

LESSON ONE

INTRODUCTION TO MEDIEVAL LIVES OF SAINTS

Francis of Assisi - who is this man who inspired so many in his lifetime and continues to inspire people throughout these past nine centuries? Who is this man who has been depicted in art and literature perhaps as often as Our Lord Jesus Himself, is the patron of modern ecology, and what is the great charisma that he possessed? Most of us are familiar with the life of Francis, having read one or more of the many biographies, sources and writings of Francis. In this brief account you will be introduced to extracts from the early sources which will be used in conjunction with a few sentences from the Testament of Francis. You will not discover the true person whom we know as St Francis but it is hoped that the selection of material will enrich your own portrait.

As a preface to any study of the life of Francis we need to understand:

- why the early sources were produced
- hagiography in the lives of medieval saints
- the purpose of legends

This helps to understand that the various medieval sources which tell us about Francis are different in style and purpose from contemporary biographies.

READING

Read Francis of Assisi Early Documents Vol. 1, General Introduction and p.173-178

A NOTE ABOUT HAGIOGRAPHY¹

Biographies today are open to criticism where they are thought to be biased or historically inaccurate. It was very different when lives of the saints were commissioned in the Middle Ages. Then the lives were expected to inspire readers or listeners to greater holiness and conformity to Christ and the apostles.

When writing biographies of saints, writers used the classical models of the lives of Anthony the Abbot and Martin of Tours - written in the 3rd-4th centuries. Francis was similarly associated with the apostles and their mission. Francis came to be presented as an instrument of God's grace, carrying out God's plan for his own time. Francis is portrayed in an idealised way in communion with God and creation. There is a contrast between Francis and his father, representing one doing God's will while the other is associated with worldly values.

No one felt a young man of such noble manners could be born of the stock of those who were called his parents.²

He was, however, vastly different from his father.³

The term legend meant a book or record of the deeds of a saint, designed for reading in a community to edify and inspire those listening. Legends stressed supernatural elements in the life even if these events could be explained naturally. They avoided recounting details which might detract from the sanctity of the saint.

The First Life by Thomas Celano was written at the command of Pope Gregory. It was prepared shortly after Francis' death, being officially approved and promulgated on February 25, 1229, four days after the canonization. Celano was following the rules of hagiography, in which the saint's

¹ See ED Vol 1 pp174-6

² 2C3, ED vol. 2, p242

³ L3C, ED Vol. 2, p68

whole lifestyle would be recorded as having been radically altered, from a “sinful” early life to a later holy life. The Life shows Francis’ growth in holiness and was designed to inspire men and women everywhere. Most of it is devoted to:

conversion, promotion of the gospel, and his (Francis) example and teaching of Christian holiness.⁴

It concludes with the third book which contains the canonization and recounts many miracles which confirm Francis’ Holiness and show his continuing influence within the church.

Later writers would try to represent Francis’ true spirit as this was differently understood by the divergent factions which emerged and who were concerned about how the Order should develop. Factions therefore produced evidence which would show that their party were the true followers of his spirit. Bonaventure’s life of Francis, requested at the Chapter of Narbonne, 1260, was completed by 1263. At the Chapter of Paris, 1266, it was decided that this life alone should be retained - other lives were to be destroyed. It was compiled by the Minister General after consulting Francis’ companions and their records of Francis’ life.

There are also writings about Francis’ life designed for use by the friars in liturgies. In addition there are official documents in respect of Francis and his followers such as papal decrees.

We have a rich supply of sources with which you will become more familiar as you follow this course. This module rather than simply recounting Francis’ life will draw on various sources in the hope that you will be inspired to refer to the early sources and that these will provide food for your own spiritual journey.

Let us go then to the land of his birth and meet this **poverello**, this little poor man known to the world as Francis of Assisi.

Assisi is a small town, nestled on a hill overlooking a valley in the area of Italy known as Umbria. It retains its medieval character to this day. Francis was born in the year 1182, the first of several children born to Pietro Bernardone, a rich cloth merchant, and to his wife Pica.

There continues to be discussion and disagreement regarding the precise place of Francis’ birth. There are several places which claim this honour:

- the **Chiesa Nuova** (which was built in 1615 reportedly over the spot of Francis’ ancestral home)
- **San Francesco Piccolino** (the proposed site of the little stable, or **staletta**, cited in the fable mentioned below and which today is open to the public),
- the **TOR Casa Paterna** or the **Bernardone House** (which is believed to have stood between the Churches of San Nicolo’ and San Paolo). According to the testimony of a Brother Nicola of Assisi, whose home was joined to that of Francis’ family, this location was, indeed, the location of the home of Pietro Bernardone.

Each of the suggested sites is in the vicinity of the central piazza. Excavations within the last several decades of the second millennium have uncovered remains of walls that correspond to recorded descriptions of renovations made to this area shortly after Francis’ death; these may be the remnants of the earlier foundation of the Bernardone home.

At the time of Francis’ birth, Pietro was away on business in Champagne, France and learned that his son had been baptized in the cathedral of San Rufino and given the name Giovanni, after Saint John (Giovanni) the Baptist.

During the Middle Ages much importance was given to the naming of a child, as it was thought that the name would have a great influence on the future life of the individual. It may have been

⁴ 1C Introduction, ED Vol. 1, p175

unthinkable for Pietro to have his son named after a desert hermit, a vocation not exactly suited to a potential rich merchant so he may have reacted against this in referring to the newly baptized baby as Francesco, or Francis. This decision may perhaps have been made also in deference to the country that helped him accumulate such great wealth. Whatever Pietro's motivation may have been, this is the name by which he was subsequently known and the name by which we know him today. (Eleven years later, in 1193, another child, a girl, would also be baptized in that very same cathedral. Her name was Chiara and she was born into the noble family of Favarone di Offreduccio and his wife, Ortolana. Thus we see that Chiara, by birth, was a member of the maiores class whereas Francis belonged to the minores class. This class distinction would eventually be subsumed into what Francis envisioned as his ideal of minority and equality). There was no system of regulated record keeping and so the precise place and time of the birth of Francis is not known.

In 1381, in the Biblioteca Comune of Assisi, the following genealogy of Francis, son of Pietro Bernardone, is contained therein:

This is the genealogy of Blessed Francis. The grandfather of Blessed Francis was Bernard; his son was Peter, the father of Blessed Francis; the mother of Blessed Francis was the Lady Pica. Their son, Blessed Francis, was born in the year 1182. In Christ he begot sons without limits in thirty-four provinces throughout the World, among whom has been one Pope (note: this first Pope who was a spiritual son of St. Francis was Friar Jerome of Ascoli, was elected Supreme Pontiff in 1288, with the name of Nicholas IV). The brother of Blessed Francis was Angelus. His sons were Picardo, who never married, and John. John's son was Ceccolo. His children were Francischina, who married; Friar Anthony of the Order of Minors, a lector at Paris; Clare, abbess of Panzo; Franciscuccio, the Guardian of San Damiano; Petruccio; and Bernard. Bernard had a son John. The genealogy of St. Francis, failing in the plague, did not proceed further.

TWO BIRTH LEGENDS

In addition to the lives of Francis which came to be produced, there are two major legends that have been handed down by tradition. The first of these legends is called the **Stalletta**, or **Stable Fable**, and according to this legend the Lady Pica, who was destined to become the mother of a saint, had come to her term. However, when she did not give birth, there was much concern. A mysterious stranger came to the door and gave her the curious message that she would not be able to give birth to her baby except in a stable, in much the same way that Mary bore Jesus. Pica was then taken to the stable next to the family house and there, on the straw, gave birth to the baby who would become Saint Francis. On the day of his baptism at the Cathedral of San Rufino, this same stranger, who had come to Pica's door, also appeared in the Cathedral and asked permission to hold the baby at the sacred baptismal font. Reluctantly, he was given the permission to do so and immediately afterwards he knelt at the step of the altar. When he arose, miraculously, his impression was left on the stone. He then disappeared.

Francis was thought to be the saint most closely conformed to Christ among Church scholars and it is not surprising, given the purpose of writing the lives of saints in the Middle Ages, to find a legend which makes the birth of Francis an imitation of that of Jesus.

The second of these legends is termed the **Prophecy Pilgrim**. This legend concerns itself with the time period immediately following the birth of Francis. While Pica was still ill in her bed, a poor beggar came to the door asking for charity. He was given a bit of chicken left over from Pica's dinner but did not appear to be satisfied with it. He asked for the baby to be brought to him, and grew more and more insistent in his demand. When the baby was finally brought to him, he held him close to his heart and uttered the following words: "Today in this realm two baby boys were born. One of them will be among the best of men, the other among the most evil." Like the mysterious stranger in the

first legend, he, too, then disappeared. The actual identity of these strange visitors has never been ascertained but it was held in these legends that they were, indeed, angels.

We can only imagine that rumours may well have abounded as to the identity of the other poor baby! Prophecies made about the future significance of individuals were found in writings about saints at this time.

FRANCIS' EDUCATION

Francis received his early education from the priests of Saint George's Church in Assisi, although he was not thought to be very studious and his literary education remained somewhat incomplete. Francis was, however, fluent in French, perhaps because of his mother's influence, or perhaps because of his father's business dealings in Provence, and had a remarkable facility for recalling passages from the Scriptures, especially the New Testament.

Francis' education was also influenced by the presence of Troubadours, who were making their first appearance throughout Italy, having originated in the courts of France. **Troubadours**, or **Jongleurs**, were some of the most picturesque figures of medieval life. Their lifestyle was a combination of Roman acting with other aspects of Germanic and French entertainment. In the summer months the troubadours could be seen walking, in brightly coloured costumes, from town to town and from castle to castle. Their songs were introduced and followed by displays of gymnastic agility and feats of magic, and their main themes centred on the miracles of the saints, the stories of the Bible, and perhaps more frequently, the legends of well-known and local heroes. The troubadours were most welcomed at county fairs and at feasts held in feudal castles. High and low, young and old, everyone glowed with delight as the troubadours sang of the prowess of Christian warriors in battle. Lords and ladies took delight in rewarding them with rich gifts and even Bishops and Abbesses sought to retain them in their service on a permanent basis. It was perhaps their ability to turn significant and/or everyday events into song and presentation that inspired Francis later on in his life to compose **the Canticle of the Creatures**, thus utilizing and displaying his own creative talents.

The young Francis may be seen as truly embodying all of the aspects of this newly developing and emerging medieval merchant class the son of a wealthy merchant, enjoying a privileged lifestyle, engaging in all of the activities of his time, and yet somehow his life was to be touched very deeply by his experience of Jesus. . It is evident that his parents indulged his every desire as we see in the writings of **Thomas of Celano**, his first biographer, who writes that Francis possessed a ready wit, loved to sing songs, enjoyed fine clothing and was very outgoing. Despite hints that Francis led a somewhat tainted early life (which may be found in Celano's first account of Francis' life), Celano was following the rules of hagiography.

Although Pietro expected Francis to work full time in his thriving cloth business, Francis showed little interest in a merchant's career, and although Francis was gallant and courteous, he displayed no great desire for a career working with his father. Whatever money Francis earned he tended to squander lavishly and, despite being the leader of the local revels and being officially crowned king of frivolity, Francis showed a rather instinctive compassion for the poor.

‘You are courteous and generous to those from whom you receive nothing except passing and worthless approval. Is it not right that, on account of God who repays most generously, you should be courteous and generous to the poor?’ From that day he looked on poor people generously and provided them affluently with alms.⁵

One day when he was in the shop where he was selling cloth, totally absorbed in business of this sort, a poor man came in, begging alms for the love of God. Preoccupied with thoughts of wealth and the care of business, he did not give him alms. Touched by divine grace, he accused himself of great rudeness, saying: ‘If that poor man had asked something from you for a great count of baron, you

⁵ L3C 1:3, ED Vol 2, p69

would certainly have granted him his request. How much more should you have done this for the King of Kings and the Lord of all!

Because of this incident, he resolved in his heart, from then on, not to deny a request to anyone asking in the name of so great a Lord.'

On another occasion while his father was away in France on business, Francis filled the dining room table with many loaves of bread, telling his mother that these were all to be distributed to the poor who had nothing because he promised to give to those who begged from him in God's name. Such acts of kindness and generosity would soon become the hallmark of Francis' behaviour and would ultimately place him into direct conflict with his father Pietro in the not too distant future. The idyllic life which Francis seemed to be enjoying was soon to be interrupted by renewed hostilities between Assisi and Perugia. Urban life during twelfth and thirteenth century Italy was notably marred by continuous turbulence. In the 1198, Innocent the Third was elected Pope of Rome. Innocent was a very astute statesman and sought to restore and reaffirm the Church's spiritual and temporal supremacy; Innocent had two other goals beyond the establishment of a political papacy: the liberation of the Holy Land and the repression of heresy.

LESSON 2

THE INITIAL CONVERSION PERIOD

“The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way...”⁶

CONTEXT - SUMMARY OF THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

In the spring of 1198, **Duke Conrad of Swabia**, the Duke of Spoleto who represented the Emperor’s authority and presence in Assisi, travelled to the city of Spoleto to yield to Pope Innocent this Duchy. While Conrad was away from Assisi, there arose new tensions in the city between people loyal to the emperor and people loyal to the Pope. People seized the opportunity to attack the fortress, known as **Rocca Maggiore**, and to level it the ground. Francis was probably sixteen years old at this time and may even have partaken in this incident. Civil war formally broke out between the citizens - the minores against the maiores - thus forcing the nobility, including Chiara and her family, to flee to the nearby town of Perugia. Perugia, being larger and stronger than Assisi, would provide a secure shelter for them. Chiara and her family probably returned to the Assisi sometime in the year 1203 when peace was re-established between the opposing factions.

