

“NO ONE SHOWED ME WHAT I HAD TO DO”

The life of Saint Francis of Assisi  
as seen in his Testament

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## The Testament of Saint Francis<sup>1</sup>

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 led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.

And the Lord gave me such faith in **churches** that I would pray with simplicity in this way and say: “We adore You, Lord Jesus Christ, in all Your churches throughout the whole world and we bless You because by Your holy cross You have redeemed the world.”

Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in **priests** who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them. And if I had as much wisdom as Solomon and found impoverished priests of this world, I would not **preach** in their parishes against their will. And I desire to respect, love and honor them and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider any sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my lords. And I act in this way because, in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy **Body and Blood** which they receive and they alone administer to others. I want to have these most holy mysteries honoured and venerated above all things and I want to reserve them in precious places. Wherever I find our Lord’s most holy **names and written words** in unbecoming places, I want to gather them up and I beg that they be gathered up and placed in a becoming place. And we must honour all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life.

And after 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 pattern of the **Holy Gospel**. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the **Lord Pope** confirmed it for me. And those who came to receive life gave whatever they had to the poor and were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and short trousers. We desired nothing more. We clerical brothers said the Office as other clerics did; the lay brothers said the *Our Father*; and we quite willingly remained in churches. And we were simple and subject to all.

And I **worked with my hands**, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all brothers to give themselves to honest work. Let those who do not know how to work learn, not from desire to receive wages, but for example and to avoid idleness. And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, **begging alms** from door to door. The Lord revealed a greeting to me that we should say: “May the Lord give you **peace**.”

Let the brothers be careful not to receive in any way churches or poor dwellings or anything else built for them unless they are according to the holy poverty we have promised in the Rule. As **pilgrims and strangers**, let them always be guests there.

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<sup>1</sup> Official English translation of the Testament of Saint Francis in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I: The Saint, Edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, William J. Short, New City Press, New York – London – Manila, 1999, pp. 124-127.

I strictly command all the brothers through obedience, wherever they may be, not to dare to ask any letter **from the Roman Curia**, either personally or through an intermediary, whether for a church or another place or under the pretext of preaching or the persecution of their bodies. But, wherever they have not been received, let them flee into another country to do penance with the blessing of God.

And I firmly wish to **obey the general minister** of this fraternity and the other guardians whom it pleases him to give me. And I so wish to be a captive in his hands that I cannot go anywhere or do anything beyond obedience and his will, for he is my master.

And although I may be simple and inform, I nevertheless want to have a cleric always with me who will celebrate the **Office** for me as it is prescribed in the Rule.

And let all the brothers be bound to obey their guardians and to recite the Office according to the Rule. And if some might have been found who are not reciting the Office according to the Rule and want to change it in some way, or who are not Catholics, let all the brothers, wherever they may have found one of them, be bound through obedience to bring him before the custodian of that place nearest to where they found him. And let the custodian be strictly bound through obedience to keep him securely day and night as a man in chains, so that he cannot be taken from his hands until he can personally deliver him into the hands of his minister. And let the minister be bound through obedience to send him with such brothers who would guard him as a prisoner until they deliver him to the Lord of Ostia, who is the Lord, the Protector and the Corrector of this fraternity.

And the brothers may not say: “This is another Rule.” Because this is a remembrance, admonition, exhortation, and my **testament**, which I, little brother Francis, make for you, my blessed brothers, that we might observe the Rule we have promised in a more Catholic way.

And let the general minister and all the other ministers and custodians be bound through obedience not to add or take away from these words. And let them always have this writing with them together with the Rule. And in all the chapters which they hold, when they read the Rule, let them also read these words. And I strictly command all my cleric and lay brothers, through obedience, not to place any **gloss** upon the Rule or upon these words saying: “They should be understood in this way.” But as the Lord has given me to speak and write the Rule and these words simply and purely, may you understand them simply and without gloss and observe them with a holy activity until the end.

And whoever **observes** these things, let him be blessed in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father, and on earth with the blessing of His Beloved Son with the Most Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, and all the powers of heaven and with all the saints. And, as far as I can, I, little brother Francis, your servant, confirm for you, both within and without, this most holy blessing.

## Introduction

“The work of textual criticism on the sources for St. Francis is now largely over. That essential work done, we are embarking on a more difficult and dangerous territory still, that of the investigation of Francis’s mind. The new and valuable work in this field, therefore, will not be done through textual investigation, but through the means of other, less familiar methods – the investigation of Francis’s use of words and symbols. What is needed is a re-creation of Francis’s thought-world.”<sup>2</sup>

The Testament of St. Francis, dictated first in Siena in April 1226<sup>3</sup> and then at the Portiuncula during the final weeks before Francis died, is definitely the most autobiographical among the writings of St. Francis. The textual analysis of the Testament has been the result of the expertise of Kajetan Esser.<sup>4</sup> It is now important to analyse the Testament from the point of view of its relation to the frame of mind of St. Francis. With the help of the images it conveys, it is possible to reconstruct many of the important episodes of the life of St. Francis. The Testament presents a perfect picture of Francis, who regarded himself an “ignorant and uneducated” man,<sup>5</sup> but at the same time, under its simple and unpolished style, we discover the true intentions that lay close to Francis’s heart. Each and every word, expression or symbol in the Testament is a reminder of some basic historical fact in the life of St. Francis.

The intentions of Francis have been the object of speculation on the part of the fraternity ever since the first years immediately following upon the death of the founder. It is surprising that, just four years after Francis’s death, the Order gathered at the General Chapter of 1230 felt the need to make recourse to Pope Gregory IX in order to have an interpretation of the Saint’s intentions as proposed in his Testament, and to understand this document in the light of the only document they knew as legally binding, namely, the *Regula Bullata* of 1223. We know from the Pope’s answer in the Bull *Quo elongati*<sup>6</sup> that the Testament had no legally binding force upon

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm D. Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty. The Doctrine of the Absolute Poverty of Christ and the Apostles in the Franciscan Order 1210-1323*, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, New York, 1998, 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Francis and Clare. The Complete Works*, Translation and Introduction by Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius Brady, Paulist Press, New York 1982, 164: “Write that I bless all my brothers, who are in the Order, and those who will come until the end of the world. Since because of my weakness and the pain of my sickness I am not strong enough to speak, I make known my will to my brothers briefly in these three phrases, namely: as a sign that they remember my blessing and my testament, let them always love one another, let them always love and be faithful to our Lady Holy Poverty, and let them always be faithful and subject to the prelates and all clerics of Holy Mother Church”.

<sup>4</sup> Kajetan Esser OFM, *Das Testament Des Heiligen Franziskus von Assisi. Eine Untersuchung Über Seine Echtheit Und Seine Bedeutung*, Münster/Westfalen 1949. *The Testament of Saint Francis. A Commentary by Kajetan Esser*, Translated by Madge Karecki, Franciscan Publishers, Pulaski, Wisconsin, USA 1982. The most recent critical edition of the Testament is that of Kajetan Esser, in *Die Opuscula des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi. Neue textkritische Edition*, Grottaferrata 1976 (Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, XIII). Among the best commentaries on the Testament we quote the following: Martino Conti OFM, *Il Discorso d’addio di San Francesco. Introduzione e commento al Testamento*, Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, Roma 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to the Order 39: “Quia simplex sum et idiota.”

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Grundmann, “Die Bulle ‘Quo elongati’ Papst Gregors IX”, critical edition in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 54 (1961) 1-25. Text in English in *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, Vol. I: The Saint, Edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, William J. Short, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 1999, 570-575 (FAED I,570-575). All subsequent references to the English translations of the Writings and Sources for the Life of St. Francis will be quoted directly from

the brothers, for the simple reason that Francis composed it at a time when he was no longer the leader of the Order, and therefore could not bind any successors to its observance. The Later Rule had been approved by the highest authority of the Church and confirmed by a papal bull, and that was the document to which the friars were bound in conscience regarding the observance of the Gospel. However, the Testament remained the document which could best explain the genuine intentions of Francis when writing the Rule of 1223, and the Order's centuries-old tradition to have it read together with the Rule is a proof of the intimate link which exists between these two foundational documents of Franciscan evangelical life.

Nowadays we can say that the recurring discussion regarding the legal value of the Testament, which is evident in the history of all Franciscan reforms, is largely a thing of the past. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to discard the Testament's value as a document with a strong autobiographical content, which throws light upon the genuine intentions of Francis as they appear in many of his writings, notably the Rules, Admonitions, and Letter to the Entire Order. Every expression of the Testament evokes a portrait of Francis's own life and experience, and it would be of great help to go to the actual facts which underlie the words which Francis uses in the Testament, in order to understand more profoundly his view of the project of evangelical life.

The historical value of the Testament lies in the fact that it was written during the climax of the evangelical experience of Francis of Assisi. The dying Francis recalls all the past memories which he held most dear to his heart, and in a few short sentences linked with the simple conjunction *et* ("and") evokes in child-like simplicity some of the most important moments of his evangelical calling. The Testament is an intensely human experience of communion with the past, as it was lived in the present moment of the life of Francis, and as it proposed to project itself in the future life of the fraternity when Francis was no longer physically present. One could describe the Testament as a reminder of the significant moments of the life of Francis, particularly of the initial experience of his conversion and experience of the Gospel project of life.

"St. Francis was aware of the closeness of his death, of the evolution of the order, and of human weakness which could intervene to change or modify his ideal. Against this complex psychological background he was anxious to condense his life-experience so that it would not be lost, so that it could be summarized and so that it could be passed on to those who were to come."<sup>7</sup>

When one is interpreting the intentions of St. Francis as expressed in the Testament, one has to be careful not to forget that these have to be studied against the background of the inner tensions within the Order, which are already evident when Francis is alive. It is an accepted fact that Francis and a limited number of the brothers, who in later sources are referred to as the *nos, qui cum eo fuimus* ("we who lived with him"), gradually became more detached from the rest of the community, which had more progressive views about how to implement the life of the Gospel within the context of the need of internal organization and the external image of the *apostolicus ordo* ("apostolic Order"). This does not mean that we can interpret this growing divergence of ideals in the light of the tensions which developed later on, particularly during the generalate of John of Parma and during the poverty controversy issues of the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. That

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this publication in three volumes: Vol. I: The Saint (1999); Vol. II: The Founder (2000); Vol. III: The Prophet (2001), abbreviated thus: (FAED I, or II, or III, plus page number).

<sup>7</sup> Raoul Manselli, "From the Testament to the Testaments of St. Francis," translated by Patrick Colbourne, *Greyfriars Review* 2 (June 1988) 91-99.

is why the references to the Franciscan Sources, which provide the basis for this study, will necessarily have to be taken at face value, and not in the context of the intentions of the friars who were writing them. What is of interest to us is the portrait of St. Francis as it emerges in the words of his Testament, explained necessarily with the help of the Sources at our disposal.

Our aim is to analyse the Testament according to Esser's method of dividing it into paragraphs, each of which is, in effect, a portrait of Francis's life and intentions. With the help of the Franciscan Sources we shall therefore build a biographical account of the life of Francis of Assisi, trying to prove that it can be done taking as our basis the autobiographical details of the Testament. This would mean leaving out many of the principal accounts of his life with which we are so familiar, for example, the event of the stigmatisation, since there is no reference to it in the Testament. Such an approach has the limits of not presenting a full picture of Francis's life, but at the same time of portraying those moments which are sufficient to grasp the Saint's genuine intentions in living out his project of evangelical life.

In the study of the Testament we are faced with a problem of interpretation. Many episodes to which we shall refer have no direct link with the words of Francis in the Testament. To mention just one example: there is no mention of the speaking crucifix of San Damiano in the Testament. Yet we know that the San Damiano episode is fundamental in the context of the process of conversion of St. Francis, to which the Testament refers at the very beginning.<sup>8</sup> Thus it is possible to analyse the Testament from the point of view of the images, which it conveys to Francis's mind. These would include the following images: lepers, churches, priests, the Lord's Body and Blood, the Lord's holy names, theologians, brothers, the Holy Gospel, the Lord Pope, the poor, the Office, work, begging alms, greeting of peace, poor dwellings, letters from the Roman Curia, the general minister and the guardian, the Lord of Ostia (the Cardinal Protector), the Rule.

Before embarking upon the analysis of these images in the light of the Franciscan Sources, it is important to understand the exact position of the Testament within the intentions of St. Francis and the lives of the first brothers. In this introduction to the Testament it is imperative to make use of Esser's expert study of this unique document.

The first problem regards the relationship between the Testament and the Later Rule. According to Esser, "the Testament is therefore not a 'flag of freedom,' for it certainly does not free one from the binding precepts of the Rule. Rather, it was written to safeguard the Rule, to have it observed better and more faithfully. The stricter part of the Order treasured the Testament because of its prohibition of

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<sup>8</sup> Raoul Manselli, "From the Testament to the Testaments of St. Francis," 95, referring to the prescriptions regarding the poor dwellings of the friars in the Assisi Compilation 56-58, is of the opinion that these could not refer to the Testament as we know it, since there is nowhere in the Testament where Francis says: "I want to leave and bequeath to the brothers the place of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula as a testament." Thus Manselli is of the opinion that "we must conclude that there was another Testament, in which, as far as we may presume, instructions or at least detailed counsels were given as to what the dwellings of the friars should be." This would entail having 3 Testaments of St. Francis. Probably there is no need to present a hypothetical Testament which, apparently, is closely linked to the writings of brother Leo, namely the *Verba Sancti Francisci* and the *Intentio Regulae*, more than to some autonomous document. It is more important to interpret Francis's words in the light of various episodes of his life which lead him to some categorical affirmations in his Testament. Thus, if the Testament states that the friars are to have "poor dwellings", it is highly likely that Francis had in his mind the example of the Portiuncula as a model for the entire Order. In this way, references to his wishes regarding the Portiuncula are intimately linked with his wishes in the Testament.

privileges and its prohibition of the glossing of the Rule and the Testament; not, as Sabatier would have liked, for the secret knowledge that supposedly the Testament grants to the splinter-groups of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Francis was not advocating freedom from the Order and thereby from the Church.”<sup>9</sup>

Esser views the Testament also in the light of the other writings of St. Francis, particularly the Earlier Rule of 1221 and the Letter to the Entire Order. He notes that there is a similarity of themes in all these documents, including the reverence towards the mystery of the Eucharist and towards the holy names, a confession of sins, the insistence upon the observance of the Rule and the prayer of the Office, and a preoccupation to keep in their entirety the phrases and thought contents of Francis’s letters or admonitions. The Testament, therefore, adds nothing particularly new to the mindset of Francis and to the values he cherished most.

“In conclusion it may be said that the Testament gets its special character not by bringing really new themes to the brothers’ attention, but by expressing them in a special way. It was to be a final declaration of the saint’s will in simple and modest terms for all the brothers, with the example of his life as the single ideal of their lives so that they would keep the Rule and Life of the Friars Minor, as they promised to God. In this way they might be truly Catholic.”<sup>10</sup>

The value of the Testament as an autobiographical document became more evident to the Order as time went by. The legislative value of the Rule of 1223 was enhanced by the ever-growing papal interventions and interpretations, many of which were prompted by the friars, who were finding it extremely difficult to adhere to the observance of the Rule without comment (*sine glossa*). At the same time, the papal bulls and letters interpreting the Rule and adapting it to the changing needs of the Order, could put the conscience of the majority of the friars at rest, and provide a moral guarantee for the living out of the gospel project of St. Francis within the ecclesial context. The assurance by Pope Gregory IX that the Testament had no legal binding effect upon the friars’ conscience could have had the effect of undermining Francis’s genuine view of the gospel life, and consequently his sincere intentions. We have to let history be the judge of the truthfulness of this affirmation. All in all, however, the friars never completely forgot the value of the Testament. The Testament was not only considered to be the banner of faithfulness to Francis and his gospel ideal by the zealous brothers. It was also revered as a genuine interpretation of the Rule by the community of the Order. That is why, over and above all currents of thought and interpretation of the gospel ideals of Franciscan life, the Testament remains to this day a document which challenges the genuineness of the ideal of all those who follow the way of the life of the Gospel as embraced by St. Francis.

Our analysis of the Testament will take into account the various images which we have outlined, and which were flowing, one after another, in the mind of St. Francis in those few weeks before he died. These images will take us back to his humble beginnings, to his process of initial conversion,<sup>11</sup> to his experience of the suffering and poor Christ on the cross, to his loving care of the brothers, to his sense of obedience to the Church, and also to his anguish over the brothers’ inability to fully grasp the values most dear to his heart in their preoccupation to enhance the Order’s standing as one of the bulwarks of reform within the ecclesiastical institution of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>9</sup> “The Testament of Saint Francis. A Commentary by Kajetan Esser,” 16.

<sup>10</sup> “The Testament of Saint Francis. A Commentary by Kajetan Esser,” 22.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Brunette, *Saint Francis and His Conversions*, Translated by Paul Lachance and Kathryn Krug, Franciscan Press, Quincy, Illinois 1997.

Each and every image will be portrayed in the light of the various episodes it evokes from the life of St. Francis, as these are presented in the Sources. We shall limit ourselves to the principal Sources, including 1 Celano, Julian of Speyer, the Anonymous of Perugia, the Legend of Three Companions, the *Assisi Compilation*, 2 Celano, the *Major Life* by St. Bonventure, and the *Mirror of Perfection* in the Little and Sabatier editions. In certain instances we refer to other Sources, especially when the episode we illustrate is peculiar to them or is better developed in their account. The order we shall follow in quoting the various texts from the Sources is that followed by the editors of the three volumes of *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*.<sup>12</sup> In this way we intend to avoid entering into the complicated discussion regarding the date of composition of some of these Sources and consequently their interdependence.

The Testament probably shows Francis holding on fiercely to his personal belief in the form of life of the Gospel, which was revealed to him. “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.”<sup>13</sup> This belief was enhanced and supported by the experience of twenty years of living out those same words that prompted him and the brothers to embark upon their evangelical adventure. This experience cannot be ignored if we are to question ourselves about the dilemma Francis was facing at the end of his life. It is this experience, as expressed in the various images which were at the centre of the spiritual vision of Francis at the point of death, that we must come to grips with, in order to try to understand why Francis is so categorical in his Testament when he knew that he no longer had any legal authority to oblige the brothers to share his own dream.

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<sup>12</sup> See note 6.

<sup>13</sup> Testament 14: “And after 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 pattern of the Holy Gospel” (FAED I,125).



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THE LEPER

*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 led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.*

When “twenty years had now passed since his conversion,”<sup>14</sup> Francis of Assisi, lying half dead near the chapel of the Portiuncula, dictated his last will, or Testament. He recalled to his mind those episodes most dear to his heart, because they were landmarks in his process of becoming more Christ-like. It strikes us that the very first image that comes to his mind at this stage is that of an episode which happened in 1205, the year that marks the beginning of his definite conversion to the values of the Gospel. It is the image of Francis’s encounter with the leper. Thomas of Celano thus describes this state of mind of Francis at the end of his life:

“He burned with a great desire to return to his earlier steps toward humility; rejoicing in hope because of his boundless love, he planned to call his body back to its original servitude, although it had now reached its limit. He cut away completely the obstacle of all cares and silenced the noise of all concerns. When he had to relax this rigor because of illness, he used to say: ‘Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing.’ He did not consider that he had already attained his goal, but tireless in pursuit of holy newness, he constantly hoped to begin again. He wanted to return to serving lepers and to be held in contempt, just as he used to be. He intended to flee human company and go off to the most remote places, so that, letting go of every care and putting aside anxiety about others, for the time being only the wall of the flesh would stand between him and God.”<sup>15</sup>

The ministry to the lepers marked the beginning of Francis’s process of conversion. Arnaldo Fortini, in his famous biography of St. Francis, gives us a clear description of the leper hospitals which lay outside Assisi in the Umbrian plain: San Lazzaro d’Arce on the road to Rivo Torto, or San Salvatore delle Pareti, on the present site of Casa Gualdi.<sup>16</sup> Francis abhorred these places while still a young man,

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<sup>14</sup> I Celano [1C], 109.

<sup>15</sup> 1C 103 (FAED I,273); cfr. Julian of Speyer, *Vita Sancti Francisci* [LJS], 67. St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior* [LM], XIV,1, links Francis’s wish to serve lepers at the end of his life with his mystical union with Christ in the episode of the stigmatization: “*Now fixed with Christ to the cross* (Gal 2:19), in both body and spirit, Francis not only burned with a seraphic love into God but also thirsted with Christ crucified for the multitude of those to be saved. Since he could not walk because of the nails protruding from his feet, he had his half-dead body carried through the towns and villages to arouse others to carry the cross of Christ. He used to say to the brothers: ‘Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord our God, for up to now we have done little.’ He burned with a great desire to return to the humility he practiced at the beginning; to nurse the lepers as he did at the outset and to treat like a slave once more his body that was already in a state of collapse from his work” (FAED II,640).

<sup>16</sup> Arnaldo Fortini, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Vol. I, Part. I, Edizioni Assisi, 266-273. Translation in English by Helen Moak, Crossroad Publishing Co. New York 1981, 206-212. Fortini gives us a vivid description of the miserable state in which lepers lived during St. Francis’s times, and of the liturgical

until the day the Lord made him come face to face with one of the poor outcasts who lived in these leper hospitals.

“One day, while he was praying enthusiastically to the Lord, he received this response: ‘Francis, everything you loved carnally and desired to have, you must despise and hate, if you wish to know my will. Because once you begin doing this, what before seemed delightful and sweet will be unbearable and bitter; and what before made you shudder will offer you great sweetness and enormous delight.’ He was overjoyed at this and was comforted by the Lord. One day he was riding his horse near Assisi, when he met a leper. And, even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself dismount, and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. After he accepted a kiss of peace from him, Francis remounted and continued on his way. He then began to consider himself less and less, until, by God’s grace, he came to complete victory over himself. After a few days, he moved to a hospice of lepers, taking with him a large sum of money. Calling them all together, as he kissed the hand of each, he gave them alms. When he left there, what before had been bitter, that is, to see and touch lepers, was turned into sweetness. For, as he said, the sight of lepers was so bitter to him, that he refused not only to look at them, but even to approach their dwellings. If he happened to come near their houses or to see them, even though he was moved by piety to give them alms through an intermediary, he always turned away his face and held his nose. With the help of God’s grace, he became such a servant and friend of the lepers, that, as he testified in his Testament, he stayed among them and served them with humility.”<sup>17</sup>

This episode may well be considered as the turning point of Francis’s life. The biographers all point out to the fact that Francis experienced an inner sweetness when he confronted the bitterness of embracing a leper. The reference to the Testament is crystal clear. The Legend of the Three Companions, besides explicitly mentioning the Testament, employs expressions which are similar to the opening words of the Testament.

The source for the Three Companions is 1 Celano 17, which quotes the Testament and is therefore the source which provides most insight into what Francis was feeling at the end of his life, twenty years after the episode of his meeting with the leper:

“Then the holy lover of profound humility moved to the lepers and stayed with them. For God’s sake he served all of them with great love. He washed all the filth from them, and even cleaned out the pus of their sores, just as he said in his Testament: ‘When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers, and the Lord led me among them and I showed mercy to them.’ For he used to say that the sight of lepers was so bitter to him that in the days of his vanity when he saw their houses even two miles away, he would cover his nose with his hands. When he started thinking of holy and useful matters with the grace and strength of the Most High, while still in the clothes of the world, he met a leper one day. Made stronger than

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rite which accompanied the leper’s banishment from civil society to the “lazzaretto”, or leper hospital. Subsequent references to this monumental work will only indicate the pages of the English translation.

