, are the signs of faith informed by charity, signs of Wille's fully attentive, receptive engagement with Abraham.

In Passus XIX the poet introduces Moses and the good Samaritan who is Christ. They figure forth the other two theological virtues, hope and charity. Hope, or Moses, seeks Christ, who will fulfill the law of love in salvation. But in the dialogue between him, Faith, and Wille, we hear nothing about poverty (XIX.1–46). Still, if the sign of poverty were to be revised and reconstituted, it might be done by the incarnate Christ figured as the good Samaritan, even though its absence from the other sustained representations of Christ's life in *Piers Plowman* (XVII–XXI) hardly encourages us to expect it here.

The Samaritan Christ enters a scene composed to correct any Pelagian delusions that may have survived from earlier orations.[116] Riding swiftly to joust in Jerusalem, sitting on a mule, Christ/Charity encounters Abraham/Faith, Moses/Hope, and Wille in a wild wilderness where thieves have attacked a man and left him in a disastrous state, bound up and only half alive:

> Bothe abraham and *spes* and he mette at ones
> In a wide wildernesse where theues hadde ybounde
> A man, as me tho thouhte, to moche care they brouhte
> For he ne myhte stepe no stande ne stere foet ne handes
> Ne helpe hymsulue sothly for semyuief he semede
> And as naked as an nedle and noen helpe abouten.
>
> (XIX.53–58)[117]

The figure who represents fallen humanity cannot move foot or hands, cannot "helpe hymsulue" at all. Half alive, half dead, the person is utterly incapable of *any* act of virtue. Such is the reality of "free" will in a fallen, enchained state. The scene makes all talk about fallen human beings voluntarily embracing a state of perfection in poverty seem rather hollow. The fallen person is unable to cooperate with the rescuing Christ even in the slightest way.[118] The poet shows Christ recognizing that the man is "in perel to deye." He soothes his wounds, picks him up, and organizes his treatment while he continues to Jerusalem. He assures Wille that in this catastrophic situation not even hope and faith, let alone any human medicine, can help. Only sacraments flowing from Christ's work can do so (XIX.48–95). And these necessary sacraments are entrusted to the Church (XIX.73–78, 86–95).[119]

From here the Samaritan's powerful oration composes models of the Trinity and the consequences of belief in the Trinity for the lives of Christians. Gradually it emerges that loving *kindness* is the form of charity which saves *and* perfects humans through grace flowing from relations within the Trinity (XIX.96–334). In this long and moving oration Christ has nothing to say about poverty as a sanctifying sign and nothing remotely resembling the Franciscan versions of Christian perfection outlined by Patience.

He does consider the rich whose salvation had so troubled Patience (XIX.209–75; cf. XV.279–XVI.9). But here too the one decisive issue is *kindness*. Only "vnkyndenesse" to one's fellow creatures quenches the loving forgiveness and grace of the Holy Spirit, regardless of social and economic status. Christ thus affirms the approach to charity articulated by Liberum Arbitrium. Instead of deploying the favored Franciscan texts (such as Matthew 19.21: "If thou wilt be perfect go sell what thou hast and give to the poor"), Christ the Samaritan takes his own parable of Dives and Lazarus, recently alluded to in *Piers Plowman* (XVIII.271–74). He focuses on Luke 16.21, a summary of Lazarus's situation: "Desiring to be filled with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, and no one did give him."

That is, Christ focuses on the rich man's refusal to give even the crumbs from his table. It is for his "vnkyndenesse" that Dives is damned (XIX.225–30). So emphatic is Christ about this that he reiterates the judgment twice within ten lines (XIX.225–35). He also makes it very clear that the rich man's place in hell had nothing to do with illicit winnings. Dives accumulated wealth without wrong, without subtle tricks (XIX.233–40). Langland's Christ says absolutely nothing to suggest that wealth in itself is the overwhelming danger that Patience asserted, nothing to suggest St. Francis's convictions about the inevitable contamination of contact with money. On the contrary, he even uses Luke 16.19 (as Hunger did) to advocate that if one has accumulated wealth unjustly, the way to right this in God's judgment is to make friends of the mammon of iniquity by generous giving (XIX.241–52). So Christ affirms the traditional line that riches become a damning trap only if they are used with cruel selfishness, exemplified in the rich man's refusal of meat and money "to men þat hit nedede," "to the nedfol pore." This is failure of charity in its starkest forms: denial of those on the margins of subsistence, turning one's face away from the neighbor in need, and, later, actual murder (XIX.231–43, 255–61). Only such "vnkyndenesse" irrevocably quenches "the grace of the holy goest, godes owene kynde" (XIX.255–56). And without this grace one is worse than *semyuief*.

