The Role of a Friar in the Middle Ages

"His dress was poor, his person contemptible, his face without beauty; but God inspired his words with so much power that great scholars were astounded and many noble families, divided by blood-feuds, were reconciled forever." This observation is from Thomas of Spalato, a student of Francis of Assisi, in 1212.

Sources such as this may have been the basis for Friar Laurence. However, Friar Laurence, as well as all friars of the Middle Ages, filled many other roles, such as counselor and adviser. Friars also attended the sick. In the times of the plague, friars often lived in the most diseased areas, hoping to provide for the neediest victims. Friars who were ordained as priests could perform marriages, give sermons, and hear confessions.

A major difference between a friar and other members of the Catholic clergy is the friars' vow of poverty. Friars can't own any possessions or property. During the Middle Ages, they wandered the countryside going where they were needed. Often writers, including Shakespeare, portray them as alchemists and herbalists with a high regard for nature.

RULES FOR FRIARS

St. Francis of Assisi was a favorite saint among the middle class in the Middle Ages. He preached a life of poverty, humility, social service, and love of all living things. His teachings led to an established book of rules called the Rules of St. Francis. The following list of rules was adapted from Christian Monasticism: A Great Force in History by Ian C. Hannah.

- The brothers shall own nothing, neither housing nor lands, but like pilgrims and strangers in this world, in poverty and meekness serving Almighty God.
- The brothers shall receive no money, unless for the care of the sick. They shall faithfully, boldly, and surely and meekly go for donations. They shall not nor ought to be ashamed, for the Lord made Himself poor in this world.
- Any brother able to work shall work, knowing that idleness is the enemy of the soul.
- All the brothers must wear simple and vile clothing. They shall be happy with a single robe, a cord and underclothes and they shall wish for no more. They may piece them and fix them with pieces of sackcloth.
- The brothers must not fight. Instead, they should be meek, peaceable, soft, gentle, and courteous. They should speak to every person as needed.
- They may not be gossips of men or women, because rumor and slander could pit brother against brother.