<sup>17</sup> Legend of the Three Companions [L3C], 11 (FAED II,74). The latin text shows the similarity of the episode with the words of the Testament: “Cum autem quadam die Dominum ferventer oraret, responsum est illi: ‘Francisce, omnia quae carnaliter dilexisti et habere desiderasti oportet te contemnere ac ordire si meam vis agnoscere voluntatem. Quod postquam inceperis facere quae tibi prius suavia et dulcia videbantur erunt tibi importabilia et amara, atque in his quae prius horrebas magnam dulcedinem et suavitatem immensam.’”

himself, he came up and kissed him. He then began to consider himself less and less, until by the mercy of the Redeemer, he came to complete victory over himself.”<sup>18</sup>

The meeting with the leper was to mark the beginning of a long process of conversion that enlightened Francis’s spiritual vision to embrace the crucified Christ. The Testament is the most tangible proof of the journey of conversion, which Francis links with the image of the leper. “When I was in sin,” is the down-to-earth way to express the need to do penance. Francis never really concluded his commitment to do penance. That is why, as 1 Celano 109 states, Francis exhorts his brothers to begin again to do penance, even though he had become an expert in Gospel perfection and a living icon of Christ crucified. The sense of being in sin, that is, of not being in union with Christ, takes the concrete form of discovering Christ in the person of the leper. No wonder that Francis calls Christ crucified “a leper”, echoing the image of the servant in the fourth canticle of the Second Isaiah (53:3). It is St. Bonaventure who gives us this unique insight into the image of the leper as a symbol of the suffering Christ:

“From then on he clothed himself with a spirit of poverty, a sense of humility, and an eagerness for intimate piety. For previously not only had association with lepers horrified him greatly, so too did even gazing upon them from a distance. But, now because of Christ crucified, who according to the text of the prophet appeared despised *as a leper* (Is 53:3), he, in order to despise himself completely, showed deeds of humility and humanity to lepers with a gentle piety.”<sup>19</sup>

The leper-Christ association is even more evident in the episode of the encounter with the leper in 2 Celano and in the Major Legend by St. Bonaventure. In both instances we notice the miraculous element of the leper who vanishes after Francis wins over his fear and runs to give him alms and a kiss:

“Among all the awful miseries of this world Francis had a natural horror of lepers, and one day as he was riding his horse near Assisi he met a leper on the road. He felt terrified and revolted, but not wanting to transgress God’s command and break the sacrament of His word, he dismounted from his horse and ran to kiss him. As the leper stretched out his hand, expecting something, he received both money and a kiss. Francis immediately mounted his horse and although the field was wide open, without any obstruction, when he looked around he could not see the leper anywhere. Filled with joy and wonder at this event, within a few days he deliberately tried to do something similar. He made his way to the houses of the lepers and, giving money to each, he also gave a kiss on the hand and mouth. Thus *he took the bitter for the sweet* (Prv 27:7) and courageously prepared to carry out the rest.”<sup>20</sup>

“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

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<sup>18</sup> 1C 17 (FAED I,195); Cfr. LJS, 12.

<sup>19</sup> LM I,6. Pierre Brunette, *Francis of Assisi and His Conversions*, 43: “Bonaventure is the only biographer to attribute to his service of lepers a specifically Christian motivation, ‘because of Christ crucified.’”

<sup>20</sup> 2 Celano [2C] 9 (FAED II,248-249).

began, therefore, filled with wonder and joy, to sing praises to the Lord, while proposing, because of this, to embark always on the greater.”<sup>21</sup>

The two sources are very similar, since Bonaventure depends on 2 Celano for his information. Both mention the mysterious disappearance of the leper after Francis had won over his initial fear and led himself to embrace this outcast. It is as if Francis is having the same experience of faith of the disciples of Emmaus on Easter Sunday. Once he comes into physical contact with the image of the leper he is led to transfer the same image on the level of faith. It is an experience of resurrection, a new life, which gives Francis the gift of joy and wonder. Although the biographers do not specifically link the leper with Christ, we are led to assume that the leper was representing something deeper than human suffering and despair. The leper becomes again the visible image of the cross, the mystery of bitterness turned into sweetness, as Celano himself states, reminding us that the same expression recurs in the Testament.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout his life Francis never forgot that one of the basic duties of the Friars Minor was that of serving the lepers. The motivation lay in the association of the image of the leper to that of Christ crucified. After giving back his possessions to his father Pietro di Bernardone and leaving Assisi for Gubbio, Francis takes upon himself the task of serving lepers:

“Then as a lover of total humility he gave himself to the service of the lepers, so that while he was subjecting himself to miserable and outcast people under the yoke of servitude, he could first learn perfect contempt of himself and of the world before he would teach it to others. Surely, since he used to fear lepers more than any other group of people, grace was given to him in more abundance. He moved to the lepers and gave himself up to their service with such a humble heart that he washed their feet, bandaged their sores, drew the puss from wounds, and wiped the filth from them. In an excess of unheard of fervour, he would fall down to kiss their ulcerous sores, putting his mouth to the dust, so that, filled with reproaches, he might efficaciously subject the pride of the flesh to the law of the spirit and, once the enemy within him was subdued, possess peaceful dominion over himself.”<sup>23</sup>

We could describe the short period of time Francis spent in Gubbio as the beginning of his novitiate, which was to continue through the years 1206-1208, particularly in his effort to repair churches and to discover Christ’s will in the Gospels. It seems that it left a deep impression upon him, so much so that the Sources tell us that he wanted all the brothers to test their vocation in the leper hospitals. The period of probation, or novitiate, was not introduced in the Order before 1220, but we can still say that the brothers all had to go through their novitiate in the service of the lepers:

“At the beginning of the religion, after the brothers grew in number, he wanted the brothers to stay in hospitals of lepers to serve them. At that time whenever nobles

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<sup>21</sup> LM I,5 (FAED II,533-534).

<sup>22</sup> 2C 9: “As he began to visit hidden places conducive to prayer, the devil struggled to drive him away with an evil trick. He made Francis think of a horribly hunchbacked woman who lived in town and whose looks scared everyone. The devil threatened that he would become like her if he did not turn back sensibly from what he had begun. But, strengthened by the Lord, he rejoiced at a response of healing and grace: ‘Francis,’ God said to him in spirit, ‘you have traded what you loved in a fleshy, empty way for things of the spirit, *taking the bitter for the sweet* (Prv 27:7). If you want to come to know Me, despise yourself. For when the order is reversed, the things I say will taste sweet to you even though they seem the opposite” (FAED II,248).

<sup>23</sup> St. Bonaventure, *Legenda minor* [Lm], I,8 (FAED II,678-679). Cfr. LM II,6.

and commoners came to the religion, they were told, among other things, that they had to serve the lepers and stay in their houses.”<sup>24</sup>

This description of the novitiate of the first brothers can be compared to what Francis himself tells the brothers later on in the Earlier Rule of 1221, within the context of the chapter on the begging of alms: “They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside.”<sup>25</sup> Although Francis prohibits the reception of money on the part of the brothers, he nevertheless allows it in exceptional circumstances, such as for the sake of the lepers whom the friars served: “Nevertheless, the brothers can beg alms for a manifest need of the lepers.”<sup>26</sup>

There is a touching story in the Assisi Compilation, about Francis who calls the lepers “Christian brothers”:

“Once when blessed Francis had returned to Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, he found there Brother James the Simple with a leper covered with sores who had come there that day. The holy father had entrusted this leper to him, and especially all the other lepers who had severe sores. For in those days, the brothers stayed in the leper hospitals. That Brother James was like the doctor for those with severe sores, and he gladly touched, changed, and treated their wounds. As if reproving Brother James, blessed Francis told him: ‘You should not take our Christian brothers about in this way since it is not right for you or for them.’ Blessed Francis used to call lepers ‘Christian brothers.’”<sup>27</sup>

The story goes on to say how Francis had a crisis of conscience for not having been gentle with the leper who came to the Portiuncula, and how he inflicted upon himself the penance of eating in the same bowl used by his “Christian brother”. Again, the intimate link between lepers and Christ is evident in the way Francis calls them. They become privileged members of the fraternity. The brothers stayed in the leper hospitals and served the patients. Even when Francis was at the end of his life, as we have seen already, he wanted to serve the lepers. His motivation was again Christ crucified.

The *Fioretti* also give us a touching episode in which Francis cures a man with leprosy through his gentle way of dealing with him. He succeeds in subduing the man’s sense of rebellion against God and humankind, which was a result of his miserable condition. The episode shows striking resemblance to Bonaventure’s

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<sup>24</sup> Assisi Compilation [AC], 9 (FAED II,123). Mirror of Perfection (Lemmens) [1MP] 12 (FAED III,223): “At the beginning of the religion, after the brothers grew in number, he wanted the brothers to stay in hospitals of lepers to serve them. At that time whenever nobles and commoners came to the religion, they were told, among other things, that they had to serve the lepers and stay in their houses.” Mirror of Perfection (Sabatier) [2MP] 44 (FAED III,290): “At the beginning of the religion, he wanted the brothers to stay in hospitals of lepers and serve them, laying the foundations of holy humility in this way. Whenever nobles and commoners came to the Order, they were told, among other things, that they had to serve the lepers humbly and stay in their houses, as it was prescribed in the first rule.” We have an episode in the *Fioretti*, chapter 42 (FAED III,636), which shows how the brothers took the duty of caring for lepers very seriously: “Brother Bentivoglia was staying alone at Trave Bonanti to care for and serve a leper; and being commanded by the Prelate to depart from there and go to another place, which was fifteen miles away, and not wishing to abandon that leper, with great fervour of charity he took him and put him on his shoulders and carried him from dawn until sunrise the whole way, fifteen miles, to that other place where he had been sent, called Monte Sancino.”

<sup>25</sup> Earlier Rule IX,2 (FAED I,70).

<sup>26</sup> Earlier Rule VIII,10 (FAED I,70).

<sup>27</sup> AC, 64 (FAED II,166). Cfr. 1MP 32; 2MP, 58.

interpretation of Francis who serves lepers for the love of Christ, who on the cross appears like a leper.<sup>28</sup>

The meeting of Francis with the leper marks the initial moment when he “began doing penance.” It marks the beginning of a new life, and is thus linked to a genuine *conversio*, a turning back to the Lord in an evangelical sense. At the end of his life Francis was fully convinced that it was the Lord who “led” him to the lepers, who “gave” him the grace to do penance. He was not aware of this option as long as he was immersed in the normal way of seeing things, common to the people of his hometown. Lepers were not regarded as outcasts, but were treated as such. The Church would “banish” them from civil society through a proper liturgical rite, even if it did not forget to take pastoral care of them from afar. Ordinary Christians would send alms to them, but would also see to it that the local authorities would confine lepers to their hospices well outside the city walls. The sight of the leper would evoke the idea of a true penitent, since the leper would have to wear an ash-coloured garment and abide by strict rules of separation from the world. Francis also “left the world” in the religious sense of embracing a life of penance (*exivi de saeculo*). Probably he would have looked at his encounter with the leper as the first occasion which the Lord gave him to look towards the world “from outside”, just like the lepers did.

St. Francis describes his life prior to the encounter with the leper as the time during which he was “in sin.” This expression refers to the youthful years of Francis, to the feasts of the *tripudianti*, or the boisterous young people of Assisi, to the songs of the *troubadours*, to dreams of chivalry. Ever since he was born in 1182 in the family of the rich merchant Pietro di Bernardone and his wife Pica, Francis was pampered and brought up in comfort. The political ideals of his social class, the *minores*, as opposed to the *maiores*, or noble class, made him a defender of the liberties of the Assisi Commune during the popular uprising against imperial domination in 1198, when he participated in the destruction of the Rocca fortress. Not even the sad events of the battle of Collestrada in 1202 and his subsequent imprisonment in Perugia could dampen his optimistic view of life. After suffering from a long period of illness he was again full of dreams when he left for Apulia in 1205 to join the armies of Walter of Brienne in the service of Pope Innocent III, and thus win glory and fame, and eventually, knighthood. The dream in Spoleto shattered his plans, and Francis returned to Assisi a changed man. This change, however, could not have been so radical as to leave an indelible mark on his outlook on life. It was simply the prelude of another hidden plan in the eyes of God, a plan that would place him face to face with misery and suffering, personalised in the emaciated features of a leper.

The crude images that the Sources convey in order to express Francis’s conversion through the service of love to the lepers, are an indication of how what had seemed “bitter” to him was changed into “sweetness”. Francis looked after the lepers not just by taking spiritual or pastoral care of them, or by giving them alms. The act of kissing a leper, of washing the infectious wounds, of staying in the leper hospitals, which were certainly a serious hazard for his health because of their unhygienic conditions, all indicate a radical turning away from his former self and a discovery of a new man living in him. That is why some Sources speak of his service

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<sup>28</sup> Fioretti, chapter 25 (FAED III,607-609): “Not only did he willingly serve the lepers himself, but besides this he set down that the brothers of his Order, while staying or travelling through the world, should serve the lepers for love of Christ, who wished for our sake to be *considered a leper* (Is 53:3-4).”

to the lepers in a Christological perspective. The “Christian brothers” become images of the crucified Lord who appears to Francis in their persons.

The opening phrases of the Testament are probably the strongest expression of a radical conversion in heart and mind in Christian history. We are struck by episodes of conversion like those of Paul of Tarsus or Augustine. Francis’s conversion would be a life-long process, and would take some years to mature, but the act of kissing a leper indicates an instantaneous drive towards evangelical conversion. It struck Francis’s sensibility so deeply that, at the point of death, he could not think of expressing it better than in recalling that autumn day of 1205 when, riding his horse in the vicinity of the leper hospital of San Lazzaro d’Arce, he came face to face with Christ, who for our sake, wanted to be considered a leper.

## THE CHURCHES

*And the Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would pray with simplicity in this way and say: "We adore You, Lord Jesus Christ, in all Your churches throughout the whole world and we bless You because by Your holy cross You have redeemed the world."*

The expression "I left the world," which Francis uses in his Testament, forms a link between the paragraph which speaks about his encounter with the leper and the one which speaks about his respect for churches. What is Francis referring to in these few words? It seems that he has in mind the period between his encounter with the leper in 1205 and the renunciation of his father's possessions in front of the bishop of Assisi in the spring of 1206. This short period of time marks an intense moment of Francis's process of conversion. Within this brief lapse of time we could include the meeting with the leper, the call of the crucifix of San Damiano, the conflict with his father, the trial before bishop Guido. In his Testament Francis refers to these moments when he says: "And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world."

The episode of the crucifix of San Damiano is not mentioned at all in the Testament. The Testament provides the context for this episode in the prayer that Francis would later teach his brothers, whenever they came across poor churches or crucifixes along their journeys.

"The brothers at that time begged him to teach them how to pray, because walking in simplicity of spirit, up to that time they did not know the Church's office. Francis told them: 'When you pray, say *Our Father* and *We adore you, O Christ, in all your churches throughout the whole world, and we bless you, for by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.*' For this reason, in whatever place a church had been built, even when they were not near it, but could glimpse it from a distance, they would turn toward it. Prostrate on the ground, bowing inwardly and outwardly, they would adore the Almighty saying, '*We adore you, O Christ, in all your churches...*' just as their holy father taught them. What is just as striking is that wherever they saw a cross or the sign of a cross, whether on the ground, on a wall, in the trees or roadside hedges they did the same thing."<sup>29</sup>

The Anonymous of Perugia motivates this prayer of the friars and presents it as an expression of their faith in the real presence of the Lord in the poor churches and in the signs of the cross by the wayside:

"Wherever these devout servants of the Lord walked along and came upon a church, whether in use or abandoned, or upon some cross alongside the road, they would pray devoutly: 'We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, and in all your churches throughout the whole world, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.' And they believed and felt that they had found a place of the Lord."<sup>30</sup>

We know that this prayer was not invented by Francis, but was taken from the liturgy of the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This fact shows us that Francis believed in the presence of Christ in the prayer of the Church, to which he

<sup>29</sup> IC 45 (FAED I,222); Cfr. LJS 27.

<sup>30</sup> AP, 19 (FAED II,42). Cfr. L3C 37 (FAED II,90): "For they believed they would find a place of God wherever they found a cross or a church."



initiated his first brothers. What is more striking is the fact that Francis was touched by the poverty of the churches and crosses by the wayside, which became privileged places of the presence of God in the midst of the brothers who used to live in such poor places, as is evident later on in the same Testament. The example of Christ teaching his apostles the prayer of the *Our Father* in the Gospels provides the setting for the initiation to prayer of the first brothers. St. Bonaventure provides us with a clear description of the prayer life of the first brothers, centred upon the mystery of the cross. In this paragraph from the Major Legend of St. Francis we notice how Bonaventure links together Francis's respect for churches, for the cross, for the liturgy of the Church, and for all creation, which takes part in the praises of God together with the brothers:

"They spent their time there praying incessantly, directing their effort mentally rather than vocally to devoted prayers, because they did not yet have liturgical books from which to chant the canonical hours. In place of these they had the book of Christ's cross, which they studied continually day and night, taught by the example and words of their father who spoke to them constantly about the cross of Christ.

"When the brothers asked him to teach them to pray, he said: 'When you pray, say *Our Father*... and *We adore you, O Christ, in all your churches throughout the whole world, and we bless you, for by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.*' He also taught them to praise God in all and with all creatures, to honour priests with a special reverence, and to believe with certainty and to confess with simplicity the truth of the faith, as the holy Roman Church holds and teaches. They observed the holy father's teaching in every detail, and prostrated themselves humbly before every church and crucifix which they were able to see from a distance, praying the formula he had taught them."<sup>31</sup>

The prayer *Adoramus te* of the Testament can be considered one of the first prayers which Francis and the brothers would utter during the humble years of the beginning of the Order when they would stay close to poor and abandoned churches, or when they would encounter these poor churches or crosses along the wayside during their long journeys of itinerant preaching. The fact that Francis inserts this particular prayer in the Testament shows that it was particularly dear to him, because it reminded him of the first years of his evangelical calling. The prayer focuses upon the presence of Christ in the churches and in the crosses. It does not deal with the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, since many of the poor abandoned churches did not reserve the Blessed Sacrament. The intensity of the faith of Francis and the brothers goes to a deeper level. They believed that the poor churches and crosses are a living sign of a divine presence, a reminder of the continuing care of Christ towards the poor brothers. The faith of the brothers was a simple faith, not nourished by study, but springing spontaneously from the meditation of Christ crucified, who became the "book" which the friars would meditate upon day and night. In a way, this prayer and the fact of Francis's respect for poor churches reminds us of some of his initial experiences of conversion as a church builder, and also of his initial experience of the presence of the crucified Christ in the poor abandoned church of San Damiano, outside the walls of Assisi.

The episode of San Damiano is one of the most popular in the life of St. Francis. It happened some time after the meeting of Francis with the leper. The historical context of Francis's insistence upon respect towards poor churches most

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<sup>31</sup> LM IV,3 (FAED II,551).

probably refers to the episode of San Damiano in the autumn of 1205. The first reference to San Damiano is found in the Legend of the Three Companions:

“A few days had passed when, while he was walking by the church of San Damiano, he was told in the Spirit to go inside for a prayer. Once he entered, he began to pray intensely before an image of the Crucified, which spoke to him in a tender and kind voice: ‘Francis, don’t you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me.’ Stunned and trembling, he said: ‘I will do so gladly, Lord.’ For he understood that it was speaking about that church, which was near collapse because of its age. He was filled with such joy and became so radiant with light over that message, that he knew in his soul that it was truly Christ crucified who spoke to him.”<sup>32</sup>

Thomas of Celano refers to this episode, not when he wrote the Life of St. Francis in 1228-29, but rather in the Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, which he composed in 1246-47:

“With his heart already completely changed – soon his body was also to be changed – he was walking one day by the church of San Damiano, which was abandoned by everyone and almost in ruins. Led by the Spirit he went in to pray and knelt down devoutly before the crucifix. He was shaken by unusual experiences and discovered that he was different from when he had entered. As soon as he had this feeling, there occurred something unheard of in previous ages: with the lips of the painting, the image of Christ crucified spoke to him. ‘Francis,’ it said, calling him by name, ‘go rebuild My house; as you see, it is all being destroyed.’ Francis was more than a little stunned, trembling, and stuttering like a man out of his senses. He prepared himself to obey and pulled himself together to carry out the command. He felt this mysterious change in himself, but he could not describe it. So it is better for us to remain silent about it too. From that time on, compassion for the Crucified was impressed into his holy soul. And we honestly believe the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh.”<sup>33</sup>

The text of Celano is used by St. Bonaventure in his Major Life of St. Francis. Although the historical details match, Bonaventure presents the episode in the context of a mystical union with Christ crucified:

“For one day when Francis went out to meditate in the fields, he walked near the church of San Damiano which was threatening to collapse because of age. 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 prayed. 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.’ Trembling, Francis was stunned at the sound of such an astonishing voice, since he was alone in the church; and, as he absorbed the power

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<sup>32</sup> L3C, 13 (FAED II,76).

<sup>33</sup> 2C, 10 (FAED II,249). Celano builds upon the simple narrative of the Three Companions, by noting that the San Damiano episode was part and parcel of Francis’s process of conversion, that the Spirit prompted Francis to enter and pray in front of the Crucifix, that his prayer had a transforming effect upon his senses, that he believed that Christ had given him an explicit command, or mandate, and that from now on the Passion of Christ was stamped on his spiritual faculties in such a way that it would also appear outwardly in his flesh on La Verna. In other words, Celano is underlining a process of life-long conversion for Francis. It seems that the term “command” (in Latin *mandatum*) would refer to the prayer before the crucifix, which Francis supposedly used to utter before the Byzantine icon of the crucifix of San Damiano: “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.”

of the divine words into his heart, he fell into an ecstasy of mind. At last, coming back to himself, he prepared to carry out the command of repairing the material church, although the principal intention of the words referred to that which Christ purchased with his own blood, as the Holy Spirit taught him and as he himself later disclosed to the brothers.”<sup>34</sup>

When Celano wrote the Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis in 1250-52, he condensed Francis’s experience at San Damiano with other episodes of his life, namely, the prayer *Adoramus te* of his Testament, and his use of the symbol of the *Tau* to indicate the cross:

“All the striving of this man of God, whether in public or in private, revolved around the cross of the Lord. From the earliest days when he began his knightly service for the Crucified, various mysteries of the cross shone around him. At the beginning of his conversion, when he had decided to take leave of the allurements of this life, Christ spoke to him from the wood of the cross while he prayed. From the mouth of Christ’s image a voice declared: ‘Francis, go, rebuild my house, which, as you see, it is all being destroyed.’ From that moment the memory of the Lord’s passion was stamped on his heart with a deep brand-mark, and as conversion reached his deepest self, his soul began to melt, as his beloved spoke. And he also enclosed himself in the cross itself when he put on the habit of a penitent, bearing the image of the cross. It was his custom, established by a holy decree also for his first sons, that wherever they saw the likeness of the cross they would give it honour and due reverence. He favoured the sign of the *Tau* over all others. With it alone he signed letters he sent, and painted it on the walls of cells everywhere.”<sup>35</sup>

The link between the San Damiano episode and the words of Francis in the Testament seems to be in the image of the churches. When Francis discovered the church of San Damiano it was a poor, derelict church, under the care of a poor priest who lived in that place. According to Arnaldo Fortini, since 1103 it belonged to the prior of the church of San Rufino.<sup>36</sup> San Damiano was the first among the many poor churches by the wayside, which Francis would grow to love so much during his life.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> LM II,1 (FAED II,536). Bonaventure underlines the fact that Francis experienced an “ecstasy of mind” when his “tear-filled eyes” were “gazing on the Lord’s cross.” Moreover, the command of Christ was urgent. In fact, Christ spoke to him “three times”. Bonaventure interprets in a mystical way this experience: the words of the crucified referred to the Church “which Christ purchased with his own blood.”

