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THE EARLY LEGENDS OF FRANCIS AND THE LEPER

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In reviewing the significant legends of Francis and the leper as contained in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*¹, we see stories within stories, not only telling us of Francis and the leper, but also encounters with God, prayer, and the conversion taking place within him. Walking through a series of legends we will see considerable expansion and elaboration to what is first read in Thomas of Celano's initial work circa 1228.

Comparing the legends in *The Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer, we see they are almost identical. We know that Julian used Celano's work to write his own legend which was used primarily for reading to the brothers who were in the University in Paris during their silent dining hours. There are subtle differences in style, sequence and terms used, but in the particular scene of Francis and the leper, Julian applied very little change to Celano's original. The leper story is immediately preceded by a story of Francis being naked, hungry and ill-treated as he moved through his conversion process of transforming himself and his life as the lowest and most humble servant of others.²

¹Regis J. Armstrong O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellmann O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short O.F.M., eds. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York: New City Press, 2000) (hereafter referred to as FA:ED).

²"The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano," 1C 16-17 in FA:ED 1:195; "The Life of Saint Francis by Julian of Speyer," LJS 11 in FA:ED 1:376.

In both early works, the story is relatively short and without much elaboration. Perhaps this brevity can be attributed to brothers at the time of Thomas' writing, closer to the death of Francis, as having more direct contact with lepers. Another perspective is that later friars gained familiarity through oral renditions of this particular story, and so did not need much more in the way of detail – when the scene came up, they easily recalled it.

The sequencing in both Celano and Julian's work does not follow a chronological pattern and the scene moves back and forth in time. In these versions we read about two primary events: Francis seeing and kissing a leper followed by Francis moving to the lepers. But we also read about important facets of the underlying spirit of his conversion, humbly considering himself less, doing penance to live according to the gospel, and coming to victory over himself.³

As we compare the later versions that follow below, it is also interesting to note the details used in describing the sores and pus of the lepers in these earlier works disappear – perhaps due to the writer's desire to remove some of the detail found most disturbing to the senses.⁴ Both Celano and Julian also link this story to Francis' Testament.⁵ This linkage is important so the readers of these legends are able to make the connection and understand why Francis wrote about the lepers – especially since in his Testament, there is no detail.

Some twelve to twenty years after Celano's first life, the Legend of the Three Companions was written.⁶ Providing considerably more stories of Francis' youth and conversion, this work adds greater detail to the scenes with the lepers and events in the life of Francis which lead up to his meeting the leper near Assisi. However, one can also see elements that can be linked back to the original framework and language used in Celano's earlier legend. These include: moving to the lepers, holding his nose, and including the importance of the leper as Francis also included this in his Testament.⁷ In the Companions legend, the reader is prepared for the leper scene after first reading about God speaking to Francis. Here God provides guidance to despise the things earlier sought and to find sweetness in what previously seemed bitter.⁸ Such a prelude is not found in Celano's first work. We know of specific events in Francis' early life, but we do not always have the reasons why he acted in some way. Refer to the earlier event in Francis' life where he turned back from starting on the crusade to Apulia.⁹

³ IC 16-17 in FA:ED 1:195; LJS 12-13 in FA:ED 1:376-7.

⁴ IC 17 in FA:ED 1:195; LJS 12 in FA:ED 1:377.

⁵ "The Testament," Test 1-3 in FA:ED 1:124.

⁶ "The Legend of the Three Companions," LC3 11-12 in FA:ED 2:74.

⁷ IC 17 in FA:ED 1:195; LJS 12 in FA:ED 1:377.

⁸ LC3 11 in FA:ED 2:74.

⁹ LC3 6 in FA:ED 2:71.

Writers of the various legends may not have known the reasons why Francis did this, but I am sure people who heard the story asked the question. In response, the writers chose to provide some rationale through the use of visions, dreams, and the voice of God – for example, in the scene of Francis on his way to Apulia, the conversation “Who can do more good for you? The lord or the servant?” So, we see in *Companions* (and again later in Celano’s second life), the writers portray God instructing Francis on how to adopt a new way of life by turning his understanding of sweetness and bitterness upside down.¹⁰

Against this backdrop, we find Francis meeting a leper, and, getting down from his horse, he kisses the leper’s hand and gives him a coin. After this experience, Francis has victory over himself and moves to the leper house.¹¹ Note the sequencing in Celano’s earlier work which began with Francis moving to the leper house and then reflecting back as to what preceded that move and contrast that sequence to *Companions*, where we see more of a chronological progression.¹²

One important detail that is missing from *Companions*, as compared to Celano’s legend, is the omission of Francis cleaning the pus-filled sores – instead we merely see Francis kissing their hands and giving them a coin¹³ – a loss, which, for me, minimizes some of the shock-impact of this story. We also see that from this legend on, money will remain a part of the later legends. Similar to Celano’s legend, this version also ends with a reference to Francis’ Testament.¹⁴

Comparing the Legend of the Three Companions to Celano’s Life of Saint Francis, I appreciate the methodology used in *Companions*. This story is so central to Francis’ conversion, I believe it would be something the reader would carry close to their heart. In reading Celano’s version, I can imagine the later audience wanted more from this special conversion moment. Based on the prelude and sequencing of the story, it seems genuine and credible. Following the death of Francis, a debate came up about his Testament and Gregory IX ruled that it had no impact on the rule or life of the brotherhood. With this in mind, I can also imagine later followers of Francis wanting to ensure the essence contained in his Testament would be remembered and linked to this important scene. I am grateful to see this story through the eyes of the writer of *Companions*.

