# *Francis of Assisi*

## PERFORMING THE GOSPEL LIFE

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# *Francis of Assisi: A Modest Foreword*

A SPECIAL ISSUE of *Time* magazine in 1992 proposed a list of the ten most important personalities of the previous thousand years in anticipation of the celebration of the new millennium. In that distinguished list there were musicians (Mozart), inventors (Gutenberg), statesmen (Jefferson), explorers (Columbus), artists (Michelangelo), writers (Shakespeare), scientists (Galileo and Einstein), as well as two religious figures: Martin Luther and Saint Francis of Assisi. Such lists are a dime a dozen, showing up every time there is some momentous calendar event, and practically everyone would have amended *Time*'s list in one way or another. What is curious, however, is the inclusion of Francis. What is it about this humble, semiliterate, medieval figure that should merit inclusion in such a litany of classic names?

This little meditative book will not attempt to answer the question just posed, although along the way it will give some indications that might help someone else to frame an answer. There are lines of inspiration rooted in the life and practices of Saint Francis that, in fact, had a shaping influence on the subsequent history of Christianity, an influence that spilled over into the larger shaping of Western culture.





In fact, this book will argue against at least one stereotype of the saint found in popular culture, mediocre Christian art, and even in some religious circles. It is a stereotype that can be traced back into the nineteenth century and, unlike most stereotypes, it is not even a half truth. It is, rather, the sentimentalizing of a very small truth. An earlier edition of the famous Butler's *Lives of the Saints* said, somewhat snippily, apropos of Francis in our own time, "that religious and social cranks of all sorts have appealed to him for justification, and he has completely won over the hearts of the sentimental." There is, in that observation made for Saint Francis on the day of his feast, October 4, more than a grain of truth. This book will work against that view of Francis that is most completely summed up by the ubiquity of those cast concrete garden statues of Francis with a bird perched on the saint's shoulder found at everyone's local garden center. Such an understanding of Saint Francis is coterminous with what I would call "spirituality lite."

That romantic view of Francis traces its ancestry back to the nineteenth century. The rediscovery of Francis as a precursor of the Italian Renaissance is as early as Frederic Ozanam's *Les Poetes Franciscans* (1849) and the occasional essays of Matthew Arnold. Paul Sabatier's *La vie de St. François d'Assise* (1893) triggered a century-long debate about whether Francis was a proto-evangelical. The Vatican honored that thesis by putting Sabatier's book on the index a year after its original publication. The Danish convert to Catholicism, Johannes Jørgensen, wrote a life of Francis that remained in print for decades after its publication in 1910. It was a direct challenge to Sabatier's understanding of Francis. In the twentieth century Nikos Kazantzakis's study of Francis turned the Umbrian saint

into a medieval Zorba the Greek. Later in time Franco Zeferelli's saccharine film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1973) made Francis into a hippy *avant la parole.* It is this Francis who has been the subject of any number of popular biographies, films, and even comic books published over the past two decades. One could multiply such instances of a romantic reading of Francis, but they are perhaps best understood as a tradition that has crystallized in those piously charming "blessings of the animals" so beloved of certain Episcopal rectors in this country.

Such a view of Francis is a shorthand way of thinking about the lamentable split that exists today between religion and spirituality. So often that split gets phrased in this fashion: "I am spiritual but not religious." The problem with "spiritual" as opposed to religion is that it can soon turn into self-centeredness, a lust for personal experience, and a kind of middle class therapy. Within that context, concrete statues of Saint Francis found in garden centers is "spirituality," but the Francis wounded by the marks of Christ on Mount La Verna is religion. It will be the burden of this book to argue that Francis of Assisi was the opposite of all of those specious "spiritual" characterizations; indeed, it could be said that he was, that his life was, a reaction against those very sentiments.

Without denying the clear charm of his persona, this work will attempt to put the life of Francis into the context of the reforming impulses of medieval Europe which sought to articulate the ideal gospel life (the *vita evangelica*). My study will look at Francis against that background in order to advance the claim that within that tradition, triggered by the cleansing reforms of Pope Gregory VII and his successors, he also was





an original. Franciscan originality derived from the success that Francis had in "performing" the gospel. That performance, in turn, developed against the official attempts at church reformation which reached its zenith in the lifetime of Francis at the Lateran Council IV (1215). The impact of that reforming council is crystal clear in the writings of the saint himself. In other words, his life and message were a kind of existential exegesis of the scriptures in response to the reforming elements abroad in the church of his day. The success of his enterprise energized a flourishing new stream of "acting out" the gospel that not only affected religious thought and practice but also gave energy to those forces that, in fact, would give shape, among other things, to the Italian Renaissance. In other words, this little book intends to view the saint through the lens of theology.

It may also displease some people to learn that Francis was a devotedly orthodox Catholic with a keen sense of the juridical and sacramental life of the church, but that is an argument that I will also advance. Such an emphasis, to be sure, does not make Francis into a grim fanatic; after all, one of the words he loved to use was "joy" and his constant mantra was "peace." Neither of those words were uttered with naivete, although he did find joy where others might find disappointment and when he spoke of peace he did so against the grim violence so characteristic of his age. Nor does an insistence on his faith in the Catholic Church mean that he is closed off from other Christians and others who have admired him as a religious genius or that this book wants to hedge him in to some rigid fortress of narrow orthodoxy.

This book will conclude with some reflections on the mod-

ern rediscovery of the Franciscan charism in ways which range from a renewed reflection on theology of creation to the focus on the reality of the poor and service to them as a new way of conceptualizing theology. The lens through which this will be done is not unlike that of the earliest writers about Francis who saw him, his life, and his message as a source for deepening the Christian life.