Here it is worth noting that Langland's Christ treats the story of Dives and Lazarus in a thoroughly Augustinian way. In a sermon preached on the day of the Scillitan saints, Augustine takes up this parable. He reflects on its treatment of wealth and poverty, rich and poor people, addressing the construal of those who have nothing, including mendicants:

> It's certainly not riches that were blamed in the rich man's case, nor poverty praised in the poor man's; but impiety was condemned in the one, piety praised in the other. Sometimes, you see, people hear these things in the gospel, and those who have nothing are delighted, the beggar is overjoyed at these words. "I," he says, "shall be in Abraham's bosom, not the rich man." Let us answer the poor man: "It's not enough, your being covered with sores; add something to yourself for merit."

What the poor can add for merit, Augustine declares, is kindness to those in even greater need (symbolized by the dogs licking Lazarus) and by faith. As for the condemnation of the rich man, Augustine identifies its source: "He ignored the poor man lying at his gate, who for his part was longing for the scraps that fell from his table; no covering, no shelter, no humanity was shown him. That's what was punished in the rich man, callousness, unkindness, conceit, pride, infidelity." He insists that "it was impiety and infidelity that was condemned in him, not riches and affluence in the present." Addressing resistance to his approach, Augustine asks his listeners to think about the place into which Lazarus was lifted up: Abraham's bosom. "Look at the poor man in Abraham's bosom," something *Piers Plowman* had led us to do at the end of Passus XVIII. Augustine then dwells on an issue discussed above, Abraham's immense wealth: "read in the book of Genesis about the riches of Abraham, gold, silver, flocks, household." He then asks: "Why are you objecting to the rich man. The rich man [Abraham] welcomed the poor man." So the rich must "possess wealth like Abraham, and let them possess it with faith. Let them have it, possess it, and not be possessed by it." But what does that mean? Augustine's answer is as powerful as it is disconcerting. He notes that in his culture, as for many in Langland's culture, people "save their riches for their children." He also maintains, in a statement that some aspects of my final chapter will cast in a strange light, that all "love their children more than their riches, love those for whom they are saving up more than what they are saving up." And yet, this is his point, Abraham set his love of God above the earthly life of the "only begotten son" for whom he had been "saving up" and whom he loved (Genesis 22.1–18). So he would undoubtedly have been willing to give all he had to the poor and follow Christ, had he been so called (Matthew 19.16–22). Perfection ("If thou wilt be perfect," Matthew 19.21) is a quality of the will's love of God, whether one possesses wealth or not. Augustine concludes that those possessing wealth with "works of kindness and piety" should "wait for the last day without anxiety," counsel that both Liberum Arbitrium and Langland's Christ affirm.[120]

It is extremely important that the figure who embodies charity, the model of perfection and the complete, redeemed identification of humanity with God, never mentions the special status and desirability of poverty. He never suggests that the excruciating poverty suffered by Lazarus, and the immense host like him, constitutes the sanctifying sign of poverty, even when endured patiently. Langland's Christ chooses to show that Christian perfection consists *not* in poverty but in following Christ, as Aquinas had argued in a subtle distinction directed against Franciscan ideology.[121] In *Piers Plowman* that means following the version of Christ whose particular features and teaching we have been tracing. Christian perfection is constituted by the form of love exemplified and embodied in the poet's dramatization of