<sup>35</sup> Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis [3C], 2-3 (FAED II,401-402). In the Prologue to the Major Life, St. Bonaventure speaks in similar terms regarding the habit of penance and the sign of the *Tau* as a penitential sign: “This conviction should be faithfully and devotedly in the forefront of our minds: not only does this advance the mission he held of *calling to weep and mourn, to shave one’s head and wear sackcloth, and to sign the Tau on the foreheads of those mourning and grieving* (Ez 9:4) with a sign of a penitential cross, and of a habit conformed to the cross; even more, it confirms with the irrefutable testimony of truth that the seal of the likeness of the living God, that is, of Christ crucified, was imprinted on his body, not by natural forces or human skill, but by the wondrous power of the Spirit of the living God” (FAED II,527-528).

<sup>36</sup> Arnaldo Fortini, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, 215-217.

<sup>37</sup> AP 7 (FAED II,36): “While he was returning from Foligno to Assisi, carrying the money he had obtained from these things, he approached a church built in honour of Saint Damian. He found the poor resident priest, named Peter, and gave him that money for safekeeping. Not having a safe place to keep it, the priest refused the money. When the man of God, Francis, heard this, he threw the money on the windowsill of that church for he considered it worthless. Led by God’s Spirit, he resolved to use the money to rebuild its structure, seeing that the church was poor and on the verge of collapse. He decided to reside there and do something to help its impoverished condition. After a while, with God’s approval, he completed the undertaking.” In L3C 24 (FAED II,83), the restoration of San Damiano is linked to the foundation of the Order of the Poor Ladies: “While labouring with others in that work, he

The Testament itself is proof to this fact: *et satis libenter manebamus in ecclesiis* (“and we quite willingly remained in churches.”) The words of Christ uttered from the Byzantine crucifix of San Damiano were the beginning of a period of at least two years which saw Francis repairing the poor churches around Assisi, particularly San Damiano itself, San Pietro della Spina and Santa Maria degli Angeli, or the Portiuncula.

The Franciscan Sources are full of references to this period of church restoration, which followed immediately upon the return of Francis from Gubbio, where he went to serve the lepers after renouncing his father’s possessions before bishop Guido. The oldest account is that of Celano’s Life of St. Francis:

“When he had returned to the place mentioned where the church of San Damiano had been built in ancient times, he repaired it zealously within a short time. Meanwhile, the holy man of God, having changed his habit and rebuilt that church, moved to another place near the city of Assisi, where he began to rebuild a certain church, that had fallen into ruin and was almost destroyed. After a good beginning he did not stop until he had brought all to completion. From there he moved to another place, which is called the ‘Portiuncula’, where there stood a church of the Blessed Virgin Mother of God built in ancient times. At that time it was deserted and no one was taking care of it. When the holy man of God saw it so ruined, he was moved by piety because he had a warm devotion to the Mother of all good and he began to stay there continually. The restoration of that church took place in the third year of his conversion. At this time he wore a sort of hermit’s habit with a leather belt. He carried a staff in his hand and wore shoes.”<sup>38</sup>

The reference to the three churches, which Francis repaired in 1206-08 recurs in many of the medieval biographies. St. Bonaventure speaks about this period of church restoration in his Major Legend of St. Francis:

“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 all 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 frail body that was weakened by fasting. With God’s help and the devoted assistance of the citizens, he completed repairs on that church. After this work, to prevent his body from becoming sluggish with laziness, he set himself to repair a certain church of Blessed Peter a further distance from town, because of the special devotion which, in his pure and sincere faith, he bore to the prince of the apostles.

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used to cry to passers-by in a loud voice, filled with joy, saying in French: ‘Come and help me in the work of the church of San Damiano which, in the future, will be a monastery of ladies through whose fame and life our heavenly Father will be glorified throughout the church.’” Clare would also record this fact in her Testament.

<sup>38</sup> IC 21 (FAED I,201). Cfr. LJS, 13 (FAED I,377-378): “Although, up to this point, the holy man did not know clearly what was to happen to him; among other things, he undertook as his first pious work the repairing of the church of San Damiano where he had first stayed. Just as he began this work out of pious concern for the danger of its imminent collapse, so, with the Lord’s cooperation, he completed it in a short time...Meanwhile, the servant of God changed the style of his habit and moved to another place not far from Assisi. There he began to rebuild another church, similarly in ruins, and did not stop until he finished what he had begun. After this, he moved to a third place called the Portiuncula, not far from the city mentioned above, where at one time a church had been built to the honour of Mary, the Most Glorious Mother of God, but was now equally desolate and demolished. He pitied the ruins, and, moved especially by his devotion to the Blessed Virgin, he remained there continuously until the third year of his conversion when the repairs to the Church were completed.”

When he finally completed this church, he came to a place called the Portiuncula where there stood a church of the most Blessed Virgin Mother of God, built in ancient times but now deserted and no one was taking care of it. When the man of God saw it so abandoned, he began to stay there regularly in order to repair it, moved by the warm devotion he had toward the Lady of the world. Sensing that angels often visited there, according to the name of that church, which from ancient times was called Saint Mary of the Angels, he stayed there out of his reverence for the angels and his special love for the mother of Christ.”<sup>39</sup>

The second paragraph of the Testament, which deals with Francis’s reverence towards churches as signs of the living presence of Christ, has to be linked with different moments of the experience of conversion which Francis went through in the period 1205-1208. The historical context in which we have to read and interpret this paragraph is that of Francis who repairs the church of San Damiano, after receiving Christ’s invitation from the crucifix venerated in the same church. Francis’s faith is a simple faith, based upon concrete signs of the presence of God. For him and the first brothers God was present wherever there was a church or a cross. As the Testament itself shows later on, the brothers had to be happy to live in poor churches as strangers and pilgrims. The poverty of abandoned churches by the wayside prompted Francis to discover yet another sign of the presence of Christ. The first time he discovered Christ in the lepers, who were the outcasts of society. This time he discovered Christ himself who is the outcast, whenever he was present in derelict churches and in the crosses by the wayside. Christ needed Francis’s care and concern. Francis, the penitent-mason, began to take care of the poor Christ present in his churches, just as he would take care of the poor lepers present in their hospices.

The first brothers learned to pray in the poor churches and in front of the crucifix. The simple prayer of the Testament echoes a strong faith in the real presence of the Lord in every sacred place, no matter how neglected its state would be. The urgent need to restore the Lord’s house would move Francis to take drastic decisions which landed him in serious trouble with his father, and which eventually made of him a penitent-oblate living with the poor priest at San Damiano, and after some time, prompted him to “leave the world” by renouncing to his father’s possessions in front of bishop Guido. This famous episode, which occurred in the winter months of 1206 in the “Piazza del Vescovado”, where the old cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore still stands, was to mark the end of the initial period of Francis’s process of conversion, and the beginning of his discovery of the evangelical calling.<sup>40</sup>

Thomas of Celano recalls how Francis appeared before bishop Guido and the onlookers, as he who “wrestles naked with the naked.”<sup>41</sup> St. Bonaventure develops further the image of spiritual nakedness as a perfect resemblance to the poor and naked Christ on the cross:

“Thereupon the father of the flesh worked on leading the child of grace, now stripped of his money, before the bishop of the city that he might renounce his family possessions into his hands and return everything he had. The true lover of poverty

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<sup>39</sup> LM II,7-8 (FAED II,540). Arnaldo Fortini, *Nova Vita di S. Francesco*, 249-251, says that the Portiuncula chapel belonged to the monastery of St. Benedict of Monte Subasio, and that it was built before 1145. The name *Porzucle* even appears in a document of the cathedral archives, dated 1045. The account of the donation of the Portiuncula to Francis by the abbot of the monastery of St. Benedict is found in AC 56 and 2MP 55.

<sup>40</sup> Arnaldo Fortini, *Nova Vita di S. Francesco*, 222-230.

<sup>41</sup> 1C 14-15 (FAED I,194). Cfr. LJS 9; AP 8; L3C 20; 2C 12.

showed himself eager to comply and went before the bishop without delaying or hesitating. He did not wait for any words nor did he speak any, but immediately took off his clothes and gave them back to his father. Then it was discovered that the man of God had a hair shirt next to his skin under his fine clothes. Moreover, drunk with remarkable fervour, he even took off his trousers, and was completely stripped naked before everyone. He said to his father: 'Until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation, *Our Father who art in heaven*, since I have placed all my treasure and all my hope in him.' The bishop, recognizing and admiring such intense fervour in the man of God, immediately stood up and in tears drew him into his arms, covering him with the mantle that he was wearing. Like the pious and good man that he was, he bade his servants give him something to cover his body. They brought him a poor, cheap cloak of a farmer who worked for the bishop, which he accepted gratefully and, with his own hand, marked a cross on it with a piece of chalk, thus designating it as the covering of a crucified and half-naked poor man. Thus the servant of the Most High King was left naked that he might follow his naked crucified Lord, whom he loved."<sup>42</sup>

The reason for this courageous act on the part of Francis was simply his experience in the poor church of San Damiano, where he began to believe that Christ crucified had, in fact, commanded him to repair that derelict building. In order to do this he had sold his father's costly bales of cloth as well as his horse in the market of Foligno, he had deposited the gold coins on the windowsill of the church when the poor priest Pietro refused to take them, he had endured weeks of fear in the dark pit where he had to hide at San Damiano away from his father's wrath, he had faced his father Pietro who angrily shut him up in his house, he had been freed by a loving mother to feel free to follow his heart's desires, and he had embraced Lady Poverty in his naked spectacle in front of the citizens of Assisi. The poor church of San Damiano and the icon of the crucifix were the culprits for his radical decision to become an outcast and a herald of the great king. But he could not accomplish his plans without support and encouragement. The poor priest of San Damiano had helped him through his ordeal. The bishop had understood his plan to "leave the world" and consecrate his life to the service of Christ. It was the Church that Christ had saved through his blood that was to be the context in which Francis understood his vocation to repair Christ's poor churches. In this Church, and in the churches he loved, Francis came face to face with the next image of his Testament: the poor priests and the humility of the ministry of the sacred Body and Blood which they alone administered.

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<sup>42</sup> LM II,4 (FAED II,538).

## THE PRIESTS WHO ADMINISTER THE BODY AND BLOOD OF THE LORD

*Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them. And if I had as much wisdom as Solomon and found impoverished priests of this world, I would not preach in their parishes against their will. And I desire to respect, love and honour them and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider any sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my lords. And I act in this way because, in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others. I want to have these most holy mysteries honoured and venerated above all things and I want to reserve them in precious places.*

Francis often expresses himself in ways that would sound incorrect from a theological point of view. He says that the Lord gave him “faith” in churches and in priests. This expression is hardly acceptable from a theological point of view, since neither churches nor priests are objects of faith. Yet we have seen that churches, for Francis, represent the visible signs of the presence of the poor and crucified Lord. In the same way, priests were for him living signs of the presence of Christ, particularly in the mystery of his Body and Blood. It is in this context that we fully understand the simple, yet touching expression of Francis, who states in his Testament that the Lord gave him faith in churches and in priests.

Celano describes Francis’s reverence to priests in the context of his great love to the Church of Rome. The Testament strikes us immediately with its reference to the “priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church.”<sup>43</sup> The quotation which follows, from the Life of St. Francis by Celano is therefore a mirror of what the saint himself states in his Testament, and it also anchors his reverence to priests on his faith in the Church of Rome. We cannot understand Francis without his idea of the Church which is very concrete, namely, that of the Church of Rome which presides over the community of believers:

“He put the faith of the Holy Roman Church above and beyond all things, preserving, honouring and following it, since the salvation of all who would be saved was found in it alone. He honoured priests and affectionately embraced every ecclesiastical order.”<sup>44</sup>

The encounter with the poor priest of San Damiano was for Francis probably an occasion to come to know the life of the poor priests who took care of the wayside

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<sup>43</sup> “Postea Dominus dedit mihi et dat tantum fidem in sacerdotibus, qui vivunt secundum formam sanctae Ecclesiae Romanae.” The latin expression “secundum formam sanctae Ecclesiae Romanae” has been translated into “according to the rite of the holy Roman Church.” The word “formam”, however, does not denote the liturgical rite to which the priests belonged, but goes much deeper than that. It would mean also their faithfulness to the doctrine of faith as it was taught by the Church of Rome. The latin term “formam” would perhaps be rendered more by the simple translation of it into “form”, or “way of life.” It is an affirmation of the catholicity of the priests to whom Francis showed reverence.

<sup>44</sup> 1C 62 (FAED I,238).

churches, and who did not enjoy the privileges of the high clergy of the cathedrals or the monks of the abbeys. In his Testament Francis motivates his great respect for those priests who lived “according to the rite of the holy Roman Church.” The motive lay in the dignity of their sacrament of orders and in their ministry of the Body and Blood of the Lord.

The words of the Testament are very selective regarding the category of priests that Francis venerates in a particular way. They are the “impoverished priests” (*pauperculos sacerdotes*) in their parishes. The reference is to the actual state of the clergy during the time of St. Francis, when the well-off bishops, cathedral canons and monks presented such a striking difference with respect to the majority of the poor priests who administered to the filial churches, most of which were situated outside the towns. The priest of San Damiano, to whom the Anonymous of Perugia gives name of Pietro, was one of these priests. He was probably one of these impoverished priests who had no fixed income in the form of benefices, and who therefore had to fork out a living as best they could. We know from historical records that these poor priests had to resort to various methods in order to procure a living, not excluding, in some cases, the practice of simony, or the administration of the sacraments upon the payment of a sum of money from those who requested them. This practice had always been condemned by the Church, but it lingered on because of the unjust economic situation of the poor clergy. The priest at San Damiano was poor. We know from the sources that he was also an honest man, because he did not accept the money, which Francis procured for the restoration of the dilapidated church. Moreover, he was content to let Francis live with him for a time as an oblate, and after Francis left his father’s house and took the habit of a penitent in order to repair San Damiano, the priest took care to give him food.<sup>45</sup>

Francis taught the brothers that they should show respect to the “impoverished priests” and not preach against their will. He was aware that, by the time he was dictating his Testament, there were many learned brothers in the Order, some of whom were priests themselves. In certain instances they would have had a better theological preparation than many of the poor priests, who lacked all doctrinal preparation for their ministry. Francis was aware of the need to be respectful and subordinate to the authority of these priests, even when the brothers knew they could preach more fruitfully in their missionary journeys.

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<sup>45</sup> 1C 9 (FAED I,189-190): “Arriving at this church, the new soldier of Christ, aroused by piety at such a great need, entered it with awe and reverence. He found a poor priest there, kissed his holy hands with great devotion, offered him the money he was carrying and explained his purpose in great detail. The priest was astounded and, surprised at this sudden conversion in incredible circumstances, he refused to believe what he was hearing. Because he thought he was being mocked, he refused to keep the money offered to him. It seemed to him that Francis, just the day before, was living outrageously among his relatives and acquaintances and exalting his stupidity above others. But Francis stubbornly persisted and endeavored to create confidence in his words. He pleaded, begging the priest with all his heart to allow him to stay with him for the sake of the Lord. Finally the priest agreed to let him stay, but out of fear of Francis’s parents did not accept the money.” According to Fortini, 173-177 and 217, by staying with the priest at San Damiano, Francis became an oblate: “Old Assisi records recall many who offered themselves and their goods to a church in the hope of finding everlasting peace. They are the *oblai mortui mundo*, the oblates dead to the world – lay men and women who, without consecration or vows, wear a religious habit, live in a church and follow a monastic regime.” In L3C 22 (FAED II,81) Francis is taken care of by the same poor priest who gives him food: “The priest judged the work to be beyond his strength, even though he was offering himself so enthusiastically to divine service. Although poor himself, he obtained special food for Francis, for he knew that, when he was in the world, he had lived rather delicately.”



What strikes us most in this section of the Testament is Francis's apparent blindness at the human side of the priest. He was aware of the many shortcomings of the clergy, some of who may have been leading scandalous lives. Yet he did not want to consider sin in them, and he treated them like his "lords". The Franciscan Sources are quite explicit in proving this paragraph of the Testament:

"The brothers did not then have priests of the Order, so they confessed to secular priests, whether good or bad and, showing all priests the greatest reverence in accordance with the example and teaching of the holy father, they did not consider sin in any of them. He himself, a Catholic and totally apostolic man, especially recommended in his preaching that the faith of the Roman Church be inviolably maintained, and the order of priests be regarded with the highest reverence, because of the dignity of the Lord's Sacrament which is made present by the ministry of priests."<sup>46</sup>

The sense of reverence towards priests included even physical attitudes of respect towards ordained ministers of all ranks and social standing. The first brothers would prefer to beg lodgings from priests rather than from secular persons:

"He used to revere prelates and priests of the holy Church...He zealously used to admonish them to observe the holy Gospel and the Rule conscientiously as they had promised; and especially to be reverent toward ecclesiastical offices and regulations; to be attentive and devoted when hearing Mass, and when they saw the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ. They were to have reverence toward priests who handle these tremendous and greatest sacraments and, whenever they encountered them, they were to bow their heads to them and kiss their hands. If they found them on horseback, they were to make a sign of reverence, kissing not only the hands of the priest, but, out of reverence for their power, even the hooves of their horses.

Whenever they met a priest, whether rich or poor, they bowed to him as blessed Francis had taught them, and paid their respect. When it was time to seek lodging, they preferred to stay with them, rather than with secular persons."<sup>47</sup>

The Assisi Compilation presents an interesting fact in the life of St. Francis, which is linked to the words of the Testament regarding respect for priests as ministers of the Eucharist:

"At one time while blessed Francis was staying at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, and there were still only a few brothers, blessed Francis sometimes used to go through the villages and churches in the area around the city of Assisi, proclaiming and preaching to the people that they should do penance. And he would carry a broom to sweep the churches. For blessed Francis was very sad when he entered some church and saw that it was not clean. Therefore, after preaching to the people, at the end of the sermon he would always have all the priests who were present assembled in some remote place so he could not be overheard by secular people. He would preach to them about the salvation of souls and, in particular, that they should exercise care and concern in keeping churches clean, as well as altars and everything that pertained to the celebration of the divine mysteries."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> LJS 27-28 (FAED I,388). This description is also echoed in the *Officium Rhythmicum* of St. Francis, written by the same Julian of Speyer, in the first antiphon of the First Vespers for the Feast of St. Francis: *Franciscus, vir catholicus et totus apostolicus, ecclesiae teneri, fidem Romanam docuit, presbiterosque monuit, pre cunctis revereri* ("Francis, the valiant catholic and perfectly apostolic, did instruct us to adhere to the faith of the Roman Church, and those who were here priests, he'd urge we should most of all revere.")

<sup>47</sup> AP 37, 40 (FAED II,52. 54). Cfr. L3C 57, 59.

<sup>48</sup> AC 60 (FAED II,162-163); Cfr. 1MP 31; 2MP 56.

This emblematic episode in the life of St. Francis, which he probably repeated so many times, shows the link between the various paragraphs of the Testament we are considering. Francis had great respect towards poor churches. That is why he repaired old and derelict churches, provided for their needs and also cleaned them. The churches were the places where priests would celebrate the divine mysteries, and therefore Francis insisted on the brothers showing respect and veneration towards all priests, rich or poor, saints or sinners alike. He would also feel himself bound by the duty of explaining to the poor priests the need to keep their churches clean and to celebrate the divine mysteries in a dignified environment, paying particular attention to the altars and the sacred objects used during the Mass.<sup>49</sup> From the writings of St. Francis we know that this was his continual preoccupation, and that he often insists upon the reverence towards the Body and Blood of the Lord, which the priests celebrate and administer to others.<sup>50</sup>

The fact that Francis did not want to consider sin in priests is also documented in the Sources. Thus Celano speaks about the first brothers going to receive confession from a priest they knew to be of bad repute, but who was worthy of reverence because of his sacramental ministry:

“They often used to confess their sins to a certain secular priest, even when his wickedness had been reported to them by many people. He had a very bad reputation and was despised by everyone else because of the enormity of his misdeeds. But they did not wish to believe it; so they did not stop confessing their sins to him as usual, nor stop showing him proper reverence.”<sup>51</sup>

An interesting paragraph from the Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul shows Francis who speaks about the submission he wanted the brothers to show to clerics. There is a parallel text in the Assisi Compilation. This prompts us to doubt whether the words of St. Francis, as they are recorded, are referring to the state of affairs when he was alive, or rather could denote the state of the Order in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, when there was growing tension between the mendicants and the secular clergy, particularly in the case of the University of Paris. We shall not delve into this argument of interpretation of the Sources, but will rather quote the source as it is and see it in the light of the words of Francis in the Testament:

“Although he wanted his sons to keep peace with all, and to behave as little ones toward everyone, he taught them to be particularly humble toward clerics by his word and showed them by his example. He used to say: ‘We have been sent to help clerics for the salvation of souls so that we may make up whatever may be lacking in them. Each shall receive a reward, not on account of authority, but because of the work done. Know then, brothers, that the good of souls is what pleases God most, and this is more easily obtained through peace with the clergy than fighting with them. If they should stand in the way of the people’s salvation, revenge is for God, and he will repay them in due time. So, be subject to prelates so that as much as

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<sup>49</sup> LM I,6 (FAED II,534): “To poor priests he also provided help, reverently and piously, especially in the appointments of the altar, and, in this way, he both became a participant in the divine worship and provided assistance for the need of its celebrants.”

<sup>50</sup> The “Eucharistic” writings of St. Francis include: Admonition I [The Body of Christ]; Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, 3; Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful, 6-17, 22-24, 33-34; Letter to the Clergy; Letter to the Custodians; Letter to the Rulers, 6; Earlier Rule, XX,5-6; Letter to the Entire Order, 14-37; Testament 6-11. Many of these references to the Eucharist and the respect that the clergy and the brother priests should show towards the sacred mysteries were prompted by the decree *Sane cum olim* of Pope Honorius III (22 November 1219). See text of decree in English in FAED I,55.

