

MEDIEVAL SAINTS

A READER

edited by

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40. HUMANISTIC HAGIOGRAPHY: THE WRITINGS OF ST. FRANCIS'S COMPANIONS

Even Thomas of Celano's stylized biography allows the reader a more personal knowledge of the saint than do most hagiographers, whose intention was not to convey idealized lives of certain saintly types. But the mass of anecdotal material collected and written down by Francis's closest companions and arranged unchronologically after his death as 'foretti' or 'little flowers' of wisdom increases our sense that we know the man personally as we know few other medieval saints. The difference in style and content is a matter both of the influence of Francis himself and one of doctrine. Franciscans emphasized the importance of a personal relationship with God. Francis humanized his own religious practices and encouraged others to do the same. The famous incident which took place one Christmas, near the town of Greccio, he had the scene of the nativity reproduced in the church in which he was to celebrate Mass, bringing in a manger, hay, an ox and an ass to drive home to people the human nature of Christ. Thomas of Celano tells us that "the people came and were filled with new joy over the new mystery." Typically, Francis ordered that the hay should afterwards be given to the animals to eat. The writings of Francis's companions convey simply and directly, often through the saint's own words, his devotion to poverty, humility, and asceticism, his encompassing sympathy for the created world, and the personal nature of his piety. The following selections are taken from the 'Legend of Perugia,' thought to be a transcription of the early writings of Francis's friends, Leo, Rufino, and Angelo.

Source: trans. Rosalind B. Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli, Sociorum S. Francisci* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 95-283; abridged and repr. with permission. BHL 3114.

How the early friars obeyed the Gospel to the letter.

4. In those days, when St. Francis was with the friars that he then had, such was his purity that from the hour in which the Lord revealed to him that he and his friars ought to live according to the model of the holy Gospel, he wanted to do this to the letter and tried to observe it throughout his life. He ordered the friar who did the cooking for the brothers, when he wanted to give them vegetables to eat, not to put them in hot water in the evening ready for the following day, as is usually done, so that they might obey that saying of the holy Gospel: 'Take no thought for the morrow.' So that friar put them to soak after the brothers had said Matins. For the same reason for a long time many of the friars in the houses where they were living, and especially in the towns, observed this injunction - being unwilling to acquire or accept alms beyond what was sufficient for them for one day.

CHAPTER SEVEN: NEW DIRECTIONS

St. Francis ate grapes with a sick friar.

At one time, while St. Francis was still at that house, a friar who was staying there, a holy man who had been a long time under religious vows, was very weak and ill. Seeing this, St. Francis was moved with compassion towards him. But because the friars then, both sick and well, with joking and with patience, treated poverty as abundance, and did not use medicines in their illness but rather preferred to take what was contrary to their bodily needs, St. Francis said to himself: 'If that brother were to eat ripe grapes first thing in the morning I believe they would do him good.' So one day he got up very early in the morning and called him and took him into the vineyard which is next to the church, and chose a vine on which were good grapes ready to eat. Sitting with the friar by the vine, he began to eat grapes so that he should not be embarrassed at eating alone. As they ate the grapes, the friar praised God, and for the rest of his life remembered this compassionate act the holy father had done for his sake, and often with great devotion and shedding of tears he recalled it among the friars.

St. Francis tried to destroy a stone house.

At one time, near the date when the chapter [the meeting of the Order] was due to be held - for in those days it was held every year at St. Mary of the Portiuncula - the people of Assisi held a general meeting. They had observed that through God's grace the friars had increased and were daily increasing, and that especially when they all gathered there for the chapter they would have nothing except a poor little cottage thatched with straw, its walls made of withies and mud, as the friars had made it when they first went to live there. In a few days they made there in haste and with great devotion a big house of stone, with lined walls, without the consent of St. Francis, while he was away. When St. Francis returned from one of the provinces and came to the chapter and saw the house that had been built there, he was astonished. Thinking that, by reason of this house, the friars in the houses where they lived and were to lodge might build large houses or cause them to be built, and most of all because he wished that this place should always be the model and example for all the houses of the friars, he arose one day before the chapter ended and climbed up on to the roof of the house and ordered the friars to come up. He began, together with the friars, to throw to the ground the wooden tiles with which it was roofed, wishing to destroy the house. Some knights of Assisi and others who were there representing the city commune to guard the house (because of the crowds and secular folk who were outside the house in those days) tried to stop him, but he would not be deterred.

to watch the friars' chapter, seeing that St. Francis and the other friars wanted to destroy that house at once came up to them and said to St. Francis, 'Brother, this house belongs to the commune of Assisi, and we are here on behalf of the commune. We tell you that you are not to destroy our house.' St. Francis said to them: 'If the house is yours I have no wish to touch it; let it at once got down off it and the other friars who had ascended with him. On account of this the citizens of Assisi for a long time decreed each year that whoever was their *podestà* should be responsible for having it roofed and repaired when necessary.