Next we come to Thomas of Celano’s second work on the Life of Francis entitled *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*.¹⁵ In the Prologue to this

¹⁰LC3 11 in FA:ED 2:74; "The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul by Thomas of Celano," 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:248.

¹¹ LC3 11 in FA:ED 2:74.

¹² 1C 17 in FA:ED 1:195.

¹³ LC3 11 in FA:ED 2:74.

¹⁴ LC3 11 in FA:ED 2:74.

¹⁵ 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:248-9.

second work, we read about Celano using information gained from additional sources he received after writing his first work.¹⁶ He also incorporated his perspective of the brotherhood from the events over the eighteen years since his first work.

In Remembrance, one sees a significantly similar story now emerge that closely aligns with Companions. The prelude of God speaking to Francis about taking the bitter for the sweet has appeared, the story of Francis on his horse meeting a leper, kissing him and giving him money is present, and the sequencing of the story is similar.¹⁷ But in this new version, Celano leaves out much of the other detail from his original legend – no sores or pus, no story about his holding his nose when seeing the leper houses in the distance, and no link to Francis’ Testament.

However, what we do find in this legend is a whole new image in the scene not taken from any earlier version – the leper Francis met on the road disappeared after receiving the kiss and money!¹⁸ Now placed before the reader is a passage leading them to contemplate that the leper was Christ. This provides a profound explanation of the fervor with which Francis went to the leper houses and his attempt to recreate this scene by kissing them – now on both the hands and mouth – and giving them money.¹⁹

The final source to be assessed is that of Bonaventure’s Major Legend of Saint Francis.²⁰ We have moved from the earliest rendition of this story in Celano’s Life of Saint Francis to this new legend composed over thirty years later. The story has changed significantly and expanded from approximately 175 words to over 500 words!

Bonaventure sets the stage and provides a significant spiritual basis for the events of Francis’ conversion process. In the opening scene, Bonaventure borrows imagery from Celano’s first life by drawing the reader’s attention to Jesus’ parable of the farmer, who finds a great treasure in the field, then goes and sells all to be able to buy the field. Bonaventure places more of the initiative on Francis’ own efforts of discovering his way through prayer and devotion leading to a “suggestion to his spirit” rather than relying solely on the voice of God – there is a partnership.²¹ Francis is portrayed as on his horse encountering the leper and “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

¹⁶ 2C 2 in FA:ED 2:240.

¹⁷ 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:248-9.

¹⁸ 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:248-9. Cf. *Luke* 24:30-32

¹⁹ 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:249.

²⁰ "The Major Legend of Saint Francis," LM 1:4-6 in FA:ED 2:533.

²¹ 1C 6 (FA:ED 1:187); LM 1:4 in FA:ED 2:533.

knight of Christ.”²² These words take the story out of the ethereal realm where God tells us what to do, and brings it down to each reader that, through prayer and devotion, one can discern their relationship with God and hear the call of God.

Bonaventure also borrows Celano’s revised scene that after kissing the leper and giving him money, the leper vanishes, impressing on Francis’ heart the knowledge of what he must do with his life to encounter Christ in others.²³ Another similar theme also repeated from Celano’s second work includes the reflection on how Francis, before his conversion, held his nose at the mere sight of leper houses in the distance. But Bonaventure expands these words to link them to Christ crucified who was despised as if a leper. He also emphasizes Francis’ despising of self, acting with piety, humility and compassion.²⁴

Through all the legends, we have seen the story change and grow when describing Francis’ actions when he meets the leper – moving from a kiss in Celano and Julian’s works, to kissing the leper’s hand and giving him alms in the Companions, to kissing the leper’s hand and mouth while giving him alms in Bonaventure’s legend.²⁵ Perhaps this growth is due to the desire by the various writers to add emphasis to the story and bring awareness back to these acts of making mercy, which had been lost in the thirty years since Francis’ death, and to inspire the brotherhood anew.