Christ's parable of the good Samaritan. In Luke's Gospel the Samaritan, "moved with compassion" [misericordia motus est], enacts the perfection of love to which the divine precepts call their followers: "Go, and do thou in like manner." But the narrative of Samaritan and *semyuief* together with Christ's elaborate commentary in *Piers Plowman* makes it clear that no one can even begin to hear this precept, let alone fulfill it perfectly, without having been placed in the Church, where Christ has left the essential sacraments (XIX.65–77, 83–95). The perspectives established in Passus XIX do not include the Franciscanizing sign of poverty. The arresting representation of our state as *semyuief* also calls into question Patience's version of the will, both in voluntary poverty, freely willing the alleged state of perfection, and in involuntary poverty, freely willing patient endurance of this state. Christ's actions for *semyuief* and his long speeches suggest that Patience's vision lacked adequate attention to the Church and its sacraments, the necessary means of grace left by Christ for the healing of *semyuief*. No one should identify the vision of *Piers Plowman* with the vision of Patience, a constitutive moment in the dialectical process to which it belongs.

It is to the founding of the Church in *Piers Plowman* that I now turn. Here the enigma of the massively glossed "pardoun" of Passus IX is resolved. We have now been given the resources to understand how Christ himself, as "conqueror," gave "Peres power and pardoun" to forgive all people provided that they confess their debts and perform loving restitution, "*Redde quod debes*" (XXI.12–198). The last two passus (like V–VII) show how the demand for such justice is inextricably bound up with the sacrament of penance and its practice in Christian communities. Given this conviction, it is logical that Langland should explore the divine resources poured into the Church after Christ's ascension. The present condition of the Church, so critically depicted by Liberum Arbitrium, is returned to in the light shed by these gifts (XXI.199–XXII.386). My thread through this characteristically inventive, densely concentrated sequence will be to follow the place of poverty in the founding gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church and in the poem's final representation of the modern Church. That will bring this chapter to its close.

In founding the Church at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit provides "tresor" which is both material and spiritual, both literal and allegorical, both individual and collective (XXI.199–260). He elaborates the treatment of "tresores" by the creedal Church in Passus I (I.41–53, 79–101, 137–202). As

Derek Pearsall observes, we are shown that the Christian community "the world of the Visio," is actually "Christ's Church."[122] In showing this, *Piers Plowman* continues to work against the amnesia and failures of self-knowledge about which Holy Church had complained so long ago as she descended "fro þe castel" to converse with Wille (I.3–9, 72–75). The poem now tries to make its diversely gifted readers recognize their gifts and themselves as Christ's Church, answerable to the source from which they have been poured forth. *Redde quod debes* (XXI.182–94, 259).

Among the remarkable facts about the poem's contemporary application of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12; XXI.228a) is its apparent comfort with commodity exchange and markets. The Holy Spirit teaches some to earn their livelihood by "sullyng and buggynge" (XXI.234–39). Even intellectual and verbal gifts to "prechours and prestes and prentices of lawe" are envisaged as labor power exchanged for livelihood (XXI.229–33). Here it seems that the Holy Spirit corrects one of the glosses on the two-line pardon of Passus IX. There men of law had been confidently told that "hit is symonye to sulle þat sent is of grace" (IX.55; see IX.44–57). This conventional aphorism is now shown to need careful complication, especially if it is to be free from any risks of the communism ascribed to envy, friars' greed, and distinctly pagan philosophy in XXII.273–79a. For Holy Spirit discloses that the graces he gives can be licitly treated as commodities in relations of exchange where "sullyng and buggynge here bileue to wynne" are themselves among his gifts (XXI.227–35).[123] Equally remarkable is the Holy Spirit's gift of dominion and violence to the Church (XXI.245–47).[124] Striking as it is, this perspective confirms that of Holy Church herself in Passus I (I.90–101).

But it does go against the views of Patience. The latter sees poverty as the virtue necessary to free people from the grave risks of dominion and authority, about which he has nothing affirmative to say. Poverty alone, according to Patience, enables people to fulfill Christ's commandment to abstain from judgment (XVI.120–27a; see too XV.277–86, XVI.94–104). But the third person of the Trinity pours out gifts in a manner that seems to sideline the account of the virtues developed by Patience (XV–XVI). The Holy Spirit certainly does call "somme" to a life of contemplation, "longyng to be hennes, / In pouerte and in pacience to preye for alle cristene" (XXI.248–49). These are the people praised in the poem's Prologue, "As Ankeres and Eremites þat holdeth hem in here selles" (Pr.27–32), and praised too by Liberum Arbitrium (XVII.6–16, 25–34). But Holy Spirit offers no support for the Franciscan claims pursued by Rechelesnesse and