This study would be for me a summary of my thinking about the saints as a resource for theological reflection in general and Francis as a model example for such an enterprise in particular. Early in my academic career I considered Francis in an anthology of texts published under the title *Brother Francis* (Harper, 1972); in a study of early Franciscan literature entitled *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Twayne, 1976); and a series of essays in a book of Franciscan art again titled *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Harper, 1981). Those works were, in a certain sense, immature; the writings of an enthusiast but an autodidact in Franciscan scholarship. I would like this work to be a more mature meditation on Francis, a kind of final word from my pen just as my other volume (*Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, 1999) was a summary of my long engagement with that great contemporary figure. My basic stance will be to "read" Francis through my theological eyeglasses to attempt to reach up to his vision of how to lead the gospel life.

My justification for generally following the chronology of Francis's life is to provide context for the ways in which Francis understood the gospel against the background of his own experience within a quite distinct culture. A chronological approach is also useful in noting the many conversions of Francis as his life played out. In using a chronological framework, this





book stands within the tradition of Franciscan biography, which is a never-ending stream. The classic, as many have reminded us, has a "surplus of meaning" so I feel no compunction in going over paths others have already trod. Indeed, while working on this book several popular biographies of the saint have been published, but none have exhausted the significance of the saint; indeed, most have that patina of romanticism that this book tends to downplay.

Studying Francis has become easier now that we have the multi-volume set of early documents (*Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* [New City, 1999-2001]) ably translated and edited under the general editorship of three Franciscan friars. In my citations of this early literature I use their work unless otherwise noted. Since the abbreviations of the writings of the saint and those of his commentators has not been standardized I will simply cite the traditional titles of these early works, identifying the titles in question in the text itself. Nor will this text employ footnotes, but a final chapter will provide an excursus on Franciscan scholarship or, better, a portion of the vast landscape of that scholarship that I have managed to embrace.

This book offers nothing new or radical in its meditation on the saint. That Saint Francis was a "classic" is accepted by everyone, but his classic status as a resource for theological reflection has been largely limited to those authors who speak within and to the Franciscan order. My aim is to enlarge that river of theological and spiritual reflection for a larger audience. In other words, this book merely hopes to capture some of that overflow.

* * *

These pages were written in such leisure as I found while carrying on my duties as a member of the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame. My congenial colleagues and the staff of the department of theology create an environment in which it is possible to find some leisure for writing. I would like to thank, in a particular way, Professor John Cavadini who makes life so agreeable in the department, and my wife Cecilia who makes it such a pleasure to come home each evening. My two daughters, Sarah and Julia, study under the shadow of the Golden Dome and are constant close reminders of all of the wonderful students here at Notre Dame who inspire us in ways they themselves do not recognize. On more than one occasion I have said to friends that some students in my class make me feel as if I am not worthy to teach them.

I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, who were my teachers from grammar school through high school at Saint Paul's parish in St. Petersburg, Florida. They were the first who taught me to love the Little Poor Man of Assisi. It is a very small token of respect for all of the religious women who made the American Catholic Church what it is today.

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*The University of Notre Dame*



CHAPTER ONE

# *Beginnings at Assisi*

*. . . fertile costa d'alto monte pende*

Paradiso 11:45

THE UMBRIAN BIRTHPLACE of Francis, the town of Assisi, rests on the eastern flank of Monte Subasio. The town is situated about one hundred miles northeast of Rome and almost an equal distance south of Florence. Today's visitors almost unanimously praise its beauty because of how much of the medieval town seems intact and because of the pinkish hue of the stone, hewn from the local quarries in and around Mount Subasio that broods over the city. Despite the tour buses and the inevitable souvenir shops there is something, well, quite Franciscan about the place. It was not accidental that the great interreligious prayer service at which Pope John Paul II participated in 1986 was held in Assisi. Pilgrims and visitors of every religious persuasion see this lovely Umbrian town and the saint who has made it famous as their own.

Assisi is a place with a long history. The Etruscans had settled the area long before the advent of Christ, as later did the

Umbri from whom the area gets its name, and later still the Romans. The most distinguished resident of the city before Saint Francis was the Roman poet Sextus Propertius, born fifty years before the birth of Christ and dying circa 16 B.C.E., who occasionally hymned the beauty of the area in his poetry, although he was best known for the passionate love poetry addressed to his mistress, a poetry erotic enough to bear comparison with Catullus. Centuries later Francis, of course, would also praise a woman he loved — Lady Poverty — but with a quite different vocabulary.

Assisi has its fair share of Roman remains visible to this day, but none more conspicuous than the little temple of Minerva, now a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, that sits in the center of the town's main square. The temple was famous enough to merit a side trip in 1786 by Goethe who, on his way south, stopped to admire the wonderful lines of the temple while showing at the same time absolutely no interest in either Francis or the art inspired by him that adorns the basilica where the saint's body rests. In fact, from his carriage, Goethe glanced at the basilica of St. Francis on his way to the town square and pronounced it a Babylonian pile. He then hurried on to Perugia, the ancient enemy of Assisi. Goethe's attitude was common enough in the eighteenth century.