PRISON AND RETURN TO LIFE IN ASSISI

In November of the year 1202 the nobility of Assisi, who had taken refuge in Perugia, once again engaged in a confrontation with the minores of Assisi. Francis, at about twenty years of age, took part in this particular confrontation at **Collestrada**, in which the troops of Assisi were defeated. Along with his fellow soldiers, Francis was taken hostage and sent to prison in Perugia.

Once there was a great massacre in a war between the citizens of Perugia and Assisi. Francis was captured along with many others, and, chained with the rest of them, endured the squalor of prison. His fellow captives were overcome with sadness weeping bitterly over the fact of their imprisonment, but Francis rejoiced in the Lord, laughing and making fun of his chain. His unhappy companions rebuked him as he revelled in his chains, and thought he was out of his mind. Francis answered them prophetically: ‘What do you think makes me happy? I’m thinking about something else: and some day the whole world will worship me as a saint!’ And now that is true; everything he said has been fulfilled.⁷

Among the others who were then imprisoned with him there was an arrogant and utterly unbearable knight. Everyone else decided to avoid him but he could not wear down Francis’ patience; he tolerated the intolerable man and restored the others to peace with him.”

Francis imprisonment is also detailed in L3C II:4 Francis of Assisi: Early Documents vol. II p.69.

Ultimately ransomed by his father Pietro, the Francis who returned to Assisi was clearly a changed man. He seems to have undergone a period of gradual recovery:

He began to mull over within himself things that were not usual for him...he began to walk about here and there through the house in order to regain his health, he went outside one day and began to gaze upon the surrounding countryside with greater interest, But the beauty of the fields, the delight of the vineyards, and whatever else was beautiful to see could offer him no delight at all. He wondered at the sudden change in himself, and considered those who loved these things quite foolish.

⁶ Testament 1, ED Vol 1, p124
⁷ 2C 1:4, ED Vol 2, p243

From that time he began to regard himself as worthless and to hold in some contempt what he had previously held as admirable and loving, although not completely or genuinely. For he had not yet been freed from the bonds of vanities...⁸

He still joined in the noisy revels with his former comrades, his changed heart indicated a yearning for a qualitatively different life. His companions began to tease Francis about his apparent absentmindedness and even asked him if he were considering getting married.

THE CALL TO BE A KNIGHT

His priorities now seemed quite different and he began to speak of, and dream about, the thrill and ideals of knighthood. Medieval Europe was, indeed, the age of chivalry and Francis seemed anxious to immerse himself in this milieu. In his desire to combine the Romantic idea of chivalry with the glory of fighting in a crusade, Francis took the opportunity, in 1205, to set out for the city of Apulia to meet with **Gautier (Walter) of Brienne**, often referred to as the **gentle Count**, to join his forces in the rescue of the widowed queen of Tancred and her daughter, both of whom had been imprisoned for over two years in an Alsatian monastery. Gautier de Brienne was fighting for the pope's interests against the emperor who wanted to keep Sicily in his domain.

There follows a summary of the major documented episodes in the conversion of Francis, starting with the quest for knighthood.⁹ There are minor differences between the accounts but what follows is largely agreed by the early writers, although the order in which they are related might differ from source to source.

- Francis made wholehearted preparations in equipping himself as a knight with the support of his father. L3C:

He prepared clothing as expensive as possible, since even though he was poorer in riches than his fellow citizen, he was far more extravagant.

He was completely preoccupied in carrying this out¹⁰

Some of the sources include an account of Francis giving clothing to a poor knight, which in 2C II:5 is compared with an episode in the life of Martin of Tours. This is to show Francis' nobility of spirit which will continue to be a recognized characteristic of his after the dreams of becoming a knight are ended.

- Francis had a dream which confirmed his belief that he was doing the right thing. The details vary, but concern seeing the trappings of knighthood in a large room. Francis understood that these were for himself and his knights. Encouraged by the dream, he set off to find Gautier de Brienne.
- However, Francis was compelled to question this decision shortly after his departure from Assisi - some sources describe another dream at Spoleto:

He heard the Lord speaking to him during the night in a familiar way: 'Francis, who can do more for you, a lord or a servant, a rich person or one who is poor?' When Francis replied that a lord and a rich person could do more, he was at once asked: 'Why, then, are you abandoning the Lord for a servant and the rich God for a poor mortal?' And Francis replied: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' and the Lord answered him: 'Go back to your own land, because the vision which you have

⁸ 1C 2: 3-4 ED Vol 1 p185

⁹ Cf 1C 2: 4-5, ED Vol 1 p 185; L3C 5, ED Vol 2, p 70; 2C2:6, Ed Vol 2 p 245; LMj 1:2,3, Ed VOI 2, p531

¹⁰ L3C 2:5,,ED Vol 2, p70

seen prefigures a spiritual outcome which will be accomplished in you not by a human but by a divine plan.’¹¹

Francis responded without hesitation by returning to Assisi.

SEEKING GOD’S WILL - STEPS IN FRANCIS’ INITIAL CONVERSION PERIOD

1. Francis, by this point, felt quite detached from the things of this world

“From that time on, as he was removing himself from the pressure of public business, he would eagerly beg the divine kindness to show him what he should do.”¹²

His quest for God’s will was undertaken with dedication, often through periods of silent prayer in lonely places. (1C describes this quest in detail¹³) Bonaventure describes this as Francis having realized “That he had found a hidden treasure and, like a wise merchant, planned to buy the pearl he had found by selling everything.”¹⁴

2. “For when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself sent me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned to sweetness of soul and body.”¹⁵

Bonaventure’s Major Life continues with the meeting of a leper:

Francis continued to go horseback riding in the plains of Assisi, where the hospital for the lepers of the commune of Assisi stood. As were all of the old leper hospitals, this one was dedicated to Saint Lazarus, the biblical beggar covered with sores. In the Sacro Convento there is preserved a document which deals with the infected men and women of San Lazzaro d’Arce, as they are called. It was known that Francis abhorred lepers and would travel miles out of his way in order to avoid any contact with them. Their presence was considered a bitter and distasteful reality for him and, since lepers were separated from the mainstream of society, Francis accepted their social situation. This encounter was a very special one to Francis, so much so, that he would bring it back to his memory even on his own deathbed.

One day. Therefore, while he was riding his horse through the plain that lies below the city of Assisi, he met a leper. This unforeseen encounter struck him with not a little horror. Recalling the plan of perfection he had already conceived in his mind, and remembering that he must first conquer himself if he wanted to become a knight of Christ, he dismounted from his horse and ran to kiss him. As the leper stretched out his hand as if to receive something, he gave him money with a kiss, immediately mounting his horse, however, and turning all around, even though the open plain stretched clear in all directions, he could not see the leper anywhere. He began, therefore, filled with wonder and joy, to sing praises to the Lord.¹⁶

And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.¹⁷

3. Bonaventure’s Major Life next, (LMj 1:5), describes the beginning of Francis’ profound devotion to the crucified Lord. Being “absorbed in God, Christ Jesus appeared to him as fastened

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12 L Mjn1: 4, ED Vol 2, p533

13 1C 3:6, ED Vol 1 p187; LMj 1:4, ED Vol 2 p533

14 L Mj 1:4, ED Vol 2, p533

15 Testament 1 -3 , ED Vol 1, p124.

16 L Mj 1:5, ED Vol 2, p 534

17 Testament 3. Ed Vol 1, p124

to a cross . . . From that hour, whenever Christ's crucifixion came to his mind, he could scarcely contain his tears and sighs . . . Through this the man of God understood as addressed to himself the Gospel text: If you wish to come after me, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."¹⁸

4. The chapter concludes with the new concerns which began to draw Francis - lepers, poor priests, and poor beggars.

At some stage within this period of withdrawal, he decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome. (LMj concludes chapter 1 with this pilgrimage). In the spring of 1206 he left Assisi on this pilgrimage receiving a benediction, a short cloak and a pilgrim's staff. In Rome, he absorbed himself into the myriad of diverse devout persons converging into the great piazza in front of Saint Peter's Basilica. In accordance with ancient custom, all of the beggars of Rome gathered in the atrium of that mighty church where they begged for alms and mercy. Francis eagerly changed his clothing with one of the beggars and, so dressed, also begged for alms and mercy, perhaps in his effort to hear again the voice he had heard in Spoleto.

After this occurrence in Rome, although Pietro Bernardone thought that returning to work in his shop would help his son finally to come to his senses, Francis continued to experience a radical spiritual shift in the priorities of his life.

5. The next encounter took place in the little rundown church of **San Damiano**, which lies just below Assisi. Francis began to frequent this church and became familiar with the priest who served there, a man named Peter. In the church there was a **Byzantine style crucifix** which Francis used to ponder at great length. The crucifix was not a traditional one of the suffering Christ, but depicted Jesus as alive. His eyes are wide open and He seems to dominate the background, where angels and saints attend Him. It was this crucifix which "spoke" to Francis asking him to repair this building in disrepair, calling it "my church."

Impelled by the Spirit, he went inside to pray. Prostrate before an image of the Crucified, he was filled with no little consolation as he prayer. While his tear-filled eyes were gazing at the Lord's cross, he heard with his bodily ears a voice coming from that cross, telling him three times: 'Francis. Go and repair my house, which, as you see, is all being destroyed.'¹⁹

6. (See LMj chapter 2, 1C10-15) There occurred a complete breakdown in relations between Francis and his father:

Francis was able to see that the church was in dire need of physical repair, and taking the words the crucifix to him literally, Francis decided to repair the building and spontaneously decided on a course of action. Francis went to his father's store and loaded up with bales of fine cloth. He then rode to the market in **Foligno** to sell these items. At the fair Francis not only sold all of the cloth but he also sold the horse as well. Having thus disposed of his father's goods, plus the steed, Francis pondered what to do with the money. Francis was so imbued with his newly found relationship with the Lord, that upon his return he kissed the priest's hands with great faith and respect, offering him all of the money he had from his Foligno excursion.

The priest, quite aware of Francis' reputation in Assisi, and also of Pietro Bernardone's proposed response at Francis' action, politely refused Francis' generous offering for fear of reprisals.

Father Peter, however, allowed Francis to reside at San Damiano as an oblate, i.e., someone who worked in the service of the church with a future aim at leading a **life of penitence**. In a gesture of his new freedom, and in his zeal not to keep the money, Francis hurled the bag of money into the window of the church. News of these events eventually reached the ears of Pietro

¹⁸ L Mj 1:5, ED Vol 2, pp 533-4

¹⁹ L Mj 2:15, ED Vol 2, p536

Bernardone who went with friends and neighbours to the church of San Damiano to see for himself just what had transpired.

Fearing to face his father directly, Francis hid himself in a secret pit which he had prepared for such an emergency. He remained thus hidden from his father for a period of a month before daring to venture forth. When Francis eventually emerged from his hiding place, he seemed to possess a renewed spirit of zeal coupled with a new resolve to follow his convictions to serve his Lord.

Instead of receiving support and understanding from family and friends, Francis was met with shouts of his being mad, and was pelted with mud and stones as he walked the streets. Francis was, indeed, a bitter disappointment to his father who tried to reason with his son at first but then resorted to blows and chains. Pietro subsequently locked Francis in a dark place for several days in an attempt to have him become submissive and obedient.

During this period of time, Pietro went away on business. Pica attempted to dissuade Francis from his decision to turn away from a career with his father, but also sought to protect him from further abuse by her husband. Only after her pleadings failed did she release him from his prison.

Upon Pietro's return, and after his discovery of Pica's intervention, he went straight away to San Damiano to confront Francis. If he could not dissuade him from this current course of action, he would, at best, drive him away from his home and the area and, hopefully, recover his lost money.

An exasperated Pietro next approached the civil authorities of Assisi to present his case. Francis, in a spirit of renewed vigour and dedication, met directly with his father and declared his intention to follow his convictions and endure whatever punishment his father would levy against him. Appropriate enquires were made and demands for full restitution were formulated into a summons that was delivered to Francis, who rejected this outright on the grounds that he was no longer under the jurisdiction of civil authorities. In essence, since Francis had attached himself to the church of San Damiano, he was considered in the service of the Church, and lived in a place subject to the authority of the local Bishop. Pietro next brought the charges listed in the summons, to the Episcopal residence, or **vescovado**, of Bishop Guido. Francis was also in attendance as Pietro presented his plea against his son. In order to preserve his stance as the defender of good Christian ideals, Bishop Guido chastised Francis for his actions that caused family disturbances and scandal. It is recorded in the **Vita Secunda**, or Second Life of Celano 12:

The man of God gave back to his father the money he wanted to spend for work on the church. He did this on the advice of the bishop of the town, a very devout man, because it was wrong to spend ill-gotten gain for sacred purposes. Within earshot of many who had gathered about, he declared: 'From now on I will say freely: "Our Father who art in heaven," and not, "my father, Pietro di Bernardone." Look, not only do I return his money; I give back all my clothes. I will go to the Lord naked²⁰.

It is also noted later on, in **Saint Bonaventure's** life of Francis, that when Francis removed his clothing, "It was discovered that the man of God had a hair shirt next to his skin under his fine clothes."²¹ a sign of his already leading a penitential life. Intervening immediately in this scenario, Bishop Guido came forth, embraced Francis, removed his own mantle, and covered him. Bishop Guido then called for some old garments to be brought forward, and these were graciously accepted by Francis.

This scenario certainly embodies all of the necessary components which a medieval hagiographer such as Thomas of Celano would employ in writing a first life of Francis. These elements would include being born into a wealthy family, an early life spent in dissolute living, a demanding and rigid father, a loving and indulgent mother, reckless carousing with friends,

²⁰ 2C 7:12, ED Vol 2 , p561

²¹ L Mj 2:4, ED Vol 2, p538

endless parties and festivals, and then some sort of series of experiences that are followed by a period of reflection and then ending in a discernable conversion.