Patience about the special perfection of voluntary poverty. Living the life of contemplation in poverty is presented here as just one among many graces given with boundless generosity by God to his Church, a Church for thoroughly embodied and social creatures inhabiting a fallen world. There is no specification, let alone elaboration, of the suggestion that one "craft" is "clenner" than another. Holy Spirit prefers Christians to acknowledge that "all craft and connynge come of my 3efte" (XXI.250–55). Furthermore, there is an absence that the poem has made extremely conspicuous. Holy Spirit does not apparently give *mendicancy* to anyone, whether "prechours and prestes" or contemplatives living in "pouerte." Such a silence on the topic of religious mendicancy, from such a source, in the context of the Church's foundation, at this stage of the poem, is extremely eloquent.[125] Nor is this silence broken in the poem's extensive account of the further gifts of the Holy Spirit to Piers, or in the details of "þat hous vnite, holy chirche an englisch" which he constructs, or in the successful defense of this Church (XXI.262–390).

Once Christians reject the covenant to which the sacrament of the altar belongs, reject the obligations to do all they can to mend bonds of community unjustly broken, *redde quod debes*, the Church and its members are in dire trouble (XXI.383–48; see chapter 2 of this book). In this situation the superseded sign of poverty returns (XXII.1–64). It seems fraught with many of the disputed problems explored in the poem, and its figuration as Need has generated sharply divergent critical readings.

Need has been read as a demonic, apocalyptic figure composed from a position congruent with the antifraternal work of William of St. Amour and Richard Fitzralph. He has also been read as a Franciscan friar instructing Wille in "a strictly Franciscan" justification for "the mendicant life," one to which the author, "probably a Franciscan," was committed. Given such extraordinarily opposed interpretations, it is not surprising that Need has also been read as "an ethical and representational enigma," one of the poem's "ultimately irresolvable enigmas" who makes poverty "a wholly ambivalent sign."[126] It seems to me that Need's speech at the opening of the final passus is an attempt to reconstitute a Franciscan version of the sign of poverty but in a context and within a dialectical process which gives readers good cause to criticize and reject the attempt. The poet's rhetorical strategy here is extremely complex.

Need confronts a hungry, mobile, and unhappy dreamer (XXI.1–3; cf. XV.1–3, V.48–52). The first part of his speech is a thoroughly traditional, orthodox denial that property is held absolutely (XXII.6–19). In the face of life-threatening need, a person may take what is needed "his lyf for to saue." Need is very careful to insist that such taking must be strictly controlled by extreme need and the cardinal virtue of temperance, the second of the four grains given to Piers by Grace (XXII.5–19; see XXI.274–75, 281–88).[127] This is conventional Christian teaching. It leaves unaddressed the questions put by Reason and Conscience to the mendicant dreamer in Passus V (discussed above). And it leaves unaddressed Liberum Arbitrium's insistence that he has "neuere" seen Charity "biddyng als a beggare" (XVI.352, also discussed above). But that does not undermine the orthodoxy and force of Need's statement about the rights of survival over the rights of private possession and dominion. The first part of Need's speech belongs to Christian tradition which had nothing to do with Franciscan ideology in particular.

The second part of the speech begins with a claim that the needy individual may take "[w]ithouten consail of Conscience or cardinale vertues." But Need has just announced that *spiritus temperancie* is central to any licit act of taking in need, and he reasserts this strongly (XXII.22; see 5–9). So the second claim does not cohere with the first. Its development makes matters worse. For Need sets up a hierarchy within the virtues in which Temperance is supreme: "For is no vertue by fer to *spiritus temperancie*" (XXII.23). He defends this claim by asserting that other cardinal virtues easily become vices (XXII.24–33; cf. XXI.451–79a). Doubtless any moral virtue is fragile, but Need ignores familiar questions about the interlocking, interdependent nature of the virtues, and he simply contradicts Conscience's statement that the "cheef seed þat Peres sewe" is *spiritus Iusticie* (XXI.405–6, 297–308).[128] Yet the problems with Need's claims here are not particularly related to a Franciscan understanding of poverty.

