Introduction

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The young Francis of Assisi, son of a prosperous merchant, dreamed of earning fame as an intrepid and chivalrous knight, whose deeds would be praised and celebrated at home and beyond the confines of his native Umbria, spreading to the neighbouring provinces. This aspiration survived his spell as a prisoner of war in Perugia after the battle of Collestrada in November 1202 when he may have witnessed horrific deeds. On his release, his interests, manner and spirit were noticeably different. The new restlessness and growing detachment could not be explained solely by a period of incarceration as a prisoner of war. Despite this enduring sense of disorientation, the hope of becoming a bold and fearless knight persisted and led Francis to join a nobleman of Assisi who was making preparations to depart for Apulia in southern Italy, where Walter of Brienne was leading the papal militia against Markwald of Anweiler, the seneschal of the German emperor. About 1204/5 Francis set out from home and travelled as far as the neighbouring city of Spoleto, where a dream about arms and their use caused him to discard his military ambitions and return home. On his journey back to Assisi he undoubtedly pondered the ruins of his military ambitions with his ardent desire to win renown and honour. The next stage in his life was far from clear. Notwithstanding the feelings of disappointment and frustration, the seeds of another vocation were being sown imperceptibly with a form of life which would bring him celebrity and universal acclaim, albeit of an unexpected kind.

Uncertainty about the new direction of Francis's life lingered for an uncomfortably long time, spanning at least two years. During this period he spent an increasing amount of time in prayer and reflection with a growing asceticism. His restless search for a clue to his future life led him to make more regular visits to churches and chapels, where he prayed with a new earnestness and eagerly awaited a sign about his future. Although the chronology is unclear, it is during this period that he encountered the leper, heard the voice from the crucifix at

San Damiano instructing him to repair the ancient church and sold his father's cloth at the market square adjoining the cathedral of San Feliciano at Foligno. This sequence of events, particularly the last one, snapped the patience of his puzzled father, Pietro Bernardone, who was deeply perplexed by the increasingly unpredictable and eccentric behaviour of his older son. The ruptured relations were cemented during the hearing in the court of Guido I, bishop of Assisi, who would play a significant role in the development of Francis's new vocation and the evolution of a new type of religious fraternity. The fifth fresco of Francis's life in the upper basilica in Assisi depicts him returning his clothes to his father and renouncing his family inheritance, while his nudity is concealed by the cloak of this bishop, a prelate whose earlier conduct made him an unlikely ally and protector. Francis is seen to be responding to the hand at the top of the fresco, slightly left of centre, slowly discerning the direction of his new vocation which sounded the death-knell to life as a merchant.

Francis's new form of life gradually crystallised after a period when he lived as a hermit outside Assisi, and he spent his time in the restoration of dilapidated rural churches. In this period he strove to correct his earlier mistakes by grounding his life in the Scriptures, which he started to interpret in a literal fashion; this disposition would remain a feature of the awe which he attached to the Word of God; on occasion, he was happy to consult the sacred text at random. The command to restore the church of San Damiano prompted him to gather stones for its repair, bringing himself ridicule from his former companions among the youth of Assisi; his old friends deemed him to be in the grip of some form of madness and callously derided him. His changed demeanour was attributed to being in love (1 Cel., 7). He was determined that his earlier folly had to be corrected by a greater attentiveness to the teachings of the Bible. The celebration of Mass at Santa Maria degli Angeli, one of the three churches which he had repaired with his own hands, gave a broader perspective to his mandate to restore the church of San Damiano; now he thought of renewing the Church by perpetuating the apostles' ministry of calling people to penance. The proclamation of the Gospel challenged him to revitalise the Church by embracing a penitential life and living in accordance with the teaching of his divine master. That process would begin in the city of his birth rather than in some distant and remote missionary territory. Forthwith he returned to Assisi to announce the Gospel and to exhort the citizens to do penance for their indiscretions and failings. His new vision was conveyed through his sermons and exhortations.