7. After this episode in Assisi proper, Francis roamed around the countryside quite elated at his new freedom. He improvised hymns of praise as he went along. When confronted at one point by robbers, Francis declared that he was “**the Herald of the great King**.”²² The result was that he was robbed of the little he possessed and thrown into a snow drift.

Francis made his way to a neighbouring monastery where he was duly welcomed and given refuge. He spent a short time there working in the kitchen. Francis is said to have headed next to **Gubbio**, where he received from a friend the cloak, staff and girdle of a pilgrim.

8. It was thus clad that Francis returned to Assisi to beg stones for the physical restoration of San Damiano.

“Grounded now in the humility of Christ, Francis recalled to mind the obedience enjoined upon him from the cross; to repair the church of San Damiano. As a truly obedient man, he returned to Assisi to obey the divine command at least by begging. Putting aside the embarrassment out of love of the poor Crucified, he begged from those among whom he was accustomed to have plenty, and he loaded stones upon his body that was weakened by fasting. With God’s help and the devoted assistance of the citizens, he completed repairs on that church.”²³

Francis was able, in time, to rebuild the church of San Damiano and, in his zeal, also restored two other deserted chapels, Saint Peter’s, which is some distance from Assisi, and Saint Mary of the Angels, in the plain below Assisi, a spot called the **Portiuncula**. Francis also spent a great deal of time nursing the lepers who abounded around the vicinity.

REFLECTIONS ON THE EARLY CONVERSION OF FRANCIS

The early sources devote many paragraphs to the story of Francis’ conversion. You will find much material on Francis’ conversion but I recommend reading *Francis and his Conversions* by Pierre Brunette ofm which is devoted to these events and episodes.

There follow a few observations from this part of Francis’ Life.

- In his Testament, quoted above, Francis summarised this whole period in the following way:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way, for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself sent me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned to sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.²⁴

Later in his testament the words “the Lord gave me,”²⁵ occur at the beginning of four paragraphs and in Test14 he wrote: “No one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel.”²⁶

It would seem that Francis sought and responded obediently to the will of God, as he believed it to have been given to him, throughout this year of radical change.

Francis discerned what to do. This was to result in:

²² L Mj 2:5, Ed Vol 2, p539

²³ L Mj 2:7, Ed Vol 2,, p540

²⁴ Testament 1-3, ED Vol 1, p124

²⁵ Testament 1, ED vol 1, p124

²⁶ Testament 14, ED Vol 1, p125

- Abandoning the call to be a knight even though it had seemed to be right initially
- Long periods of prayer in solitude and in churches
- Tremendous devotion to the poor Crucified
- A tireless searching, in which he abandoned many aspects of his previous life and eventually turned to begging and seeking out the poorest in society.
- Confronting the leper within and without himself
- The resolute pursuance of whatever course he discerned to be right regardless of the he encountered from other people
- Always seeking church support as he did in abandoning his father's lifestyle

Francis' radical conversion was accompanied by changes, such as the stripping and abandoning of clothing; an austere life, taking up masonry, becoming more aware of his true Lord and His unimaginable love for him. Francis acted alone but found company - the companion in his journeys to pray, the priest at San Damiano. He lost any sense of fear of earthly obstacles.

The early writers provide evidence of Francis conforming to the virtues of Christ, such as humility and obedience. They contain many allusions to scripture, as expected in the life of a saint. However, according to the requirements of the genre, they do not depict Francis as a saint during this process, rather showing his progress in holiness.

As a consequence, we are able to find in Francis many experiences which will help us on our own conversion - journey. The variety of sources help to build up a convincing sense of this really happening to a person who lived in this world.

PRAYER BEFORE A CRUCIFIX

➤ Most High, glorious God,
 Enlighten the darkness of my heart
 And give me
 True faith, certain hope and perfect charity,
 sense and knowledge,
 Lord.
 That I may carry out
 Your holy and true command.²⁷

This is Francis' earliest recorded prayer. (Later prayers do not focus on himself, rather on God.) It seems a fitting conclusion for this lesson on Francis' conversion.

²⁷ Pr Cr, Ed Vol 1, p140

LESSON 3

FRANCIS AND THE EARLY FOLLOWERS

And afterwards the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the patterns of the Holy Gospel.²⁸

On a certain morning during the year 1208, thought to be the 24th February, the Feast of Saint Matthias, Francis was at mass in the chapel of Saint Mary of the Angels.

The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the priest after the solemnities of the Mass to explain the Gospel to him. The priest explained it all to him thoroughly line by line. When he heard that Christ's disciples should not possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics, but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance, the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God. 'This is what I want,' he said, 'this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart.'²⁹

Francis wasted very little time in carrying out, literally, the words that he had heard. He removed his staff, his shoes, his hermit's leather girdle, and went barefoot with a tunic he had cut into a "Tau", or a "T", with a cord around his waist. This change of outward garb, i.e., from that associated with a hermit-preacher to that associated with an apostolic preacher, would indicate not only a change of identity, but characterize the thrust his ultimate movement would embody.

Francis then set out to preach the Lord's peace to all. In a matter of only a few weeks, Francis began to attract followers, or brothers (**friars**, from the Italian word *frati*), as he would refer to them, and began to receive them at the Portiuncula. Bernardo of Quintavalle, a very rich young noble from Assisi, had invited Francis for supper at his home and to stay the night. He noted that Francis did not sleep at all but prayed throughout the night. These passages of Sacred Scripture would constitute the foundation of the life and Rule of this new evangelical movement. In that same year, 1208, other men from Assisi joined Francis and Bernardo.

Just who were these men and how did they come to be companions of Francis? Historians generally agree that there were twelve friars including Francis in the number that went to Rome for the approval of the Rule by Pope Innocent III in order to gain ecclesiastical legitimacy for this new foundation. It was only after years of reflection upon the stigmata did the friars see more and more likenesses between Francis and Christ and so changed the number of companions to Francis plus twelve. There is a first companion mentioned but unnamed by Thomas of Celano (1C X:24) and never again mentioned anywhere, even by Celano in his second life of Francis. He is described as "Among these there was a man from Assisi with a holy and simple character, who was the first to follow devoutly the man of God."³⁰ Perhaps he is the same man mentioned in (2C VII:12), "a lowly, rather simple man"³¹ whom Francis asked to bless him when his father cursed him. However, historically after 1 Celano, Bernard is always called the first friar.

The following is a compilation of the names and general backgrounds of these initial followers of Francis:

²⁸ Testament, ED Vol 1 p125
²⁹ 1C 9:22, ED Vol 1, p 201-202
³⁰ 1C 10:24, ED Vol 1, p203
³¹ 2C 7:12, Ed Vol 2, p251

Bernardo of Quintavalle (Quintavalle being the name of Bernardo's father) was a rich and prominent Assisian who officially becomes the second friar in April 16, 1208 and whose sale of property and distribution to the poor shook the city of Assisi. He was the chosen leader of the group going to Rome in 1209, was at Clare's reception and accompanied Francis to Spain. He became a great contemplative and spent much time in a grotto at the Carceri. He died at the Sacro Convento in Assisi between 1241 and 1246 and is buried there.

Peter, whom historians disagree as to his actual categorization, that is, that he is not Peter Catanii but rather Peter from Assisi. He, along with Francis and Bernardo, went to the Church of Saint Nicholas in Assisi in seeking certain passages in the Gospel as basis for a plan of life. According to the source called The Anonymous of Perugia (1241), they could not read well and thus got the priest to open the book. In the Legend of the Three Companions (1305) the problem was not that they couldn't read well, but rather that they could not find the appropriate pages, so they asked God to show hem His will on opening the book.

Sylvester, the first priest, was not one of the original twelve but his conversion began not long after that of Bernardo and Peter. He lived for some time as a penitent in his own home and later became a friar with the approval of the Rule by Pope Innocent III.

Giles was born of a peasant family about 1190 and was so deeply affected by Bernardo's conversion that he went in search of Francis at the Portiuncula and joined him one week later in April 23, 1208. He was present at Francis' death who praised his spirit of contemplation. He died in April 22, 1262 and was initially buried in Perugia.

Sabbatino was one of three men who joined Francis and Giles after they returned from their first missionary journey and had rejoined Bernardo and Peter. Very little is known of Sabbatino's life prior to his entrance into the new community.

The other two were **Moricus Parvus** and **John**. Moricus Parvus, or Morico the Short, or Morico the Little was thus called by the writer of the Anonymous of Perugia since legend had it that he was a former religious who, when gravely ill, had asked Francis to pray for him. As a result, he regained his health and followed Francis as a friar.

John of Capella was, perhaps, one of the most controversial initial friars. Aside from trying to form a new order of lepers while Francis was in the Holy Land, he was a procurator, dealt too much with secular people, became quite relaxed in discipline, was often reprovved by Francis, was the first to wear a hat in the order, contracted leprosy which he did not bear with patience, stole the balsam that was intended for Francis' burial, and in the end hanged himself.

Philip, called Longinus in later texts, preached in the Marches of Ancona around 1213 and served as Visitor of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano from 1219-1230. He died in Perugia in 1259. The last four are named only in 14 Century sources. John of San Costanzo was a simple man of the commune of Assisi, of great sanctity, died and was buried at the Portiuncula.

Barbaro was an outstanding lover of poverty and in his manner displayed acts of charity towards his neighbours, was assiduous in prayer, and austere in physical discipline.

Bernardo of Vigilante was known for his imitation of Francis in all things, especially in patience. He was outstanding for his miracles and also died at the Portiuncula.

(N.B. **Angelo Tancredi** is said to have been the first nobleman to join the order.) He is one of the famous "**Three Companions**"; the other two being **Leo**, who would become Francis' secretary and confessor, and **Rufino**, a cousin of Saint Clare. He was present at Francis' sermon to the birds, visited Cardinal Brancaleone with Francis in Rome in 1223, was with Francis at La Verna in 1224, at Fonte Colombo and Rieti in 1225, and remained with Francis in his last days in 1226. He sang with Leo the Canticle of Brother Sun in Francis' last hours, wrote memoirs with Leo and Rufino at Greccio in 1246 and was present at the death of Saint Clare in 1253. At his conversion Francis is said to have said to him, "You have worn the belt,

the sword, and the spurs of the world long enough. Come with me and I will arm you as Christ's knight." He died in 1258 and was buried near Francis' tomb. This number was augmented later on by another friar, **Juniper**, who became known as the "renowned jester of the Lord".

After Francis had resolved to follow the way of life of the early disciples, he preached penance and used the words 'May the Lord give you peace,' in all his preaching. Bonaventure describes what happened:

Thus it happened that filled with the spirit of the prophets and according to a prophetic passage, he proclaimed peace, preached salvation, and, by counsels of salvation, brought to true peace many who had previously lived at odds with Christ and far from salvation.³²

Therefore, as the truth of the man of God's simple teaching and life became known to many, some men began to do penance, and, abandoning all things, joined him in habit and life. The first among these was Bernard.³³

READING

Chapters four to six of the Anonymous of Perugia give an indication of why many were attracted to the way of life of Francis and his companions but makes it clear that they were often met with suspicion and persecution. (ED vol. II p. 41-48)

³² LMj 3:2, ED Vol 2, p543
³³ LMj 3:3, ED Vol 2, p543

LESSON 4 THE EARLY “RULE”

THE WAY OF LIFE PROPOSED BY FRANCIS AND HIS COMPANIONS

Francis again turned to Scriptures in order to discern the will of God. Together with Bernard he went to the Church of St Nicholas and prayed. They then opened the gospel three times and found the following:

If you will be perfect, go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor.” (Mt 19:21)...”Take nothing on your journey.” (Lk. 9:3)”If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24). ‘This is our life and rule,’ the holy man said. ‘and that of all who wish to join our company. Go, then, if you wish to be perfect, and carry out what you have heard.’³⁴

These passages of Sacred Scripture would constitute the foundation of the life and Rule of this new evangelical movement. In that same year, 1208, other men from Assisi joined Francis and Bernardo.

Thus Francis had found the basis for the ‘Propositum’ or proposed way of life for himself and his companions. The sources describe Francis teaching his companions according to the gospel, preparing them to go out in pairs to spread the good news of the Kingdom of God. He desired the Pope’s approval and set out for Rome.

Prior to undertaking his journey to Rome, Francis consulted Bishop Guido, who seemed sympathetic to him and to his idealism and who was also well versed in the practical involvements of seeking an audience with the Pope. It is to be noted that at this point in church history, there were many heretical groups in existence throughout Europe, the most notorious of these being the **Cathari**, whose polemic against church abuses and wealth were causes of great strife and dissension. If Francis and his band of brothers were to be successfully received, and not be confused with being yet another heretical group, they would have to have carefully guided access to the Papal court with all of its eccentricities. This was accomplished when Bishop Guido, in his kindness and generosity, appealed to his friend in Rome, Cardinal John of St. Paul, a man himself sympathetic to reform, to provide Francis and his brothers with an introduction to the Papal court and to the Holy Father. Cardinal John of St. Paul met with Francis and his brothers and deemed this group worthy of his intervention. It was vital for the success of the brothers in achieving papal approval to have the support of their bishop. The added support of a cardinal would have greatly helped their cause to be heard at all.

Bishop Guido may have found the early brothers challenging. He already had decided to take Francis under his particular care when his father sought punishment for his son because of his irresponsible behaviour. The people of Assisi were not pleased to lose to many of their worthy sons caught up in a community who begged rather than contributed to their town. Bishop Guido could easily have joined in the opinion of the townspeople and chosen to direct Francis differently. The behaviour of Francis during the early days must have been influential in gaining the Bishop’s favour. The relationship between this bishop and the brothers was to prove very valuable to the acceptance and development of the movement.