<sup>51</sup> IC 46 (FAED I,223).

possible on your part no jealousy arises. If you are children of peace, you will win over both clergy and people for the Lord, and the Lord will judge that more acceptable than only winning over the people while scandalizing the clergy. Cover up their failings, make up for their many defects, and when you have done this, be even more humble.”<sup>52</sup>

Francis’s intention regarding priests in the Testament was interpreted in many ways after his death. One of the interesting interpretations is that given by Ubertino da Casale, in his *Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*, where the author shows his readers how the friars had entered into unnecessary competition with the secular clergy, and where being persecuted for it. If they had followed the words of Francis in the Testament, particularly in the paragraph regarding privileges, to which we shall refer later on, they would have given an example of Gospel perfection.<sup>53</sup>

The words of Francis regarding priests in his Testament have to be understood in the context in which they were written. When Francis was still alive, the Order was still made up of a large number of lay brothers, together with an increasing number of clerics. The attitude of the brothers regarding secular priests was that of a sense of service and reverence. The same clerics who entered the Order had also to go through this process of conversion regarding their ranks in the brotherhood. We have the example of brother Sylvester, who joins the Order after feeling guilty because of his sense of avarice.<sup>54</sup> Francis himself is very careful not to let any of the brother clerics be promoted to positions of authority in the Church.<sup>55</sup> His words in the Testament are an echo of what he felt to be the vocation of the brothers, particularly in their relationship with the Church of Rome. It was to be a vocation of humble service and submission, expressed in very concrete ways in their reverence towards ordained ministers.

The fact that the Sources seem to insist upon this element, which is present in the life and writings of St. Francis, could also be the result of the subsequent

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<sup>52</sup> 2C 146 (FAED II,341); Cfr. AC 19.

<sup>53</sup> Ubertino da Casale, *The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*, Book 5, Chapter 3 (FAED III,156): “Because there are many who cloak their pride and, unsupported by privileges, cannot put up with clerical harassment, we can give a twofold reply based on sayings of the blessed Francis. One is that to men of perfection, which these are supposed to be, nothing should be a source of bother except what would drive them to sin, to which, of course, no one is forced against his will. And if you speak of the many tribulations the clergy often inflict upon them and to which they are unequal, we must respond that such people simply should not embark on the way of perfection and, with their immaturity, wreck a state of perfection. Another rejoinder might be that these are the people who from the outset stood up to the clergy, while commandeering revenue – even though in a less obviously greedy way – by means of questing for alms and devotional stipends for Masses. For these reasons the clergy came down even harder on them. But if they had kept their humility and poverty intact, harassment would have been sweetly borne; besides, they couldn’t have had much to suffer, since they wouldn’t have had anything to lose! Francis wanted them to flee to another place and do penance, if they were persecuted in one place instead of standing on privileges. He used to teach, according to the Gospel which we have promised to observe, that Jesus himself says: *If they persecute you in one town, take refuge in the next* (Mt 10:23). The most sacred Testament of the holy father Francis repeats this.”

<sup>54</sup> AP 12-13; L3C 30-31.

<sup>55</sup> 1C 104 (FAED I,273): “He saw many rushing for positions of authority. Despising their arrogance, he strove by his own example to call them back from such sickness. Indeed, he used to say that it was a good and acceptable thing in God’s sight to take care of others. He held it was appropriate for some to take on the care of souls as long as in this they sought nothing of their own will, but in all things constantly obeyed God’s will. Such people should consider in the first place their own salvation and aim for the growth of their subjects, not their applause. They should seek glory before God, not honour from the people, never desiring but fearing the office of prelate. If given to them it would humble them, not exalt them; were it taken away, it would not leave them dejected, but uplifted.” Regarding Francis’s opposition to have brother clerics promoted to ecclesiastical offices, cfr. 2C 148; LM VI,5.

developments within the Order, particularly after 1239, when the Order began to assume the characteristics of a clerical institution. It was then important to remember Francis's own intentions regarding priests, and particularly regarding the relationships of the brothers with the secular clergy. His Testament provided a unique document that could uphold the testimony given by the various biographers, who were aware of the ever-changing pattern of life and ministry in the Order and its relationship with the official Church.

Francis had never been a priest himself, and nowadays scholars have voiced doubts as to whether he was even ordained a deacon, as tradition normally presents him. Therefore, his words in the Testament, and indeed, in all of his writings, come from the sensibility of a lay person, who knows that sacramental grace passes through the ministry of the priests who live according to the form of life of the Church of Rome. Faithfulness to the Church of Rome was for Francis's simple faith the guarantee of faithfulness to Christ and his Gospel. That is why he insists so much upon this aspect in all of his writings. For Francis, it was not relevant at all to delve into the moral standards of the clergy who administered the sacraments. He did not want to consider sin in the priests, as ministers of the Eucharist. It seems that Francis was aware of the dangers of lapsing into the erroneous teachings of some of the lay movements of his times, which were advocating a morally holy life as a precondition for the validity of sacramental celebration on the part of priests. Francis links the validity of the sacraments rather with the faithful submission of the priests, and indeed of the brothers, to the "holy Roman Church."

In his sense of awe in front of the sacred mystery of the Eucharist, Francis is drawn to give due honour to the priests as the ministers of these sacred mysteries. Even here Francis is specific about the priests he honours, namely, all the priests who lived according to the form of the Church of Rome, but particularly those among them who were "impoverished priests." It was in their poor churches that Francis discovered the living presence of Christ naked on the cross, and therefore these priests could be the link he needed to arrive at the full knowledge of Christ himself. It was to a poor priest at the Portiuncula that Francis asks the explanation of the Gospel text regarding the mission of the apostles on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1208, in order to receive enlightenment regarding his evangelical calling.

The ministry of the poor priests who consecrate the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord leads Francis on to the next portrait in his Testament, namely, that of the most holy names of the Lord and of the theologians who administer the mystery of the Word of God as "spirit and life" to the brothers.

## THE LORD'S HOLY NAMES AND WRITTEN WORDS, AND THEOLOGIANS

*Wherever I find our Lord's most holy names and written words in unbecoming places, I want to gather them up and I beg that they be gathered up and placed in a becoming place. And we must honor all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life.*

Francis of Assisi was uniquely devoted to the Word of God. His expressions betray a sense of reverence, which could very well be considered ahead of his times, since he often considers the Eucharist and the Word of God on the same level. From the Sources, as we shall see later, we know that he often consulted the book of the Gospels before taking serious decisions for his life. The Testament is a proof of the profound reverence of Francis toward the holy names and written words of God, which become for him another sign of Christ's living presence. As a consequence, Francis also showed great honour towards theologians and preachers, since they were the ministers of the Word, and could render Jesus Christ present to those who listened to them with faith.

This paragraph of the Testament has to be seen within the context of what we have already noted regarding Francis's reverence to the mystery of the Body and Blood of the Lord, which priests administer to others. The Assisi Compilation provides the key to understanding the link between these two elements of Francis's spirituality:

"Now blessed Francis had such reverence and devotion to the Body of Christ, that he wanted it written in the Rule that the brothers in the regions where they stay should take care and be concerned about this, and should admonish and preach about this to clerics and priests, so that they place the Body of Christ in a good and fitting place; and, if they did not do so, he wanted the brothers to do so.

In fact one time he wanted to send some brothers through every region with pyxes and wherever they found the Body of Christ placed illicitly, they were to place it honourably in them. Out of reverence for the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, he wanted it placed in the Rule that, wherever the brothers find the written words and name of the Lord by which the most holy sacrament is confected, not well kept, or carelessly thrown around in some place, let them gather them up, honouring in the words of the Lord Who spoke them. Many things are made holy by the words of God, and the sacrament of the altar is celebrated in the power of the words of Christ.

Although he did not write this in the Rule, particularly because it did not seem good to the brother ministers that the brothers should take this as a command, nevertheless, the holy father wanted to leave the brothers in his Testament and in his other writings his will about these things."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> AC 108 (FAED II,214-215). Although the text of the AC mentions the Rule, it rather refers to the Letter to the Entire Order.

The holy names and written words of the Lord to which Francis refers in the Testament could well indicate all kinds of liturgical books that were used during the celebration of the sacraments. Francis shows the same reverence to these holy names as he does to the Eucharistic species, since he asks the brothers to place them in suitable places if they find them thrown away in unbecoming places. The reference to the holy names and written words is therefore linked to the ordained ministry of the priests, and also to that of the preachers and theologians who announced the Word. From the context of the Rules of St. Francis we know that official preaching was a ministry reserved only to those brothers who had been examined by their respective Ministers. All the brothers were bound to popular preaching by word and example. But only some of them could become preachers and theologians.<sup>57</sup>

From the Sources we know that Francis did not consider it necessary for the brothers to undertake the study of theology. In the Later Rule, Francis is even wary of those brothers who would give too great an importance to studying:

“Let those who are illiterate not be anxious to learn, but let them pay attention to what they must desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity, to pray always to Him with a pure heart, to have humility and patience in persecution and infirmity, and to love those who persecute, rebuke and find faults with us.”<sup>58</sup>

Celano shows Francis giving direction to the brothers regarding what “eminent clerics” who enter the Order should do with their learning. This episode has the aim of motivating the study of theology within the context of mystical union with Christ crucified, a common theme in similar episodes, to which we shall refer in this section:

“Once he said that if an ‘eminent cleric’ were to join the Order, he should in some way renounce even learning, so that having renounced even this possession, he might offer himself naked to the arms of the Crucified.”<sup>59</sup>

Francis himself regarded Holy Scriptures as a means to come to the perfect knowledge of Christ, more than as words to be studied for the sake of receiving comfort or learning from them. The following episode, by Celano, probably occurred close to the death of St. Francis, that is, during the same time when he was composing his Testament:

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<sup>57</sup> Earlier Rule XVII,1-4 (FAED I,75): “Let no brother preach contrary to the rite and practice of the Church or without the permission of his minister. Let the minister be careful of granting it without discernment to anyone. Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds. No minister or preacher may make a ministry of the brothers or the office of preaching his own, but, when he is told, let him set it aside without objection.”

<sup>58</sup> Later Rule X,7-10 (FAED I,105). These words of the Rule are illustrated by AC 47 (FAED II,147): “It grieved the blessed Francis when brothers sought learning while neglecting virtue, especially if they did not remain in that calling in which they were first called. He said: ‘Those brothers of mine who are led by curiosity for knowledge will find themselves empty-handed on the day of reckoning. I would prefer that they grow strong in virtue, so that when the times of tribulation arrive they may have the Lord with them in their distress. For,’ he said, ‘a tribulation is approaching, when books, useful for nothing, shall be thrown into cupboards and closets!’ He did not say these things out of dislike for the study of Scriptures, but to draw all of them back from excessive concern for learning, because he preferred that they be good through charity rather than be dilettantes through curiosity. Besides, he could smell in the air that a time was coming, and not too far away, when he knew learning would be an occasion of ruin. After his death he appeared in a vision to one of the companions who was once tending toward preaching, and he forbade it, commanding him to walk on the way of simplicity.” Cfr. 2C 195.

<sup>59</sup> 2C 194 (FAED II,371).

“Once when he was sick and full of pain all over, his companion said to him: ‘Father, you have always taken refuge in the Scriptures, and they always have offered you relief from pain. Please, have something from the prophets also read to you now, and maybe your spirit will rejoice in the Lord.’ The saint said to him: ‘It is good to read the testimonies of Scripture, and it is good to seek the Lord our God in them. But I have already taken in so much of Scripture that I have more than enough for meditating and reflecting. I do not need more, son; I know Christ, poor and crucified.’”<sup>60</sup>

This episode refers to St. Paul’s theology of the “wisdom of the Cross.” One could see in this expression another way of looking at Francis’s experience of Christ when, together with his first brothers, he had no liturgical books to recite the canonical hours, and would therefore meditate the “book of the Cross.” The fact that Francis seemed to be wary of learned brothers, and of giving permission to the brothers to own books, might seem to indicate that he was against study of Scripture and theology. But we know from the Sources that his knowledge of Scriptures was profound, not because he studied Scriptures in an academic sense, but because he was constantly meditating the mystery of Christ in Holy Scripture and fixing it to his memory:

“He sometimes read the Sacred Books, and whatever he once put into his mind, he wrote indelibly in his heart. His memory took the place of books.”<sup>61</sup>

The Sources provide us with a rather clear picture regarding Francis’s intentions in the case of the study of theology on the part of the brothers. One could say that this is the same picture we have in the Testament, which is one of Francis’s writings that are highly respectful of theologians.

Julian of Speyer says that Francis “also taught that teachers of divine law and all ecclesiastical orders were to be given the highest reverence.”<sup>62</sup> The Assisi Compilation makes an explicit quotation from the Testament to prove that Francis did not disdain the study of theology:

“Not that he despised or disdained holy knowledge. On the contrary, he revered with great feeling those who were knowledgeable in religion, and all knowledgeable persons, as he himself says in his Testament: ‘We must honour all theologians and those who minister the divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life.’”<sup>63</sup>

One of the most famous examples of Francis’s profound respect for the doctors of theology in the Order is the case of St. Anthony of Padua. Francis wrote a short letter to brother Anthony who, in 1223, was lecturing theology to the brothers in the university city of Bologna. It is the first instance we come across of a brother who is appointed lecturer of theology to the brothers. Celano presents the episode of the permission that Francis gives to brother Anthony to teach sacred theology to the brothers, “provided that, as it is contained in the Rule, you do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion during study of this kind.” In this text Celano also makes explicit reference to the words of the Testament:

“He wanted ministers of the word of God to be intent on spiritual study and not hindered by other duties. He said that these men were heralds chosen by a great king to deliver to the people the decrees received from his mouth. For he used to say: ‘The preacher must be first secretly draw in by prayer what he later pours out in

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<sup>60</sup> 2C 105 (FAED II,316); Cfr. AC 79.

<sup>61</sup> 2C 102 (FAED II,314); Cfr. LM XI,1.

<sup>62</sup> LJS 28 (FAED I,388).

<sup>63</sup> AC 103 (FAED II,207).

sacred preaching; he must first of all grow warm on the inside, or he will speak frozen words on the outside.’ He said that this office was worthy of reverence and that those who exercised it should be revered by all. As he said, ‘They are the life of the body, the opponents of demons, the lamp of the world.’ He considered doctors of sacred theology to be worthy of even greater honour. Indeed he once had it written as a general rule that ‘we should honour and revere all theologians and those who minister to us the words of God, as those who minister to us *spirit and life* (Jn 6:64).’ And once, when writing to blessed Anthony, he had this written at the beginning of the letter: ‘To brother Anthony, my bishop.’<sup>64</sup>

This episode shows that Francis was not against preaching or the study of theology, but rather against the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of self-esteem. The life of prayer of the Friars Minor was the basis for the ministry of the Word that they exercised either by preaching or by teaching sacred theology. It seems that even the later Sources, coming from the Spiritual branch of the Order, which would normally regard study as an obstacle to Gospel perfection, present studies in the Order in a very positive light and say that Francis was not against study of Scripture and theology, if it was accomplished in a spirit of humility and service to the brotherhood and did not extinguish the spirit of prayer. Such is the case of the *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu*, or The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus, written by Ubertino da Casale:

“Brother Leo likewise said that blessed Francis did not want his brothers to be desirous of learning and books, but wanted and preached to the brothers to be eager to have and imitate pure and holy simplicity, holy prayer, and Lady Poverty, on which the holy and first brother had built. And he believed this to be the more secure path for the soul’s well-being. Not that he despised and disdained holy knowledge. On the contrary, he revered with great feeling all those who were wise in the religion, and all the wise, as he himself says in his Testament: ‘We must honour holy theologians and those who minister the divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life.’”<sup>65</sup>

Another proof of Francis’s reverence towards theologians is shown by various Sources, which speak of a meeting that Francis has with a Dominican doctor of theology at Siena, where he went for treatment in the spring of 1226, and where he dictated the Testament of Siena:

“While he was staying in Siena, someone from the Order of Preachers happened to arrive; he was a spiritual man and a Doctor of Sacred Theology. He visited blessed Francis, and he and the holy man enjoyed a long and sweet conversation about the words of the Lord. That man went away greatly edified, and said to the companions of blessed Francis: ‘My brothers, the theology of this man, held aloft by purity and contemplation, is a soaring eagle, while our learning crawls on its belly on the ground.’”<sup>66</sup>

Francis would show a great reluctance to accept brothers who would enter the Order only to pursue higher studies for their own personal glorification. In his Admonitions we find an echo of what he says in the Testament regarding the duty of preachers and theologians to be ministers of the Word, which is *spirit and life* (Jn 6:64):

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<sup>64</sup> 2C 163 (FAED II,352).

<sup>65</sup> Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu*, Book V, Chapter 3, (FAED III,168); Cfr. Arnald of Sarrant, *De Cognatione Sancti Francisci*, II,20, (FAED III,705).

<sup>66</sup> AC 35-36 (FAED II,141); Cfr. 2C 103; LM XI,2; 2MP 53.



“The apostle says: *The letter kills, but the spirit gives life* (2 Cor 3:6). Those people are put to death by the letter who only wish to know the words alone, that they might be esteemed wiser than others and be able to acquire great riches to give to their relatives and friends. And those religious are put to death by the letter who are not willing to follow the spirit of the divine letter but, instead, wish only to know the words and to interpret them for others. And those people are brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter who do not attribute every letter they know, or wish to know, to the body but, by word and example, return them to the most high Lord God to Whom every good belongs.”<sup>67</sup>

Francis was aware of the danger of those brothers who would be puffed by knowledge and who would not employ their studies to the spreading of God’s kingdom. He would say that souls are converted by the prayers and tears of humble and simple brothers, more than by the learned friar theologians and the preachers.<sup>68</sup> In the *Historia septem tribulationum Ordinis Fratrum Minorum* (History of the Seven Tribulations of the Order of Friars Minor), the Spiritual Franciscan writer Angelo Clareno presents an episode in which Francis is supposed to have shown how dangerous it was to accept learned friars in the Order. Again, we do not intend to enter into the argument of the historical value of this source, which comes from the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and which is polemical in its nature, coming as it is from the pen of one of the major exponents of the tradition of the Spirituals:

“Some brothers came from France and reported to him that the brothers had recently received an important man, a master of sacred theology in Paris. Both the people and the clergy were greatly edified by this. Blessed Francis listened, then sighed and responded: ‘I am afraid, my sons, that in the end such masters will destroy my plant. The true masters are those who show their way of life to their neighbours through good works with gentle wisdom. A person has only as much learning as his actions show; and is wise only as much as he loves God and neighbour; and a religious is only as good a preacher as much as he humbly and faithfully does the good that he understands.’”<sup>69</sup>

Francis himself was convinced all along that the holy names and written words of the Lord were a way of life more than a matter for academic study. He even regarded the use of Scripture for the prayer life of the brothers as subordinate to the more urgent need to live the spirit of Holy Scripture in order to give witness to the Gospel of the Lord present in his word. There is a touching episode from Celano’s Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul that is a witness to Francis’s radical commitment to the spirit of the Gospel:

“The mother of two of the brothers once came to the saint, confidently asking for alms. Sharing her pain the holy father said to Brother Peter of Catanio: ‘Can we give some alms to our mother?’ He used to call the mother of any brother his mother and the mother of all the brothers. Brother Peter replied: ‘There is nothing left in the house which we could give her.’ Then he added: ‘We do have one New Testament, for reading the lessons at matins, since we don’t have a breviary.’ Blessed Francis said to him: ‘Give our mother the New Testament so she can sell it to care for her needs, for through it we are reminded to help the poor. I believe that God will be pleased more by the giving than by the reading.’ So the book was given to the

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<sup>67</sup> Admonitions, 7 (FAED I,132).

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. 2MP 72.

<sup>69</sup> Angelo Clareno, *Historia septem tribulationum Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, I,212-219, (FAED III,409).

woman, and the first Testament in the Order was given away through this sacred piety.”<sup>70</sup>

The reference in the Testament to the holy names and written words of the Lord is linked to what precedes it, namely, the use of the same words for the consecration of the Body and Blood of the Lord by priests, and to what follows it, namely the preaching ministry of the theologians. But, in order to understand more fully where and when Francis discovered the true meaning of the holy names and written words of the Lord, it is essential to return to his life story, particularly to the early years when the Lord gave him brothers, and together they discovered the words of the Gospel, which would form the way of life of the Friars Minor. The life of the brothers *secundum formam sancti evangelii*, “according to the form of life of the Holy Gospel,” as confirmed by the Lord Pope, is the theme of the next section of the Testament.

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<sup>70</sup> 2C 91 (FAED II,306); Cfr. AC 93.

## THE BROTHERS AND THE LIFE ACCORDING TO THE FORM OF THE GOSPEL

*And after 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 pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me. And those who came to receive life gave whatever they had to the poor and were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and short trousers. We desired nothing more. We clerical brothers said the Office as other clerics did; the lay brothers said the Our Father; and we quite willingly remained in churches. And we were simple and subject to all.*

This paragraph is the central and most important section of the Testament. It is a portrait of the first Franciscan fraternity, and to read it means to recall to one's mind many of the episodes of the calling of the brothers who joined Francis from 1208 until the journey to Rome to ask the Pope's approval of the primitive form of Gospel life in 1209-10.

The episodes, which are the object of our analysis in this section of the Testament include the awareness of the vocation to the Gospel life which Francis acquired at the Portiuncula on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1208, when he listened to the explanation of the Gospel of the mission of the apostles.<sup>71</sup> This development in Francis's personal awareness as one who is called to the *apostolica vivendi forma* leads him to accept the gift of the brothers whom the Lord sends. The vocation narratives of Bernard of Quintavalle and Pietro Catanio, Sylvester, and Giles follow. These vocation narratives occur within the context of the first contact, which Francis and the first brothers have with the "book of the Gospels" in the church of San Nicolò, where they discover the verses that would eventually make up their primitive form of life. The first brothers would then set out for itinerant missions of preaching, as Francis and Giles did in the summer months of 1208 when they set out for the Marches of Ancona. On returning to the Portiuncula they were joined by Sabbatino, Morico, Giovanni della Cappella and Filippo Longo.<sup>72</sup> A second mission of the brothers took place some time later. Bernardo and Giles went to Florence and on to Santiago de Compostela, whereas Francis and Filippo went to the Rieti valley.<sup>73</sup> This mission provided the occasion to come face to face with the problem of identity of the first brotherhood:

"Those who saw them were amazed: 'We have never seen religious dressed like this.' They seemed to differ from all others by their habit and lifestyle, like wild men. When they entered a city, town or a home, they would announce peace ... Some people willingly and joyfully listened to the brothers; others, however, jeered at them. Many people repeatedly questioned them, and it was extremely wearisome to answer so many questions because new situations often give rise to new questions. Some

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<sup>71</sup> Cfr. 1C 21-22.

<sup>72</sup> Cfr. AP 10-17; L3C 27-35.

<sup>73</sup> Cfr. 1C 30; AP 19-24; L3C 36-40.

asked them: 'Where do you come from?' While others asked: 'To which Order do you belong?' They answered simply: 'We are penitents and were born in Assisi.' At that time the religion of the brothers was not yet called an order."<sup>74</sup>

The question of identity revolved around the form of life, which the brothers were embracing. Were they penitents or religious? It seems from the Sources that the first brothers never thought of giving any form of organized structure to the fraternity. Certainly, Francis was aware that no one showed him what he had to do. The simple form of life of the brothers, who preferred poor churches like the Portiuncula chapel, who were dressed in poor clothing, who prayed the Office as best they could with the limited liturgical means they had at their disposal, who went around announcing peace in an itinerant way of life, badly needed a more organized structure which could help it to develop into an institution in the Church and in society. Francis probably knew this, and that is why he wrote a simple "form of life" and decided to go to Rome, to have his form of Gospel life approved by the "Lord Pope." The submission to the Church of Rome, as a result of the simplicity of life of the first brothers and their need to be supported in what appeared to be a risky Gospel adventure, is the theme of this paragraph of the Testament, in which we shall analyse the various moments we have been mentioning as possible references which the Testament makes to the life of St. Francis as the Sources portray it. What is fundamental, however, is the saint's innermost conviction that it was the Lord himself who showed him what he had to do regarding the form of Gospel life he was inspired to live in fraternity.