St. Francis's efforts to keep churches clean.

18. At one time, when St. Francis was staying at the church of St. Mary of the Portiuncula and the brothers were still few, sometimes he went through the villages and churches in the neighborhood of the city of Assisi announcing and preaching to men that they should do penance, [and] he carried a broom to sweep the churches. For St. Francis was very grieved when he entered any church and found it was not clean, and therefore he always, after he had preached to the people and the sermon was ended, gathered together all the priests who were there into some remote spot so that laymen should not hear, and preached to them of the salvation of souls and especially that they should be careful and diligent in keeping clean their churches, altars, and everything connected with the celebration of the divine mysteries.

St. Francis ate from the same dish as a leper.

22. One day, when St. Francis returned to the church of St. Mary of the Portiuncula, he found James there, a simple brother who had come that day with a leper with ulcerous sores. The holy father had strongly recommended this leper and all other lepers who were badly afflicted to him. For in those days the brothers used to stay in leper hospitals and this brother James was, as we were, the doctor of those who were most afflicted, and willingly touched, dressed, and healed their wounds. St. Francis said to Brother James as though criticizing him: 'You ought not to bring Christian brothers here, as it is not seemly either for you or for them.' St. Francis called lepers 'Christian brothers.' The holy father said this because, although it pleased him that James should help and serve them, he did not want him to take those who were badly afflicted outside the hospital, particularly as this Brother James was very simple and often went to the church of St. Mary with some leper, and people were in the habit of shrinking from lepers who were badly afflicted. As soon



[Fig. 42] St. Francis preaching to the birds: on finding a flock of many birds of different kinds, he spoke to them of the gratitude they owed to God, and the birds listened attentively until he gave the sign of the Cross and they flew away (Giotto, reproduced in Baring-Gould, *Lives of the Saints*, 11).

as he had said it St. Francis blamed himself and confessed his fault to Brother Peter Catani, who was then minister-general [of the Order], because he believed that by rebuking Brother James he had shamed the leper. So he submitted his fault, to make satisfaction to God and to the leper, and St. Francis said to Brother Peter: 'I am going to tell you the penance that I wish to do for it so that you can confirm it for me, and not contradict me at all.' Brother Peter said to him: 'Do as you please, brother.' For Brother Peter was so respectful and afraid of St. Francis and so obedient to him that he did not presume to change his orders even though on that occasion and on many others he was distressed inwardly and outwardly. St. Francis said: 'May this be my penance, that I eat from the same dish with the Christian brother.' This was done, and when St. Francis sat at the table with the leper and the other

friars, a dish was put between the two. The leper had sores and ulcers all over him and in particular his fingers, with which he ate, were contorted and bleeding, so that always, when he put them in the dish, blood flowed into it. Seeing this, Brother Peter and the other friars were much upset, but they did not dare to say anything for fear of the holy father. He who wrote this saw it and bore witness.

St. Francis would not help put out a fire.

50. Another time, when he was keeping Lent on Monte La Verna, his companion one day, when it was time for the meal, was lighting the fire in the cell where they ate; when it was lit he came to St. Francis in the cell where he prayed and slept, as it was his custom to read to him the portion of the Gospel which was recited at Mass that day. When St. Francis could not hear Mass, he always wanted to hear the Gospel for the day before he ate. When he came to eat in the cell where the fire had been lit, the flames of the fire had reached the gable of the cell and were burning it. His companion began to put it out as best he could but he could not manage alone. St. Francis did not want to help him, but picked up a skin, with which he covered himself that night, and went out into the wood. The brothers of the place, although they lived far away from the cell, as the cell was a long way from the friary, when they sensed that the cell was on fire, came and put the fire out. St. Francis afterwards returned to eat. After the meal he said to his companion: 'I do not want to have this skin over me any more, since through my avarice I did not want brother fire to eat it.'

St. Francis's love for all creatures.

51. When he washed his hands he chose a place where the washing-water would not afterwards be trampled underfoot. When he was obliged to walk over rocks he walked with fear and reverence for the love of him who was called a rock, and when he recited that verse of the Psalm where it says, 'Thou hast raised me on the Rock,' he used to say with great devotion, 'Thou hast raised me beneath the feet of the Rock.' He told the brother who got wood for the fire not to cut down the whole tree but to cut it in such a way that some part remained and part was cut. He also made this an order to a brother who was in the friary where he was staying.