When Francis was born in 1181 (or, by some reckonings, 1182) there were four architectural monuments that symbolized, each in its own right, the highly stratified social tensions in the town. High above the city was the fierce-looking citadel known as La Rocca Maggiore, the traditional seat of power of the old feudal aristocracy which, at the time Francis was born, housed a German agent of the Holy Roman Emperor. In the





town itself the old cathedral *(duomo)* dedicated to the Virgin was the church of the powerful aristocratic bishop who held, in the name of the church, about half the lands in the area. Curiously enough, Assisi had a second cathedral, dedicated to its fourth-century martyred saint, San Rufino, built with the aid of the new class of rich mercantile interests who competed in prestige and power with the older feudal lords and the bishop who represented aristocratic interests. Between the canons of San Rufino and the bishop there were strained relations. The fourth center of power emerged during the lifetime of Francis: the city hall *(palazzo del commune)* that represented the growing secular and political power of the urban rich and a sign of the growing sense of civil life in medieval Italy. Below the "centers of power" represented by these architectural monuments was, of course, the roiling sea of beggars, day laborers, craftsmen, local traders, farmers, and herdsmen who made up what Francis was to call the *minores,* the little ones who stood economically and politically beneath the *majores* who endowed the cathedrals of the day and negotiated their business in the city hall.

That pinkish hue to the stones quarried from the mountain which so enchants visitors today masks the violence that was part of life in Francis's own time — violence of vendettas, street brawls, warring families, grotesque forms of public torture or execution, and class struggles. The grandees of the city would build towers at their homes not only to show power but also as fortresses to protect them when the inevitable vendettas would break out. It is against that aura of urban violence that we must understand the Franciscan cry of "Peace!"

It was into this complex but relatively small world, slowly

evolving from a feudal to a mercantile culture, that Francis was born. Like all Assisians of his class he was baptized shortly after his birth, with the name "John," at the cathedral font. His mother's name was Pica (other sources say Giovanna) and his father, Pietro da Bernadone. Although his baptismal name was John, his father renamed him Francesco (the "little Frenchman"), most likely as a tribute to France where Pietro frequently visited in pursuit of his business in the cloth trade. It was not a common name at the time.

Some scholars have tendered the suggestion that the family may have been Jewish by ancestry, a theory resting largely on the slender thread of evidence that the early biographer Thomas of Celano seems to deprecate the Christian roots of the family and because Pietro was in the cloth trade and a reputed moneylender — common occupations of the Jews of the time. There is no consensus on this point, which is very much a minority opinion, asserted but hardly proved.

Francis was born into the reasonably well-off mercantile class who identified their fortunes with the city hall and with the newer cathedral of San Rufino, although Francis probably was baptized in the old cathedral since San Rufino was not quite complete when he was born. This merchant group would find itself at loggerheads with the old feudal aristocracy. Most likely, his father applauded the siege of the fortress of La Rocca, when Francis was barely in his late teen years, with the resulting expulsion of the feudal lords resident there and the destruction of their fortified towers and castles, and it is equally probable that he contributed to the forces that did the deed. That siege, in 1198 and 1199, saw the expulsion of Duke Conrad of Urslingen and his followers with the result





that Assisi now came under the political patronage of Pope Innocent III.

Interestingly enough, among the nobles who fled Assisi was the Offreduccio family of the future Saint Clare. It is clear that Francis grew to maturity at a time when his kind of family was very much in the ascendent and very much antagonistic to the aristocrats with their prideful sense of nobility and their unearned wealth. Within a few years, however, the aristocrats would return and the merchants would have to help rebuild the noble towers and palazzi, which explains how Clare got back to Assisi from her place of exile in Perugia.

Francis was raised in relative wealth. His education was, as far as we can tell, meager and local. Years later Francis himself, in his *Testament,* describes himself as unlettered *(idiota),* which means only that he had precious little formal education. That he could write we know because we possess a few autographs. That he knew some French (Learned from his father? On travels with his father to France for market reasons? As part of the musical culture of the time?) is stated in some of the early recollections of Francis that have him singing in that language. There are charming portraits of him later in life walking through the woods, pretending to play a violin with two sticks he picked up, singing in French.

Most of his education came probably at the hands of the priests of his parish church of San Giorgio where he learned some Latin, most likely using a psalter as a textbook, and some skill in writing. Writings from his own hand show little Ciceronian polish. He probably picked up some commercial skills in computation from working in the cloth trade with his father. There is no evidence that he yearned to go to Bologna

for the university that was then the place for upwardly mobile young Italian men to attend because of its famous law faculty. His world was the practical and local world of business.

One thing all the early legends agree on is that in his youth he was far from a model of piety or virtuous living. His earliest biographer, Thomas of Celano, in his first life of the saint says bluntly that he wasted his life from the time of his childhood until he was twenty-five, charging him, specifically, with a love of frivolity, a penchant for extravagant clothing, and for being a "squanderer of his property." Interestingly enough, Thomas blames this dissolute style of life on Francis's parents who "reared him to arrogance in accord with the vanity of the age." Thus, Thomas concludes, "by long imitating their worthless life and character he himself was made more vain and arrogant." In his second life of Francis, Thomas would have him as a glutton and street brawler. Later biographers would add further salacious details to this catalog: he loved lewd songs, pranks, mindless vandalism, and so on. Only Saint Bonaventure, writing an "authorized" life much later in the thirteenth century, softens the image of a wild youth by emphasizing his innate generosity and moments of Christian passion. In the process, the negative picture of his own family also gets softened.

Not to put too fine a point on it: Francis seems to have been a typical indulged, wealthy, spoiled, and thrill-seeking adolescent who was indulged by a family who could afford to look with a benevolent eye on the peccadilloes of youth. What the early biographers describe, with the paradigmatic example of Augustine's *Confessions* in the back of their mind, was the portrait of a young man whose life was spent without aim or purpose but supported by a family who could afford to underwrite





his whims. Francis seems to have done all the things that adults deplore in the youth of today: waste time and money; be preoccupied with fancy clothes which had to be in the latest mode; run around with the wrong crowd; chase after women; and take an interest in subversive music — in his case, the love songs *(chansons)* introduced from France.