The clarification of Francis's vocation was accompanied by a growing spiritual focus and maturity. He was resolved to live in the style of the apostles. Like them he was to be unencumbered and ready to take his master's message to the people of Assisi and then Umbria. Thereafter the impetus passed from an imitation of the apostles to the literal following of their divine teacher. Francis wished to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, who had called people to reject their earlier errors *(metánoia*). This reflection on the virtue of poverty was also nurtured by the Psalms and the Old Testament. The spirit of renewal was fed by his frequent meditations on the crib and the cross, the two pivotal moments in the drama of the redemption, which paved the way for the resurrection. His biographers dwell on devotion to these two decisive moments in the salvation of the human race. His prayerful reflection on the circumstances of the Incarnation led him to concentrate on the poverty of the life and death of the Son of God. This aspect of the life of Jesus Christ challenged Francis to renounce not only his possessions, but also his very self. Francis, too, would empty himself and surrender himself to the divine influence and endeavour to follow God's will in all things. This self-emptying was symbolised by the nakedness of the crib and the cross, a gesture which signified his fuller identification with the will of God the Father; it became a motif favoured by Francis and his biographers.[1]

Lengthy meditation on the life of Jesus and the mode of human redemption enabled Francis to enter into this sacred mystery, moving him to tears at the recollection of the passion and the crucifixion. Jesus's self-giving was encapsulated in the voluntary poverty which he embraced. Evangelical poverty became a central virtue for Francis, a vow to take its place alongside the obedience, chastity and stability of the religious life. It was not fully explained by the renunciation implicit in the monastic conversion of conduct; it was not merely confined to the rejection of possessions, as the fourteenth Admonition attests. It was a broader and much richer concept: evangelical poverty was a redemptive and ennobling force, which inspired Francis to strip himself interiorly in imitation of Jesus; this selfless process is described in St Paul's letter to the Philippians (2: 6–11). The abandonment of all material possessions was to be matched by an internal act of renunciation which finds expression in the term that the friars should live without anything of their own (*sine proprio*). The poverty of the Incarnation enriched a penitent humanity, as Francis explains in his *Letter to the Faithful*. Voluntary poverty brought with it a sense of liberation and freedom to invest in the pursuit of spiritual development. Francis's vow created

the conditions for an interior development and enrichment, offering a fertile ground for the blossoming of the Christian virtues. His espousal of evangelical poverty permitted him to flourish in the most dramatic manner.

A radically new dimension was brought to the history of religious life in the western Church by Francis's renunciation of all forms of ownership and his rejection of the customary forms of economic support for a community of friars. He and his followers lived in both individual and corporate poverty, a significant departure by a religious community. This freshness is reflected in the chroniclers' comments about the penury in which the friars lived. While it was claimed that Francis had injected a new theme into the discourse of religious life, evangelical poverty and its benefits had deep roots in the history of the Church; it appeared in some patristic texts and was beginning to emerge with greater frequency in the writings and teachings of monastic reformers of the eleventh century, such as St William of Volpiano (962–1031), who revitalised numerous monastic communities, seeking poverty and holiness.[2] Twelfth-century reformers sought a return to a simpler and more authentic form of religious life and commented on the poverty of the Son of God. Penitents such as Ranieri (1118–61), patron saint of Pisa, anticipated features of Francis's discipline, asceticism and voluntary poverty, and Cistercian hagiography talked unself-consciously about the poverty of the monks' living conditions.[3]

Like earlier reformers, Francis initially regarded the life of the apostles as the apex of Christian observance, although the focus moved from the idyllic community gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2: 42–7) to the itinerant preaching of the Gospel. This image was undergoing development in the course of the twelfth century, when new ideas about religious perfection were surfacing. Francis was the heir to these reflections, and his decision to 'flee the world' was conditioned by a commitment to spread the Gospel.[4] His ideals, which serve as the culmination of this movement of renewal, were derived primarily from the Scriptures, and he expanded these, making them the foundation of his new vocation. His teaching was regarded as ground-breaking, and contemporaries saw his witness to evangelical poverty as something of a novelty, the return to a long-neglected virtue (2 Cel., 55).