The form of life according to the Gospel was revealed to Francis on the occasion of the feast of St. Matthias the Apostle, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1208. It was one of the greatest turning points of his life. Up till then he had been living as a penitent church-mason, with a hermit's garb.<sup>75</sup> Celano and the Three Companions describe how the Lord revealed to him the way of life of the Gospel, which he was to follow:

"One day the gospel was being read in that church about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach. The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the priest after celebrating 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* (Mt 10:9-10; Lk 9:2; Mk 6:12), 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.' The holy father, overflowing with joy, hastened to implement the words of salvation, and did not delay before he devoutly began to put into effect what he heard. Immediately, he took off the shoes from his feet, put down the staff from his hands, and, satisfied with one tunic, exchanged his leather belt for a cord. After this, he made for himself a tunic showing the image of the cross, so that in it he would drive off every fantasy of the demons. He made it very rough, so that in it he might *crucify the flesh with its vices and sins* (Gal 5:24). He made it very poor and plain, a thing that the world would never covet. As for the other things he heard, he set about doing them with great care and

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<sup>74</sup> AP 19 (FAED II,43); Cfr. L3C 37.

<sup>75</sup> LJS 15 (FAED I,379): "Blessed Francis had completed his work on the three churches, as has been said, and he had, up until that time, worn the habit of a hermit, carrying a staff in his hand, with shoes on his feet and a leather belt around his waist."

reverence. For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel; rather he committed everything he heard to his excellent memory and was careful to carry it out to the letter.”<sup>76</sup>

“While he was completing the church of San Damiano, blessed Francis wore the habit of a hermit: a staff in his hand, shoes on his feet, and a leather belt around his waist. Then, one day at Mass, he heard those things which Christ tells the disciples who were sent out to preach, instructing them to carry *no gold or silver, a wallet or a purse, bread, walking stick, or shoes, or two tunics* (Mt 10:9-10; Lk 9:3; 10:4). After understanding this more clearly because of the priest, he was filled with indescribable joy: ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what I want to do with all my strength.’ And so, after committing to memory everything he had heard, he joyfully fulfilled them, removed his second garment without delay, and from then on never used a walking stick, shoes, purse, or wallet. He made for himself a very cheap and plain tunic, and throwing the belt away, he girded himself with a cord.”<sup>77</sup>

The Testament says that no one showed Francis what he had to do, except the Lord, who *revealed* to him the way of life of the Gospel. It is this reference to a *revelation* of Jesus Christ, which provides the key to an understanding of the radical choices which Francis makes and of the program of life he proposes to his brothers. Celano underlines the importance of the contact with the Gospel as a revelation of the will of the Lord: “For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel.” From this point onwards, the Gospel became the only sure direction, which Francis was to follow. Everything else, including the brothers and the Lord Pope himself, had to be subordinate to this form of life, which Jesus Christ himself had revealed to him more than once, whenever he consulted the book of the Gospels.

The same reasoning is present where the Testament speaks about the brothers. It is the Lord who “gives” the brothers to Francis. The brothers are a gift of Christ who repays Francis for his faithful commitment to the Gospel project. In this section of the Testament we not only meet the basis for the way of life of the Gospel, but we also understand what motivated it. Francis had in mind the concrete way of life, which Christ and the apostles chose out of their own free will. It was the *apostolica vivendi forma* that he proposed to the first brothers, and that he pleaded with the Lord Pope to approve. It was not an abstract notion of Christian perfection, but rather a reenactment of the style of life which Christ and the apostles chose, and which Francis could see before his eyes whenever he brought to memory the words of the Gospel. It was not a philosophy for speculation, but a model for everyday life according to the Gospel. The proof of this is given to us by the Sources, whenever they mention the calling of the first brothers, particularly the calling of Bernard of Quintavalle and Pietro Catanio:

“When they saw and heard these things, two men from Assisi, inspired by divine grace, humbly approached him. One of these was Brother Bernard, and the other, Brother Peter. They told Francis simply: ‘We wish to live with you from now on and do what you are doing. Tell us, therefore, what we should do with our possessions.’ Overjoyed at their coming and their resolve he answered them kindly: ‘Let us go and seek counsel from the Lord.’ So they went to one of the city’s churches. Upon entering it, they fell on their knees and humbly prayed: ‘Lord, God, Father of glory, we beg you in your mercy, show us what we are to do.’ After finishing the prayer, they asked the priest of the church who was there: ‘Sir, would you show us the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.’ And, since before this happened

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<sup>76</sup> 1C 22 (FAED I,201-202).

<sup>77</sup> L3C 25 (FAED II,84).

none of them knew how to read very well, when the priest opened up the book, they immediately found the passage *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell everything you possess and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven* (Mk 10:21). Opening up the book a second time, they discovered: *Whoever wishes to come after me...* (Mt 16:24). When they opened up the book for the third time, they came upon: *Take nothing for the journey...* (Lk 9:3). When they heard this, they were filled with great joy and exclaimed: 'This is what we want, this is what we are seeking.' And blessed Francis said: 'This will be our rule.'<sup>78</sup>

"Lord Bernard said: 'Then, brother, I want to give away all my worldly goods for the love of my Lord who gave them to me, as it seems best to you.' The saint told him: 'We will go to the church early in the morning and, through the book of the Gospels, we will learn how the Lord instructed his disciples.' Rising at daybreak, then, together with another man named Peter, who also wanted to become a brother, they went to the church of San Nicolò next to the piazza of the city of Assisi. They entered for prayer, but, because they were simple, they did not know how to find the passage in the Gospel about renunciation. They prayed devoutly that the Lord would show them his will on opening the book the first time. Once they had finished prayer, blessed Francis took the closed book and, kneeling before the altar, opened it. At its first opening, the Lord's counsel confronted them: *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell everything you possess and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven* (Mk 10:21). Blessed Francis was overjoyed when he read this passage and thanked God. But since he was a true worshipper of the Trinity, he desired it to be confirmed by a threefold affirmation. He opened the book a second and a third time. When he opened it up the second time he saw: *Take nothing for your journey* (Lk 9:3), etc., and at the third opening: *If any man wishes to come after me, he must deny himself* (Mt 16:24), etc. Each time he opened the book, blessed Francis thanked God for confirming his plan and the desire he had conceived earlier. After the third divine confirmation was pointed out and explained, he said to those men, Bernard and Peter: 'Brothers, this is our life and rule and that of all you will want to join our company. Go, therefore, and fulfil what you have heard.' After getting rid of everything, they both received the habit which the saint had adopted after he put aside the habit of a hermit; and from that hour, they lived with him according to the form of the holy Gospel as the Lord had shown them. This is why blessed Francis said in his Testament: 'The Lord Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the holy Gospel.'<sup>79</sup>

The episode of the consultation of the book of the Gospels in the church of San Nicolò *iuxta plateam civitatis Assisii*, the church which was close to Francis's paternal house,<sup>80</sup> is linked with the words of the Testament by the Legend of the Three Companions. It was the occasion that, together with that of the feast of St. Matthias, would provide the basic Gospel texts which would make up the primitive form of life of the Friars Minor. These texts basically are the following: *Provide yourselves with no gold or silver, not even with coppers for your purses, with no haversack for the journey or spare tunic or footwear or a staff, for the labourer deserves his keep* (Mt 10:9-10). *Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me'*

<sup>78</sup> AP 10-11 (FAED II,37-38). Cfr. 1C 24-25.

<sup>79</sup> L3C 28-29 (FAED II,85-86).

<sup>80</sup> Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 91, 270. The footnotes provide interesting information regarding both the church of San Nicolò and the missal consulted by Francis and Bernardo, which is probably still in existence at the Walters Art Gallery of Baltimore.

(Mt 16:24); *Jesus looked steadily at him and he was filled with love for him, and he said, 'You need to do one thing more. Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'* (Mk 10:21); *He said to them: Take nothing for the journey: neither staff, nor haversack, nor bread, nor money; and do not have a spare tunic* (Lk 9:3); *Take no purse with you, no haversack, no sandals. Salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, let your first words be, 'Peace to this house.'* (Lk 10:4-5).<sup>81</sup>

The same texts are present in at least two chapters of the Earlier Rule (1221), which was the result of the practical needs of the brothers in the period 1210-1221, and which therefore shows how the Rule evolved gradually from the primitive *forma vitae*.<sup>82</sup> In chapters 1 and 14 we probably have the clearest references to these Gospel texts, which Francis and the brothers discovered at the very beginning of their vocation:

“The rule and life of these brothers is this, namely: to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own, and to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who says: *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me. And: If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

“When the brothers go through the world, let them take *nothing* for the journey, *neither knapsack, nor purse, nor bread, nor money, nor walking stick. Whatever house they enter*, let them first say: *Peace to this house.*”<sup>83</sup>

The motivation behind the vocational choices of Francis and the first brothers lies in their discovery of the Gospel as a programme of formation and action. The consultation of the book of the Gospels became the driving force, which lead Francis, the “simple and uneducated” to “commit everything he heard to his excellent memory, and to carry it out to the letter.” He simply and humbly wrote down in a few words whatever he could memorise in the Gospel texts he had meditated upon for so long with his first brothers, and then took the bold decision to go to the “Lord Pope” Innocent III with his simple way of life to have it approved.

“When blessed Francis saw that the Lord God was daily increasing their numbers, he wrote for himself and his brothers present and future, simply and in few words, a form of life and a rule. He used primarily words of the holy gospel, longing only for its perfection. He inserted a few other things necessary for the practice of a holy way of life. Then he went to Rome with all his brothers, since he greatly desired that the Lord Pope Innocent the Third confirm for him what he had written. Presiding over God’s Church at that time was the lord Pope Innocent the Third, a glorious man, prolific in learning, brilliant in speech, burning with zeal for justice in matters which the cause of the Christian faith demanded. When he recognized the wish of the men of God, he first considered the matter and then gave his assent to their quest, something he completed by a subsequent action. Exhorting and then warning them about many things, he blessed Saint Francis and his brothers and said to them: ‘Go with the Lord, brothers, and as the Lord will see fit to inspire you, preach penance to all. When the almighty Lord increases you in numbers and grace, come back to me

<sup>81</sup> The Gospel quotations are taken from *The New Jerusalem Bible. Study Edition*, London 1994.

<sup>82</sup> David Flood, Theophile Desbonnets, *The Birth of a Movement. A Study on the First Rule of St. Francis*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1976.

<sup>83</sup> Earlier Rule, chapters I,1-3 and XIV,1-2 (FAED I,63-64 and 73). Other similar Gospel texts are found in other chapters of the Rule, as, for example, in chapter XVI,17-21. They could all have formed part of the primitive form of life which Francis presented to Innocent III for approval in 1209-1210.

with joy, and I will grant you more things than these and, with greater confidence, I will entrust you with greater things.”<sup>84</sup>

The mandate, which Francis and the first brothers receive from the Pope is that of “preaching penance.” This is the characteristic form of Franciscan preaching, which is evident in the way of life which Francis and the brothers lead. The Testament mentions the poor habits, which the friars used to wear, their staying in poor abandoned churches, their praying the Divine Office, their submission to all in true simplicity. The brothers were witness to a profound conversion of heart, which is the basis for any form of external preaching that would merit to be listened to attentively. To the very end of his life Francis was convinced that the Lord had called him “to do penance” as the only way in which he could imitate the way of life of Christ and the apostles and transform the world by his own example and that of his brothers. The invitation “to begin anew to do penance” at the end of his life was the most normal sentiment ever present in his heart and mind, the driving force which was pushing him and the brothers to attain greater goals in their quest for Gospel perfection.

Francis needed a guarantee for the way of life, which the Lord had revealed to him. He found it in the person of the “Lord Pope.” We know that Innocent III had already approved similar ways of life, just as he had done when he approved the *Propositum* of the Humiliati. Francis did not need a confirmation of his faith in the truth of the revelation of the Gospel life directly by Jesus Christ. “No one showed me what I had to do.” However, he needed a confirmation of the validity of this way of life within the ecclesial community, of which he had felt part and parcel ever since he was sent to repair the church of San Damiano, and was given the protection of the bishop of Assisi for his radical decision to “leave the world.” He found this confirmation in the Lord Pope Innocent III. The little poor man of Assisi knelt before this great Pope and humbly begged him to confirm him in obedience to Christ’s own mandate.

“The Lord Pope approved the rule for him and his brothers, both present and future. He also gave him authority to preach everywhere as the grace of the Holy Spirit was given him and that the other brothers were also to preach, provided that blessed Francis gave them the office of preaching.”<sup>85</sup>

The Lord Pope consented to Francis’s request in a true spirit of humility. The parable with which Celano accompanies this episode in the Life of St. Francis explains in figurative language how the wisdom of the great was won over by the simplicity of the humble of heart:

“The Lord was truly with Saint Francis wherever he went, gladdening him with revelations and encouraging him with gifts. For when he had gone to sleep one night, he seemed to be walking down a road, and alongside it stood a tree of great height. That tree was lovely and strong, thick and exceedingly high. It came about that when he approached the tree and stood under it and marvelled at its beauty and

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<sup>84</sup> 1C 32-33 (FAED I,210-212); LJS 21 (FAED I,383-384): “Seeing that the number of brothers was gradually increasing, Blessed Francis explained more fully to them his heart’s purpose, not to mention the hidden design of divine revelation. He wrote a rule in simple language, including words from the holy gospel, for the perfection of which he strove as much as he could. He wanted what he had written to be confirmed by the supreme pontiff, so he took the eleven brothers that he had with him, himself being the twelfth, and made his way with them to Rome. The supreme pontiff gave the twelve brothers his kind consent concerning the confirmation of their rule and also gave them his mandate concerning the preaching of penance. With joy, he blessed and dismissed them, but he promised that later, when their number had increased, he would give them even more.”

<sup>85</sup> AP 36 (FAED II,50-51).



height, the holy man himself rose to so great a height that he touched the top of the tree. Taking it into his hand, he easily bent it to the ground. It really happened this way, when the lord Innocent, a very high and lofty tree in the world, bent himself so kindly to his wish and request.”<sup>86</sup>

The Testament next gives us a moving portrait of the life of the primitive Franciscan fraternity, which goes back to Assisi full of joy at being recognised as a movement of penance. We could see a reflection of this description in the Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano:

“As followers of most holy poverty, since they had nothing, they loved nothing; so they feared losing nothing. They were satisfied with a single tunic, often patched both inside and out. Nothing about it was refined, rather it appeared lowly and rough so that in it they seemed completely crucified to the world. They wore crude trousers with a cord for a belt. They held firmly to the holy intention of remaining this way and having nothing more. So they were safe wherever they went. Disturbed by no fears, distracted by no cares, they awaited the next day without any worry. Though frequently on hazardous journeys, they were not anxious about where they might stay the next day. Often they needed a place to stay in extreme cold, and a baker’s oven would receive them; or they would hide for the night humbly in caves or crypts.”<sup>87</sup>

The brothers “went through the world as strangers and pilgrims, taking nothing for the journey, except the books in which they could say their Hours.”<sup>88</sup> They willingly stayed in the poor churches, which reminded them so much of the hidden presence of the Lord. The first brothers, “having no place to stay, went and found a poor and nearly abandoned church called Saint Mary of the Portiuncula. There they built a small dwelling where they all lived together.”<sup>89</sup>

“They left that hut [Rivotorto] for the use of poor lepers, moving to a small dwelling near Saint Mary of the Portiuncula where they stayed from time to time before acquiring that church.”<sup>90</sup>

It would suffice to mention the name “Portiuncula” to enter into a labyrinth of references in the Franciscan Sources regarding the holiness of this place, which Francis rightly saw as the spot where the Order had its humble beginnings. The Testament makes no mention of the Portiuncula, but the reference to the poor churches, as we have already seen, reminds one immediately of the importance which this chapel had in the life of the Poverello.<sup>91</sup>

The last note of this paragraph of the Testament regards the distinctive quality of the first fraternity. Francis uses a very clear description: *Et eramus idiotae et subditi omnibus* (“And we were simple and subject to all.”) It is the description of the

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<sup>86</sup> 1C 33 (FAED I,212).

<sup>87</sup> 1C 39 (FAED I,218).

<sup>88</sup> AP 40 (FAED II,53-54).

<sup>89</sup> AP 14 (FAED II,39-40).

<sup>90</sup> L3C 55 (FAED II,99-100).

<sup>91</sup> References in the Sources to the Portiuncula chapel include the following: 1C 21-22; 1C 57; 1C 78; 1C 88; 1C 105-106; 1C 108; LJS 14; LJS 26; LJS 36; LJS 68; AP 14; AP 18; AP 24; AP 30; AP 37; L3C 14; L3C 32; L3C 34; L3C 41; L3C 44; L3C 57; L3C 61; AC 5; AC 11; AC 18; AC 27; AC 56; AC 60; AC 63; AC 74; AC 78; AC 93; AC 96; AC 98; AC 103; AC 105-109; 2C 18-20; 2C 57; 2C 63; 2C 65; 2C 67; 2C 76; 2C 100; 2C 115; 2C 160; 2C 171; Treatise on the Miracles 37-39; LM II,8; LM III,1; LM IV,5; LM IV,10; LM VII,4; LM VIII,7; LM VIII,9; LM X,5; LM XIV,3; 1MP 9; 1MP 14; 1MP 27-28; 1MP 31; 1MP 32; 1MP 35; 1MP 38; 2MP 4; 2MP 7-8; 2MP 11; 2MP 14; 2MP 21; 2MP 25; 2MP 38-39; 2MP 55-56; 2MP 58; 2MP 82-84; 2MP 92; 2MP 99; 2MP 112; 2MP 124; Actus 7; Actus 10; Actus 15; Actus 18; Actus 20; Actus 25; Actus 26; Fioretti 8; Fioretti 10; Fioretti 15; Fioretti 18; Fioretti 23.

sense of submission and simplicity of the first brothers, which finds an echo in chapter 16 of the Earlier Rule, where Francis is speaking about the way of life of the brothers who go among the Saracens and other non believers: “One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake.”<sup>92</sup> This reference in the writings of St. Francis is a direct witness to the choice of the name of the Order, which Francis himself calls Order of Friars Minor:

“He himself originally planted the Order of Friars Minor and on the occasion of its founding gave it this name. For when it was written in the Rule, ‘Let them be minors,’ at the uttering of this statement, at that same moment he said, ‘I want this fraternity to be called the Order of Friars Minor.’ They were truly minors who, by being subject to all, always sought the position of contempt, performing duties which they foresaw would be the occasion of some affront. In this way they might merit to be grounded on the solid rock of true humility and to have the well-designed spiritual structure of all the virtues arise in them.”<sup>93</sup>

“From the beginning of his conversion blessed Francis, with God’s help, like a wise man, established himself and his house, that is, the religion, upon a firm rock, the greatest humility and poverty of the Son of God, calling it the religion of Friars Minor.”<sup>94</sup>

The quality of minority, coupled with the vocation of fraternity, gave the distinctive identity of the first brothers, who understood the Gospel form of their life in the light of the love of Christ who lays down his life and humbles himself even unto death on a cross. This is what fraternity and minority in the primitive fraternity meant. The name of the brotherhood thus became the trade-mark of the Gospel way of life which Francis and the brothers had discovered when consulting the book of the Gospels. In the same quest for the historical Jesus Christ and the apostles who accompanied him, the brothers discovered the value of poverty in manual work and begging for alms. This will be the subject of the next section of the Testament.

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<sup>92</sup> Earlier Rule XVI,6 (FAED I,74).

<sup>93</sup> 1C 36 (FAED I,214-215). Although the name *Ordo Fratrum Minorum* is consistently translated as Order of Lesser Brothers in the English edition of the Sources, “Friars Minor”, the commonly accepted title of the First Order of Saint Francis, reflects the early English translations of *frater* as “friar” and the diminutive *minor* as “minor.”

<sup>94</sup> AC 9 (FAED II,123-124).

## WORK AND BEGGING ALMS

*And I worked with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all brothers to give themselves to honest work. Let those who do not know how to work learn, not from desire to receive wages, but for example and to avoid idleness. And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door.*

The Testament shows Francis, who was terminally ill and could hardly move, wanting to work with his hands, just like he used to do when he was younger and healthy. One could see in this wish a normal desire to feel better and fit to lead a normal life, in a moment when one is not in the best of health. Besides this consideration of the human side of Francis of Assisi, it is however, important to understand the value of work for him and the first brothers, as we can see it expressed in the Testament and Rules.

Francis speaks here, as he does elsewhere in his Rules, of work in a particular way, namely, manual work. The expression *et ego manibus meis laborabam*, refers in explicitly to manual work. The brothers at the beginning of the Order were convinced that manual work was part and parcel of their Gospel vocation, and a living witness to their life of poverty. A close examination at the Rules help illustrate this point.

The Earlier Rule speaks about the manner of serving and working in chapter 7: “None of the brothers may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others. They may not be in charge in the houses in which they serve nor accept any office which would generate scandal or be harmful to their souls. Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house. Let the brothers who know how to work do so and exercise that trade they have learned, provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly...And for their work they can receive whatever is necessary excepting money. And when it is necessary, they may seek alms like other poor people. And it is lawful for them to have the tools and instruments suitable for their trades. Let all the brothers always strive to exert themselves in doing good works...Servants of God, therefore, must always apply themselves to prayer or some good work.”<sup>95</sup>

The characteristic elements of manual work, which Francis underlines in this chapter of the Earlier Rule include the following. The brothers are to work always in a position of submission. They are not to assume positions of responsibility or authority, which would undermine their status as minors in society. Their work has to be seen to be a humble service. As lesser brothers they are to remain subject to all, lest their position of authority cause scandal, because of their opportunity to acquire authority, money, privileges, and the like. All brothers are obliged to work with their hands in that work to which they have been trained. However not all work can be done by the brothers, but only that work which would appear fruitful for their spiritual life and which could be performed honestly. The implications of this verse would include all kinds of work, which would place the brothers in dangerous situations regarding their spiritual well-being and that of the brotherhood. The fruit of their

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<sup>95</sup> Earlier Rule VII,1-3, 7-11 (FAED I,68-69).

work is to be given to them out of a sense of justice, but the brothers could not accept money as a remuneration of their service. Remuneration in kind seems to have been the norm for the first brothers. This, however, could not be pretended as a right, but the brothers could ask for it with humility. In the event that the brothers were not remunerated for their services, they were to make use of the right of the poor, namely, to go out and beg for alms. Francis permits the brothers to make use of the instruments, which were necessary in order to perform their work. The instruments were a means to an end, and therefore they were to be considered useful and their use would be considered a poor use of the simple means with which to earn a decent living. Then Francis reminds the brothers of the duty to exert themselves in good works. The reference to work is here widened, including not only manual work but every type of service which would provide the occasion of giving a good example to others. Moreover, they were to engage in prayer and good work as servants of God. The link between prayer and work was not new in the history of religious life. We know how much the Benedictine Rule estimates the alternate life of prayer and work of the monks. Francis uses the same image, but with a difference. The monks would work in order to render their community self-sufficient and provide a good environment for a decent life of prayer. The Franciscan fraternity would work in order to prolong the spirit of prayer and to give good example. Remuneration is secondary in the Franciscan philosophy of work. What comes first is the witness of a life akin to the Gospel.