When he was in his late adolescence Francis seems to have begun to grow out of this feckless life. The early authors do not seem very precise about how this change in his life came about. Some mention an extended period of illness. In a brief war in the fall of 1202 between Assisi and its traditional enemy from Etruscan times, the city of Perugia, Francis evidently went to war with his fellow bravos but ended up captured and held in the prison of Perugia's city hall. More than likely Francis, as a child of wealth, proved a fine bargaining chip in a ransom negotiation. After nearly a year, his father ransomed Francis, who was by then ill.

It goes without saying that periods of enforced recuperation from illness or times of enforced isolation figure large in the slow conversion of some people. Centuries later, healing from a battle wound was instrumental in the conversion of Ignatius of Loyola, and one could fill a small library with books written by persons who were imprisoned for a long period of time who use their silence and solitude to map a new way of life. Such books include Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy,* written in Pavia in the late Roman period; the extraordinary letters written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who languished in a Nazi prison; and the prison writings of the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci who suffered from the enforced hospitality of the Fascist government of Italy.

All of the early authors agree that, after his rescue and recuperation from whatever illness he suffered, Francis decided to take up arms as a knight. Along with a friend he left his family home in Assisi bound for Apulia in the south of Italy, where he intended to put himself under arms with a lord named Walter of Brienne who was raising an army as part of the militia of Pope Innocent III. After only a day's journey to Spoleto, however, something happened that caused Francis to return to Assisi a changed man. What happened has never been clear, but whatever it was it deterred him from going off for military fame. It may well be that he heard of the death of Walter of Brienne while he was traveling south to Apulia. The records do not show any "road to Damascus" conversion drama, but he clearly repented of his plan for military glory. His biographers, naturally enough, read this incident as a kind of premonition, which they tout as prophetic dreams of victory that would change him into a new, spiritual kind of warrior.

However much Francis may have turned his back on the chivalric ideal, he did not fail to learn powerful lessons that came from the romance tradition that praised it. More than one scholar has noted that the chivalric ideal held in high esteem two important virtues. The first was liberality *(largesse)* by which the knight gave freely and abundantly of himself and his goods. The second was courtesy *(cortesia)*, a favorite word of Francis. By courtesy he did not mean manners but a certain gentle way of relating to the other. Saint Thomas Aquinas would later discuss this virtue of courtesy using the Latin word *affabilitas,* weakly translated into English as "affability." The word *cortesia* shows up frequently in the mouth of Francis — most famously, perhaps, when later in his life his eyes were to





be cauterized with white hot irons. He looked at the physician's instrument and said, "Brother Fire, I pray you, be courteous to me." It is the rare poet, G. K. Chesterton once remarked, who remembers his poetry in a moment of dire danger.

Francis himself, in a rare moment of autobiographical testimony, treats his change in his life in a much more abbreviated fashion. In the beginning of his *Testament,* written a few years before his own death, Francis opens with these laconic words:

> . . . 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.

While the early writers attribute a number of steps by which Francis left the world to become a man of penance, the saint himself singles out his changed attitude toward lepers. There is a reported incident in the early legends that he met a leper while out riding his horse and gave the leper some alms out of a sense of pity. It might have been that moment that Francis recalled, but we are not absolutely certain.

Medieval law stipulated numerous draconian rules to isolate lepers from common society even though the term "leprosy" most likely covered any number of disfiguring diseases like elephantiasis or the visible ravages of tertiary syphilis. The afflicted had to wear gloves and keep a clapper to sound when people came near. They lived in separate camps outside city walls. They could not speak to children or use any still (well)

water for drinking or washing. An early statute in Assisi forbade any leper from walking in the town. Those that did so could be struck by everyone "with impunity." A quasi-funeral mass in honor of Lazarus (see Lk 16:20) was celebrated in some places as part of their ritual separation from society. Canon #23 of the Third Lateran Council (1179) insists that the lepers should have their own churches, access to the sacraments, and cemeteries for their dead. In the Assisi of Francis's day there were about five dwellings of lepers outside the town. Lepers, in short, were highly segregated in fact and feared as a matter of custom. Their very continued existence depended on the charity of people of good will since they could have no intercourse with regular society.

Despite the dread of leprosy there was a deeply embedded concern for lepers — a concern developed from stipulations found in the New Testament. Jesus had compassion on them, touched them, and cured them. It is worth noting that when Jesus heals the leper the evangelists quite explicitly note that Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the leper (Mt 8:2; Mk 1:41). Disregarding the law of purity whereby such contact rendered him ritually unclean, Jesus made explicit and open his contact with the leper by the gesture of touch. He did not keep the prescribed distance demanded by the custom and law of the day. The interaction of Jesus and lepers must be read against the purity codes of Leviticus where the leper is at least as polluted as a polluted house and more like a person with abnormal bodily discharges (see Lev 15:2-12). The Christian spiritual tradition was not slow to note the willingness of Jesus to touch a leper. It became, as it were, a test for anyone who aspired to take on Christ as model and exemplar.





In the hagiographical tradition great saints ministered to them. Compassion for the leper was held up as a heroic act of love. Furthermore, the tradition saw a nexus between Christ himself and the leper. The Vulgate translation of the Bible, glossing Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant, sees Jesus, in Jerome's words, as *quasi leprosus* — like a leper. The subsequent tradition of Christian art would sometimes depict Christ as suffering leprosy, as the French iconographical motif of *le Christ Lepreux* testifies. The apex of that theme, of course, is depicted in the overpowering crucifix painted by Matthias Grünewald for the Isenheim altarpiece at Colmar at the end of the fifteenth century, which was situated in a hospice for sufferers of skin maladies. There was, in short, a powerful ambivalence in place vis-à-vis the lepers: they were to be shunned because of the (largely mistaken) fear of instant contagion but they were also an opportunity for the Christian to exercise the most compassionate form of charity by aiding them and sympathizing with their plight. Lepers invoked, in short, a combination of horror and compassion. In any case, the lepers were a direct challenge to those who took the gospel seriously.