After being presented with this latest reform group, Pope Innocent III judged that Francis and his brothers would, indeed, be instrumental in initiating genuine reform among the laity and clergy, without lapsing into heresy. (According to tradition, it was Pope Innocent III who is indicated as being the Pope who dreamed that he saw Francis supporting a church on his shoulder, thus paving the way for his positive decision in favour of Francis and his ideal). And so it was that Pope Innocent III, after a time of reflection, orally approved the initial Rule and life of the Order of Friars Minor, as Francis referred to himself and his retinue in his firm belief that they were to live as brothers and truly as “minores” based on the model of the lives of Christ and the apostles.

³⁴ LMj 3:3, ED Vol 2, p544

The austerity of the brothers and their insistence on owning nothing both caused great anxiety and it was thought that they were perhaps too idealistic and unrealistic. He finally blessed them and gave them permission to preach penance to all. He also asked that they return to him if their numbers greatly increased.

The position of the brothers was made more secure because of this approval of the early Rule. In Lateran Council IV, it was decreed that there should not be any more new Rules, existing Rules were to be used by new groups wanting to become “religious Orders.” The Franciscan Rule, however, was formally approved. (Regula Bullata of 1223).

It is clear that the followers of Francis were seen as helping the church to reform because the Order was to receive privileges which assured its survival and growth after the death of Francis and as the Order changed over time.

Francis and his eleven brothers returned to Assisi filled with joy. Chapter 4 of the Major Life gives a little insight into how the companions developed their way of life:

On the way he discussed with his companions how they might sincerely keep the rule they had accepted, how they might advance in all holiness and justice before God, how they should improve themselves and be an example for others³⁵

Filled with divine consolation, they firmly decided and irrevocably resolved never to withdraw from the promise to holy poverty, be it from starvation or from trial.³⁶

They began to discuss whether they should live among the people or go off to solitary places, but Christ’s servant Francis, putting his trust in neither his own efforts nor in theirs, sought the pleasure of the divine will in this matter by fervour of prayer....He chose to live for everyone rather than for himself alone.³⁷

They spent their time praying incessantly...He also taught them to praise God in all and with all creatures, to honour priests with special reverence, and to believe with certainty. And to confess with simplicity the truth of the faith.³⁸

They had found shelter in a deserted hut at Rivo Torto, a short distance away from the Portiuncula. Here, in this place, they were able to live their ideal in extreme poverty.

The place was so cramped that they could barely sit or rest. Very often for lack of bread, their only food was the turnips that they begged in their need, here and there.

The man of God would write the names of the brothers on the beams of the hut, so that anyone wishing to rest or pray would know his place, and so that any unusual noise would not disturb the mind’s silence in such small and close quarters.³⁹

They made this their home until a local farmer rather rudely insisted that they leave, so as to enable him to make use of this space for himself and his animals. Being obedient to the true spirit of charity, Francis and the brothers left Rivo Torto. They moved to a small dwelling near St Mary of the Portiuncula which shortly afterwards, in 1211, was given to them by the Abbot of the Benedictine monastery on Mount Subasio.

³⁵ LMj 4:1, ED vol 2, p550
³⁶ LMj 4:1, ED Vol 2, p550
³⁷ L Mj 4:2, ED Vol 2, Pp550-551
³⁸ LMj 4:3, ED Vol 2, p551
³⁹

Adjoining this small and humble sanctuary the first Franciscan **convento** was established with erection of a few small huts or cells made of wattle, straw and mud, and enclosed by a hedge. The Portiuncula would be the foundational home of the expanding Order of Friars Minor and, as legend tells us, Francis, in a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was told by her that this was a very special place and that the friars were never to leave it. In order to satisfy Francis' concerns about ownership, the brothers could be evicted as they did not own the chapel. However, only the monks could evict them. From this place the wide world was their cloister in which they toiled with the labourers in the fields, and when no one would employ them, they would beg. In a very short time Francis and his companions gained an immense influence and during the ensuing months, Francis received more brothers at the Portiuncula, including a wide variety of learned and university educated men.

The Portiuncula was the place at which chapters were to be held twice a year. The Legend of the Three Companions, Chapter 14, describes the chapters (ED vol. 2 p100 -103,)

The Portiuncula was also the place where, in the year 1211, Chiara Offreduccio would escape from her home to meet with Francis in order to follow his ideal of living in the footsteps of the Lord and His apostles. The full extent of this episode in the history of the Franciscan family will be treated in the section dealing with life of Saint Clare. Suffice it to say, the Portiuncula to this day, while enshrined in a monumental cathedral-like edifice, still exudes the same simple charm and appeal as it did in 1209 as a place of peace and tranquillity.

CONCLUSION TO LESSONS THREE AND FOUR

Francis was joined by companions after the early period of his own conversion. Some idea of their life emerges but without precise details. It seems that the companions did not study but rather learned from one another with Francis admonishing them as required. As they travelled or shared poor accommodation, they seemed to develop a way of life, to which prayer and Scripture were central. The picture is similar to how Jesus must have taught his disciples on their journeys.

Francis taught by example but would only preach as permitted by the Church. He also sought the approval, guidance and assistance of Bishop Guido and probably other members of the Church hierarchy and it is clear that loyalty to the Church was vitally important for Francis. The support of the Church for the Franciscan movement was essential because without it the Pope would have been unlikely to give too much attention to a group of poorly clothed penitents in the beginning. Once support was given the Franciscan penitents were to have a positive influence in the movement for reform of the Church which was a major concern for Lateran Council IV. The Papacy gave privileges which made it possible for the Franciscan movement to develop during the years.

Chapters gave the opportunity for discussing how the movement would develop, for deciding where the brothers should travel and they provided a forum where issues could be addressed, brothers could be admonished and encouraged. They were necessary because of the very large growth in the movement.

The Franciscans were one of many groups who sought a more apostolic way of life. The monastic way of life was not how Francis discerned he should live. The significant Scripture passages which were at the core of the movement drew Francis to an apostolic lifestyle with Jesus very much at the centre. Poverty was adopted and Franciscans had to learn how they should live their poverty through the centuries. For Francis, it seemed clear what was meant by "sine proprio."

LESSON 5 1212-1216

FRANCIS' PREACHING

As we saw in the last lesson, Innocent III both approved the friars' way of life - the *Propositum vitae* drawn up by Francis - but also gave them the mission of preaching penance. It was this mission from the Pope that legitimated the friars' preaching and manifested the fact that they were preaching in the name of the Church and not from their own authority. Armed with papal approval for their way of life and the mandate from the Pope to preach, Francis and his companions could expand their activity beyond the diocese of Assisi and so they did. As Julian of Speyer tells us:

Then, comforted in the Lord, Saint Francis began to speak out more boldly owing to the apostolic authority he had been granted, and going around through cities, towns and villages, he steadfastly preached penance.⁴⁰

In his preaching Francis "spoke the truth boldly"⁴¹. He preached without ornate language but in a simple manner that was direct and accessible to all and yet he preached with a power that drew men and women, clerics and lay people, religious and seculars. In the Later Rule he would recommend the brothers to speak with brevity and to ensure that their preaching was for the edification of the people "announcing to them vices and virtues, punishment and glory."⁴² And he followed these recommendations in his own preaching. Julian of Speyer tells us that when Francis preached before the Pope and the Cardinals: "He preached very tranquilly . . . , not so much moving them to laughter by the simplicity of his words as wringing from them a sigh of remorse at the marvellous fervour of his inspiration."⁴³

Francis did not restrict preaching to Christian lands. Francis' old zeal for battle in a crusade now gave way to his desire to embark on a peaceful crusade to preach the message of the gospel to the Saracens and so he began the first of his attempted missionary adventures. Setting out in 1212 for Syria, his dream to convert the Saracens was short lived in that his ship was caught in a storm and wrecked on the coast of Slavonia. Francis was forced to return to Assisi, disappointed but still undaunted in his convictions.

LA VERNA AND THE LIFE OF SOLITUDE

The following spring saw him concentrating his efforts at evangelisation in Central Italy. The effectiveness of his preaching is illustrated by the story of the gift of La Verna. Passing by a celebration for the creation of a new knight, Francis preached to the revellers on the theme "Such is the good which I await, that every pain delights me." This theme was taken from a Troubadour ballad sung by a knight who anticipated winning the lady he desired, but typically Francis took this secular theme and transformed it into a moving appeal to conversion. Moved by his words, Count Orlando of Chiusi asked to speak to him. At the end of their conversation Orlando offered Francis the mountain of La Verna, an isolated peak nestled among the Appenine mountains of Tuscany, which rises some 4,000 feet above the valley of Casentino. This place would be a retreat, especially favourable for contemplation, to which he might retire from time to time for rest and prayer.

Francis' acceptance of Mount La Verna, after some of his brothers had reconnoitred the location and deemed it suitable, demonstrates a vital feature of Francis' combination of prayer and preaching: his preaching was based upon many hours of prayer and contemplation during which he developed the intimacy with the Lord that would flow out in his preaching. Therefore the earliest places where Francis and his companions had buildings to which they could retire were the hermitages that gave

⁴⁰ LJS 4:23, ED Vol 1, p385

⁴¹ 1C 15:36, ED Vol 1., p215

⁴² LR 9:3, ED Vol 1, P105

⁴³ LJS 58, ED Vol 1, p409

them a place away from the tumult of the world. Julian of Speyer tells us of one retreat Francis made at La Verna:

That most holy man, who had come to know how to divide his time usefully between himself and those around him, on a certain occasion left the crowds of secular people, sought out a place of solitude, and took a few companions with him, in order to defend his repose from all the tumult of those who thronged to him. For, on occasion, he longed to have time free for God alone, and to shake off any dust he had picked up while dealing with men. And after his mind was quiet for a little while, he tasted the sweeter fruit of contemplation, then with all his heart he longed to know what to do to be able to make the sacrifice of himself more pleasing to the Lord.⁴⁴

From this we can see that Francis did not separate the contemplative life from the active life, but went away periodically to seek out solitude so as to draw closer to God. La Verna was one of a string of hermitages to which Francis retired with his friars from time to time including: Fonte Colombo, Greccio, Monte Casale, Poggio Bustone and Sant' Urbano. His experience in these hermitages led him to consider how the friars should live when they went apart to spend some time in solitude and so he wrote the **Rule for Hermitages**, recommending that the friars in hermitages split their duties between those who look after the temporal needs of the community (the "Marthas") and those who devote themselves to solitude and silent contemplation (the "Marys"). After a while these groups would swap over so that the Marthas would have their opportunity for solitude and the Marys have theirs for service. La Verna would ultimately be the site where Francis would receive the Stigmata (1224), thus affirming his total conformity to the life of Christ both in spirit and now in body.

NEW OPENINGS

In 1213-1214, Francis embarked on his second attempted apostolic voyage to the lands of Islam. On this occasion, he intended destination was Morocco, where he sought to evangelise the infidels. Again, Francis' desire for an apostolic conquest, where he might even be called upon to be a martyr, would be frustrated, as he suffered from a severe illness which forced him to return to Italy.

After his return to Umbria, Francis received several more men into the community, one of them friar **Thomas of Celano**. It is the same Thomas of Celano who would later become the author of three biographies of Francis, through which we know so much of Francis' story. Around the same time as Thomas of Celano a number of other educated men joined the Order, drawn to the ideals of Francis and seeing the life of the Lesser Brother as the best way of living the Christian life. They would also want to make use of their education in the friars' ministry and so it became possible for Francis to draw on the advice and learning of these professionals. However, within the next few years there would also emerge tensions in the movement as educated, professional men sought to reconcile making their talents available for the use of the Church with the life of poverty enjoined by Francis.

FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL AND THE DOMINICANS

It is possible that Francis assisted at one of the most important events in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, the Fourth Lateran Council. It is certain, however, that the Council had a profound effect on his preaching and on the development of the friars. Francis' devotion to the Eucharist followed the promotion of Eucharistic devotion by the Council. His journey to Damietta accompanied the Crusade promoted at the Council. The development of provinces, chapters and visitors within the Order flowed from decrees of the Council for the reform of religious life. Francis' preaching after 1216 can be seen as a promotion of the teachings of the Council and its programme for the renewal of Christian life.

The Council also had a great effect on Dominic Guzman, founder of the Order of Preachers or Dominicans. Dominic had begun to live the life of a wandering preacher in Southern France in 1206

⁴⁴ LJS 59, ED Vol 1, p409

and had gained approval from local Bishops for his way of life. Later he would seek papal ratification but because of the ban on new rules introduced at the Fourth Lateran Council, he would have to choose the rule of St. Augustine interpreted through proper constitutions. By contrast Francis, whose first “propositum” was approved by the Pope in 1209, was able to write his own rule. We cannot be sure whether Francis and Dominic ever met. The evidence for a meeting is late and emerged at a time when Raymund of Penyafort (the Master of the Dominicans) and Haymo of Faversham (Minister General of the Friars Minor) were trying to overcome rivalry between the two Orders and promote harmony between the friars. So the stories of the meeting could have been encouraged to promote this harmony. Also it is difficult, looking at their biographies, to see when the two would have been in the same place at the same time.