The same Earlier Rule continues to develop the theme of manual work in chapter 9, which speaks about begging alms: "When it is necessary, they may go for alms. Let them not be ashamed and remember, moreover, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the all-powerful living God, *set His face like flint* (Is 50:7) and was not ashamed. He was poor and a stranger and lived on alms – He, the Blessed Virgin, and His disciples. When people revile them and refuse to give them alms, let them thank God for this because they will receive great honour before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ for such insults...Alms are a legacy and a justice due to the poor that our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us. The brothers who work at acquiring them will receive a great reward and enable those who give them to gain and acquire one; for all that people leave behind in the world will perish, but they will have a reward from the Lord for the charity and almsgiving they have done."<sup>96</sup>

This chapter is also a portrait of the first Franciscan fraternity. Francis motivates the need to beg alms. The real need for alms is motivated by the example of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin and the apostles. This is certainly an interesting and original way of reading the Gospel, since nowhere in the Gospel accounts do we find that Jesus Christ and the apostles were mendicants. This intuition of the poverty of the apostolic community was the reason for so many discussions and problems in the Order during the first two centuries of its existence. But a reference to this would go beyond the scope of our study. Begging for alms was also an occasion to give witness to Christ, the suffering Servant of Yahweh, as the reference to the third Canticle of the Servant in the Second Isaiah shows. It is also an occasion to suffer persecution and humiliation, on the part of those who refuse to give alms. The brothers are not to be afraid of these humiliations, but should be convinced that begging is an act of justice due to the poor, after these have not received remuneration in kind for the work and service they have accomplished. Moreover, begging becomes an occasion for spiritual advancement of those who give alms, since they

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<sup>96</sup> Earlier Rule IX,3-6, 7-9 (FAED I,70-71).

would be seeing the Lord in the charity they do with his poor ones. Linked with this theme of begging is another part of the same chapter, in which Francis asks the brothers to make known with confidence their needs to one another. The ministry of the brotherhood is also an act of charity, and begging alms one from the other is a guarantee of building fraternity. “Let each one love and care for his brother as a mother loves and cares for her son.”<sup>97</sup> The most heroic result of mutual charity is when a sick brother asks for alms and for help from his other brothers. This is the subject of chapter 10 of the Earlier Rule.

In the Later Rule we also find chapter 5 dedicated to the manner of working of the brothers: “Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working may work faithfully and devotedly so that, while avoiding idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute. In payment for their work they may receive whatever is necessary for the bodily support of themselves and their brothers, excepting coin or money, and let them do this humbly as is becoming for servants of God and followers of most holy poverty.”<sup>98</sup>

Although the motivations for manual work are equal to those expressed in the Earlier Rule, some details are particular in this case. Francis speaks about the “grace” of working. Work is not a burden imposed by necessity, but an occasion to receive the Spirit of the Lord working within us. The style of work of the brothers should be that of faithfulness and devotion. These qualities are linked with humility and a spirit of service and dedication. The reason for work is even more explicit in the Later Rule, namely, that the brothers avoid idleness, “the enemy of the soul,” and that they do not “extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion.” Work is thus presented as a compliment to the life of prayer of the fraternity, and as an occasion to win over the temptation of idleness, which is the cause of sin. We could speak of a moral motivation for the Franciscan style of work. Moreover, work is an incentive to pray. It is interesting to note that Francis does not consider prayer without any relation to work. Work intensifies the time given over to the spirit of prayer, and not vice-versa. In this way, the spirit of prayer and devotion assumes primacy over all work.

Thomas of Celano, in his *Life of St. Francis*, describes the life of work of the first brothers, which can provide us with a reflection upon what Francis says in his *Testament and Rules*: “During the day those who knew how worked with their own hands, staying in the houses of lepers or in other suitable places, serving everyone humbly and devoutly. They did not want to take any job that might give rise to scandal; but rather always doing what was holy and just, honest and useful, they inspired all they dealt with to follow their example of humility and patience.”<sup>99</sup>

This description of the primitive brotherhood fits in well with what the *Testament* states regarding manual work. The brothers preferred work, which was truly a humble service, particularly to the lepers. It is the style of the work of the brothers that strikes us most. Their humility and devotion to the ones they served was the characteristic witness of love they were giving to all. Their work for the lepers included nursing in what probably were appalling conditions of hygiene, but the brothers knew that this kind of work was an exterior sign of the inner sense of poverty and humility, which they promised in their Gospel commitment. Their work is described as being just, honest and useful, and they carried it out with a spirit of humility and patience.

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<sup>97</sup> Earlier Rule IX,11 (FAED I,71).

<sup>98</sup> Later Rule V,1-4 (FAED I,102-103).

<sup>99</sup> IC 39 (FAED I,38).

Certainly the Testament is referring to the initial years of Francis's experience and that of the brothers. The clerical work of the Order, which greatly grew in proportion after the death of St. Francis, was still not the principal occupation of the friars. However, one is tempted to see in the dying Francis a wish to go back to the early days of humility and service, since he was aware of the growing number of brothers who were engaging themselves in studies and in preaching and other apostolic activities, which were largely reserved to clerics. Although Francis was not against such intellectual or spiritual work, as we have already noted in his respect for theologians, he was nevertheless aware that it could become an occasion for the creation of privileged classes of brothers in the Order. Franciscan history shows that this is what exactly happened in the years, which followed the death of St. Francis.

Francis recalled to his mind his initial experiences of humility in begging oil for the lamp of the church of San Damiano. The Legend of the Three Companions describes one such experience:

"While he was working steadily at restoring the church, he wanted to have a lamp burning continually in the church, so he went through the city begging for oil. But when he was approaching a certain house, he saw a group of men gathered for a game. Ashamed to beg in front of them, he backed away. Mulling it over, he accused himself of having sinned. Hurrying back to the place where they were playing, he told everyone standing around his fault, that he was ashamed to beg because of them. And, in fervour of spirit, he entered that house and, for the love of God, begged in French for oil for the lamps of that church."<sup>100</sup>

The same experience of humility during begging is also described in the Legend of the Three Companions when Francis preferred to go to beg for his daily food, rather than depend on the kindness of the poor priest with whom he was staying at San Damiano. The words, which he uttered to himself are eloquent in showing his project of life for himself and, eventually for the future brotherhood: "This is not the life of the poor that you have chosen. As a beggar, going from door to door, you should carry a bowl in your hand, and, driven by necessity, you should collect the scraps they give you. This is how you must live willingly, out of love for him who was born poor, lived very poorly in this world, remained naked and poor on the cross, and was buried in a tomb belonging to another."<sup>101</sup>

The Christological motive for poverty and begging is ever-present in the Franciscan tradition. The Sources are a proof of this way of life, which Francis taught his brothers to observe. The Assisi Compilation gives us the reason why Francis was not ashamed to beg for alms, and even invites the knights who accompanied him from Nocera Umbra to Assisi to go and beg humbly from the locals of a small town in the Commune of Assisi.<sup>102</sup> The same episode has this explanation attached to it:

"For blessed Francis held that to beg for alms for the love of the Lord God was of very great nobility, dignity, and courtesy before God and before the world. He held this because, everything that he heavenly Father has created for a human's use, after the sin, He has given freely, as alms, both to the worthy and the unworthy on account of the love of His beloved Son."<sup>103</sup>

To Hugolino, the cardinal bishop of Ostia, who invites him to dinner in his house, and is nearly offended by the fact that Francis begs his own dinner, the saint answers: "While I am with you, who are our Lord and Pope, and with other great and

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<sup>100</sup> L3C 24 (FAED II,83).

<sup>101</sup> L3C 22 (FAED II,82).

<sup>102</sup> AC 96 (FAED,198-199).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

wealthy people in the eyes of the world, who for the love of the Lord God and with great kindness, not only receive me into their houses, but even compel me to do so, I do not want to be ashamed to go for alms. Indeed I want to have and hold it as a sign of great nobility, as the highest dignity and an honour to that most exalted King, who though He was Lord of all, willed for our sake to become the servant of all and, although he was rich and glorious in majesty, came as one poor and despised in our humanity. So I want all who are and will be brothers to know that I hold it a greater consolation for both soul and body when I sit at a poor little table of the brothers and see before me the meagre alms they begged from door to door for the love of the Lord God, than when I sit at your table and that of other lords, set abundantly with all kinds of food, even though they are offered to me with great devotion. For the bread offered as alms is holy bread which the praise and love of God have hallowed, because when a brother goes out begging, he must first say: 'Praised and blessed be the Lord God.' Afterwards he must say: 'Give us alms for the love of the Lord God.'",<sup>104</sup>

The Testament is a faithful witness of this kind of poverty, which Francis cherished all his life. Begging also provided him with the occasion to announce peace.

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<sup>104</sup> AC 97 (FAED II,200-201).

## THE SALUTATION OF PEACE

*The Lord revealed a greeting to me that we should say: "May the Lord give you peace."*

The Testament is the document that gives us the typical Franciscan salutation of peace, taken from 2 Thessalonians 3:16: "May the Lord give you peace." This expression of Francis is placed as the conclusion of all the paragraphs we have been considering, so much so, that it seems that the Testament ends with this greeting, and that the continuing sections of the Testament were added on a different occasion. The gift of peace is the result of a life of penance, in the service of the suffering Christ in the outcasts, in the churches and poor priests, in his presence in the Eucharist and the holy names and words which theologians proclaim, in the gift of the brothers, who discover the way of life of the Gospel and ask the Lord Pope to confirm it for them, who choose poverty and want to be considered as lesser brothers, who pray humbly the divine office in the poor churches, who work with their hands and go begging for alms. The messianic gift of peace is the result of this way of life, which Francis and the brothers embraced, and which Francis cherished to the very end of his life. It was also this messianic peace that was announced even before his birth, as this striking episode in the Legend of the Three Companions eloquently shows:

"As he later testified, he learned a greeting of this sort by the Lord's revelation: 'May the Lord give you peace!' Therefore, in all his preaching, he greeted the people at the beginning of his sermon with a proclamation of peace. It is certainly astonishing, if not miraculous, that this greeting of peace was used before his conversion by a precursor who frequently went through Assisi greeting the people with 'Peace and good! Peace and good!' It seems plausible that, as John heralded Christ but withdrew when Christ began his mission of preaching, so too, like another John, this man preceded Francis in using the greeting of peace, but disappeared when he appeared. Immediately, therefore, filled with the spirit of the prophets, the man of God, Francis, after that greeting, proclaimed peace, preached salvation, and, according to a prophetic passage, by his salutary admonitions, brought to true peace many who had previously lived at odds with Christ and far from salvation."<sup>105</sup>

The mysterious herald who announced peace and good in Assisi before the birth of Francis was echoing a sincere need for a new society on every level. A critical examination of the society in which Francis was born reveals the need for peace. The feudal lords were at odds with the emerging class of the merchants, the clergy and monks were always fighting for privileges, titles and possessions, rivalry between neighbouring towns was generating bloody wars, as happened in 1202 in the battle of Collestrada between Assisi and Perugia, in which Francis himself took part and was captured and taken prisoner. Medieval society in Italy was yearning for peace, from the highest levels of authority at odds between papal and imperial hegemony to the least in society who were also slaves of the brutality of hatred and wars between social classes. Francis grew up in this society, and for twenty years was part and parcel of this social framework. It was only when he started his process of conversion that he began to appreciate the value of inner peace, and so began to

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<sup>105</sup> L3C 26 (FAED II,84).



announce it with his silent witness and with the way of life, which he eventually chose for himself and the brothers. The main biographers of Francis are all witnesses to the importance of the announcement of peace in his witness to the Gospel:

“In all of his preaching, before he presented the word of God to the assembly, he prayed for peace saying: ‘*May the Lord give you peace*’ (2 Thess 3:16). He always proclaimed this to men and women, to those he met and to those who met him. Accordingly, many who hated peace along with salvation, with the Lord’s help wholeheartedly embraced peace. They became themselves children of peace, now rivals for eternal salvation.”<sup>106</sup>

According to the records in the Assisi archives discovered by Arnaldo Fortini, we come to know that a good number of the first brothers came also from the families of the nobles who were always intent on waging wars in order to defend their possessions and fortified castles. Through the example of Francis these knights became brothers and lovers of peace, so much so that they would receive solid training from Francis in order to become heralds of messianic peace:

“He used to tell them: ‘As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your hearts, thus no one will be provoked to anger or scandal because of you. Let everyone be drawn to peace and kindness through your peace and gentleness. For we have been called to this: to cure the wounded, to bind up the broken, and to recall the erring. Many who seem to us members of the devil will yet be disciples of Christ.’”<sup>107</sup>

The image of a peace-loving fraternity could be a sign of Gospel conversion. This image was given by the attitudes of meekness and gentleness, indeed by the importance of the attitude of courtesy. Francis makes this very clear to his brothers in his Rules, when he admonishes them how to go out into the world:

“I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ not to quarrel or argue or judge others when they go about in the world; but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle, and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming.”<sup>108</sup>

In his Admonitions Francis gives the brothers the definition of what it means to observe the beatitude of peace of Matthew 5:9, *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*. “Those people are truly peacemakers who, regardless of what they suffer in this world, preserve peace of spirit and body out of love of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>109</sup>

In the prologue to the Major Legend of St. Francis, St. Bonaventure describes Francis as the one who became a messenger of peace from God, a sign of the messianic salvation present in the last days:

“He preached to people the Gospel of peace and salvation, being himself an angel of true peace. Like John the Baptist, he was destined by God to prepare in the desert a way of the highest poverty and to preach repentance by word and example.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> 1C 23 (FAED I,202-203). LJS 16 (FAED I,379): “He also learned by the Lord’s revelation a greeting of this sort, that he should say: ‘May the Lord give you peace.’ Thus, in all his preaching, he greeted the people at the beginning of his talk with the proclamation of peace. Filled with the spirit of the prophets, he proclaimed peace and preached salvation, as the prophet said. And it happened that by counsels about salvation, he brought to true peace many who had previously lived at odds with Christ and far from salvation.”

<sup>107</sup> AP 38 (FAED II,52).

<sup>108</sup> Later Rule III,10-11 (FAED I,65-66).

<sup>109</sup> Admonition 15 (FAED I,134).

<sup>110</sup> LM Prologue, 1 (FAED II,526).

The salutation of peace is thus intimately linked with the ministry of announcing the word of the Gospel. The way Francis would speak to the people before and after his sermons would sometimes sound strange to them, but he adamantly continued to insist with the brothers that this was the way to win them over to Christ. The first brothers were sent according to the command of the Gospel in order to announce peace to all:

“Go, my dear brothers...two by two through different parts of the world, announcing peace to the people and penance for the remission of sins. Be patient in trials, confident that the Lord will fulfil His plan and promise. Respond humbly to those who question you. Bless those who persecute you.”<sup>111</sup>

Just some months before he died, Francis had succeeded in establishing peace between bishop Guido and the Podestà of Assisi, Oportulo di Bernardo, by sending two of the brothers to sing before them the stanza about peace which he had added to his Cantic of Creatures.<sup>112</sup>

The gift of peace is the climax of the experience of brotherhood, which Francis proposes in his Testament. It also crowns the many episodes of the humble beginnings of the brotherhood, which Francis looked back on as an inspiration for the future of the Order. But the rest of the Testament shows that Francis was in anguish about this future.

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<sup>111</sup> 1C 29 (FAED I,207).

<sup>112</sup> Cfr. AC 84 (FAED II,187-188). “He called one of his companions and told him: ‘Go to the podestà and, on my behalf, tell him to go to the bishop’s residence together with the city’s magistrates and bring with him as many others as he can.’ And when the brother had gone, he said to two of his other companions: ‘Go and sing the Cantic of Brother Sun before the bishop, the podestà, and the others who are with them. I trust in the Lord that He will humble their hearts and they will make peace with each other and return to their earlier friendship and love.’”

## PILGRIMS AND STRANGERS WITHOUT PROPERTY

*Let the brothers be careful not to receive in any way churches or poor dwellings or anything else built for them unless they are according to the holy poverty we have promised in the Rule. As pilgrims and strangers, let them always be guests there.*

The second part of the Testament is an exhortation to the brothers to be faithful to some foundational values, which according to Saint Francis, provided the basis for the evangelical way of life. These would include the prohibition to receive anything which would go against poverty, including churches and houses, the spirit of itinerancy which should characterise the life of the brothers, the prohibition to ask for papal letters of recommendation which would entail having privileges, even in cases of persecution, the obligation to pray the Divine Office according to the rite of the Roman Church, the obligation of obedience to the Minister General and the Cardinal Protector of the Order. Francis also inserts his own experience of obedience to “his” guardian.

A closer look at the verbs, which Francis uses in this second section, reveals a very strong language on his part. He speaks in forceful terms: *caveant sibi fratres* (“let the brothers be careful”), *praecipio firmiter per obedientiam* (“I strictly command through obedience”), *firmiter volo obedire* (“I firmly wish to obey”), *volo esse captus* (“I so wish to be a captive”), *tamen volo habere* (“nevertheless I want to have”), *per obedientiam teneantur* (“let them be bound through obedience”), *custos firmiter teneatur per obedientiam* (“let the custodian be strictly bound through obedience”), *minister firmiter teneatur per obedientiam* (“let the minister be bound through obedience”), *et generalis minister et omnes alii ministri et custodes per obedientiam teneantur* (“let the general minister and all the other ministers and custodians be bound through obedience”), *praecipio firmiter per obedientiam* (“I strictly command through obedience”).

These strong expressions show clearly a very tense situation, in which Francis is in anguish about the state of the brotherhood. This last section of the Testament certainly reflects his state of mind at the very end of his life. In the *Assisi Compilation* and the *Mirror of Perfection*, we find many instances where we sense the anguish of Francis, because of the brothers’ lack of understanding of the Gospel project of life he was proposing. One of such examples occurred during the Chapter of Mats, held at the Portiuncula in 1221:

“When blessed Francis was at the general chapter called the Chapter of Mats, held at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, there were five thousand brothers present. Many wise and learned brothers told the Lord Cardinal, who later became Pope Gregory, who was present at the chapter, that he should persuade blessed Francis to follow the advice of those same wise brothers and allow himself to be guided by them for the time being. They cited the Rule of blessed Benedict, of blessed Augustine, and of blessed Bernard, which teach how to live in such order in such a way.

Then, blessed Francis, on hearing the cardinal’s advice about this, took him by the hand and led him to the brothers assembled in chapter, and spoke to the brothers in this way: ‘My brothers! My brothers! God has called me by the way of simplicity

and showed me the way of simplicity. I do not want you to mention to me any Rule, whether of Saint Augustine, or of Saint Bernard, or of Saint Benedict.”<sup>113</sup>

Francis was confident that the way of the Gospel, which the Lord himself revealed to him, was to be followed with faithfulness. He was aware of the concrete needs of the brotherhood, which by 1226, had grown and spread far and wide, and which therefore could not continue living in the simplicity of the origins. A closer look at the words of the Testament reveals, in fact, an awareness of the need to adapt, even on Francis’s part, to the changing circumstances in which the Order was living. Francis, in fact, could do little to halt this development. He himself had resigned from the direction of the Order in the Pentecost Chapter of 1220.

“Blessed Francis wanted to be humble among his brothers. To preserve greater humility, a few years after his conversion he resigned the office of prelate before all the brothers during a chapter held at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula. ‘From now on,’ he said, ‘I am dead to you. But here is Brother Peter di Catanio: let us all, you and I, obey him.’ Then all the brothers began to cry loudly and weep profusely, but blessed Francis bowed down before Brother Peter and promised him obedience and reverence.”<sup>114</sup>

The *Assisi Compilation* says that Francis resigned his office of prelate out of humility. It is hard to believe that this could have been the only motive. From the Sources it seems that, in 1220, when he had returned from the East and had asked the Pope to give a Cardinal Protector to the Order in the person of Hugolino, Francis was feeling very much incapable to leading the brotherhood and facing up to its ever-growing needs. He probably felt anguished at not being in full control of the situation, but he knew he could do little about it. That is why he humbly resigned. In the *Assisi Compilation*, we find this unique fact that could illustrate what we are saying:

“A short time later, when he was suffering a serious illness, he raised himself up in bed in an angry spirit: ‘Who are these people? They have snatched out of my hands my religion, and that of the brothers. If I go to the general chapter, I’ll show them what is my will.’”<sup>115</sup>

On his deathbed, Francis knew that the brothers were constructing new houses, out of sheer necessity. He also knew that Pope Honorius III had given permission to the brothers to have their own oratories and chapels, by the Bull *Quia populares tumultus* (3<sup>rd</sup> December 1224).<sup>116</sup> The growing numbers of the brothers necessitated more fixed dwellings for them. At the same time, Francis insists upon the poverty, which these houses or places had to show, as a witness to the evangelical life of the brothers. Two notes are characteristic in the words of the Testament. The first one is that the poor houses and churches built for the brothers by others had to

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<sup>113</sup> AC 18 (FAED II,132-133); Cfr. 2MP 68.

<sup>114</sup> AC 11 (FAED II,125); Cfr. 2MP 39.

<sup>115</sup> AC 44 (FAED II,145-146); Cfr. 2C 188; 2MP 41. The fact that the same episode is also found in 2C is significant, because Thomas of Celano would have not approved of any wrong interpretation of the will of St. Francis in a Legend which he was composing at the request of a Minister General like Crescentius of Iesi. 2C seems to confirm the truthfulness of this account in AC, and leaves little doubt about the 2MP, which coming as late as 1318 would sometimes appear to interpret facts in the light of the Order’s history at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>116</sup> K. Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 64: “Francis used and, by that very fact, approved a real privilege that Honorius III granted the Friars Minor through the Bull *Quia populares tumultus* of December 3, 1224. Here the Pope permitted the Holy Sacrament to be preserved in all “places and oratories, monasteries and chapels of the Friars Minor and allowed Holy Mass together with the Divine Office to be celebrated there.”

be, in fact, poor. The second one is that the brothers could never claim these places as their property. Regarding the poverty of the churches and houses of the brothers, we find a description in *The Remembrance of the Desire of Soul* by Thomas of Celano:

“He taught his own to build poor little dwellings out of wood, and not stone, and how to build these according to a crude sketch...Once, there was going to be a chapter at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula. The time was already close at hand, and the people of Assisi could see that there was no house there. So in a great rush they built a house for the chapter, while the man of God was away and unaware of this. When the father finally returned, he saw the house and was annoyed. He complained, and not gently. Immediately, wanting to dismantle the building, he was the first to get up; he climbed to the roof and started tearing out slates and tiles with a mighty hand. He ordered the brothers also to climb up and to tear down completely that monstrosity against poverty. He said that this would quickly spread throughout the Order, and everyone would take for an example any sign of pretension they saw in that place. He would have destroyed that house right to the foundations, but some knights standing nearby dampened his fiery spirits. They told him that the building belonged to the town, not to the brothers. At another time, when he was returning from Verona and wished to pass through Bologna, he heard that a new house of the brothers had been built there. And just because he heard the words ‘house of the brothers,’ he changed course and went by another route, avoiding Bologna. Furthermore, he commanded the brothers to leave the house quickly. For this reason the house was abandoned; and even the sick could not stay, but were thrown out with the rest of them. And they did not get permission to return there until Lord Hugo, who was then Bishop of Ostia and Legate in Lombardy, declared while preaching in public that this house was his. And he who writes this and bears witness to it was at that time thrown out from that house while he was sick.”<sup>117</sup>

Francis was adamant that the brothers should never have houses which were not poor, and that they should never accept property rights:

“He did not want the brothers to live in any place unless it had a definite owner who held the property rights. He always wanted to have the law of pilgrims for his sons.”<sup>118</sup>

The precept to be *advenae et peregrini* (“pilgrims and strangers”) comes from the Later Rule: “Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence.”<sup>119</sup>

This second characteristic note of this paragraph of the Testament insists upon the brothers’ vocation to itinerancy. The ideal of Christ and the apostles, who had nowhere to lay their heads, becomes a way of life for Francis and his first followers. Although Francis is aware of the great difficulties inherent in this ideal because of the growing number of friars and their increasing day-to-day needs, he nevertheless reminds them in the Testament that, in the beginning, they were born as an itinerant Order of brothers without any fixed abode.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> 2C 56-58 (FAED II,285-286). These episodes also probably happened in the critical period of 1219-1221.