He told the brother who tended the garden not to plant all the space in the garden entirely with vegetables but to leave some part of the soil where he might grow flowering plants which in their season might produce their perfume. He told the brother who tended the garden not to plant all the space in the garden entirely with vegetables but to leave some part of the soil where he might grow flowering plants which in their season might produce their perfume.

might to make a beautiful little bed in some part of the garden, putting and planting there all the sweet-smelling herbs and all the plants which produce lovely flowers, so that in their season they might invite all who saw them to praise God, since all creatures say and proclaim: 'God made me for you, O man! We who were with him used to see him always in such joy, both inwardly and outwardly, over all creatures in general, gladly touching them and seeing them, that his spirit seemed to be not on earth but in heaven. The truth of this is evident, since on account of the great comfort which he had and had had in God's creatures, a little before his death he composed some verses of the Lord for his creatures to incite the hearts of their hearers to the praise of God, and so that God might be praised by all through his creatures.

St. Francis wanted to be free to give away his clothes.

54. Another time a poor man in poor garments came to a hermitage of the friars and asked the friars for some old rag for the love of God. St. Francis told one of the friars to look through the house to see if he could find some cloth or rag to give him. Going all round the house the friar said he could not find any. So that the poor man should not go away empty-handed, St. Francis went privately, in order that his guardian should not forbid him, took a knife and, sitting down in a hiding-place, began to cut off a piece of his tunic, which was sewn on the inside of the tunic, wanting to give it secretly to the poor man. But as his guardian at once sensed what he wanted to do, he went to him and forbade him to give it, chiefly because it was then very cold and he was ill and really cold. St. Francis said to him: 'If you wish me not to give it to him it is absolutely necessary that someone else procure a piece to give to the poor brother.' So the friars gave him some cloth from their garments at St. Francis's prompting. If the friars lent him a cloak when he went through the world preaching, whether on foot or on an ass – after he began to be ill he could not go on foot and so it was necessary for him sometimes to ride on an ass, as he was not prepared to ride on a horse unless in genuine and very great necessity, and this only a short time before his death when he began to grow much worse – or when he was staying in a friary he did not want to accept it unless under this condition that, if he met any poor man or any came to him whom the spirit told him was in evident need, he could give it to him.

St. Francis's reply to the novice.

On another occasion St. Francis was sitting by the fire warming himself

St. Francis tamed a cicada.

came yet again to speak to him about [having a] Psalter. St. Francis said to him: 'After you have a Psalter you will want and hanker for a breviary; then you have a breviary you will sit in an armchair like a great prelate, saying to your brother: "Bring me the breviary." Thus saying, with great fervor of spirit he took some ashes in his hand and put them on his head, drawing the hand round his head as you do when you wash it, saying to himself as he did so: "A breviary! I a breviary!" He continued to reiterate this saying many times. "A breviary," drawing his hand over his head. The friar was dumbfounded and ashamed. Afterwards St. Francis said to him: 'Brother, I have been similarly tempted to have books, but in order that I might know the Lord's will in this matter, I took the book where the holy Gospels are written and prayed God that when I first opened the book, he would deign to show me his will. This. After I had prayed, on first opening the book this Gospel saying struck me: "To you it is given to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to others in parables." And he said: "There are so many who ascend willingly to knowledge that he is blessed who makes himself sterile for the love of God.'

The novice asked again. This time St. Francis found the answer, and always used it in future.

74. Many months later, when St. Francis was at the church of St. Mary of the Portuncula, by the cell past the house on the road, the brother spoke to him again about the Psalter. St. Francis said to him: 'Go, and do as your minister says to you.' Hearing this, the brother started to go back by the way he had come. St. Francis, staying where he was, began to think over what he had said to the brother, and at once called after him: 'Wait, brother, wait! He came up to him and said: 'Come back with me, brother, and show me the place where I said to you as to the Psalter that you might do as your minister told you.' When they came to the spot where he had spoken these words to him, St. Francis bowed down before the brother and said on bended knee: 'I was wrong, brother, I was wrong, since whoever wishes to be a friar must learn not to have anything except a tunic, as the rule allows him, and a cord and breeches, and those who are forced to by necessity or illness may have shoes. From then on he gave this answer to as many friars as came to him for advice in such matters. Wherefore he used to say: 'A man has only as much learning as he can work with, and a religious is as good an orator as he is a worker, much as to say: 'A good tree is known only by its fruit.'