HONORIUS III AND THE PORTIUNCULA INDULGENCE

According to a chronicler, **Thomas of Eccleston**, we learn that Francis was present at the death of Innocent III in Perugia in July, 1216. With Innocent’s passing, it was not certain that a successor would be as favourable to the friars. That same year, Honorius III succeeded Innocent III as Pope of Rome and soon proved to be a good friend and promoter of the friars. Honorius is described by Jacques de Vitry, whom he ordained Bishop of Acre in the Holy Land, as: “an elderly and devout man, quite simple and humble, who had distributed almost all his patrimony to the poor.”⁴⁵

Very early on in the pontificate of Honorius III, we find the concession of the **Portiuncula Indulgence**. We know of the circumstances of this concession from a diploma written by Br. Theobald, Bishop of Assisi, in 1310. Francis, while praying at the Portiuncula, received a vision of Christ offering him whatever favour he might desire. Since the salvation of souls was high on Francis’ prayer intentions, he begged a plenary indulgence for all who, having confessed their sins, should visit this tiny chapel. Francis also sought to have this chapel become a sanctuary where many might be saved. Our Lord acceded to Francis’ request on the condition that the Pope should ratify this indulgence. Francis immediately set out for Perugia with Brother Masseo in order to find Pope Honorius and thus to present his request. Despite intense opposition from his Curia at such an unheard-of favour, Pope Honorius granted the indulgence but restricted it to one day yearly. He subsequently fixed the date as 2 August in perpetuity, as the day for gaining the Portiuncula Indulgence, commonly known in Italy as *il perdón d’Assisi*. This is the traditional account of this event, although there was a great deal of controversy as to the validity of the event due to the lack of discernable documentation in the early biographies of Francis, or even in papal or diocesan archives. In 1279, Peter of John Olivi supported the truth of the granting of the indulgence and argued that it was credible from the evidence of the dignity of Francis who had asked for it, the witness of the evangelical state of life lived at the Portiuncula by the friars who witnessed to the granting, and the magnificence of the one granting the indulgence, the Lord Pope. More recently, in the 19th century Paul Sabatier reviewed the evidence for the indulgence and concluded it had indeed been granted by Honorius III⁴⁶.

It is about this time that Francis and the friars’ impact on the Church is witnessed to in outside sources. In 1216 Jacques de Vitry mentions the Lesser Brothers and Lesser Sisters in a letter he wrote while at Genoa. In this letter he speaks of different poverty movements in Italy. The Humiliati in the North of Italy are praised for their preaching and listening to the Word of God but the most effusive praise is reserved for the Lesser Brothers and Lesser Sisters. Their virtue is extolled and their “apostolic life” is contrasted to the worldly atmosphere that pertains in the Roman Curia. This document is of major importance to the history of Franciscana in that it is the first non-Franciscan document mentioning the movement of Lesser Brothers and Sisters. From this document we can see that Francis and his followers are beginning to have significant influence in the Church in Italy.

⁴⁵ Jacques de Vitry, Letter 1, ED Vol 1, p579

⁴⁶ The validity of the indulgence today is confirmed in a decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary *Portiuncula sacra aedes* of 15th August, 1088, which states, furthermore, that it may be gained on any day and not only on the 2nd August.

LESSON 6 1216-1218

BEYOND ITALY: FAILURE AND RESPONSE

The rapid growth of this community of poor brothers, largely as a result of Francis' charismatic personality, coupled with his itinerant preaching in Ancona and surrounding environs, would uncover a variety of management difficulties and frustrations for Francis as leader and founder, as well as for the members of the expanding fraternity itself. The increased presence of clerics and university educated lay men, only pointed out the apparent weaknesses of Francis' ability to effectively lead such a diverse group of men. The lack of organisation that accompanied the first missions of the friars to the north of the Alps illustrated some of these difficulties.

The Order met in chapter at Pentecost in 1217. The friars had already met in 1216 and possibly before that. Chapters had been recommended by the Fourth Lateran Council as a way of reforming and organising the growth of religious orders and the young movement of friars took to them enthusiastically. In the first years all the friars would meet for chapter, returning to the Portiuncula from their missionary activities all over Italy. At their meeting in 1217 they decided to branch out beyond Italy and so bring to life Francis' dream of friars running from all over the world to join them.

The friars decided that to organise their mission better they should divide the order into provinces, with each province having a Minister to guide the mission and care for the friars assigned to the province. The areas the friars wanted to go into were divided into eleven provinces, six in Italy and five beyond the Alps. Friars were assigned to each area under the supervision of a Minister. Tuscany, Lombardy, Provence, Spain and Germany were assigned to five of Francis' principal followers; for himself, Francis reserved France, and he actually set out for that kingdom but upon arriving at Florence, he was dissuaded from travelling any further by Cardinal Hugolino. Hugolino persuaded Francis that at this important stage in the Order's development he should stay in Italy. This marks the first meeting between the two men. In the coming years Francis was fortunate in being able to turn to **Cardinal Hugolino dei Conti** for support and advice when initially confronted by emerging problems and difficulties. Francis sent to France in his stead Brother Pacificus, a renowned poet of the time, and Brother Agnellus, who later on would establish the friars in England.

The General Chapter sent friars to Germany, Hungary, Spain and the other provinces of Italy. **Jordan of Giano**, a chronicler of Franciscan life, testifies to the early history of these missions and their inherent problems. The friars who were sent to France were ill equipped to deal with the conditions they would encounter and the divisions within Christendom. For example ... when asked whether they were **Albigensians** (a prominent heretical group widespread across Europe at that time), they responded by stating that they didn't know who the Albigensians were and they were suspected of heresy themselves.

In a similar manner, the early friars sent out on mission were also linguistically ill prepared as witnessed by the experiences of the friars sent to Germany and Hungary. Initially they discovered that positive responses brought hospitality and amenities from the local folk. However, when these same folk asked about intentions of sowing seeds of heresy, and receiving positive answers, the resulting responses were not so hospitable. The same dynamic was operative within the experiences of the friars who were sent to Hungary. There, even while travelling with a bishop from that country, the friars were severely mistreated by the local farmers by deriding insults and physical beatings. One friar even related to Jordan that he wondered why these people wanted to steal his clothing as he was robbed of his breeches fifteen times. Disgusted and highly disillusioned, these friars returned to Italy and were quite at odds with Francis.

The friars' mission beyond the Alps thus ended in failure, but the response of the French Bishops sowed the seed for future successes. In response to the accusations of heresy in France, the friars had shown the local Bishop their rule. This seemed to him to be orthodox, but it was sent to Masters of the University of Paris for a further analysis since they were responsible for investigating heresy. The

Masters adjudged the Franciscan rule orthodox, but the Bishops sent to Pope Honorius asking for confirmation that these friars were indeed Catholic.

Francis travelled to Rome to preach before the papal curia at about this time (1217-1218). It seems likely that Francis made this trip to answer criticisms that in part resulted from the failed missionary journeys beyond the Alps. On Hugolino's advice, Francis went to preach to the Pope and Cardinals to reassure them of his own orthodoxy and that of his friars. Hugolino, an astute politician, realised the need for Francis to remain in Italy to counter the Cardinals and others at the Roman Curia who were opposed to the Franciscan movement. Francis' presence was all the more necessary since Cardinal John of St. Paul, who had protected the Order at the Roman Curia, had died a little before Innocent III, so the friars were left without their most powerful protector at the Curia. This explains the careful preparation that Francis made for his sermon, a preparation that in the end counted for nothing, for he forgot the text as soon as he rose to speak and then preached a brilliant and moving extemporary homily.

Honorius must have been reassured by Francis and Hugolino because his response to the French Bishops' request was to issue the friars with a sort of "passport" that guaranteed their orthodoxy and asked for the co-operation of Bishops in their ministry. This is the Bull *Cum dilecti filii*, the first that Honorius wrote in support of the life of the friars. Honorius sent this response not just to the Bishops in France but, no doubt informed of the reception the friars had been subject to elsewhere also, to all the prelates of the Church everywhere. So that when the friars next went to strange lands they could show the local Bishops the letter of the Pope as proof of their orthodoxy and papal support.

This papal support was to prove crucial in the development and success of the friars. When some French Bishops again questioned the orthodoxy of the friars in their next mission in 1219, Honorius responded in 1220 with a second bull *Pro dilectis filiis*, berating the Bishops for their lack of attention to the first bull he had sent earlier. The pattern of suspicion or even opposition by some Bishops to the ministry and life of the friars, countered by firm papal support, would become a *leitmotif* in Franciscan history and illustrates the close relations the Lesser Brothers had with the papacy from the start.

The Order did not forget the lessons of the need for good organisation in a mission to a strange land. This is evident in the preparations made by the General Chapter in 1221 for the mission to Germany. Jordan of Giano tells us the story, which is not without its comic moments. The chapter asked for volunteers and ninety men arose. The mission was entrusted to Caesar of Spires, who had just helped Francis write the Earlier Rule. Caesar chose thirty from among these friars and one of those he chose was Jordan himself. Jordan protested that he had only been with the group to shake their hands goodbye, but Caesar insisted on taking him. The matter was referred to Elias, Francis' Vicar, and eventually Elias ordered Jordan to go. These thirty men included Germans such as Barnabas and Corrado, who could speak the language and interpret the customs, and Italians such as John of Monte di Pian Carpino⁴⁷ and Thomas of Celano⁴⁸ whose organisational and intellectual skills would help establish the Order.

Another of the missions we know about illustrates good organisation. The General Chapter of 1224 organized the mission to England. On September 10th, the friars landed in Dover, Kent, and proceeded to the city of Canterbury. One can see all of the marks of careful preparation, with a clear plan for expansion and development. Of the nine friars in the original party, three were English and they journeyed first to **Canterbury**, the Episcopal seat. They then journeyed north west to **London**, the capital city. Within a relatively short period of time, they were able to establish themselves in the university city of **Oxford** and about a year after that, they had settled in **Cambridge**, the site of a young university, and **Northampton**, the administrative centre of the North of England. Their numbers increased so that they were able to found communities in the major cities and towns before the year 1230. Richard of Ingworth, one of the original group, then went to Ireland to found the Irish province of the friars. The chronicle of **Thomas of Eccleston** "De adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam", give us the edifying tale of these friars and their work to found the Province of England,

⁴⁷ Later a famous missionary to the Mongols

⁴⁸ Later Francis' biographer

which would be an intellectual powerhouse of the Order. Many would see in the improved organisation of the Order the influence of Cardinal Hugolino whose role was to become increasingly important in these years.

CARDINAL HUGOLINO

The person of Cardinal Hugolino dei Conti, a relative of Pope Innocent III and one of his most trusted advisors, is pivotal in the study of the life of Francis. Hugolino was a prominent member of the Sacred College and enjoyed widespread influence within ecclesiastical circles. He was ordained Bishop of Ostia in May, 1206 and expressed sympathetic support for the developing **mendicant movements** of that time; he was known to enjoy close relationships with both Francis and Dominic. At Francis' request, Hugolino would be appointed as Cardinal Protector of the fraternity. In this official capacity, Hugolino would thus be able to defend the friars from their outspoken critics and to ensure that Francis' Rule would definitely be confirmed by Honorius III (note that Hugolino had assisted Francis in the final version of his Rule). His involvement with, and his influence on the developing fraternity, would be a continuous one, stemming initially from his friendship with Francis and extending, in time, to his supervision of the process of Francis' canonization, when he would then be known as Pope Gregory IX (his election was on 19 March, 1227).

The year 1218 saw Francis continue his apostolic preaching missionary tours in Italy which were met with immense success. He preached out of doors, in the market places, from church steps and from castle court-yards. The extraordinary response he received was matched only by the almost immediate and visible result of his preaching.

ANIMAL STORIES

A series of incidents involving animals, as reported by Thomas of Celano, indicates Francis' exercise of miraculous power over the very forces of nature. Celano cites the following incidents as being integral to an understanding of this celestial gift:

- 1) at **Pain d'Arca**, is a town between Bevagna and Cannara about 3 miles from Assisi. Francis, seeing a large number of birds by the wayside, is surprised that they do not disperse at his greeting. He preaches to them and they remain docile until he dismisses them. Subsequently, he admonished all creatures to love and praise the Creator, "for daily, when the name of the Saviour had been invoked, he saw their obedience by personal experience."
- 2) At **Alviano**, 30 miles southwest of Assisi, Francis commands the swallows to be silent until he has finished preaching. The incident is realized as a miracle by the people who "hastened with the greatest devotion to at least touch his clothing."
- 3) In **Greccio**, some 45 miles south of Assisi in the Rieti Valley, a hare released from a trap is consoled by Francis and does not leave him until carried to the woods. A similar incident occurred at Lake Trasimene.
- 4) At **Lake Piediluco**, Rieti, a fish refused to leave Francis' boat until it was dismissed.
- 5) At **San Urbano**, near Narni, water is reported to have changed into wine for Francis' benefit.⁴⁹

THIRD ORDER

These incidents had the effect of changing the existing popular estimation of Francis from that of his being merely another itinerant preacher to a man truly blessed by God. While he was preaching in Camara, a small village near Assisi, the entire population of the town came out to him as a body begging to be admitted to his order. This gave Francis the impetus to devise a Third Order, as it came to be known, of the **Brothers and Sisters of Penance**, which he intended to span the gap between the world and the cloister for those who could not leave their home or their avocations in order to enter either the First Order of Friars Minor, or the Second Order of Poor Ladies. While this Rule was

⁴⁹ Conrad Harkins, ofm – lecture notes summer 1994

officially confirmed by Nicholas IV in the year 1289, the date 1221 is usually assigned as the foundational year, although the precise date is actually not certain.

LESSON 7

1218-1221

DAMIETTA AND MARRAKESH

The second general Chapter (May, 1219) decided to send new missionaries to Germany, France, Hungary, Spain and Morocco. The friars who were sent to Morocco were martyred at Marrakesh on January 16, 1220. Saint Berard and his companions would be the first in a long list of heroic friars who would give their lives in witness to the Gospel.