Why does Francis, looking back on his youth, single out his conversion to the lepers as the nodal point in his life? He does not tell us beyond the affirmation that God led him to them; he did not go to them out of any natural sympathy. One can assay, however, some reasons for this turn to the leper. First, the lepers were the most ostracized persons in medieval society. To succor them was, in a real sense, to identify, albeit fleetingly, with those who were on the opposite pole of the important people — the *majores*. Francis was increasingly becoming a countercultural person. He gave up the life of the knight; he

was, as we shall see, increasingly indifferent to family wealth and public prestige. Later in his life, Francis would still hold care of the lepers as a natural occupation for his lesser brothers, as the early friars were called. In the 1221 draft of his rule of life he assumed his friars would work with lepers, but he did not want them dealing with monies for them unless, as he writes, there was a "manifest need" (Rule of 1221). In its earliest phase, the Franciscan movement seems to have considered service to the lepers as a natural part of their novitiate. The charming compendium of vernacular stories known as the *Fioretti* includes an entire chapter on Francis's continuing love for lepers. The author notes that "not only did Francis willingly serve the leper but he also ordered the brothers of his order to serve them for the love of the Lord. . . ." That order gets spelled out in more precise detail in the *Mirror of Perfection,* which recalls that Francis said that when one enters their order "noble or not . . . it was necessary that they serve the lepers and live in their houses."

More important than the fact that Francis served the lepers was his gospel insight for doing so: in working with lepers he was doing so in imitation of Christ who received the lepers. In that sense, Francis "performed" the gospel that was the inspiration of his life. The equation was simple enough: If Christ served the abandoned lepers so should his followers. He would have been familiar with the common theme in the lives of the saints (for example, Saint Martin of Tours) that those who serve the poor and outcast often find, by dream or revelation, that they are serving Christ. That popular belief was a "filling out" of the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 25 that when one aided the "least of the brethren" one did it to Christ. There





was no group who more qualified as the "least of the brethren" than the lepers of the day. Assisi afforded Francis a perfect opportunity to carry out this command since its environs contained two rather large leper colonies — one dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene and the other under the patronage of San Salvatore, the Savior — as well as at least three others within walking distance of the town.

If Francis found compassion for the leper to be the axial moment of his conversion, the early biographers also put much emphasis on another change in Francis that would soon bring him into confrontation with his father. Francis took some of his father's stores of cloth and sold them in order to have money for alms and to rebuild the broken down church of San Damiano. While praying before a crucifix, Francis heard instructions coming to him from Christ to "rebuild my church." Such a crucifix would have been done in the Italo-Byzantine style common in the period and which is still seen in Assisi to this day. Those crucifixes were not sculpted figures attached to a cross but monumental wooden panels on which the figure of the crucified Christ was painted.

The significance of Francis hearing the words of Jesus from the cross early in his career should not be overlooked. It formed the first part of a parenthesis that came to its conclusion decades later when, on Mount La Verna in 1224, he had a vision of a crucified man enclosed within the wings of a seraph. Anyone tempted to sentimentalize the saint needs to recall that his life from his youth to his final years forms a great *inclusio* bracketed by the Crucified One.

Francis took these words from the cross quite literally. He set out to gather material and actually began working at the re-

construction himself — an unthinkable act for a member of the gentry. Persons of his class simply did not work with their hands. Francis's bizarre behavior irritated his father greatly. If he was tolerant of Francis the young gallant-about-town, he saw the family honor shamed by Francis's increasing attention to the poor and by his work on San Damiano and other semi-ruined churches in the area. This odd behavior was all the more intolerable since Francis was doing it with Pietro's hard-earned money, and Pietro was nothing if not a hardheaded businessman who knew the value of a coin earned in commerce. The father first responded to these excesses by clapping Francis in his cellar until he came to his senses, but this strategy came to naught with the maternal intervention of Pica who set her son free.

The antagonism between father and son came to a head in one of the more famous scenes in the life of Francis. His father brought Francis before Guido, the bishop of Assisi, with the dual purpose of knocking some sense into the head of Francis and of recovering his lost money. The early chroniclers intimate that it was not so much family reconciliation but the return of his funds that the father most desired. That may or may not have been the case; the early Franciscan disdain for money might have figured in this interpretation of the struggle. At any rate, the encounter before the bishop now brought the private family rift between son and father into the public arena.

We have two famous visual descriptions of this father-son encounter. One is a fresco in the upper church of the basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi once attributed to Giotto but now more plausibly attributed to an unknown painter called the Master of the Saint Francis Cycle, even though some scholars still see





the hand of Giotto in some of the works. The other depiction is a fresco certainly by Giotto done in the Bardi chapel of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence executed sometime in the 1320s. Both paintings take their inspiration from the description of the event found in Saint Bonaventure's *Legenda Major* since the other, earlier, *legenda* had been suppressed in favor of Bonaventure's account and were not easily available after the middle of the thirteenth century.