It is not until the third part of his declamation that Need explicitly moves into Franciscan ideology (XXII.35–50). He identifies the quality he personifies, Need, with God's Incarnation. God "toek mankynde and bicam nedy" (XXII.40–41). Need then appropriates Christ's statement that whereas foxes have holes and birds have nests he has nowhere to lay his head (XXII.42–47; Matthew 8.20). He relocates the gospel text, having Christ speak it from the cross. And he rewrites it to insert himself into Christ's language: "'Ther nede hath ynome me þat y moet nede abyde'" (XXII.46). Wendy Scase recalls that the gospel text Need uses "was a friars' authority for complete renunciation." Lawrence Clopper too observes that Matthew 8.20 (Luke 9.58) "plays a key role in all Franciscan discussions of poverty and is always used to support the assertion that Christ and the apostles had no *dominium* individually or in common."[129] By dislocating the text's place in

the narratives of Matthew and Luke to relocate Christ's saying "in his sorwe on þe sulue rode" (XXII.43), and by representing Christ's journey to the cross in the passive mode ("nede hath ynome me þat y moet nede abyde"), Need composes Jesus in the dominant late medieval manner outlined earlier in this chapter. This mode was central to Franciscan devotion and its representations of Christ, but, as I have shown, it was one that the poet systematically set aside. In its place he composed an active, prophetic figure of immense power, "conqueror" in his ministry, jousting "conqueror" on the cross, "conqueror" in harrowing hell, "conqueror" in the resurrection: very much the Christ of John's Gospel.[130] Need misrepresents these disclosures of Christ in Passus XVIII–XXI. It follows that, in this poem, whatever the case elsewhere, Need's Franciscanizing model of the imitation of Christ is without good warrant. In the Christocentric narratives of *Piers Plowman*, Need is mistaken when he simply claims divine authority for those who decide to "byde and to be nedy" (XXII.48–50).[131] We are thus shown the return of Patience's ideology in a context which confirms the supersession of its Franciscan tendencies which has been unfolding since the departure of Patience from *Piers Plowman* (XVI.164).[132]

The poet now envisages his Church under the assault of Antichrist (XXII.51–386). Only those the culture perceives as "foles" resist this tyrant (XII.58–68, 74–79). Their folly involves deliberate and courageous resistance to "alle falsenesse" and to all who pursue it, however socially powerful and whatever their status (XXII.65–68). These "foles" are thus certainly not "lunatyk lollares," who, we recall, were witless (IX.105–38). Nor is there any indication that their identity as "foles" is bound up with poverty, whether voluntary or involuntary. We do indeed meet people devoted to the sign of poverty, religious mendicants. But these are not among the "foles" who resist Antichrist. On the contrary, they "folewed þat fende for he ȝaf hem copes" (XXII.58).

But why would friars follow Antichrist for copes? These are not as obvious markers of collective and individual transgressions of claims to collective poverty as the building or dining programs associated with mendicants earlier in *Piers Plowman* (III.38–58, XV.38–109). The answer to the question just posed is that the very commitment to living and wearing the fraternal sign of poverty makes people vulnerable to the gifts of Antichrist and the desire these symbolize. A further implication is that those who think they can freely will the state of absolute poverty, mobile and mendicant, chosen as the most perfect form of life, betray the kind of Pelagian delusions about the condition of the fallen will which emerged in the orations of Recheles-

nesse and Patience, delusions analyzed earlier in this chapter. We should also recall that neither Christ nor Holy Spirit have given any indication that voluntary and mobile mendicant poverty is a state created and sustained by divine grace in the Church. Here and later in the final passus Langland discloses that those devoted to constructing, exalting, and wearing the sign of poverty have turned out to be no better Christian guides than the sign-bearing pilgrim of Passus VII (VII.155–81; see chapter 2 of this book).