Francis was acutely conscious of the pervasive divine presence, making the whole world a theatre for the praise of the Creator. No longer was the parish church deemed to be the only place where the things of God were aired. The biographies of *il poverello* show how the Gospel migrated to the piazza and other places where people were

accustomed to gather. Francis found the divine footprints everywhere and wished to bring his neighbours to a greater recognition of their Creator. Harmony was restored to the created order. Thus, the early hagiographical tradition of the saint reflects the laity's new thirst for the principles of spirituality, which had previously been seen as the preserve of a cloistered elite. The monastic rhetoric regarding the excellence and supremacy of the religious life was ceding ground to newer models of lay piety. This prevalence of what Professor Lawrence called a *fugitive piety*, embracing the monastic habit in the face of death, was under challenge.[5] New assumptions and patterns were manifest in Innocent III's canonisation of Homobonus in 1199, an act which signalled the growing self-confidence of the laity in the realm of spirituality. These fresh currents of asceticism and piety found expression in the proliferation of penitential groups and individuals in the first decades of the thirteenth century.

While Francis's teaching was addressed to the friars, his message was not limited to the cloister. His salutary advice was especially apposite and timely in a society which bristled with new economic opportunities for the accumulation of material possessions and wealth. It was a message tailored to the lives of the residents of the newly expanding commercial centres, the mercantile community, figures like Giovanni Boccaccio's disreputable Ciappelletto of Prato.[6] Such merchants were inclined to invest an inordinate amount of time and energy in seeking their salvation through material goods, the false gods. The hagiographical literature, supported by material from the probate registers, dwelled upon the perils which lurked in the urban centres, where honesty and probity of life ensnared many and avarice and usury menaced others. For example, Ugolino Cavaze testified on 29 March 1237 that his father, a citizen of Bologna, had accumulated many things illicitly and dishonestly as much through usury as any other way.[7] The friars' voluntary poverty, humility and preaching were seen as a divinely inspired remedy for the vice of avarice. Within fifty years Francis would be presented as the patron saint of merchants.[8]

Echoing the monastic concept of the pilgrim, the sixth chapter of Francis's *Rule* exhorted his disciples to live with a spirit of detachment; they should be like visitors and strangers in a world of change (1 Peter 2: 11). The same salutary advice is applicable to all Christians, whose consciousness of the transitoriness of life should shape their values and decisions. Christians were exhorted to work for the values that endure to eternal life (John 6: 27). Evangelical poverty was, moreover, clothed in an eschatological dimension, and this confirms the fact that material possessions

are to be used in a responsible, balanced and detached manner. From the early 1230s preachers such as Robert Grosseteste, then the master of theology at the friars' school in Oxford, saw this vow as a foretaste of the celestial harmony in which everything would be shared. It is unclear whether Francis was aware of a patristic tradition connecting the Fall with the institution of private property. Ironically, this patristic debate was revived in the discussions regarding the order and its observance of the vow of poverty.

Francis's genius was to recognise the sheer power and persuasiveness of the acquisitive instinct, the itch to amass possessions and wealth in the illusory search for absolute security this side of the grave. As a young man from a wealthy and privileged background, he was keenly aware of the connection between wealth, influence, power and violence, the very antithesis of the Son of God who voluntarily lived in poverty to fill humanity with spiritual gifts in abundance. Keenly aware of the divisiveness of money, Francis taught that material possessions should not become the cause of dispute and division between people. His intense desire to immerse himself as completely as possible with the Son of God accounts for his unbending refusal to compromise by accepting coins for his work or the charity dispensed by the friars; this explains his insistence that friars should on no account touch money, as the *Rule* ordains. Furthermore, he pointed out that ownership and wealth alone were incapable of providing happiness. In some situations, they constituted an impediment to safety, harmony, charity and love. That limitation is articulated by Iris Origo, who prepared for the German occupation of her Tuscan home at the Val d'Orcia. Her diary for 11 October 1943 reads:

> Our 'thirty-two boxes, carefully packed, with the name printed clearly on each' are now ready, stored and walled up. As the last brick was set in position, we began to remember the things we had omitted to put away, as well as to regret those which we have packed, but will probably need. It is, however, quite impossible to attach importance to any material possessions now. All that one clings to is a few vital affections.[9]