<sup>118</sup> AC 23 (FAED II,135-136).

<sup>119</sup> Later Rule VI,1-2 (FAED I,103).

<sup>120</sup> AC 9 (FAED II,123-124): “As stated in the Rule, let the brothers remain as strangers and pilgrims in the houses in which they stay. Let them not seek to have anything under heaven, except holy poverty, by which, in this world, they are nourished by the Lord with bodily food and virtue, and, in the next, will attain a heavenly inheritance.”

What could Francis have had in mind when he was dictating his Testament and stating that the brothers should live in poor churches and houses? A closer look at the Sources, particularly the ones coming from the pen of the companions of St. Francis, shows that he regarded the Portiuncula as the model church and friary of the Order.

The donation of the Portiuncula to Francis and the brothers by the abbot of the monastery of St. Benedict of Mount Subasio is a clear indication of what Francis intended when he was speaking about poor churches and houses for the friars.<sup>121</sup> The church of the Portiuncula remained for Francis a model of a true Franciscan brotherhood.<sup>122</sup>

The way of life of the brothers at Saint Mary of the Angels was probably the motive, which led Francis to speak about the poor churches and houses of the brothers in his Testament. It was at the Portiuncula that the brothers were formed “as pilgrims and strangers” who went out to spread the good news and returned to the safe haven of that poor dwelling where they were born as an evangelical and apostolic movement. The words of the Testament betray a longing for that distant past, which was an ideal never totally forgotten in the long history of the Franciscan Order.

Francis had an ideal and he was sure that it was the ideal of the Gospel. He knew that it would have been very hard for him and the brothers to be faithful to this ideal at all costs, and the Testament is proof that Francis had to make concessions on his project of evangelical life. But he never went back from what he knew was the ideal in its simplicity and purity. The Testament could be regarded as a spiritual document, which could not bind the friars in conscience to its observance. But it could never be regarded as an outmoded way of living the Gospel project. That is why Francis insists on certain foundational values, to the point of appearing too pressing with his demands on the brothers. The demand to live in poor churches and houses without any fixed dwelling paved the way for the next demand, which consists in the prohibition to ask for any letters of recommendation or privileges from the Roman Curia. No other section of the Testament was destined to be progressively ignored by the brothers than the one we shall be considering next.

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<sup>121</sup> Cfr. AC 56 (FAED II,154-155); 2MP 55. *The Assisi Compilation* says: “Blessed Francis was overjoyed at the place granted to the brothers, especially because of the name of this church of the Mother of Christ, and because it was such a poor little church, and because of the surname it had, for it was surnamed, ‘of the Portiuncula.’ This name foreshadowed that it was to be the mother and head (*mater et caput*) of the poor Lesser Brothers. It was called ‘Portiuncula’ after the neighbourhood where that church was built, which from earliest times was called ‘Portiuncula.’ Blessed Francis used to say: ‘This is why the Lord willed that no other church be granted to the brothers, and why the first brothers would not build any completely new church, and would not have any other but this one. For this church was a prophecy that has been fulfilled in the coming of the Lesser Brothers.’” One cannot help noticing in these expressions a sense of faithfulness to Francis’s original idea about the poverty of churches, when one remembers that, by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Friars Minor had large conventual churches in all cities and major centres of studies. The title *mater et caput* given by AC and 2MP to the Portiuncula is, in fact, a way of saying how Francis intended Franciscan churches to be, given that the only church which had the title of *caput et mater Ordinis Minorum*, given by Pope Gregory IX, was the basilica of St. Francis in Assisi.

<sup>122</sup> 2C 18-19 (FAED II,256-258). Cfr. The poem of praise to the Portiuncula in 2MP 84.

## NO PRIVILEGES FROM THE ROMAN CURIA

*I strictly command all the brothers through obedience, wherever they may be, not to dare to ask any letter from the Roman Curia, either personally or through an intermediary, whether for a church or another place or under the pretext of preaching or the persecution of their bodies. But, wherever they have not been received, let them flee into another country to do penance with the blessing of God.*

This is another strict prohibition in the Testament. It reflects Francis's preoccupation to safeguard the vocation of the brothers to minority. The Friars Minor had to be humble and show submission to the Church, and never pretend to be considered special in any way. The Sources, for example, show Francis's insistence with the brothers not to accept privileges, which would hamper their call to minority.

"Some of the brothers told blessed Francis: 'Father, don't you see that sometimes bishops do not permit us to preach, allowing us to remain idle in an area for many days before we can preach to the people? It would be better if you arranged for the brothers to get a privilege from the Lord Pope: it would be the salvation of souls.' He answered them with a stern rebuke, telling them: 'You, Friars Minor, you do not know the will of God, and will not allow me to convert the whole world as God wills. For I want to convert the prelates first by humility and reverence. Then, when they see your holy life and your reverence for them, they will ask you to preach and convert the people. These will attract the people to you far better than the privileges you want, which would lead you to pride. And if you are free of all avarice, and lead the people to give the churches their due, they will ask you to hear the confessions of their people. Although you should not be concerned about this, for if they are converted, they will easily find confessors. For my part, I want only this privilege from the Lord: not to have any privilege from any human being, except to show reverence to all, and, by the obedience of the holy Rule, to convert everyone more by example than by word.'"<sup>123</sup>

This text, taken from the section on the *Verba Sancti Francisci* (*The Words of St. Francis*) by brother Leo, probably shows the state of affairs in the Order in a period when it had undergone a thorough process of clericalisation, with the friars living in spacious friaries and large conventual churches, having all privileges for the sake of their ministry. The brothers would look back at what Francis would have said in this situation, and they would remember the words in his Testament as well as other words like the ones quoted above. Most probably, however, one can find a nucleus of the genuine intentions of St. Francis in these words, since the Sources often portray him being unenthusiastic about the brothers assuming ecclesiastical offices. Such is the case regarding a meeting which Francis and Dominic Guzman were supposed to have had at the residence of Cardinal Hugolino, during the celebration of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215:

"Those two bright lights of the world, namely, Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, were once in the City with the Lord of Ostia, who later became Supreme Pontiff. As they took turns pouring out honey-sweet words about the Lord, the bishop finally said to them: 'In the early Church the Church's shepherds were poor, and men

<sup>123</sup> AC 20 (FAED II,134). Cfr. IMP 44; 2MP 50.

of charity, not on fire with greed. Why don't we make bishops and prelates of your brothers who excel in teaching and example'...Blessed Francis bowed to the bishop and said: 'My lord, my brothers are called *minors* precisely so they will not presume to become greater. They have been called this to teach them to stay down to earth, and to follow the footprints of Christ's humility, which in the end will exalt them above others in the sight of the saints. If you want them to bear fruit in the Church of God, keep them in the status in which they were called and hold them to it. Bring them back down to ground level even against their will. Never allow them to rise to become prelates.'"<sup>124</sup>

These texts from the Sources seem to solve the problem of privileges for the brothers once and for all. But, in fact, when Francis was still alive, the brothers had already acquired some letters of recommendation and privileges from the Roman Curia. What is interesting is not the fact that Francis himself was not against acquiring letters from the Pope for the sake of a better organisation of the Order, or for the sake of the orthodox reputation of the brothers. According to the expert advice of Kajetan Esser, it seems that the prohibition in the Testament regards the excessive use of asking for privileges from the Roman Curia, which would render this practice an abuse on the part of the friars.<sup>125</sup>

The prohibition of the Testament regards the faculty of asking for letters from the Roman Curia either directly or through intermediaries. The brothers could make use of persons who had influence in the Roman Curia in order to acquire privileges. This possibility could have been real, given that Francis himself had had access to Pope Innocent III way back in 1209, through the good services of Guido, bishop of Assisi, and especially Cardinal John of St. Paul, bishop of Sabina.

The objects for which the friars might have asked for privileges would have included churches or other dwellings, particularly friaries. Francis might have had in mind the many privileges, which the Benedictine abbeys enjoyed, particularly the

<sup>124</sup> AC 49 (FAED II,148); Cfr. 2C 148.

<sup>125</sup> K. Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 63-67: "We will try to test the basic position of St. Francis toward papal writings and letters of protection by the way he put it into practice in his life. The question is whether his practical behaviour was in agreement with his theoretical position in the Testament or whether the prohibition in the Testament is to be understood in the light of his practical behaviour. Already at his first meeting with the Roman Curia, Francis asked Innocent III for a new privilege for those times: lay-preaching for himself and his brothers, together with a confirmation of the unusual Order, even though it was ideal for the situation. Celano reported that 'the Pope approved the request.' Strictly speaking one cannot consider it a 'letter,' but, in fact, Celano's account treats it as a privilege. On September 22, 1220, the Bull *Cum secundum consilium* of Honorius III introduced the novitiate or the canonical year of probation into the Order ... Francis used and, by that very fact, approved a real privilege that Honorius III granted the Friars Minor through the Bull *Quia populares tumultus* of December 3, 1224. Here the Pope permitted the Holy Sacrament to be preserved in all 'places and oratories,' monasteries and chapels of the Friars Minor and allowed Holy Mass together with the Divine Office to be celebrated there ... At the beginning of the mission around 1219, Honorius III in the Bulls *Cum dilecti filii*, dated November 6, 1219, and *Pro dilectis filiis*, May 29, 1220, explains to the clergy of France that the Friars Minor are true believers and Catholic and should be considered true members of a religious order ... In the Letters *Vineae Domini Custodes* of October 7, 1225, and *Ex parte vestra* of March 17, 1226, all brothers who go as missionaries to the Saracens are granted the protection of all Christian princes and are assured of far reaching authority. This listing shows clearly that in the Testament Francis came up with a corrective, not against the possible use of papal letters, but against a frequent use of them. The following facts are certain: time and again Francis requested privileges from the Roman Curia; in some cases his own actions encouraged papal letters, and in each instance it can be proven or explained with good reasons as thoroughly as possible. It is a fact that he accepted papal writings for the Order and thereby found them good. It is also a fact that the Friars Minor received privileges in his lifetime which were certainly against his intentions."



privilege of exemption from Episcopal jurisdiction. Even though the Order did not possess a single church which would rival these large abbeys even in the remotest sense, Francis nevertheless had the premonition that the brothers were already planning to have their own churches and friaries, in which they could live a fairly stable conventual style of life modelled, at least partially, upon that of the monastic Orders.

Another object, which would attract letters of recommendation from the Curia would be the ministry of preaching. The various letters of recommendation that the Pope sent to bishops regarding the orthodox preaching of the Friars Minor could be the occasion, which prompted Francis to include this detail in this section of the Testament. The ministry of preaching, according to the Rule, fell under the scrutiny of the Ministers, who had to act in the name of the ecclesiastical authority, particularly the diocesan bishop, who alone could authorise preaching in his diocese. The fact that the Pope was giving the brothers, letters of recommendation was a way to coax bishops into giving the friars permission to preach as soon as they set foot in their dioceses.

The last object, which would justify the asking of letters of recommendation or privilege would have been the persecution of the friars, especially in the lands of the “infidels.” We know that Francis already had an experience of the outcome of the preaching of the friars who went to Morocco, namely Berardus and his companions, and who were martyred at Marrakesh on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1220. Francis himself had the experience of being misunderstood by Pelagius the Papal Legate, and initially persecuted when he tried to go to the Saracen camp with brother Illuminato in order to meet the Sultan of Egypt, when he went to Damietta in 1219.

The solution to these problems for Francis remained the Gospel injunction to flee to another place and do penance there with God’s blessing. In this way, Francis would avoid the temptation that his friars would always go on asking for privileges in order to pave the way for a rapid expansion of the Order and an efficient way of making apostolate. The middle course, which he probably tolerated, was to be grossly misunderstood in the years immediately following his death. The reasons for this might have sincerely been those of enhancing the efficiency of the Order’s presence and activity, with all the good intentions of the authorities of the Church and of the Order. The tone of the Testament, however, is strict and leaves little room for doubt regarding the genuine intentions of St. Francis.

## OBEDIENCE TO THE MINISTER, GUARDIANS, AND FAITHFULNESS TO THE OFFICE ACCORDING TO THE RULE

*And I firmly wish to obey the general minister of this fraternity and the other guardians whom it pleases him to give me. And I so wish to be a captive in his hands that I cannot go anywhere or do anything beyond obedience and his will, for he is my master. And although I may be simple and inform, I nevertheless want to have a cleric always with me who will celebrate the Office for me as it is prescribed in the Rule. And let all the brothers be bound to obey their guardians and to recite the Office according to the Rule. And if some might have been found who are not reciting the Office according to the Rule and want to change it in some way, or who are not Catholics, let all the brothers, wherever they may have found one of them, be bound through obedience to bring him before the custodian of that place nearest to where they found him. And let the custodian be strictly bound through obedience to keep him securely day and night as a man in chains, so that he cannot be taken from his hands until he can personally deliver him into the hands of his minister. And let the minister be bound through obedience to send him with such brothers who would guard him as a prisoner until they deliver him to the Lord of Ostia, who is the Lord, the Protector and the Corrector of this fraternity.*

The Testament is a document of faithfulness to an ideal, not in the abstract sense of a doctrine or philosophy of life, but in the practical sense of a way of life, which follows the “footsteps” of Christ in the Gospel. Francis was always careful not to separate the real needs of the brotherhood from those of the real body of Jesus Christ, which he saw as being very visible in the community of believers. Such as there is no true Gospel without the mystery of the Incarnation, there is also no true fraternity without the mystery of the Church. It is in this theological light that we may interpret this section of the Testament, which is definitely the strictest and most forceful part of the whole autobiographical document we are considering.

Francis bases his faithfulness to the Gospel project upon the word “obedience.” For him, obedience meant a very concrete way of relating to the ministers and guardians of the fraternity. We know, from the Sources, that Francis would insist on having a “personal” guardian, to whom he would promise obedience.

“Although he was more exalted than all other brothers, he still appointed one of the brothers staying with him as his guardian and master. He humbly and devoutly obeyed him, in order to avoid any occasion of pride.”<sup>126</sup>

The figure of the guardian in the Writings of St. Francis and in the Sources is unique. It denotes a quality of service, more than a specific office in the Order, even though it ended up being necessarily linked with the office of the local superior in a given fraternity. Francis was convinced that no friar could live in obedience without relating to another friar who could be of protection (*guardianus*) to his spiritual welfare. After resigning from the ministry of the brothers during the Chapter of 1220,

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<sup>126</sup> AP 37 (FAED II,52).

Francis asked to have a personal guardian, in order to provide an example of obedience to all the brothers.

“He wished to be subject to the general minister and the provincial ministers, so that in whatever province he stayed or preached, he obeyed the minister of that province. What is more, a long time before his death, for the sake of greater perfection and humility, he said to the general minister: ‘I ask you to put one of my companions in your place regarding me, so that I may obey him as I would obey you. For the sake of good example and the virtue of obedience, in life and in death I always want you to be with me.’ From that time until his death, he always had one of his companions as a guardian whom he obeyed in place of the general minister. One time he said to his companions: ‘Among other favours, the Most High has given me this grace: I would obey a novice who entered our religion today, if he were appointed my guardian, just as readily as I would obey him who is the first and the eldest in the life and religion of the brothers.’”<sup>127</sup>

A second sign of faithfulness and obedience to the Gospel project of life was Francis’ insistence on praying the Divine Office according to the rite of the Roman Curia. This was a distinctive mark of his spirituality, not because of any preoccupation about liturgy and rites, but out of a sense of faithfulness to the Church, and to its form of prayer. The Franciscan Order was unique in this respect, since it seems not to have developed its own liturgical tradition, like other monastic or mendicant Orders, but followed that of the Roman Curia.

The Writings and Sources are full of references regarding Francis’ faithfulness to the duty of praying the canonical hours, even if he had to stand up in the pelting rain.<sup>128</sup> One Source of particular interest is the rubric written by brother Leo in a breviary which belonged to St. Francis, and which was given by the same Leo to the Poor Ladies, and which is nowadays kept as a relic in the monastery of St. Clare in Assisi. This rubric illustrates in an eloquent way what St. Francis says in his Testament regarding his faithfulness to the Divine Office.<sup>129</sup>

The section, which regards those brothers who do not want to pray the Divine Office according to the rite of the Roman Church, is particularly harsh. We notice that three times Francis binds the conscience of the brothers and ministers, under obedience, to correct brothers like these. Note the ascending order of obligations, which Francis lays upon the shoulders of the brothers, the custodian, the minister, and finally upon the Lord Cardinal Protector himself, who is the guarantee of faithfulness towards the Church of Rome. The reasons for this seemingly harsh procedure can be understood with the help of the historical background of the lay heretical movements, which were causing trouble to the Church’s institutions, such as the Cathari,

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<sup>127</sup> AC 11 (FAED II,125-126); Cfr. 2C 151; 1MP 15; 2MP 46.

<sup>128</sup> Cfr. AC 119-120; 2C 96.

<sup>129</sup> *Inscription of Brother Leo* (1257-60), (FAED II,773): “Blessed Francis acquired this breviary from his companions Brother Angelo and Brother Leo, and when he was well he wished always to say the Office, as is stated in the Rule. At the time when he was sick and not able to recite it, he wished to listen to it. And he continued to do this for as long as he lived. He also had the Book of the Gospels copied, and whenever he would be unable to hear Mass due to infirmity or any other manifest impediment, he had that Gospel read to him, which on that day was read at Mass in Church. And he continued to do this until his death. For he used to say: ‘When I do not hear Mass, I adore the Body of Christ in prayer with the eyes of my mind, just as I adore it when I see it during Mass.’ After blessed Francis read the Gospel or listened to it, he always kissed the Gospel out of the greatest reverence for the Lord. For this reason Brother Angelo and Brother Leo, as much as they can, humbly beg Lady Benedetta, the abbess of the Poor Ladies of the Monastery of Saint Clare, and all the abbesses of the same monastery who are to come after her, that in memory of and out of devotion to our holy Father they always preserve in the Monastery of Saint Clare this book out of which he so many times read.”

Albigensians and Waldensians.<sup>130</sup> It was not, therefore, simply a question of uniformity in the manner of praying of the brothers. It went deeper to the very core of the existence of the Gospel project of the brothers, namely, within the reality of the Church, as the visible incarnation of Christ, present in the Pope as a bond of unity.

To further this sense of faithfulness, Francis had asked Honorius III to provide the Order with a Cardinal Protector, when he came back from the East in 1220. “Blessed Francis petitioned the Lord Pope for one of the cardinals who would be the governor, protector, and corrector of this religion, as stated in the Rule. And he granted him the Lord of Ostia.”<sup>131</sup> The most important duty of the Cardinal Protector was that of being the corrector of the fraternity, that is, of providing the visible bond of unity between the brothers and the Church of Rome.

The Testament, as an autobiographical document that shows Francis’s genuine intentions to the brothers, is one of the most forceful regarding the vocation of the Friars Minor as one of service to the Church. The dynamics of obedience in the Franciscan life are based upon the relation between the brothers and their ministers and servants, who, in turn, provide the guarantee for faithfulness towards the Church, expressed in their humble submission to the Church of Rome, in the person of the Pope and of the Cardinal Protector. To see Francis’s ecclesial charism in a different way is to thwart his original intuition. The Testament is proof that, even if Francis was not always understood by the official Church organs, which could have “institutionalised” his Gospel project of life, he nevertheless knew that there could be no life of the Gospel if it was not in communion with the Church.

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<sup>130</sup> K. Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 79: “As soon as his brotherhood was suspected of ‘not being Catholic,’ of being heretical, or whenever there was the possible risk of separation from the Church, he left his tone of love and goodness. He sacrificed the possible welfare of the individual for the certain good of the community. Perhaps it is most clear here that Francis was deeply aware of the formal similarity of the movement he founded with the heretical movements at the start of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He did everything possible to protect his brotherhood from the ways which other movements took in disobedience to the Church.”

<sup>131</sup> AP 45 (FAED II,56-57).