In the upper church of San Francisco in Assisi, the artist sets his scene in the main square of Assisi. Even the architecture in the background divides the two groups. To the left is the figure of Pietro Bernadone and his entourage and to the viewer's right is the nude Francis, covered by the cope of Bishop Guido with the sympathizers of Francis forming a cluster around the bishop. We should not overlook the symbolic importance of Bishop Guido who, after all, belonged to the propertied class. That he should mediate between Pietro (with whom he would have a natural affinity) and Francis is striking. Pietro holds in his arms the clothes of Francis and the other materials which he had taken from his father's storehouse. The fresco by Giotto in Florence makes a similar division into parties, but the architectural background is not in sharp contrast.

From a purely symbolic point of view one could not find a more explicit theological statement than what one finds in these famous depictions. There is a clear division between the world of the merchant and the world of the penitent Francis. The cloaking of the young man with the bishop's cope reads as a clear statement of Francis exchanging his natural paternity for the maternal embrace of the church. The artistic space between Francis and his father only hints at the chasm between

**St. Francis renouncing all his worldly possessions**
The Master of St. Francis Cycle, Upper Church, Assisi
Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

**Another rendering of St. Francis renouncing all his worldly possessions**
Giotto, Bardi Chapel, Florence
Scala/Art Resource, NY

the natural and heavenly father. There is, in these scenes, a clear and explicit message about two of the oldest tropes in Christian ascetical spirituality: flight from the world *(fuga mundi)* and contempt for the world *(contemptus mundi)*. To choose this new path of life demanded explicitly to abandon the old.

One should not underestimate the symbolic power inherent in Francis's rejection. Pietro represented the rising new reality of late twelfth-century life: the rise of the money-earning entrepreneur whose skill in the making of money had given power to a new class of people. In early times it was the possession of physical power that counted; now it was the possession of wealth. As Adrian House, a recent biographer of Francis, has noted, Francis's emphasis on poverty and non-possession was a prophetic rejection of the nascent capitalism of the late twelfth century symbolized by the success of his own father.

In this dramatic separation of father and son there is another fundamental theme in Franciscan literature that is only hinted at in the twin depictions by the Master of the Saint Francis Cycle and that of Giotto: the theme of nudity. Francis stands enveloped within the protective cope of the bishop because he had stripped himself completely of his clothes; Bonaventure's *Legenda Major* makes a point of noting that Francis took off even his underclothes.

At one level this dramatic stripping off of his clothes represents a working out of a favorite metaphor of Saint Paul who uses such an image to distinguish the old life of sin and the new life in Christ: "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self . . . and have clothed yourselves with the new self" (Col 3:9-10); or, more pertinently: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and debased by lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God . . ." (Eph 4:22-24). Perhaps, also, there is an allusion to the trope of "putting on the armor of God," harkening back to Francis's turning away from the warrior life when he first began his life of conversion. That Pauline image (Eph 6:11ff.) carries with it the twin movements of despoiling and rearming — but rearming not with the secular instruments of war but the clothing of spiritual combat or, as Saint Paul, phrases it, "cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Rom 13:12).

The symbolism of putting off the old and putting on the new, taken from scripture, stands behind the ancient monastic custom of leaving aside secular clothes and adopting the monastic habit. In Thomas of Celano's *First Life* he alludes to that highly symbolic gesture when in his opening chapter he introduces his discussion of Francis's unconverted life with the heading "How he lived in the Clothing and Spirit of the world." Clothes, of course, had and continue to have a decided social signification. It was often legislated, for example, what kind of clothes a prostitute was to wear. What one wore or dared to wear was a preoccupation in medieval and renaissance society. Sumptuary laws designed to limit outrageous fashion were a commonplace, and fine clothing carried with it a certain sense of decadence and self-indulgence — a sense that has roots in the New Testament itself. Jesus, in praise of the ascetic John the Baptist, siezes on the clothing metaphor almost naturally: "What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who are dressed in soft robes are in royal palaces" (Mt 11:8). It is remarkable how often Francis or his bi-

ographers remark on clothing and its symbolism — a frequency that we shall note in appropriate places.

Another important theme emerges in the early Franciscan chroniclers when they note that by stripping himself of his secular garb Francis is standing naked in the public square in Assisi. The classic formulation of an old spiritual dictum spoke of "nakedly following the naked Christ" *(nudus nudum Christum sequi)*. That saying goes back at least to the time of Saint Jerome who uses it, in almost those exact words, in one of his letters. The Fathers loved to play with the concept of the naked Christ: born without clothing in his nativity and stripped by the Roman soldiers before his crucifixion. To crucify a person naked was to bring that person to further shame by exposing the person to the gaze of the crowd.

The Christian spiritual tradition saw in the nakedness of Jesus as an infant an indication of his true humanity as well as a recapitulation of the nakedness of the first Adam who, in Edenic innocence, was naked and without shame. The about-to-be-crucified Christ was left naked by the Roman executioners to shame him. The spiritual tradition was almost unanimous in seeing that humiliating gesture of the Roman soldiers in the light of Saint Paul's classic passage that speaks of the self-emptying of Jesus (kenosis): "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born into human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8).

It is a reiterated theme in the Franciscan tradition that Francis linked the life of poverty, under the rubric of self-





emptying, with the cross as the paradigmatic example of dying in humility and poverty. It did not escape those who studied the life of Francis to view his passion for poverty within the framework of the passion of Christ. Dante seems to have understood this perfectly well. In the eleventh canto of the *Paradiso* when Saint Dominic praises Francis, he says that at Calvary Mary stood at the foot of the cross but Lady Poverty climbed up the cross to embrace Jesus in his death.