75. One summer, when St. Francis was at the same house, staying in the first cell next to the hedge of the garden behind the house, where after his death Brother Rainerius the gardener used to live, it so happened that one day when he went down from that cell there was a cicada on the branch of the fig tree which was near the cell, and he was able to touch her. Stretching out his hand he said to her: 'Come to me, my sister cicada.' Immediately she jumped on to the fingers of his hand and with the finger of his other hand he began to stroke the cicada, saying: 'Sing, my sister cicada.' Immediately she obeyed him and began to sing and St. Francis was much comforted and praised God. For a good hour he held her thus in his hand. Afterwards he put her back on the branch of the fig tree, from which he had taken her. Then for eight days running, when he left the cell, he found her in the same place, and every day he took her in his hand and as soon as he said to her that she should sing, and stroked her, she sang. After eight days he said to his companions: 'We will give sister cicada leave to depart wherever she wishes, for she has comforted us enough and the flesh might draw vain glory from this.' When he had given his leave she immediately went away and appeared there no more. His companions marveled that she obeyed him thus and was so close with him. St. Francis had so much joy in creatures through his love of the Creator that God, for his consolation both inward and outward, made come to him creatures normally wild.

The night before St. Francis died many larks flew low over the house. St. Francis's love for birds and animals, and his concern for them, especially at Christmas time.

76. On the Saturday evening after Vespers the night before St. Francis died, many birds called larks flew low over the roof of the house where St. Francis lay and circled, singing, making the form of a wheel. We who were with St. Francis and have written these things about him bear witness that many times we have heard him say: 'If I speak with the emperor I will implore him for the love of God and the intervention of my prayer to make a constitution and decree that no man should trap sister larks or do them any harm whatever, likewise that all *podestas* [mayors] of cities and lords of towns and villages should be bound each year on Christmas Day to compel men to scatter corn and other grain on the roads outside cities and towns for the birds to have something to eat, especially sister larks, and other birds, on the day of such a festival. Out of reverence for the Son of God whom the blessed Virgin his mother bore that night in a manger between two and two among men and other animals.'

41. THE OFFICIAL LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS: THE STIGMATA

that night to give a good meal to our brothers the oxen and asses. Similarly on Christmas Day all the poor ought to be sated by the rich.' For St. Francis had a greater regard for Christmas than for any other festival of the Lord, since although the Lord may work our salvation in his other festivals, you because he was born for us, as St. Francis used to say, it was his concern to save us. Therefore he wished that on that day every Christian should exult in the Lord for love of him who gave himself for us. Every man should with gladness be bountiful not only to the poor but also to animals and birds. St. Francis said of the lark: 'Sister lark has a hood like a religious and is a humble bird, who goes cheerfully along the road to find herself some corn and even if she finds it among the dung of beasts she takes it out and eats it. As she flies she praises God, like a good religious despising earthly things, for her life is always in the heavens. Moreover her clothing is made like the earth, her feathers that is, giving an example to religious that they ought not to have colored and fancy clothing but as if dead, looking like soil.' Because he saw these things in his sisters the larks St. Francis loved them dearly and saw them gladly.

Some thirteen years after the completion of Thomas of Celano's second 'life,' the General Chapter of the Franciscan Order commissioned a new version from their minister-general, St. Bonaventure. His 'life,' based on material from the earlier ones which he organized under thematic headings, with some controversial passages excised (such as Francis's prophecies, and instances of his more extreme behavior), was accepted as the official one. As a mark of its status, a shorter version of it was adopted for reading in the liturgy, and the Chapter took the unusual step of suppressing all earlier accounts and related material. The reasons for the suppression lie in the controversies that had developed both within the Order, concerning Francis's true intentions for his followers, and outside it, between the monastic orders, jealous of their ancient prerogatives, and the friars (Dominican as well as Franciscan), eager to assert their new privileges. The major argument within the Franciscan Order was between the Spirituals, those who adhered to the literal interpretation of poverty, and the Conventuals, who stood for a more moderate community life adapted to the needs of study and preaching. St. Bonaventure's 'life' of the founder was both an attempt to make peace among the factions and an assertion of what he felt to be the true spirit of the Order. The famous story of the stigmata, the culmination of Francis's mystical experiences, is included in all three accounts of his life. By the time St. Bonaventure wrote, it was more essential than ever to give a convincing version of this event, since its veracity was being called into question by the Order's critics; his is the account that follows.

Source: trans. Benen Fahy, "Major and Minor Life of St. Francis with excerpts from other works by St. Bonaventure," in St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies, English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis, ed. Marion A. Habig (4th ed. rev.; Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1972), pp. 729-735; repr. with permission. BHL 3107.

Chapter 13

St. Francis never failed to keep himself occupied doing good; like the angels Jacob saw on the ladder, he was always busy, either raising his heart to God in prayer, or descending to his neighbor. He had learned how to distribute the time in which he could gain merit wisely, devoting part of it to his neighbor by doing good, and part to the restful ecstasy of contemplation. According to the demands of time or circumstances he would devote himself totally to the salvation of his neighbor, but when he was finished, he would escape from the distracting crowds and go into solitude in search of peace. Here he was free to attend exclusively to God and he would cleanse any sin he had contracted while living in the midst of the world. Two years