Before, when Francis had sent his brothers to the dangers of missions beyond the Alps, he had wanted to join them by going himself to France. Hugolino had dissuaded him from this course of action because of the needs of the Order in Italy and the precarious position at the Papal Curia. When it was no longer a question of sending brothers to possible dangers, but one of sending them to probable martyrdom, Francis would not be dissuaded from going himself (we do not know if anyone tried). So while Berard and his group left for Morocco, Francis set out to join the Crusaders in the East. It was not, it seems, primarily a desire for martyrdom that motivated Francis, but a desire to evangelise the Saracens, bring them to the gospel and so return the Holy Land to the followers of Christ. But the consequence of such a mission was, as Berard and companions showed, likely to be martyrdom.

Francis selected as the target of his missionary efforts the Sultan Malek-el-Kamel. He had earlier tried to approach the Muslim leader in Marocco the Caliph Muhammed-ben-Nasser⁵⁰, but had been driven back by illness. Francis left for Egypt and in the autumn of 1219 he arrived at Damietta. There he found the Crusader armies engaged in a long siege of the city, seen as the key to preventing Egyptian reinforcements from reaching the Holy Land. He arrived before the 29th August and probably left soon after the 5th November of that year.

⁵⁰ Peter II of Aragon had defeated Muhammed-ben-Nasser in the decisive battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, which ended the Caliph's attempt to break through Christian Northern Spain into western Christendom. So Francis' attempted mission to Spain in 1213-1214 may have been to try to capitalise on this victory by converting the Caliph.

He found the crusading armies preparing for an assault on the city which he tried in vain to stop, foreseeing a massacre of the Crusaders. Battle was joined on the 29th August, but as he predicted the Crusaders were driven back with great loss of life. It was possibly in a truce after this battle to allow both sides to recover and bury their dead, that Francis asked permission from the papal legate Pelagius to go to speak to the Sultan. At first reluctant because he was sure Francis was going to his death, the legate gave way before Francis' insistence. Francis took with him as a companion Br. Illuminatus. As they crossed the lines they were taken to the Sultan, perhaps because it was felt they were either messengers or seeking to convert. Once in the Sultan's presence they declared that it was not their intention to convert but they challenged the Sultan's religious leaders to a public debate about the truths of faith. However, the Sultan's religious leaders had no intention of debating with these Christian monks, instead they demanded the monks be killed for daring to try to preach another faith to the Sultan. The Sultan dismissed his advisers and conversed with Francis and Illuminatus. After a few days, when Francis realised that his wish for the Sultan's conversion would not be realised, Francis and Illuminatus were led safely back to the Christian lines. Before they left the Sultan offered them riches and asked them to stay with him, but they refused all these offers. Instead they took their leave and many sources say that the Sultan's last request to Francis was that he pray for him that God might show him which was the true faith. Tradition says that Francis was given a safe pass by the Sultan so that he could visit the Holy Sepulchre and the Sacro Convento in Assisi displays a horn that is said to have been that safe pass. According to this tradition, then, Francis would have visited the holy sites of Jesus' life, death and resurrection before returning to Italy with Peter Catanii, Elias, and Caesar of Spire.

While Francis failed in his intention of converting the Sultan, his visit was remarkable in its results. It was not unknown for Christians to seek to convert Muslims instead of fighting them: Joachim of Fiore had suggested this as a more appropriate attitude and Honorius III called for missionaries to go to preach to the Saracens. The example of Francis, however, was to have a profound effect in Franciscan history. The effect on Francis of his stay with the Sultan seems to have been significant. Afterwards he wrote to all Christian leaders that they should ring bells to call Christians to prayer at certain times of the day - could this be in imitation of the *muezzin* whose call to prayer would have resonated over Damietta five times a day? In both his rules Francis included a chapter encouraging those friars who wished to go among the Saracens and in the earlier Rule he recommends two ways of going among them. Friars could live peacefully among them a life of service in witness to Christ or when they saw it was pleasing to God, they could preach the gospel explicitly and call people to conversion and baptism. This is the first time a religious rule included an explicitly missionary chapter and it has inspired Franciscans down the ages both to live in peace with Muslims and those of other faiths, and to preach the gospel to them when it has pleased the Lord.

FRANCIS RENOUNCES GOVERNANCE OF THE ORDER

During his absence from Italy, Francis had placed the care of the order in the hands of two friars, **Matteo da Narni** and **Gregorio da Napoli**. In the spring of 1220, Francis received information regarding the state of the order that compelled him to quickly return to Italy. It seems that Matteo da Narni and Gregorio da Napoli had summoned a chapter which had proposed the following changes:

- the imposition of new fasts upon the friars, much more severe than the Rule required;
- the seeking and acceptance of privileges for Clare and her community by Philip the Long, despite Francis having forbidden seeking privileges from Rome;
- the assembly of a great number of lepers by Brother John of Capella who sought to form them into a new religious, and had set out for Rome to seek approval for the rule he had written for them.

Finally, the rumour that Francis was dead was widely in circulation so that when Francis arrived at Venice in July, 1220 accompanied by **Peter Catanii**, **Elias** and **Caesar of Speyer**, there prevailed a general feeling of uncertainty and unrest among the friars.

These novelties represented tension between different groups within the Order. While Francis had been around, his presence and prestige had contributed to holding them together, but his prolonged absence in the East and the rumours of his death exacerbated certain centrifugal tendencies in the Order. One tendency, represented by those who promoted the fasting regulations at the intermediary chapter called by Matteo and Gregory, was towards settling down to being like other religious orders with fixed dwellings and set daily timetables. For the type of rigorous fasting proposed in these regulations could quite feasibly be followed in fixed houses of this type, but not by friars moving from town to town begging for their food who must eat what they are given. So the move to impose rigorous fasting was a move to settle to regular houses and regular lifestyles. It was perhaps inevitable that the friars should seek this eventually, but it clashed with the ideals of the early movement and friars who held to these early ideals saw the danger of the regulations. It seems it was friars opposed to this changing identity of the movement who called Francis back urgently from the Holy Land.

Concurrent with these difficulties there existed a feeling that the order was experiencing a period of intense transition. While for the moment it appears that Francis' return was enough to quieten the dissent and bring people back in line so that the fasting regulations were dropped and we hear no more of Philip seeking privileges or John and his community of lepers - the tensions that led to these moves had not disappeared. It was evident to Francis that the charismatic, simple and unceremonious ways that marked the initial period with his first followers were gradually disappearing and that the heroic poverty practiced by Francis and the early friars was also jeopardized by the vast increase in numbers. Francis' strength was living the gospel life, not organisation or reproof of recalcitrant friars. Francis' dream of a little black hen trying, and failing, to keep all her chicks under her wings illustrates his mind at this time. He was like the mother hen, but was no longer able to protect and guide his friars, so new structures were needed.

Further factors that influenced Francis' decisions were his failing health (he returned from Egypt with an eye disease that never left him) and a growing realisation that being in command of men was undermining his commitment to be the least of all.

On his return from the East, Francis went to Hugolino to seek his advice on how to deal with the tensions in the Order. Francis recognised the need of help from the Pope in the organisation of his order, but he also realised that with the Pope so busy in affairs of Church and state, he would not always have time to devote to the friars. Therefore Francis asked the Pope for someone to be his representative in dealing with the Order and Hugolino was the man chosen by them for the job. It would seem beyond dispute that the contributions of Cardinal Hugolino were quite pivotal in bringing Francis' lofty ideals within the range of attainability and these changes, effected by his hand, are recognizable in the so-called **Chapter of Mats**.

This famous assembly was held at the Portiuncula in September 1220. Approximately 5,000 friars are said to have been present, besides some 500 applicants for admission to the order. Since Francis deliberately made no provision for the friars, huts of wattle and daub were erected to shelter this multitude, hence the name of "Mats" being given to this chapter. The charity and generosity of the neighbouring towns saw this multitude supplied with food, while it was noted that knights and nobles waited on them gladly.

It was on this occasion that Francis relinquished his role in day to day governance of the order in favour of Peter Catanii. Francis also asked Peter to assign one of the brothers to be his personal Superior, so that he too would be under obedience and could rejoice in his status as Lesser Brother. Peter died in less than a year and was succeeded by Brother Elias, who held this position until the death of Francis.

Despite his not being in day to day charge of the order, and his acceptance of a personal Superior, Francis still sought to inspire and direct the friars toward his original ideals by his own personal example. Some of the sources speak of Peter and Elias as being Minister General of the Order, but Francis seems to have kept in his hands the guiding reins of the Order's inspiration, while leaving its day to day running to Peter and then Elias. Had Elias been considered Minister General, rather than Francis' administrative Vicar, it is difficult to see why a new election for Minister General would have been necessary at Francis' death.

Francis remained passionately concerned about the Order's development. While he was passing through Bologna, Francis refused to enter a **convento** (Italian word for friary) because he heard it referred to as a 'house of friars' and also because a **studium** was instituted there, so much was he disappointed at this development. He forbade all the friars, even the sick one, to stay within its confines and it was only after Cardinal Hugolino publicly declared that the property was his own that Francis reluctantly allowed his brothers to re-enter it. Despite very strong convictions and resolve, Francis was amenable to an adjustment of his viewpoint and the implementation of subsequent responses.

As concerns his attitude toward studies in general, Francis desired that his friars accrue sufficient theological knowledge that was conformable to the mission of the order, and which was to be, above all else, a mission of example. Hence he regarded the accumulation of books as being somewhat at variance with the poverty that his friars professed, and so he resisted the eager desire for book learning for itself so prevalent in his time, in so far as struck it at the root of that simplicity which underscored the essence of his life and threatened to stifle the spirit of prayer, which he accounted preferable to all the rest. For Francis, the shifting movement toward a more scholarly and intellectually based fraternity presented a conundrum from which he could not affect a resolution.

One way of ensuring that his inspiration for the Order would remain at its heart was the approval of a definitive text for the rule. Up until now, the rule had developed according to the needs of the friars expressed at chapter so that as the Order grew, so did the rule. However, while this was appropriate for a rapidly developing Order that needed to change with its growth, what the Order needed most now was the stability that would come from a fixed text to the rule.

In the year 1221 Francis drew up a text of the Rule for the Friars Minor and presented it to the General Chapter presided over, in the absence of Hugolino, by the Cistercian Cardinal Capocci. This Rule was based on the original *propositum vitae* approved by Innocent III with such additions and modifications as had been deemed necessary during the preceding twelve years. These Francis gathered together and embellished with scriptural texts, with the help of Caesar of Spire, a scripture scholar. The Earlier Rule can be divided up into three sections: Chapters 1-17 consist of the original *propositum* and developments in the Order up to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Chapters 18-20 include legislation drawn up in the wake of Lateran IV, and Chapters 21-23 constitute a sort of appendix of important texts for Francis that did not find a place elsewhere in the Rule.

This Rule of 1221 was unlike any conventional rule made and was written in a very non-judicial style. It contained lengthy scriptural quotations, model homilies and exhortations that the science of canon law, at the height of its prestige at this time, considered out of place in a rule. For canonists a rule was a text of law and so needed a juridical formulation. This is the probable reason why the Earlier Rule was never sent to the Pope for approval, although it may also have been felt that the rule needed a period of being lived before being finally approved.

Two years later, Francis retired to Fonte Colombo, a hermitage near Rieti, and rewrote the rule in a more concise format. This time he took with him, not the scripture scholar Caesar, but his trusted friend and scribe Leo and the canonist Bonizio of Bologna⁵¹. He reduced the twenty three chapters of the Rule to twelve and removed the long scriptural quotations, the exhortations and the model homily to give the Rule a more spartan, but more juridical style. Francis then went to Hugolino and worked on a final draft of the text with him. The text was discussed and approved at General Chapter and then in this more refined form, the rule was solemnly approved by Pope Honorius III on November 29, 1223 under the Papal Bull entitled **Solet Annuere**. This Later Rule, or **Regula Bullata**, is the one ever since professed throughout the First Order of Saint Francis. It is based on the three vows of

⁵¹ Here some of the sources tell us of a Rule that Francis is supposed to have given to Elias and which the latter lost. This legend probably comes from later attempts to draw an analogy between the Franciscan rule and the Commandments given by God to Moses. Since the first version of the Ten Commandments was lost when Moses broke the tablets coming down the mountain, so the first version of the Rule was said to have been lost. But just as Moses returned to Mount Sinai and God gave exactly the same commandments to him, so Francis was supposed to have returned to Fonte Colombo where Christ dictated the Rule to him.

obedience, chastity and poverty with special stress being placed on poverty, which Francis had always sought to make the special characteristic of his order.

There is little substantial change between the Earlier and Later Rules. One significant change is a tightening of the legislation on poverty. In the Earlier Rule the Ministers were permitted to accept money for the needs of the sick brethren. In the Later Rule money could be accepted for no reason, instead the Ministers were to have recourse to spiritual friends for the needs of the sick brethren and the clothing of the friars. One reason for this change is the emergence of significant numbers of lay people who followed a Franciscan way - the Order of Penitents or Third Order - and who could be relied upon to sustain the friars in need.

The year 1221 marked the approval of the “**Memoriale Propositi**”, the first rule of this Order of Penitents. It was given to them by Francis as a rule or norm of life for their lay vocations. The emphasis on absolute poverty as held by the members of the First and Second Orders of Saint Francis, and the reconciliation of the religious with the secular state of the Third Order of Penance, are the chief foundational elements of the family of religious and lay people founded by Francis.

