

Man-Movement-Machine-Monument-Memory It seems that all great things in history start with an individual person. For the sake of alliteration and memory I will say man. If that person has something to say that is alive and real, and names reality well, it often moves to the second stage of becoming a movement. That's the period of the greatest energy. The church, for example, is at its greatest vitality as "the God Movement," and the institution is merely the vehicle for that movement. Neither pope nor president can ever control the movement itself, through any theology, doctrine, or dogma. We cannot control the blowing of the Spirit. It is to the mature credit of the Roman Catholic Church that it was able to teach this officially at the time of the Second Vatican Council. The movement stage is always very exciting, creative—and also risky. It's risky because the movement of God in history is larger than any denomination, any culture, or any tradition's ability to verbalize it. We feel out of control here, and yet why would anybody want it to be anything less than that? Do we really want to think that the great God could be in our little pockets? Would we respect a God that we could control? Would we really respect a church that presumed it could predict and contain God's actions? I don't think so, yet that is what so much immature religion seems to want—control over God by worshiping God "correctly." Thus, we move rather quickly out and beyond the dangerous movement stage to the machine stage. This is predictable and understandable, even if also unfortunate. The institutional or machine stage of a movement will necessarily be a less-alive manifestation, which is not bad, although always surprising for those who see church as an end in itself instead of merely a vehicle for the vision... We can also learn from the less-mature stages of life. The steps to maturity, in fact, are always steps through immaturity. There is no other way, but when we do not realize the limited capacities of a machine, we try to make it into something more than it is. We make it a monument, a closed system operating inside of its own, often self-serving, logic. It's the nature of the beast and a seemingly inevitable movement, especially as we get tied up with job security, consistent policies for everything, and public image and identity. As soon as we get employment norms and professional people whose job depends on status, security, and dependability, it's very hard to take risks for God or for gospel values. Eventually this monument, and its maintenance and self-preservation, become ends in themselves. Jeremiah rails against such formalization at the beginning of his prophecy: "Put no trust in delusive words like, 'the temple, the temple, the temple!' While you follow alien gods... I am not blind—it is Yahweh who speaks" (see 7:4–11). Monuments need to be regularly deconstructed and rebuilt. Thus Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) believed that revolution had to be repeated in some form every twenty years! Truth is never actualized until it becomes my truth—suffered, owned, and internalized. Surely authentic religion can settle for nothing less. Let me use here a clarifying and dense quote from John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). He is warning us against the monument and machine stages: Even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. Each generation has to appropriate its deepest beliefs for itself. We used to say it this way: "God has no grandchildren." Each generation must itself be realigned with God and discover the mystery for itself. Yet we want the results of someone else's homework. A machine-become-monument is now in place. It is so easy to just step on board, without ever knowing why or feeling the longing ourselves. We have entirely jumped over the man and movement stages and have "God's frozen people" instead of any hint of chosen, beloved, or journey status. In this state, religion is merely an excuse to remain unconscious, a memory of something that must once have been a great adventure. Now religion is no longer life itself, but actually a substitute for life or, worse, an avoidance of life. But God has no grandchildren; only children. The secret is to know how to keep in touch with the man and

movement stages, without being naïve about the necessity of some machine and the inevitability of those who love monuments. We must also be honest: All of us love monuments when they are monuments to our man, our movement, or our machine.

Ordinary People Sometimes machine and monument folks can be recaptured by the vision of the man and the movement. At the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, we were often visited by our friend Frank Strabala (who died in 1999). He worked for the nuclear test site outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. In fact, Frank headed the operation for a number of years—and then dared, by the grace of the gospel, to call it into question. He even joined me once as we practiced civil disobedience at the test site. I will never forget seeing him walking toward me with a half-worried half-smile on his face. “I have trusted your teaching all these years. Now I have to trust where it has led me,” he said. We stood together as his former employees drove by and gave less-than-flattering gestures to their old boss. I was humbled and awed by such courage and such humility. He had let go of his secure monument through an encounter with the man Jesus and the vision of the peace movement. It’s hard, and very rare, to call your own job into question. When Jesus called his disciples, he also called them away from their jobs and their families (see, for example, Matthew 4:22). Now, jobs and families don’t sound like bad things, do they? He called them to leave their nets because as long as anyone is tied to job security, there are a lot of things they cannot see and cannot say. This is one of the great recurring disadvantages of clergy earning their salary from the church, and perhaps why Saint Francis did not want us to be ordained priests. We tend to think and say whatever won’t undermine the company store. Anyone who has ever worked for another person understands this, and I wonder if it is not at the root of so much anti-clericalism among the blue-collar workers of the world. They often see right through our clergy pretensions. As one smart construction worker once angrily said to me, “Would you really bother to try to prove or defend papal infallibility or who can ‘transubstantiate’ if you did not have a vested interest in the answer? Those are the prefab answers of people in management, but they are not even the questions of those in labor!” Wow. We must be humble enough to hear. I know he has a point when I see the glazed eyes of parents in the front pew as we sermonize about the glories of Holy Orders and celibacy! Jesus called the disciples away from their natural families too...When the safe assumptions of society and family reach the monument stage, you might think you need TNT or major surgery to break through. But you never win with any frontal attack on the mystery of evil. If you attack something directly, you let it determine the energy, the style, the opposition. You soon become the same thing, but in a better-disguised and denied form. Jesus calls that trying to drive out the devil by the prince of devils (see Luke 11:14–22). That’s how evil expands so successfully. The disguise is almost perfect and, without spiritual discernment, will fool the best of us. So, instead, Francis of Assisi went out to the edge and did it better. Francis respected the monuments, even loved them, but also went back to the original dynamism and nonviolent style of Jesus the man for his inspiration. Assisi is surrounded by city walls. Inside those walls are the cathedral and the established churches, all of which are fine. That’s where Francis first heard the gospel and fell in love with Jesus. But, then, he quietly went outside the walls and rebuilt some old ruins called San Damiano and the Portiuncula. He wasn’t, with his mouth, telling the others they were doing it wrong. He just gently, lovingly tried to do it better. I think that’s true reconstruction. Remember, the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. That might be a perfect motto for all reconstructive work. It does not destroy machines or even monuments but reinvigorates them with new energy and form. San Damiano was still a church building, but it was small, poor, and on the edge. Francis transformed it.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Disorder, Reorder (Cincinnati, OH, Franciscan Media, 2001, 2020), 92-95.