Dante may or may not have known the allegorical text called the *Sacrum Commercium* (the "Sacred Exchange") written more than a decade after the death of Francis. That text makes the strongest case possible for the Franciscan understanding of poverty and does so using the example of nudity. Francis, searching for Lady Poverty, queries two ancients (representing the Old and New Testament?) about her location only to be told that she lives on top of a high mountain, and "if you wish to reach her, brother, take off your clothes of rejoicing and put aside every burden and sin clinging to you for, unless you are naked, you will not be able to climb to her who lives in so high a place" (chapter 11). When Francis does find Lady Poverty she is seated naked on a throne (chapter 15). In conversation with Francis she tells him that she walked nakedly with Adam in the garden of paradise before the Fall (chapter 25ff.). Toward the end of their long conversation and a simple meal of bread and water, Lady Poverty lays down to rest "naked upon the naked earth" (chapter 63) — an anticipation of Francis's own death when he asked to die naked on the ground close to Mother Earth.

This connection between nakedness and the cross and Franciscan poverty is a theme to which this study will return

more than once. But as rich as that theme is in the subsequent life of Francis, it is anticipated in the scene between Francis and his father. Again, Thomas of Celano saw that in his description of the scene. Immediately after Guido wraps the young Francis in his vestment, Thomas interjects a homiletic cry: "Look! Now he wrestles naked with the naked!" In the very next chapter Thomas has Francis traveling about half naked — he who, as Thomas says, "once enjoyed wearing scarlet robes."

There is a passage in the recently discovered *Gospel of Thomas* that reflects the trope of spiritual nakedness: "The Disciples said: 'When will you be shown forth to us and when shall we behold you?' Jesus said: 'When you strip naked without being ashamed and take your garments and put them under your feet like little children and tread upon them, you will see the child of the living and not be afraid.'"

IT WAS CLEAR ENOUGH that Francis had "left the world" but it was not clear what he was going to do with his life. For the moment, in a kind of spiritual limbo of indecision, he did what he had been doing. He worked with lepers, he wandered about in prayer, and he continued with the physical work of rebuilding churches in the area. What he did, in fact, was to live like many of the spiritual outsiders — the "men of penance" as they were known — did: he prayed, he worked, he gave alms, he practiced the works of charity, and he looked for a sign. What that sign was to be he was not at all sure. In a sense, Francis lived providentially moving through the outskirts of Assisi.

When did all of these life-changing events take place? The early biographers of the saint were notoriously indifferent to strict chronologies, so readers of the early reminiscences must





extrapolate from almost parenthetical asides. If we accept as accurate that Francis died twenty years after his conversion to Christ it would mean that at the time of his repudiation of his family patrimony he was roughly twenty-five, and since he died in 1226 these events happened around 1206.

In this period Francis did work with lepers in Gubbio for a time, but then returned to Assisi to continue his work of church rebuilding. The sources tell us that he did repairs not only on the church of San Damiano but also on the church of San Pietro and, in the valley below Assisi, on the chapel known as the "Little Portion" *(Portiuncula)*. That latter chapel would become, in time, the place that Francis favored as a center both for himself and for the band of followers who would join him. It had originally belonged to the Benedictines who had deep roots in the area of Assisi.

At this time in his life clothing again takes on importance. Francis assumed the clothing usually identified as that worn by hermits: he had a rough gown held at the waist by a leather belt, he wore shoes, and he carried a wooden staff. Many paintings of that period and later used such a costume to identify the typical hermit, the paradigmatic figure of whom was Saint Antony of the desert as conveyed through the powerful influence of Saint Athanasius's *Life of Saint Antony* in the fourth century.

The hermit's life was a common form adopted by those who had left the world to take up a life of prayer and penance. The hagiographical tradition is full of stories of men and women who went off to forests or deserts or mountains to live a life of solitude, poverty, and simplicity. It was a life that said symbolically that the person had fled from the world and the

world's concerns. While some hermits graduated to that state after years of the common life of monastic living (Saint Benedict's *Rule,* for example, did not look with general favor on the eremitic life), there was a long tradition of "free-lance" hermits who adopted the life after a religious conversion. Creating a hermitage was a popular choice from the century before Francis as one way to live out the gospel life. Saints like Peter Damien, John Gualbert, and Bruno of Cologne all attempted to regularize the hermit life in this period. Francis himself always kept a love for eremetical retreat — as do Franciscans to this day.

The oldest tradition of the hermit life both in the deserts of the East and in the spirituality associated with Ireland, Scotland, and the British Isles was preeminently a lay phenomenon. Persons would simply move to a life of solitude out of a desire for solitude and a need for the simple life of prayer. Sometimes, such hermits would take up occupations like that of a river ferryman to make a living (the legend of Saint Christopher has him leading a solitary life as a river crossing person), while others lived as forest gleaners, part-time herders, or small-crop farmers.

This kind of free-form eremitical life seemed to have suited Francis's circumstances, since he needed some kind of identification in order to follow his still flexible plan to serve lepers, repair churches, and lead a life of prayer. What he sought out was a fairly common style of life adopted by many in the eleventh and twelfth centuries as an experiment in gospel living.

Francis followed this program for about two years. He then received an insight that set him on a new and radically different path. In 1208 on the feast of Saint Matthias, February 28, Francis listened to the proclamation of the Gospel and, unsure





if he understood correctly, asked for the passage to be read to him again after Mass. The priest read it to him line for line: Jesus commanded his disciples to possess neither gold nor silver nor money, to carry neither a wallet nor a sack nor bread, and not to wear shoes but simply to go forth and proclaim the Good News (Mt 11:7-10).