Further, increasing the call to live the Gospel life, Bonaventure also adds an entirely new segment to this scene which he borrows heavily from Celano’s second legend on Francis praying to Jesus on the cross and Jesus’ words “if you wish to come after me, take up your cross and follow me.”²⁶ It may be that Bonaventure is using this to replace the opening scenes in the Companions and Celano’s Remembrance which both open with God speaking to Francis on sweetness and bitterness.²⁷

Overall, the changes to this story from the first legend through four other legends are significant. The first starting with basic information without much elaboration, then growing not only in detail but in connecting the scenes of this story with other important aspects of Franciscan spirituality, ethos of prayer, living a Gospel life, creating a relationship with Christ, and serving the outcast.

I have learned that the key to a critical analysis of the early documents for most scholars is to answer “The Franciscan Question” -- finding the true Francis and looking at the genealogy of the documents we have to discover the real

²² LM 1:5 in FA:ED 2:533.

²³ LM 1:5 in FA:ED 2:533-4.

²⁴ LM 1:6 in FA:ED 2:534; 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:248-9.

²⁵ 1C 17 in FA:ED 1:195; LJS 2:12 in FA:ED 1:377; LC3 11 in FA:ED 2:74; 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:249; LM 1:6 in FA:ED 2:534.

²⁶ LM 1:5 in FA:ED 2:534; Mt 16:24.

²⁷ 11 in FA:ED 2:74; 2C 9 in FA:ED 2:248.

Francis and separate it from what the writers have placed upon him. But as a “young,” new enthusiast for Francis, I also eagerly appreciate the theological interpretations that I read in these legends. Although I understand I am moving even further away from the real Francis, if I were to write my own legend of him today, I would primarily use Bonaventure’s Major Legend as the foundation since I appreciate his presentation and imagery.

Bonaventure uses many scenes from *Companions*, which itself, originates from other sources that may have been closer to Francis and his early companions. The method in which Bonaventure introduces the story is beautiful. I find meaning through his prelude of Francis in prayer searching for a discernment of God’s call, and taking it upon himself to enter into a relationship with God to find and respond to that call.²⁸ This is not just reporting an event, it is a legend to explain why, to include something deeper than just watching an event as a spectator. It sets the stage for an “aha” moment for the reader and quite possibly creates the opportunity for relationship with Francis and the seeds for a conversion to take place within the reader.

I also appreciate Bonaventure’s introduction of the scene of Francis meeting the leper on the plain below Assisi. I resonate with the image of Francis on a horse representing his superior status, being up high, separated from the infirm leper on the ground below, and I am moved by the image of Francis climbing down off of his horse to stand on equal ground with the leper.²⁹ I can vividly imagine Francis’ spontaneity as he makes the connection to the hidden treasure and quickly jumps forward to plant a kiss on the leper, and I can imagine the surprise and emotion the leper must have experienced.

Including the vanishing leper who gives us a hint that Francis kissed Christ creates mixed emotions.³⁰ While I appreciate creating the imagery of seeing Christ in the lepers, the poor, and the outcast, I would keep that scene. But, I also want Francis to turn the corner and also meet a human leper – I want to bring it down to earth so that someone does not take the opportunity to just reflect on Francis having seen a vision, rather to associate putting it all into practice with real, human brothers and sisters in the world. To see the face of Christ in all our brothers and sisters, we must put sandals to the path and truly be present using our senses of sight, smell, taste and touch of them. As my basis for this action I would incorporate the scene from *Companions*, where the leper does not disappear.³¹

²⁸ LM 1:4 in FA:ED 2:533.

²⁹ LM 1:5 in FA:ED 2:533.

³⁰ LM 1:5 in FA:ED 2: 533-4.

³¹ LC3 11 in FA:ED 2:74.

Keeping the scene of Francis not only kissing the leper, but giving him alms is another important feature to me.³² Through all the legends of Francis we consistently read that the asking for and giving of alms is a central act in his life and that of the brotherhood. It adds an additional reminder of our reliance on the grace of God, taking only what meets our basic needs, and sharing the rest with others. Giving alms is also an act of mercy, but it lacks the reciprocity.

In Celano's first life, we see Francis cleaning the pus from the leper's sores. This vividly demonstrates the length to which Francis moved during his conversion in re-defining bitterness and sweetness – I would also ensure this is included.³³ This detail demonstrates the breadth and depth of his conversion process. As my basis for this action, I would look to the sincerity of the words “and I showed mercy to them” which Francis dictated for his Testament.³⁴

Throughout all of these legends of Francis and the leper, we experience a story of passion and grace, a story of discernment and profound calling. We experience why it is important to continue this story today and tomorrow. Bonaventure provides a purpose, as he writes in his prologue to Major Legend: *“If we consider the height of his extraordinary sanctity we can come to the conclusion, without any doubt, that this messenger of God—worthy of love by Christ, imitation by us, and admiration by the world—was God’s servant, Francis. In this, while living among humans, he was an imitator of angelic purity and was placed as an example for the perfect followers of Christ.”*³⁵

³² LM 1:6 in FA:ED 2: 534.

³³ 1C 17 in FA:ED 1:195.

³⁴ Test 2 in FA:ED 1:124

³⁵ LM Prologue in FA:ED 2: 527.