Ownership is coterminous with life, and its propensity for imperilling the quest for eternal life is conveyed by Francis's evocation of the scene of the death-bed, where material concerns blight the celestial prospects of the dying man, who may have been a merchant. An attachment to material things, regardless of how great or small their value, is capable of polluting human relations, violating friendships and destroying

families. The inclination to raise a protective wall of possessions around our lives calls for corrective remedies. Francis's teaching has a timeless freshness which makes it just as incisively pertinent today as it was 800 years ago. His insights run counter to the temptation to obtain an ever greater number of material goods and to measure life by ownership, possessions, valuables and money. The maldistribution of the planet's finite material and financial resources endangers the harmony and peaceful co-existence of the nations. The transient nature of ownership is demonstrated by the request of the dying Francis, *il poverello*, to be placed on the naked earth as he awaited Sister Death at Santa Maria degli Angeli on 3 October 1226 (2 Cel., 214). This gesture associated him with an earlier ecclesiastical tradition whereby clerics and prelates went nakedly to their deaths, like the exemplary Ralph Luffa, bishop of Chichester (1091–1123). As he lay dying he gave all his possessions to the poor, even his bedclothes and mattress.[10]

The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi offers a series of studies of one of the most fascinating and most lovable figures in the life of the medieval and modern Church. A volume of this size has the limited objective of introducing Francis and explaining some of the key aspects of his life and thought. It is neither a biography of the saint nor a history of the order which he founded. Its focus is twofold. The first is the magnetic appeal of the founder, and this is treated in the first eight studies, which explore features of his life, from his conversion to his death and canonisation. The second part of the volume, chapters 9 to 17, is devoted to his influence on the friars and his legacy. It deals primarily with the abiding impact of the saint on the friars' vocation and their wide-ranging contribution to the life of the Church. The century following the death of *il poverello* is the historical framework for these essays. The last study is the chronological exception, and it reflects the ecumenical dimension of Francis's appeal to Christians of diverse traditions.

Francis was buried at the church of San Giorgio, where he had first attended school and later preached his first sermon (1 Cel., 23); the church was subsequently absorbed by the basilica di Santa Chiara. Within a short time of Francis's death miracles were attributed to him, and these reports attracted pilgrims to his tomb in search of healing. The troubled and sick came from all parts of Umbria and from further afield. The miracles were sufficiently numerous for Gregory IX, formerly Cardinal Hugolino, to examine them and to canonise Francis within a comparatively short time, that is, on 16 July 1228 (1 Cel., 124). The inseparable bond between the life of the saint and the genesis of his

fraternity is explored by Michael F. Cusato in the volume's opening study. The circumstances of Francis's dramatic conversion, triggered by a series of events in which God spoke to him with increasing clarity, are narrated by the *Testament*. Francis's unexpected encounter with the leper re-orientated his life completely, leading him among the sick and the marginalised people in the neighbourhood. His comparatively small collection of writings and exhortations forms the basis of the second chapter, which maps out the new direction of Francis's life. Pride of place among those writings went to the *Rule*, whose evolution and content are described by William J. Short. The saint's new vision and his originality shine forth in the *Rule*, the first to be approved between the *Rule* of St Benedict (*c.*480–*c.*550) and the constitutions of St Ignatius of Loyola in the middle of the sixteenth century.[11] The *Rule* was regarded as a significant addition to the older codes of religious life, and it was copied verbatim by Matthew Paris, the monastic chronicler of St Albans.

The writings of Francis were quoted and summarised by the early hagiographical tradition of the new order. Quotations from the *Testament* and other writings invested the work of Thomas of Celano with a new authority. The first biographer wrote at the request of Gregory IX in connection with the ceremony of canonisation and completed his task within six months. Celano displays his familiarity with the standard works of hagiography, the lives of St Antony the hermit, St Martin of Tours, the dialogues of St Gregory the Great and the *Confessions* of St Augustine. The complexity of Franciscan hagiography during the first half of the thirteenth century is explored by Michael W. Blastic, who introduces the seminal texts which left an indelible mark upon the subsequent tradition. The twenty years following the death of *il poverello* witnessed the production of a series of texts which incorporate various accounts of his life and teaching. These portraits reflect the diverse perceptions and the growing ideological differences among the friars; they mirror the formation of parties or groups containing the seeds of the division of the order which became increasingly visible from the end of the thirteenth century, paving the way for the Observant reformers from the later fourteenth century.