After writing the Earlier Rule in 1221, Francis undertook a preaching tour in southern Italy. On March 15, 1222 Francis preached in the main square of the city of Bologna, a famous university city, where his friars most probably already had an established school of theology. It was prior to this time, circa 1220, that a gifted priest-scholar, Anthony di Alfonsi, a canon of Saint Augustine living in Coimbra, Portugal, heard about the massacre at Marrakesh of the friars who followed Francis from Assisi. Their martyrdom caused a great stir in Coimbra and when the relics were transported there, he went to view them. Anthony was so caught up in the spirit of these first martyrs that he decided to leave the Augustinian Canons and join this new and inspirational fraternity. We know that he was received around 1220 into the fraternity. Francis’ Letter to Saint Anthony stated: “...it pleases me that you teach sacred theology to the brothers, on condition that you do not extinguish the study of prayer and the devotion as the Rule declares.” From this brief note written to him, dated 1223, we know that by this time Anthony was teaching theology to the friars in Bologna since, by then, Anthony belonged to the province of Romagna, in northern Italy.

LESSON 8

GRECCIO AND LA VERNA 1223-1224

Celano tells us about Francis' desire to follow Christ's footsteps:

His highest aim, foremost desire and greatest intention was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace His footsteps completely with all vigilance and all zeal, all the desire of his soul and all the fervour of his heart. Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ and recollect His deeds with most attentive perception. Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.⁵²

In the years 1223 and 1224 the two events in his life that most clearly express his devotion to both the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ took place. At Christmas in 1223 Francis manifested his devotion to the Incarnation by re-enacting the traditional scene so that others could re-live it and be moved to gratitude for God's humility.

GRECCIO

At the hermitage of Greccio, Francis conceived the idea of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ in a totally new manner by actually reproducing this event inside a grotto a short walk from the town. Francis had long wanted everyone to be able to celebrate this "feast of feasts." He desired that the poor and the hungry sit at the tables of the rich, and oxen and asses, those humble beasts who had warmed the body of the baby Jesus with their breath, to be given more than the usual amount of grain and hay. Francis, in his quest to expand his enthusiasm and joy, wished to persuade the Emperor Otto to make a special law in that men should provide well for the birds and the beasts as well as for the poor, so that all might have the occasion to rejoice together in the birth of the Lord He stated,

All mayors and of cities and lords of castles and villages should be bound to oblige people on the Nativity of the Lord to scatter wheat and other grain along the roads outside towns and villages, so that all the birds, but especially our sister larks, may have something to eat on such a solemn feast. Also out of reverence for the Son of God, whom His Virgin Mother on that night laid in a manger between an ox and ass, everyone should have to give brother ox and brother ass a generous portion of fodder on that night. Likewise, on the Nativity of the Lord, all the poor should be fed their fill by the rich⁵³.

A few days before Christmas, Francis sent for a man named John, a nobleman of Greccio for whom Francis had a special love because of his goodness. Francis shared the plans that he had made with him. Brothers from nearby Franciscan places were invited to participate in this celebration, by which Greccio itself would be transformed into a new Bethlehem. People came from all around the area carrying torches and candles thus illuminating the grotto, and Francis, vested as a deacon, sang the Gospel announcing the birth of Jesus. Celano states that the nobleman, John, was so overwhelmed during the singing of the gospel that he saw Francis go up to the baby Jesus in the crib and rouse the child as if from a deep sleep. Francis then preached to the people speaking words of inspiration of concerning the nativity of the poor King and the little town of Bethlehem. This re-enactment would give rise to the beginning of popular devotion, not only in regard to the nativity scene, in Italian called a "**praesepio**", but also to the introduction into this context of popular hymns and songs.

⁵² 1C39:84, ED Vol 1, p 254

⁵³ AC 14, ED vol 2, pp129-130

LA VERNA

The next year Francis' devotion to the life of Christ was rewarded by God with the gift of the stigmata so that he bore in his body the marks of the passion of Christ until his death two years later.

La Verna Early in August of 1224, Francis went with three companions to La Verna for a period of prayer and fasting in preparation for **Michaelmas**, which he termed "*the Lent of Saint Michael*".

It was during this time, probably around the feast of the Exultation of the Cross, September 14th that Francis had a mystical vision of the crucified seraph and received the marks of the passion of Christ on his body. Brother Leo, who was with Saint Francis when he actually received the **stigmata**, has left us a clear and accurate account of this miracle which we find in his note to the saint's autographed blessing⁵⁴. This document is preserved in Assisi and has become one of the best contemporary sources of this miracle. The document states that the saint's right side bore an open wound which looked as if it had been made by a spear or lance, while through his hands and feet were nails of flesh, black in colour, the points of which were bent backward.

READING

Read LMj XIII:3 *Francis of Assisi Early Documents* Vol. II, pg 632-633

Francis' growing conformity to Christ impacted on his view of the world. As he drew closer to Christ in the illness of his last year, Francis also came to see creation as united in brotherhood and sisterhood and thus his final illness produced the first, and one of the finest, poems in the Italian language.

After receiving the stigmata, Francis continued to mortify himself through penances to "**Brother Ass**", as he called his body, and thus suffered increasing pains throughout the remainder of his life. At the end of this time period, Francis returned to the Portiuncula, passing through Borgo San Sepolcro, Monte Casale, and Citta' di Castello. Although growing continually weak and very ill, in 1224-1225 Francis rode on a donkey throughout Umbria and the Marches preaching, although worn out by more than eighteen years of toil.

CANTICLE OF BROTHER SUN

The year 1225 marks the beginning of Francis' last illness. His eyesight began to fail him and he became virtually blind, so that in the early spring he was taken to San Damiano to be taken care of by Sister Clare. Brother Elias insisted that should receive medical care but such treatment was postponed. In the garden at San Damiano, in a hut made of reeds especially for him, Francis composed the first part of his **Canticle of Brother Sun**, or the **Canticle of the Creatures**. This opus was written in September of 1225 (later on Francis would add to the original opus, a verse dealing with forgiveness, after he had reconciled the bishop with the **podesta'**, or chief official, of Assisi, and then he would add the concluding verse addressed to Sister death as he neared the end of his life).

The following is a presentation of this famous canticle written in the original Umbrian dialect, with a modern English translation placed beside it:

Canticum Solis

Altissimu, omnipotente, bonignore, tue
sono le laude, la Gloria elhonore et omne
benedictione.

Ad te solo, Altissimo, se konfano et nullu
homo enne dignu te mentovare.

The Canticle of Brother Sun

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is
yours, all glory, all honour And all blessing.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong No mortal
lips are worthy To pronounce your name.

⁵⁴ A thorough study of this document was done by Duane Lapsanski ofm, in 'The Autographs on the "Chartula" of saint Francis of Assisi, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 67 (1974); 18-37. The critical text of Kajetan esser ofm, was based on this work (cf Kajetan esser ofm *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis* (Grottaferrata: Collegium S. Bonaventura, 1978) pp89-93.

Laudate sie, misignore, cum tucte le tue creature Spetialmente messor lo frate sole loquale iorno et allumini noi par loi. Et ellu ebellu eradiante cum grande splendore de te, Altissimo, porta significazione

Laudato si misignore, per sora luna ele stele: in celu lai formate clarite et pretiose e belle.

Laudato si, misignore, per frate vento et per aere et nubilo et sereno et omne tempo per loquale a le tue creature dai sustentamento.

Laudato si, misignore, per sor aqua laquale e multo utile et humile et pretiosa et casta. Laudato si, misignore, per frate focu, per loquale ennalumini la nocte: edello ebello et iocundo

Laudato si, misignore, per sora nostra mater terra laquale ne sustena et governa, et produce diversi fructi con coloriti flori et herba.

Laudato et benedicite, misignore, et rengratiate et serviate li cum grande humilitate.

Laudato si, misignore, perquelli ke perdonano per lo tuo amore et sostegno infirmitate et tribulatione.

Beati quelli kel sosterrano in pace ka da te, Altissimo sirano inonorati.

Laudato si, misignore, per sora nostra morte corporeale da laquale nullu homo vivente poskappare.

Gai acqueli ke morrano ne le peccata mortali.

Beati quelli ke trovarane le tue sanctissime voluntati ka la morte secunda nol farra male.

Laudate et benedicite, misignore, et rengratiate et serviate li cum grande humilitate⁵⁵.

All praise be your, my Lord, through all that you have made And first my lord Brother Sun Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars In the heavens you have made them, bright And precious and fair.

All praise be your, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods By which you cherish all that you have made

All praise be yours, my Lord, for Sister Water, So useful, lowly, precious and pure.

All praise be your, My Lord, through Brother Fire Through whom you brighten up the night How beautiful is he, how gay! Full of power and strength.

All praise be your, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our Mother, Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces Various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks, And serve him with great humility.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through those who grant pardon For love of you; through those who endure Sickness and trial.

Happy those who endure in peace By you, Most High, they will be crowned

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death From whose embrace no mortal can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!

Happy those she finds doing your will! The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks, And serve him with great humility.

This poem reveals the depths of Francis' mystical awareness of God's presence in every aspect of our lives. All creation becomes a manifestation of God's goodness and those who look with the eyes of faith are called to praise God through and for (the Italian *per* means both) his creatures. After the trauma of having to relinquish the day to day running of the Order, Francis was freed to consider the question that haunted him on La Verna "Who am I Lord and who are You?" The answer to this question comes in Francis' experiences of these last years. The Lord is the one whose humility gave rise to the incarnation and whose profound self-emptying love was shown in his passion. Francis is the creature called to praise God for all his brother and sister creatures.

⁵⁵ Fortini, Arnaldo *Francis of Assisi*, p566

Francis' genius was that this was not simply an intellectual awareness, but an awareness with every fibre of his being. He not only perceived the love of Christ for the world, but not a concept for him, but a reality. In the last two years of Francis' life we see a man who has overcome the need to do God's work because he has himself become God's work. A man reconciled with himself, and with God and thus with all creation. Had he simply founded the Order of Friars Minor, Francis would have been a great reformer, but in the events at Greccio and La Verna and in the poem of the Canticle, we see that Francis had become a great saint: a man so intimate in his union with God, that he became transparent to God's love for him and for the world.

LESSON 9

FRANCIS' DEATH 1225-1226

FRANCIS' ILLNESS

Francis had returned from the Holy Land a very sick man. His illnesses cannot be diagnosed today with certainty but from the symptoms that he suffered it appears that they were multiple. His bouts of fever suggest that he had contracted a form of malaria called by the medievals a quartain fever because the fever returned each fourth day. But this would not account for the constant stream of tears from his eyes, nor the pain that light inflicted on him, leading him to stay in the semi-darkness for months at San Damiano. His eye infection appears to have been a severe tracomatose (tear inducing) conjunctivitis, which resulted in a gradual loss of vision so that by the end he was virtually blind. The incident of cauterisation, where Francis did not feel a hot iron that cauterised his veins from his ear to his jaw may also suggest that he had a form of leprosy that left the side of his face without feeling by deadening the nerve endings there.

Francis did not want to seek treatment for his illnesses, regarding them as a small trial compared with the riches that awaited him in heaven. But Hugolino and Elias, concerned for his health and seeking to relieve his suffering, ordered him to see doctors who treated him with the best treatments available to medics of the day. In July 1225, Francis agreed, at the urging of Brother Elias to go to Rieti to receive medical treatment for his eyes at the hands of papal physicians, but to no avail. In Rieti Francis was welcomed by Cardinal Hugolino and the papal court. Francis went on to Fontecolombo to receive further treatment. He accepted to undergo the painful operation of having his temples cauterised. Approaching the operation, Francis showed his understanding of creation by asking "Brother Fire" to be gentle with him. The doctor who did the cauterisation described it as a miracle that Francis felt no pain during the cauterisation and Francis seems to have accepted it as such, admonishing his brothers (who had squeamishly abandoned him) for their lack of faith⁵⁶. This operation and others like it, including having ears pierced, poultices applied and blood being let from his veins were complete failures and his condition deteriorated. In September 1225, he was transferred to San Fabiano della Foresta, near Rieti, where he underwent further treatment. It was here that the crowds visiting Francis were so great, and so inconsiderate, that they picked all the grapes from the priest's vineyard. The priest could not keep himself from complaining, so Francis assured him that the vintage would be better than ever and so it was.

THE TESTAMENT

In April 1226, during an interval of slight improvement, Francis was moved to Sienna for further treatment. One night, while he was in intense pain, and fearing that he would die, he dictated some words of farewell which have become known as the Sienna Testament. In these brief words we see the recommendations dear to his heart:

I bless all my brothers, those who are and who will be in the religion until the end of the world. . . . Since I cannot speak much because of weakness and the pain of my illness, I am showing my will to my brothers briefly in these three words: as a sign of remembrance of my blessing and my testament, may they always love each other; may they always love and observe our Lady Holy Poverty; and may they always remain faithful and subject to the prelates and all the clerics of holy Mother Church.⁵⁷

As the Sienna Testament shows when Francis came close to death he expressed the essence of his Order in three phrases. His brothers should love one another, they should be poor and love their poverty, and they should remain faithful to the Church and subject to her Bishops and priests. In these three phrases we see a resume of the three vows all the friars took and take. Chastity lived in fraternity requires the brothers to love one another, poverty is self-explanatory, and obedience urges the friars to

⁵⁶ AC 86, ED Vol 2, pp190-191
⁵⁷ AC 59, ED Vol 2, p162

remain faithful to the Church and in particular to her Bishops and priests. Once he recovered a little he was transferred to the hermitage of Le Celle just outside Cortona. From there, as dropsy-like symptoms developed, Francis asked to return to Assisi. The direct route from Cortona to Assisi passes through Perugia but his escort took a circuitous route in order to avoid Perugia lest its citizens attempt to carry off Francis in order to have him die in their city. In July of 1226 Francis arrived, in safety, at the bishop's palace in Assisi amid great rejoicing and gladness. In the early autumn of that same year, feeling the hand of death upon him, Francis was borne to his beloved Portiuncula. On the way to that place, he asked to be set down and invoked a beautiful blessing upon the city of Assisi which he was no longer able to discern from afar.