That reading struck Francis as a direct inspiration: this is what he would do with his life. He heard the words of Jesus as a program for his life. When he heard those words, Thomas of Celano says, he heard them as no "deaf hearer." He immediately took off his shoes, unloosened the belt from his tunic replacing it with a simple cord, and set aside his staff. He then, Thomas continues, chalked a cross on the back of his tunic. Francis became, as it were, a cross bearer — a person who took up the cross not as a crusader in the military sense but as one who would be protected by the cross. He made this tunic very plain and poor and rough (Thomas uses all those words) so that the world would not covet it.

A contemporary Franciscan commentator, Paul LaChance, has written of the "conversions" of Saint Francis; the plural noun is quite apposite. In this early period of his life we can see three such conversions. He converted from a life of luxury and frivolity by converting to the service to the lepers. That conversion was the symbolic repudiation of his father's world. He then took up the life of penance and work symbolized by his hermit's habit of belt, shoes, and staff. When he heard, really heard, the gospel, he set aside that life and began his new life as an itinerant lay preacher, dependent on providence, in order to follow the poor Christ.

The stages Francis went through are hardly original with

him. From the end of the eleventh century there had been a strong reforming impulse in the church to combat the persistent problem of corruption in the church. That reforming impulse had as its background a compelling question: what is the gospel life or, as it was sometimes phrased, the apostolic life? The question, as is clear, was an attempt to get back to the absolute basics — a kind of *ressourcement* — in order to provide a purified way of living as a Christian, an attempt to re-form the church by reforming its members.

The answer to the question of what constituted the gospel life was various. Monks, and reforming impulses within monasticism, pointed to the church described in the Acts of the Apostles where the primitive community held all things in common. From that template they deduced that the most perfect form of the gospel life was the life of monasticism. Others decided that the best way of undercutting the corrupt life of the clergy would be to have the clergy live in community under a rule in order to serve the church effectively. Thus, the "Canons Regular" provided an alternative to monastic living. One of the most well known of the Canons was Hugh of Saint Victor who taught that if such clergy lived in community, relinquishing private possessions and exercising a life of humility, that combination — poverty and humility — would create a cadre of *Pauperes Christi* (The "Poor of Christ") who would be transformed into a life of charity: love of God and neighbor.

To those more "regular" experiments one must also note figures, especially in the early twelfth century in France, like Robert of Abrissel (died 1117) who combined a life of poverty with a life of itinerant preaching, a way of life formally endorsed in 1096 by Pope Urban II. Vitalis of Savigny (died 1122)





followed the same pattern, although he added to it the apostolate of alleviating the suffering of the poor and the outcast by founding hospices for lepers, arranging marriages for fallen women (rather than clapping them into monasteries of women), finding shelter for the homeless, and so on. The most famous of these apostolic figures was Saint Robert of Xanten (died 1134), the founder of an order of Canons Regular in Premontre still extant today, who was an itinerant preacher with a special mission to preach peace and reconciliation to warring factions in towns and villages. When he did reluctantly accept the role of abbot for regular canons in Lyons he did so only on condition (the terms are important here) that they become "imitators of Christ" who "lived by the Gospel principle" and practiced "voluntary poverty."

Along with these attempts to breathe new life into clerical and monastic institutions there were also a number of lay initiatives, like the lay movement in the environs of Milan called the Patarines who resisted the corrupt clergy and feudal bishops in order to live a simple life of sharing and prayer, or the Hirsau reform in Germany in which laypeople attempted to live a lay life inspired by monastic ideals in their own homes. Their form of life actually received papal approval in 1091 by Urban II as part of his own efforts to reform the church.

The most famous movement in this period — a movement that bore some resemblance to what Francis was attempting to do — was inspired by a rich layman named Peter Waldo who gave up his rich life in Lyons in 1171 to live a life of poverty and itinerant preaching. Peter Waldo soon attracted a rather large following who preached in the area around Lyons. Their way of life received approval from Pope Alexander during the deliber-

ations of Lateran III (1179) but the pope refused to give them a license to preach because of their lack of intellectual formation. They did not observe this restriction for long, and by 1184 they came under ecclesiastical censure. Their response was to insist that the "true church" derived from the apostolic life and not from apostolic succession. Some of their members veered into heresy, and a few actually seemed to have been touched by the Cathar heresy then deeply rooted in the culture of the south of France.

The movement of reforming laypersons in Lombardy, known as the Humiliati, had an evolution not unlike that of the Waldensians. Pope Innocent III gave them, not a rule, but a program *(propositum)* of life for the various strata of their membership (they actually had three orders within the movement). One rather striking part of their life was that instead of alms they shared the profit of their labors (they were mainly weavers by trade) with those in need. They also eventually got permission to listen to exhortations by their own members on Sunday which was, as Duane Lapsanski and other scholars have noted, a significant concession relative to the issue of who could preach and under what conditions. The Humiliati were groping toward some kind of life in which all classes could share in the gospel life with their insistence that ordinary lay life and work were compatible with the reforming impulses once almost exclusively found within the traditional religious orders or their reforming offshoots.

It is against that background that the life of Saint Francis must be understood as his life turned from his solitary search to follow the gospel life into a movement that had models and antecedents in the culture of his time. In other words, while





Francis is a singular figure, what he did and where he came from and what resources were at his disposal were not unique to him. Francis was not some solitary flower blooming in a desert. Attempts to portray Francis as a singular figure who invented something absolutely new — and such attempts are rife in the popular literature on him — oversimplify matters. That oversimplification, in turn, leads to an inability to see Francis within a larger tradition of Catholic reform and spirituality, and that, I think, is a very bad mistake. Such an oversimplification, as we shall see, also makes it extremely difficult to understand some of Francis's writings and many of the decisions he makes or the wishes he wants observed. If one does not see Francis within the stream of Catholic reform one does not see him clearly at all.