## THIS IS MY TESTAMENT

*And the brothers may not say: "This is another Rule." Because this is a remembrance, admonition, exhortation, and my testament, which I, little brother Francis, make for you, my blessed brothers, that we might observe the Rule we have promised in a more Catholic way. And let the general minister and all the other ministers and custodians be bound through obedience not to add or take away from these words. And let them always have this writing with them together with the Rule. And in all the chapters which they hold, when they read the Rule, let them also read these words. And I strictly command all my cleric and lay brothers, through obedience, not to place any gloss upon the Rule or upon these words saying: "They should be understood in this way." But as the Lord has given me to speak and write the Rule and these words simply and purely, may you understand them simply and without gloss and observe them with a holy activity until the end. And whoever observes these things, let him be blessed in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father, and on earth with the blessing of His Beloved Son with the Most Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, and all the powers of heaven and with all the saints. And, as far as I can, I, little brother Francis, your servant, confirm for you, both within and without, this most holy blessing.*

The final section of the Testament reflects the intentions of St. Francis at the very end of his life, regarding the role of the Later Rule of 1223 in the life of the brothers. It is amazing how much tension was generated in the history of the Order regarding the intentions of St. Francis on the Gospel project of life, when one considers the simplicity and clarity of the words: "And the brothers may not say: 'This is another Rule.'" The Testament was never intended by Francis to become a Rule binding the conscience of the friars. He only meant it to be a spiritual exhortation to observe the Rule according to its spirit.<sup>132</sup>

These last exhortations of the Testament were probably prompted by what Francis was going through psychologically during the last years of his life. "The most important element in this situation was the saint's consciousness of his responsibility which was magnified in the last years of his life. Francis found himself engrossed in a conflict between ideals and reality. In his absoluteness he did not understand that this affected his brotherhood at that time. The conflict was visible in the relationship of Francis with some of the brothers, especially some of the ministers. The latter tried time and again to gain Francis' consent to a more flexible interpretation of the ideal. Francis saw in these attempts an attack on the Rule and on the purity of his ideals. He

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<sup>132</sup> Kajetan Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 82-84: "What is the Testament supposed to be according to the intention of St. Francis? In short, n. 11's importance (The friars should not say this is another Rule) is that it is the key to understanding the Testament, if one values the saint's intention in the Testament...One has to regard the 11<sup>th</sup> section as the most important for an understanding of the Testament in accordance with the meaning intended by St. Francis...The 'last will' of St. Francis is in the real sense, not the content of the Testament, but that of the Rule. He intends that Rule to be his last will. The Rule is the object of Francis's entire care, even at the hour of death and for the last time, in the Testament."

rejected them fiercely until the end. In the conflict, the Testament was intended to safeguard the Rule against all these attacks.”<sup>133</sup>

The expressions, which Francis uses show his preoccupation to make the brothers interpret his Testament in a correct way. The Testament has a style comparable with that of the Admonitions, the Letter to the Entire Order, or even the Earlier Rule of 1221. It is an admonition, an exhortation, and certainly not a juridical document. The interpretation given by Gregory IX in the Bull *Quo elongati* (28<sup>th</sup> September 1230), points in this direction.<sup>134</sup>

Francis was aware of his personal responsibility in the formation of the Rule and the Testament. He makes a clear-cut distinction between the spiritual-juridical value of the Rule and the spiritual value of the Testament, and presents the latter as a kind of hermeneutical tool, which clarifies the contents of the Rule. “Francis had to have the deciding voice in the formation of the Rule as well as of the Testament, not only because he had done the greatest part of the work himself, but also because in the deliberations with the Chapter his voice had had decisive weight. That is why he could call both, the Rule and the Testament, his own work.”<sup>135</sup>

Francis intends the Testament as a document that helps the brothers to observe the Rule “in a more Catholic way.” This would entail seeing the Testament as a guarantee of faithfulness to the Gospel project of life as approved by the Church in the Rule, and also as a result of the experience of the same project of evangelical life which Francis and the first brothers had made over a number of years. This experience is probably the driving force behind Francis’s forceful statements not to “gloss” over the words of the Rule or of the Testament, but to understand them in a pure and simple way, without comment.

“The prohibition to gloss the Rule and Testament is important in this section. Here again we have an instance within the minorite movement where the ideal and the reality are in conflict. In his naiveté Francis could not see that the Rule might not be clear. He had no inkling of the tragedy of the Order and of the brothers who were given the whole world as a field of action, but who were bound by him to a Rule that originated in very concrete conditions possible only in Italy.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> K. Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 91-92.

<sup>134</sup> Gregory IX, Bull *Quo elongati*, 2-3 (FAED I,571): “Towards the end of his life he commanded – and this command is called his Testament – that the words of his Rule should not be glossed...We certainly believe that in the Testament the confessor of Christ demonstrated a single-hearted purpose and that you therefore aspire to conform to his just longings and holy desires. Nevertheless, we are aware of the danger to your souls and of the difficulties you could incur because of this. And so, wishing to remove all anxiety from your hearts, we declare that you are not bound by the Testament.” K. Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 86-87: “In content the statement in the Testament n. 12 is in agreement on important points with the guidelines that Francis lists at the end of the other Writings in this regard (LtMin, 2LtF, LtOrd). One may, therefore, attribute no greater value to his words at the end of the Testament as though comparison with the other Writings justified it...Now we know from the Bull *Quo elongati* that Gregory IX stood at his side when the Final Rule was being completed. It can be assumed from the text of the Letter to the Minister that the Chapter of the brothers played a decisive role in its final redaction of the text of the Rule; Francis did not formulate the final text of the document alone...If one takes the situation thus, as it presents itself, then one has to assume that here Francis was actually trapped in historical illusion. However, it is also possible that Francis hid behind the cooperation of the others and accepted it completely as his own. Then the whole theory collapses which argues that there was a conflict over the final formation of the Rule. Then the respective information coming from the Spirituals, especially from Clarenus, should be checked carefully; and the theory of Sabatier which is based on such information collapses.”

<sup>135</sup> K. Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 87-88.

<sup>136</sup> K. Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 88.

It was probably this rather restricted view, in a geographical and cultural sense, regarding the possibility of applying the Gospel project of life in the case of individual brothers, fraternities and provinces, that created many of the problems which later surfaced regarding the Testament. Francis, however, had quite clear ideas regarding the contents of the Gospel project of life, and he makes it very clear that he wants to underline them in his Testament. In this way, if the brothers were not to feel the Testament as binding in conscience like the Rule, they were also bound to ask themselves if they would be faithful to their Gospel project of life were they to abandon the contents of the Testament as being simply a “spiritual exhortation.” This dilemma in the life of the brotherhood was a continuation of the inner anguish, which Francis was already showing when he was dictating his last will to the brothers.

The key idea at the very end of the Testament, just before Francis blesses the brothers, is that of “observance.” Francis wants the brothers to observe the words of the Rule and Testament “with a holy activity” (*cum sancta operatione*). In the light of chapter 10 of the Later Rule we know that the agent of “holy activity” is the Spirit of the Lord. This way of looking at the duty of being faithful and observing the Gospel way of life is the theme of the Testament, which can be seen as the final document, which seals Francis’s innermost longings and most genuine intentions for his brotherhood.

## CONCLUSION

The study of the Testament of St. Francis is the study of his life and ideals. As Kajetan Esser states in his analysis of the Testament: "Above all, the Testament gives authentic information about the spiritual figure of the saint himself, about his way of thinking and speaking, and about the manner in which he reacted to the world about him, and the strong changes in moods that he, like all southern Italians, was subject to during periods of turmoil. The Testament also shows us his strong idealism, allowing for no compromise, which was probably unique in its own way. It also shows where a weakness lies in this strength. At the same time even this admirable idealism reveals a limitation in Francis, a man who does not entirely understand the realities of life any longer. The Testament shows the tragedy of Francis' life and the fate of the Order as it grew out of these limitations."<sup>137</sup>

Francis knew he was dying when he asked to be taken to the Portiuncula during the last weeks of September 1226. But he did not want his ideal to die with him. He calmly and resolutely remembered those events, which were the inspiration of his life-long commitment to the Gospel project of life, and he made sure that he would leave them as a legacy to the brothers.

Francis retraces his memories to the early years of his youth, when he was living "in sin" in the family of his rich father, Pietro di Bernardone. Those were the years which saw him dream about courtly love and tales of chivalry, when he would take part in the night time partying of the *tripudianti*, when he went out for war against Perugia with his Assisi companions in 1202, and ended up miserably in a prison cell. His dreams of glory were shattered by a long illness. His ideals of freedom from the feudal lords, which prompted him to take part in the dismantling of the Rocca fortress in 1198 and the setting up of the Assisi Commune, had all but vanished. A revival came with his expedition to the Puglie with Walter de Brienne. Even this adventure ended up in failure after a sleepless night at Spoleto.

It was while he was "in sin" that "the Lord led him" to the lepers. The year 1205 marked his turning point, which became so incisive in his sensibility that he would remember it and record it as the moment of conversion in his Testament. The meeting with the leper near the hospital of San Lazzaro d'Arce was for Francis a new beginning of sweetness seeped in the bitterness of human misery and suffering. The steps of his conversion were now close at hand and followed one another in quick succession: his pilgrimage to Rome to dress as a beggar, the long hours he spent in the hidden "cave" meditating on his "treasure", his encounter with the poor dilapidated church of San Damiano, where the Crucifix spoke to him, his period of penance spent as an oblate with the permission of the poor priest residing in that church, his father's anger and the trial before bishop Guido on a cold winter morning in 1206, his freedom to become the "herald of the great King" and servant of his "Father in heaven."

Francis then moves on through a long string of images, which evoke the characteristic notes of his evangelical ideal. The first image, after that of the leper, denoting his conversion, is the image of the poor churches in which he and the first brothers would find the real and hidden presence of the Lord Jesus. The poor churches were the ones which Francis himself had laboriously restored when he became a penitent-mason in the years 1206-1208: San Damiano, San Pietro della

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<sup>137</sup> Kajetan Esser, *The Testament of St. Francis*, 93.



Spina, the Portiuncula. It was in these poor churches that Francis and the brothers would meet the “poor priests” who were also another proof of the great social injustice of medieval society, which based its structure on a hierarchical basis which excluded many of the have-nots in all spheres of life, political, social and ecclesiastical. The “poor priests of this world in their parishes” represented the ignorant clergy, but for Francis they were the instruments of the grace of the Lord, which passed through their ministry, even though they might have been notorious sinners. It was the dignity of the Body and Blood of the Lord, which they administered which prompted Francis and the brothers to revere them and humbly submit themselves to their service.

In the same way Francis would take care of the material means, which were the signs of grace flowing from the sacraments. The Sources show his intense love for the Eucharist and the fact that he would encourage his brothers to take care to keep the poor churches clean, as well as the sacred linens and vessels which were used for the celebration of the Eucharist. It is an echo of the Fourth Lateran Council decrees in 1215, but Francis was conscious of this need long before, judging from his great respect towards priests and sacred vessels.

The same degree of respect and love was shown towards the “holy names and written words” of the Lord, which included all liturgical books and Gospel books that were used in the celebration of the sacraments. The image of the written word, which renders holy the sacrifice of the Mass, leads Francis to the image of those who were teachers of divine truth, namely the theologians. He himself, being a simple and unlettered brother, knew that his brothers needed such men in order to grow in the knowledge of the Word and preach it in a Catholic way. That is why Francis never excluded theologians and preachers from his fraternity, and even encouraged the study of sacred sciences, as long as the spirit of prayer and devotion was not extinguished.

Francis then recalls the most important moments of his calling to the Gospel project of life. He mentions the first brothers who joined him in 1208, Bernard of Quintavalle, Peter Catanio, Giles, with whom he discovered the Lord’s will after consulting the book of the Gospels at the church of San Nicolò in the piazza of Assisi. The Gospel words they discovered were to become the foundation of their way of life, or primitive Rule. Francis himself had already made a similar experience at the Portiuncula, when on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1208, he had heard the Gospel of the mission of the twelve. Francis then says how he wrote the Gospel ideal of life with a few simple words, and took this primitive Rule to Pope Innocent III, in order to present it together with the brothers. “No one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel.” These are probably the key words of the Testament, which underline Francis’s evangelical charism as coming directly from his experience of love and faithfulness to Christ and the Gospel.

The Lord Pope approved this way of life in 1209-10, and Francis was overjoyed. He then continues to show how the first brothers lived this way of life in concrete terms. They would give to the poor all their belongings, and be content with a simple habit or religion. They would go out to preach the Gospel in a spirit of fraternity, and moreover their salutation would be one of peace to all those who would listen to their message. This is the picture of the way of life of the apostles (*apostolica vivendi forma*), which the brothers were living from the very beginning.

The witness of poverty reminds Francis of the early years of the brotherhood, when he and the brothers would work manually in order to avoid idleness and nourish

their spirit of prayer and devotion. As a recompense for their work they would make recourse to the “table of the Lord” by begging alms, and making use of the privilege reserved to those who are true followers of Lady Poverty. In the light of the Earlier Rule and the other Writings of St. Francis, this section of the Testament presents a faithful picture of the way of life of the first brothers, regarding their particular devotion to Lady Poverty. The brothers would live in poor churches, as they did in their experience at Rivotorto and the Portiuncula. They would be subject to all and therefore live their vocation of Friars Minor as Francis had taught them from the very beginning of their calling.

It is this image of the first brotherhood that Francis evokes and tries to preserve when he passes on to the second part of his Testament, in which his tone becomes rather harsh and strict. In this section Francis again insists upon the poverty of the churches and houses in which the brothers had to live, upon their spirit of itinerancy as “pilgrims and strangers” who possess nothing in this world, upon their sense of obedience to the ministers and servants, upon their faithfulness to the Church of Rome, which would be seen in concrete terms in their praying the Divine Office according to the rite of the Church and in their catholicity. The brothers are prohibited from asking letters of recommendation or privilege from the Roman Curia, even in cases where they were being persecuted in the missionary expeditions beyond the Alps, in North Africa and in the Middle East. This second section of the Testament is a presentation of the development of the Order, particularly after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, when the Order organised new missionary expeditions in 1217 and 1219 and when it was coming to grips with its legalistic structure as a religious Order in the period of formation of the Earlier Rule, approved in 1221.

The Testament, therefore, is truly a portrait of images, which were racing in Francis’s mind and creating within his sensibility a sense of excitement to live according to the original spirit of his calling. Francis was becoming more aware of the need of his Order to settle down to new situations, and to present itself as a well-established religious Order. We could say that Francis did not feel that he could interfere with this development, which was particularly rapid after he resigned from the leadership of the Order in 1220.

Yet Francis could not resign himself to a passive acceptance of facts. He still wanted to remind the brothers that the original intuition of the Gospel project of life was still valid, and had to be kept in mind as a check upon the future options of the brothers. In this way, the Testament would be an autobiography in which the Saint would exhort and admonish the brothers to observe the Rule in a more Catholic way. The Testament was never intended to become another Rule, parallel to the one which the Pope approved and which the Church would eventually interpret in so many ways. It was only a simple and pure exhortation to the faithfulness of the beginnings of the Order, which had to remain a constant reminder to the brothers of the intrinsic values of their calling.

In this light the Testament remains, more than ever, a document of inspiration to us Franciscans, to review our evangelical options in the light of the options which Francis himself made during his life. His creativity in embracing the Gospel values, which are underlined in his Testament remains a challenge to us today, in order to translate the same values in our contemporary experience of Franciscan life. Thus, the Testament as an autobiography of Francis, would also become the autobiography of each and every one of us, who feels called to incarnate in a creative way the same foundational values of the Gospel which Francis discovered, when he was convinced

that “no one had shown him what he had to do, but that the Most High himself had revealed” to him the way of life of the Gospel.

## Appendix

### CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

- 1181/82 Francis is born in Assisi, son of Pietro di Bernardone and Lady Pica. Baptised in San Rufino and named John.  
His father changes his name to Francis upon returning from France.
- 1193/94 Clare is born in Assisi, daughter of Favarone di Offreduccio and Ortolana.
- 1198 [8 Jan] Cardinal Lotario dei Conti di Segni elected as Pope Innocent III.  
The Assisi citizens destroy the Rocca fortress, symbol of imperial power.  
Civil war in Assisi. Nobles flee to Perugia, among them Clare's family.
- 1202 [Nov] Battle of Collestrada between Assisi and Perugia. Francis taken prisoner.
- 1202-1203 Francis is prisoner in Perugia.  
He is freed because of an illness and after his father ransoms him.
- 1204 Francis is ill and slowly recovers under his mother's care.
- 1205 [spring] Francis embarks on an expedition to Puglia with Walter de Brienne.  
Has a vision at Spoleto, and returns to Assisi.  
Beginning of the period of conversion.
- 1205 [June] Francis participates for a last feast with his friends.  
He goes to Rome as a pilgrim and begs alms on St. Peter's steps.
- 1205 [autumn] Meets a leper near San Lazzaro dell'Arce, in the Umbrian plain.  
Francis prays in front of the crucifix of San Damiano.  
The crucifix invites him to repair the crumbling church.  
Francis as oblate stays with priest of San Damiano.  
Upon returning home is persecuted by his father.
- 1206 [Jan] Process before Bishop Guido of Assisi.  
Francis renounces to his father's possessions. Leaves Assisi.  
Clad in a penitential garb he goes to a Benedictine monastery.  
In Gubbio is welcomed by a friend and serves lepers.
- 1206[summer] Returns to Assisi. Lives at San Damiano as hermit and penitent mason.
- 1206-1208 Repairs the churches of San Damiano, San Pietro della Spina and Santa Maria degli Angeli (Portiuncula).
- 1208 [24 Feb] Feast of St. Matthias Apostle.  
At Portiuncula hears Gospel of mission of the apostles.  
Begins to wear a habit and cord and preaches penance.
- 1208 [16 Apr] Bernard of Quintavalle and Pietro Catanio join Francis at Portiuncula.  
The brothers consult the book of Gospels at San Niccolò in Assisi.
- 1208 [23 Apr] Giles joins the group. First mission to the Marches of Ancona.
- 1208[summer] Filippo Longo, Sabbatino, John and Morico the Short join Francis.
- 1208[autumn] Second mission to the Rieti valley (Poggio Bustone).  
Francis assured of God's forgiveness and future of the brotherhood.  
Bernard and Giles sent to Florence and Saint James of Compostella.
- 1209[winter] The 8 brothers return to Portiuncula. Other 4 brothers join them.
- 1209/10 Francis and the brothers go to Rome to present their way of life to Pope.

- Pope Innocent III orally approves the Gospel way of life.  
The brothers return to Assisi and stop at Orte and stay at Rivotorto.
- 1210 After some time they transfer to Portiuncula.  
The Benedictines of Mount Subasio let Francis stay at Portiuncula.
- 1211[summer] Francis tries to go to Syria, but ends up on the Dalmatian coast.  
Returns to Ancona as a stowaway on a ship.
- 1212[18-19 Mar] Palm Sunday. Clare joins Francis and the brothers at Portiuncula.  
Clare sent to Benedictine monastery of San Paolo at Bastia Umbra.  
Clare transfers to Benedictine monastery of Sant'Angelo di Panzo.  
Her sister Catherine (Agnes) joins her.  
Francis places Clare and her sister Agnes at San Damiano.  
Founding of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano.
- 1213 [8 May] Count Orlando of Chiusi gives Francis the mountain of La Verna.
- 1213-1214 Francis goes to Spain, with the aim of passing over to Morocco.  
An illness obliges him to return to Assisi.  
A group of educated men enter the Order, including Thomas of Celano.
- 1215 [Nov] Innocent III opens Fourth Lateran Council in Rome.  
Francis takes part in Council. Traditional meeting with St. Dominic.
- 1216 [16 Jul] Innocent III dies in Perugia.  
Cardinal Cencio Savelli succeeds him as Pope Honorius III.  
Jacques de Vitry writes about the Friars Minor and Poor Ladies.  
Probable occasion for the Indulgence of the Portiuncula.
- 1217 [5 May] Chapter of Pentecost at Portiuncula.  
First missions to Germany, Tunisia (Giles), Syria (Elias).  
Francis wants to go to France. Goes as far as Florence.  
Cardinal Hugolino, Papal Legate in Tuscany and Lombardy, stops him.  
Francis returns to Assisi.
- 1218 [11 Jun] Papal bull "Cum dilecti" of Honorius III regarding catholicity of friars.
- 1219 [26 May] Chapter of Pentecost at Portiuncula.  
Missions to Germany, France, Hungary, Spain, and Morocco.
- 1219 [24 Jun] Francis leaves for the East. Goes to Acre and Damietta (Egypt).  
Fifth Crusade is taking place for the capture of Damietta.  
Francis meets the Sultan Malik-al-Kamil.
- 1219 [5 Nov] The Crusader army captures Damietta. Francis returns to Italy (?)
- 1220 [16 Jan] First brothers martyrs in Morocco, Berard and companions.  
Ferdinand of Lisbon (Anthony of Padova) joins the Order at Coimbra.
- 1220 [spring] After staying in Acre and visiting the Holy Land (?)  
Francis returns to Italy with Peter Catanio, Elias and Caesar of Speyer.  
Arrives at Isola del Deserto, Venice.  
Asks Pope to give the Order Cardinal Hugolino as Protector.  
Francis renounces government of the Order. Peter Catanio named Vicar.
- 1220[22 Sept] Bull "Cum secundum consilium" establishes year of novitiate.
- 1221 [10 Mar] Peter Catanio dies at Portiuncula. Elias named Vicar.
- 1221 [30 May] Chapter of Pentecost (Chapter of Mats?)  
Earlier Rule approved.

- New mission to Germany, led by Caesar of Speyer.  
Thomas of Celano and Jordan of Giano go to Germany.
- 1221 Honorius III approves “Memoriale Propositi” for the Order of Penitents.
- 1221-1222 Francis on a preaching tour in central Italy.
- 1222[15 Aug] Francis preaches at Bologna. Testimony of Thomas of Spalato.
- 1223 Anthony lectures theology at Bologna. Francis writes to him.
- 1223 [winter] Francis goes to Fonte Colombo and writes the Later Rule.  
He is helped by brother Bonizo of Bologna, brother Leo and Hugolino.
- 1223[11 Jun] Chapter of Pentecost at Portiuncula approves Later Rule.
- 1223[29 Nov] Honorius III confirms Later Rule with Bull “Solet annuere”.
- 1223[25 Dec] Christmas celebration at Greccio.
- 1224[2 Jun] Chapter of Pentecost at Portiuncula. Mission to England.
- 1224[summer] Francis spends period from the Assumption to St. Michael on La Verna.
- 1224[10 Sep] First brothers land in Dover and proceed to Canterbury.
- 1224[14 Sep] Feast of Exaltation of Cross, circa. Receives stigmata on La Verna.
- 1224 [Oct] Francis returns to Portiuncula through Borgo San Sepolcro, Monte Casale, Città di Castello.
- 1225[winter] Francis goes on a preaching mission to Umbria and Marche.
- 1225[spring] Francis stays at San Damiano. Composes Canticle of Creatures.  
His eye condition worsens.
- 1225[June] Reconciles Bishop Guido with Bernardo, the Podestà of Assisi, after composing the stanza about forgiveness in Canticle of Creatures.
- 1225[summer] Goes to Rieti for eye treatment. Welcomed by Hugolino and Papal curia.  
At Fonte Colombo undergoes a painful operation.
- 1225[autumn] Stays at San Fabiano della Foresta.  
The priest’s vineyard at San Fabiano produces abundant fruit.
- 1226[Apr] Francis goes to Siena for further treatment.  
Dictates Siena Testament when on point of death.  
Moves to Le Celle at Cortona. Dictates his Testament (?)
- 1226[summer] Francis taken to Bagnara hills, near Nocera Umbra, for fresh air.
- 1226[endAug] Francis returns to Assisi. Resides at Bishop’s palace.  
Bishop Guido leaves on a pilgrimage to Monte Gargano.
- 1226[Sept] Francis asks to be transported to the Portiuncula. Blesses Assisi.  
At Portiuncula dictates his Testament (?)
- 1226[3 Oct] Francis dies at Portiuncula on Saturday, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1226, after Vespers.
- 1226[4 Oct] Francis’s body is taken in procession to Assisi.  
Clare and the Poor Ladies of San Damiano see Francis for the last time.  
Francis is buried in the church of San Giorgio.
- 1227[19 Mar] Cardinal Hugolino is elected as Pope Gregory IX, succeeding Honorius III  
who died the day before.
- 1227[30 May] Chapter of Pentecost. Giovanni Parenti elected Minister General.
- 1228[29 Apr] Bull “Recolentes” of Gregory IX announces the building of a basilica (“specialis ecclesia”) as a definite burial site for Francis.
- 1228[16 Jul] Gregory IX in Assisi celebrates canonisation of St. Francis.

- 1228[19 Jul] Gregory IX publishes Bull of canonisation “Mira circa nos”.
- 1228-1229 Thomas of Celano composes “The Life of St. Francis”.
- 1229[25 Feb] Pope Gregory IX approves “The Life of St. Francis”.
- 1230[25 May] General Chapter of Pentecost in Assisi.  
Francis’s relics are transported from San Giorgio to the new basilica.