In the last months of his life, possibly at Cortona, or in the Bishop's palace in Assisi, Francis dictated the text that is known as his Testament. At about the same time he dictated a piece known as his Last Will, for Clare and her sisters. The Testament of Francis is based on the farewell discourses of Jacob (Gen. 48-49) and Moses (Deut. 31:28 - 33:29) in the Old Testament and on those of Jesus (Jn. 13-17) and Paul at Miletus (Acts 20:17-35), in the New. Thus the testament should not be seen as a legislative text but as a remembrance, an exhortation/admonition and a blessing. Following these examples, in the first part of the Testament Francis gives us his memories of the earliest days of his conversion and of the life of the order. He goes on to exhort the friars to observe poverty and obedience and to interpret the rule and testament with simplicity and purity. Finally Francis invokes God's blessing upon the friars and, like an Old Testament Patriarch, imparts to them his blessing. In his memory of the early days of the friars and in his exhortations and admonitions Francis follows the outline of the rule and provides a brief resume of its salient points. Among the points he stresses are the principles that were to guide his followers, implicit obedience to superiors as holding the place of God, literal observance of the rule "without gloss", especially as regards poverty, and the duty of manual labour, being solemnly enjoined on all the friars.

In the Last Will, written to Clare and her Ladies we find an exhortation to them to live always in the highest poverty just as he, Francis, had followed the highest poverty of Christ and his holy mother.

I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of His holy mother and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask and counsel you m, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and poverty. And keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.⁵⁸

FRANCIS' FINAL AGONY

During these last days Francis also added to his Canticle of the Creatures his final words addressed to Sister Death, thus completing his marvellous poem. In his last days he showed a remarkable freedom from protocol and expectation. He asked for music to be played while he stayed at the bishop's palace, but was denied this by the friars because it would not appear seemly that a saint should die indulging in such worldly amusement. He would not to be denied the joy of meeting his friend the Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli one last time. He dictated a letter asking her to bring him some of the almond pastries (**mostaccioli**), that she prepared so well and he enjoyed. No sooner had the brother left to find another to deliver the letter her than she arrived unbidden. The Assisi Compilation tells us that she had with her, by divine inspiration, all those things that Francis had asked for in his letter⁵⁹. A scrupulous friar asked what was to be done since she was not allowed into the cloister to see Francis, but he replied that one whose faith and devotion had brought her so far should not be denied entry into the cloister and no-one dared contradict him in his extremity. She brought cloth from which the habit in which he was buried was made, the almond pastries Francis was looking forward to, and candles and incense to burn around his body once he had died. She was not to have to wait long, for within a week of her arrival Francis died.

⁵⁸ *Rule of Saint Clare*, 6: 6, in R Armstrong (ed. and trans.) *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993, p72.

⁵⁹ AC 8, ED Vol 2, pp121-123

On the day before his death, Francis had bread brought to him and when he had broken the bread, he distributed it among those present. He blessed Bernardo of Quintavalle, his first named companion, Elias, his vicar, and all the others in the order. He stated, **“I have done what is mine, may Christ teach you what is yours!”**⁶⁰ In his effort to sustain his relationship with Lady Poverty even in the face of death, Francis asked to have his habit removed and to be placed on the ground covered only by a borrowed cloth. After a while, he asked to have read to him the Passion according to Saint John, and then in very faltering tones, he himself intoned Psalm 141 and, at the concluding verse which reads “...bring my soul out of prison,” Francis was led away by Sister Death. It was Saturday evening, October 3, 1226. Francis was in the forty-fifth year of his age, and in the twentieth year of his conversion to Christ.

Prior to his death, Francis had expressed his desire to be buried on a hill just outside of Assisi called the **Colle d’Inferno**, where criminals were usually executed. Despite his request, upon his death his body was borne, on the 4th of October, to the city of Assisi where a stop was made at San Damiano so that Saint Clare and her companions might venerate the sacred stigmata which was now visible to all. The body was placed provisionally in the church of Saint George (which is now the chapel where the San Damiano crucifix hangs), the church where Francis originally learned to read and where he preached his first sermons. On March 19, 1227 Cardinal Hugolino was elected Pope and took the name Gregory IX. During that same time period, John Parenti was elected Minister General of the order during the Pentecost Chapter. One of Pope Gregory’s first preoccupations was to render glory to the *poverello* of Assisi. On April 29, 1228, with the papal bull **“Recolentes”** Gregory IX decided to build a **“specialis ecclesia”**, a special church in honour of Francis. On July 16, 1228 Pope Gregory came personally to Assisi to canonize Francis. The bull **“Mira circa nos”** of July 19th declared Francis of Assisi a saint and fixed his feast day for the universal Church on October 4th.

On the same occasion, Gregory IX laid the foundation stone of the great double basilica he ordered to be built on the **“collis inferni”**, which he renamed **“collis paradisi”**. This rather large church for its time was built in record time under the guidance and direction of Brother Elias. The structure consists of Francis’ burial cell, and of two superimposed basilicas, that is, a sepulchral church and a monastic church. On May 25th, 1230 Francis’ remains were secretly transferred by Brother Elias and buried quite far down in the lower church. As a result of this action, Francis’ coffin, like that of Saint Clare’s, lay hidden for six centuries and it was only after an extensive effort (a fifty-two night search) that his remains were discovered. This discovery of his body is also marked in the Franciscan **ordo** (calendar of feasts and memorials) while his feast is kept on October 4th and the impression of the stigmata on his body is celebrated on September 17th.

⁶⁰ 2C 157: 214, ED Vol 2, p386

LESSON 10

FRANCIS' IMPACT

The oldest likeness of Francis that has come down to us is the one preserved in the Sacro Speco at Subiaco, probably painted by a Benedictine monk during the saint's visit there, which may have been in 1218. The absence of the depiction of the stigmata, a halo, and the title of saint, seem to form its chief claim to be considered a contemporary painting. It is not, however, a true portrait in the modern sense of the word, and we are thus dependent for the traditional presentation of Francis' features, rather on artists' ideals. We are told in Celano's First Life of Francis that he was of less than medium height, frail in form, had a long yet cheerful face, possessed a strong voice, had small black eyes, dark brown hair and a sparse beard. His person was in no way imposing, but there was about him a delicacy, grace, and distinction which made him most attractive. The amount of literary material in existence required for a study of the life of Saint Francis is quite numerous. Few, if any, medieval lives are as well documented as that of Francis of Assisi. The actually extant and authentic writings of Francis, himself, are his Rule of the Friars Minor, and some fragments of other legislation, several letters, a set of spiritual counsels addressed to his disciples, the Canticle of the Creatures, some lesser praises, an Office of the Passion compiled for his own use, and a few other prayers, all of which reveal Francis to us as Celano saw him - not so much as a man praying, but as prayer himself.

There are a number of Papal Bulls and other diplomatic writings, which bear upon his life and work. Later biographies, properly so called, will include the lives written by Thomas of Celano from 1229-1247, a joint narrative of his life compiled by Leo, Rufino and Angelo in 1246, and the celebrated legend of Saint Bonaventure which appeared in 1263; there is also a somewhat polemic legend called the "**Speculum Perfectionis**" attributed to Brother Leo, There are several important thirteenth century chronicles of the order, namely those of Giordano of Giano, Thomas Eccleston, and Bernard of Besse and a few later works including the "**Chronica XXIV. Generalium**" and the "**Liber de Conformitate**" which are in continuity with the prior works. It is upon these works that all of the later biographies of Francis' life are based.

THE EXAMPLE OF FRANCIS

Francis was canonized for the universal Church as an example of the converted sinner. Conversion, a turning to God, is a decisive moral and spiritual reorientation of life away from something that is not of God to something that is of God. Francis converted from a worldly life style, from a merchant's manipulation of funds, from the allurements of the flesh, to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Saint Bonaventure succinctly combined all of the previous sources written about Francis' life to provide for us the following observation and reflection:

Yet with God's protection, even among wanton youths, he did not give himself over to the drives of the flesh, although he indulged himself in pleasures; nor even among greedy merchants did he place his hope in money or treasures although he was intent on making a profit."⁶¹

Francis left two legacies to the Church: his example and his Orders. His example of a man who transcended barriers and reached out to those beyond the fringe of contemporary society. A man who kissed the leper, invited brigands, whom one might call moral lepers, to praise God with him and even reached out to those whom his society considered spiritual lepers, the Muslims of his day. Seeking always reconciliation and the peace that goes with true fraternity. The Lord gave him brothers, he wrote in his Testament, and he sought to guide and mould them according to the inspiration the Lord had given him as to the life they should lead. When he came to realise that he could no longer cope with the organisation of the order, he relinquished its administration in an act of humility of which few are capable. This freed him to concentrate on perfecting his conformity to Christ, docile to the Holy Spirit. And in his last years we see him as a man who was reconciled not only with all that was outside him, but even with his very self.

⁶¹ LMj I:1 Vol. 2 p530

The Canticle of creatures reveals to us a man profoundly at peace with himself and thus able to look at creation and see in it the beauty that God put there. Seeing that beauty he praised its creator. From the beginning of his conversion, standing before his father and the bishop in the square in front of the bishop's palace, Francis had declared God to be his Father. In the Canticle, Francis realised the full implication of this declaration and embraced all creatures, animate and inanimate as his brothers and sisters. This profound respect for creation flowed from a deep identification with Christ through whom all things were made. In his last years of life he drew close to Christ in such a powerful way that he has been called the "First Christian since Christ". In his desire to experience and allow others to experience the joy and pathos of the incarnation, Francis directed the crib scene at Greccio. The next year he had the vision of the crucified seraph and his prayer to feel both the love and the pain that Christ felt on Calvary were answered.

Francis' desire for identification with Christ had led him from an early stage in his conversion to seek out poverty - the beautiful lady that he loved because she had stayed with Christ to the end of his life. When he thought of Christ, it was the Christ who had nowhere to lay his head, the Christ who wandered from town to town doing the Father's will, the Christ who had given up the glory of the godhead to become the poorest of the poor. Christ had been absolutely poor and so would Francis give up every security to rely on his Father in heaven and on the love and generosity of his fellow Christians. In this way he taught with every action and gesture that it is in obedience to God and love of our fellows that we find our only true security. The first commandment of loving God and neighbour became a reality in his life because he would allow nothing to intervene between himself and God or his neighbour.

Francis had a profound love of the Church as the body founded by Christ to continue to witness to the kingdom of heaven on earth. He would allow no direct criticism of priests, out of respect for their role in bringing the Eucharistic Christ into our lives. His love of scripture gave rise to an order to his friars to collect up all the parchments upon which words of scripture were written and store them in an honourable place. He ordered his friars likewise to ensure that both the words of scripture and the blessed Eucharist were stored fittingly in churches.

Francis' is an example that has inspired millions and continues to inspire. Caught up in his simple grasp of our human condition and his immense love for God and creation, men and women continue to seek to draw close to God by following his way. This is a strong part of his impact on society and will continue so long as people read stories and aspire to goodness.

THE FRANCISCAN ORDERS

The second of his legacies, the orders he founded, have been no less influential in the history of the church and the world and form a vital part of Francis' patrimony. Not only do they keep alive his memory but they seek to inspire men and women to follow Christ in a way that is ever new. They have contributed to evangelisation in every continent, to the arts, economics, philosophy, theology, and natural science. They have educated millions, nursed many more and cared for souls in every country and every age. The Franciscan movement continues to be the largest spiritual movement within the Church at large and draws people from many different churches together as they try to follow Christ in a manner inspired by Francis and his followers.

To summarise, one could give a brief and by no means exhaustive list of the ways that Francis provided an impact on the world, beginning with the 13th Century and continuing until the present moment:

- 1) he gave an example of total acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ without compromise, even the most demanding challenges of Jesus.
- 2) he inspired a renewal of Christian life by "setting the world on fire" with the love of God
- 3) he founded an enormous religious movement comprising three Orders within the Roman Catholic Church which have endured over the centuries

- 4) he established a new kind of religious order: the mendicant friars, who combined contemplative life and apostolic activity and sought support only in voluntary offerings, a development which for a time challenged the basic structure of the Church
- 5) he inspired a great peace movement urging his followers to intervene to make peace
- 6) he launched a new missionary drive in the Church that sent friars to Beijing at the end of the thirteenth century and to the New World at the end of the fifteenth century
- 7) he gave the world a new way of looking at creation

FRANCIS THE PATRON SAINT OF ITALY AND ECUMENISM

In 1939 Francis was proclaimed the patron saint of Italy, and on November 29, 1979 Pope John Paul II proclaimed Francis as the Patron Saint of Ecology. An English translation of the Papal Bull, **Inter Sanctos**, follows:

“Pope John Paul II. In everlasting remembrance. Among the famous saints who loved nature as a marvellous gift from God to the human race, Saint Francis of Assisi is justly numbered. He had a remarkable sensitivity for all the works of the Creator, and he sang that very beautiful Canticle of the Creatures in which he gave the Omnipotent and Good Lord due praise, glory, honour and all blessing for our most powerful Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and the stars of heaven. Very opportunely, therefore, did our venerable brother Silvius Oddi, Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Clergy, in the name especially of the international society called “Institute for Environmental and Ecological Planning for Quality Life,” petition this Apostolic See that Saint Francis of Assisi be named celestial patron of ecologists. We, therefore, with the agreement of the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments and Divine Worship, by force of this letter, name Saint Francis of Assisi permanently as celestial patron of Ecologists, with all appropriate honours and liturgical privileges, all contrary considerations notwithstanding. We require that all who see this letter observe it now and in the future.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter’s under the Fisherman’s ring, November 29, in the year of the Lord, one thousand nine hundred seventy nine, the second year of our Pontificate.”

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