Meditating on the forces attacking his Church, the poet confirms Liberum Arbitrium's view that the priesthood is decisive in determining the form of Christian community and the *habitus* it fosters (for example, XXII.218–31; cf. XVI.242–85, XVII.233–51). Conscience cries out that "inparfit prestes and prelates" overwhelm Christian conscience (XXII.228–29). Those committed to pursuing the allegedly perfect state of life under the sign of poverty present themselves as the solution to the Church's difficulties. Initially Conscience rejects their claim, recognizing that "they couthe nat wel here crafte" (XXII.231). As we observed, in the generous multitude of graced crafts poured into the Church by Holy Spirit, no link was made between the divine gifts forming "prechours and prestes" and those of mendicant poverty. In fact, we recall, there was no mention of religious mendicancy as a calling or state in the Church founded by Holy Spirit (XXI.213–61). Once Conscience has rejected religious mendicants claiming "to helpe" the Church (XXII.230–31), Need reappears. Just as Wille's neediness at the beginning of the final passus had generated the personification Need, so now the friars' neediness briefly conjures up Need once again (XXII.232–41). But whereas Need instructed Wille, a married mendicant with a family (V.1–2, 48–52; XV.1–3; XX.468–72; XXII.193–98), in the rights of the needy and their affinities with a Franciscan model of Christ, his attitude towards religious mendicants is different. He tells Conscience that their offer to help with the "cure of soules" is motivated by covetousness and provides an explanation for their alleged vices. These failings are actually generated by the very sign of poverty to which they are committed. Because they are "pore" and have chosen a lack of "patrimonye," they ingratiate themselves with the rich. They thus abandon the critical, prophetic force of Christian discipleship which we saw in the "foles" who resisted the tyrant Antichrist (XXII.57–64). Abandoning this force, wearing the sign of poverty, they subject themselves to the tyrant. In response to this, Need advises Conscience to make friars live the rigors of the sign they carry, absolute poverty (XXII.236–37). But he acknowledges the ethical dangers of a mendicant life and concludes with two alternatives. Either let them live this morally dangerous life "as beggares" or

let them "lyue by angeles fode" (XXII.238–41).[133] At this stage of *Piers Plowman*, Need's alternatives do not constitute a defense of Franciscan ideology and practice. The option of mendicant poverty has not been proposed by Christ or Holy Spirit, and nothing has been done to overturn Liberum Arbitrium's statement that he has "neuere" seen Charity "biddyng als a beggare" (XVI.352; see too XVII.8, 27).[134] Need himself recognizes that working "for lyflode" and giving to beggars in need is a much safer form of life than voluntary mendicancy (XXII.238–39). The other option, living off "angeles fode" by divine miracle, is of course not institutionizable. Need is in fact now mocking the Franciscan project of absolute mendicant poverty in a manner that makes Conscience himself laugh (XXII.242). The critical irony Need thus directs against both options shows that he has been persuaded by the wider process in which he reemerges to repudiate his earlier alignment with Franciscan ideology and practice around the sign of poverty.[135] This undoing accords perfectly with the direction the poem has taken and continues to take.

Conscience laughs at Need's irony but still invites "all freres" into the house called unity, exhorting them to live according to their rule (XXII.242–47, XXI.328). He makes no distinction between different fraternal orders, and what he now proposes is a fundamental challenge to Franciscan ideology. He promises to ensure that the friars have "breed and clothes / And oþere necessaries ynowe; 3ow shal no thing lakke" (XXII.242–49). To be guaranteed all material necessities, to be guaranteed to lack nothing material, is certainly not the Franciscan marriage to holy poverty invoked by Patience (XVI.111–13), certainly not the identification with the destitute envisaged by St. Francis and his most devoted followers. In fact, Conscience's proposal could spell the end of any distinctively Franciscan project. But at this point its implications are not elaborated. Instead Conscience and the narrator focus on the friars' struggles for status and power in the Church (XXII.250–96). One result of this struggle is the subversion of the sacrament of penance with its integration of restitution (*redde quod debes*) and divine pardon (XXII.279–93; see XXI.182–90, 256–61). But the subversion of this sacrament, according to *Piers Plowman*, cuts people off from God's pardon and the sacrament of the altar (XXI.383–408). And Christ himself, we remember, proclaims that without the latter, *semyuief* who has been rescued in baptism will "neuere" gain strength (XIX.89–90; see chapter 2 of this book).

Trying to defend the Church from the powerful attacks of Antichrist, Conscience calls for "a leche þat couthe wel shryue / To salue the þat syke were and thorw synne ywounded."[136] The obedient priest responsive to Conscience's call concentrates on the relations between sacramental healing and restitution, *redde quod debes* (XXII.306–8). But just as Christians had resisted Conscience's insistence that the sacraments of penance and the altar belong to a new covenant calling for transformed practices in the community (XXI.182–90, 383–408), so now some Christians demand a diminution of penitential practices. Their solution is to call for mendicant confessors represented by "frere flaterrere" (XXII.309–15). Conscience denies that there is any need for confessors who do not belong to the secular clergy. But he then gives way to what the friars desire and sends for them, duly licensed (XXII.316–37). Despite encountering an archetypal antifraternal porter (significantly named Peace), the friars are allowed into the besieged Church and welcomed by Conscience (XXII.329–61). The poet represents this decision as catastrophic for individual Christians and the Church (XXII.362–79). The sanctifying sacramental sign of penance is turned into a drug that enchants Christians and makes them utterly indifferent to sin (XXII.378–79). We have been shown why Christian people welcome such intoxicating confessors. But what motivates the friars?

We recall that in his second appearance Need described the friars' motives as covetousness "to haue cure of soules." This covetousness is caused by the fact that "thei aren pore," and this poverty in turn means that they will "flatere to fare wel folk þat ben riche" (XXII.232–35). The final narrative supports Need's analysis. Not only is the representative friar named "frere flaterrere," but he also acknowledges that he wishes to act "for profit and for helthe." In case we miss the multiple meanings of "profit," the poet shows us how the friar "gropeth contricion," offering prayer and Masses by "freres of oure fraternite for a litel suluer" (XXI.363–67).[137] An institutional commitment to the sign of poverty generates the will to accumulate material resources and privileged status in the Church. Many strands in the poem's explorations of the sign have been leading inexorably to this final moment. In colluding with the friars, despite his strong reservations, Conscience has erred.

But whatever his error, he remains the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Church, "constable" of "vnite, holy chirche an englisch" (XXII.213–14, XXI.328).[138] And the Church too remains the gift of Christ and the Holy Spirit (XXI.182–380). So despite the seemingly overwhelming presence of Antichrist's forces in the Church, Kynde himself orders Wille not to leave the "hous" (XXII.204–6, XXI.328). Wille obeys, completely (XXII.199–213).[139] And Conscience responds to his own mistake. He

decides to seek for Piers Plowman, the "procuratour" given to the Church by Holy Spirit (XXI.256–61). With this search he proposes an *ecclesiastical* solution to the disastrous effects of the mendicants' commitment to their sign of poverty. He accepts Need's view that the friars' vices are motivated by their poverty, "for nede" (XXII.232–35, 383). Their very quest for perfection in absolute poverty leads them to oppose Conscience. If the Constantinian endowment of the Church could become "venym" (XVII.220–24), we now know that the commitment to absolute voluntary poverty has become a source of the drug that poisons the Church. Conscience's solution takes up earlier suggestions made by Reason in his presence (V.173–77) and more recent ones he himself offered in the final passus (XXII.248–50). Reason associated ecclesiastical reformation with a *fyndynge* for friars from the Church's endowments, a *fyndynge* that would terminate their mendicancy and terminate all possibility of claiming to pursue absolute communal poverty. Conscience, as we saw, suggested that friars should "haue breed and clothes / And oþere necessaries ynowe" (XXII.248–49). He now proclaims that the Church must provide "a fyndynge" for friars (XXII.383). The Church's *fyndynge* will deliver *all* friars, including radical Franciscans, from their identification with the sign of poverty which the poem has so carefully composed, explored, and superseded.[140] The final supersession of "þe signe of pouerte" is thus part of a proposal by the "constable" of the Church for a radical transformation of its current institutionalization. In a complex dialectical process *Piers Plowman* has disclosed how such institutionalization has encouraged a reification of this sign and its mistaken pursuit as the most perfect life in the Church. Tenaciously and inventively working through these contemporary difficulties, the poet created a powerful model for thinking about signs and sanctification in the Church within which and for which he wrote.