An example of how the biographical tradition reflects discussion among the friars is the treatment of the saint's attitude towards breviaries and manuscripts, which were costly items in the Middle Ages. Debates concerning the acquisition of the textbooks required for study and preaching entered the hagiographical tradition of the first century, as Neslihan Şenocak demonstrates. The biographies of the saint are supplemented

by a rich tradition in the composition of chronicles, a subject treated by Annette Kehnel, who sifts the evidence provided by the order's three principal chroniclers, Jordan of Giano, Thomas of Eccleston and Salimbene de Adam, who record an immense amount of detail on the missions to Germany and England and the friars' varied contribution to the life of the Italian communes and provinces. Salimbene adds that Francis spent twenty years in the service of God. Nonetheless, he could not refrain from boasting about his knowledge of the famous and the influential friars. He portrayed Bernard of Quintavalle as his close friend, adding that they were members of the community at Siena for a winter. The first friar to be received into the order told Salimbene many things about the founder which may have escaped the hagiographical net.[12]

The striking message of renewal preached by Francis attracted a wide spectrum of Umbrian society. One of those touched by his fiery and incisive sermons was the aristocratic young woman, Clare di Favarone di Offreduccio, who heard him preach in the cathedral church of San Rufino. It is one of the ironies of Franciscan history that this noblewoman of Assisi should become the staunch and heroic defender of the ideal of evangelical poverty from 3 October 1226 until her death twenty-seven years later. Her unshakeable firmness of purpose was a reproach to the friars, some of whom were prepared to accept an accommodation, if not compromise, with their ideal of evangelical poverty. The unfolding of her vocation as his first female follower and first abbess of San Damiano is analysed by Jean François Godet-Calogeras. Jesus's mission to effect the reconciliation of the human race inspired Francis, the former prisoner of war, to extend the greeting of peace to all whom he encountered; friars were regarded as the only religious who gave this exhortation to all whom they met, presaging their crucial ministry of restoring peace to the cities of Italy. The concept of universal respect and charity was a further enrichment of Francis's spiritual development, and it knew no exceptions. It is perhaps best illustrated by his remarkably enlightened and courteous dealings with the sultan of Egypt, al-Malik-al-Kâmil, during the fifth Crusade, a dramatic gesture which recommended him as a model of wider ecumenical dialogue. This encounter forms the basis of Steven J. McMichael's study. The same openness to all life informs the colourful accounts of Francis's easy rapport with the world of animals, recalling the earlier Celtic tradition. His exhortation to the birds at Bevagna is narrated by Thomas of Celano, and it features prominently in the earliest iconography of the order from the panel by Bonaventure

Berlinghieri at San Francesco, Pescia, in 1235. This respectful disposition towards all the works of the Creator is reviewed by Timothy J. Johnson. Parisian scholastics, such as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, would provide a theological framework for the saint's meditation, the source of life, beauty and harmony.

Historians treat the appearance of the friars as a providential response to the defects besetting the medieval Church. At a time when many of the parochial clergy were ill-equipped and unsuited to expound the teaching of the New Testament to their parishioners, the friars accomplished this ministry in a persuasive, cogent and attractive form. Their personal example and words of exhortation drew their hearers to a deeper love of God and neighbour. The priests who had been admitted to the fraternity were authorised to preach and hear confessions. The orthodoxy, fervour and power of their sermons played a central role in many provinces of the Church from the thirteenth century. The friars' effectiveness is summarised by the first biographer of Anthony of Padua (1195–1231), an outstandingly popular preacher who applied the principles of the Gospel to the practices and customs of the market place. As a result of his sermons in Padua the estranged were brought to peace; prisoners were liberated; restitution was arranged for whatever was taken through usury or violence; and many who had mortgaged houses and fields made satisfaction for what they had illicitly gained through extortion or bribery.[13] The friars' impact on the cities and towns of western Europe is considered by Jens Röhrkasten, who focuses on the urban nature of the order's ministry and their ties with the local community. While the friars sowed the Word of God in the churches of a city, their ministry was not confined by parochial or urban boundaries. They ministered to those who escaped the parochial net; Simone da Collazzone, for example, preached to the lepers.[14] One of the reasons for the sheer effectiveness of the friars' programme of pastoral renewal was their solid theological and moral preparation. Their qualities recommended them for specialised apostolates, such as the campaign against heresy in northern Italy and southern France; they were required to give an account of what they believed (1 Peter 3: 15), a quotation cited at the beginning of St Anselm's treatise on the Incarnation, *Why God became Man*. The emergence of theological studies in the order was viewed by some friars with caution and misgiving; before the end of the thirteenth century it was attracting some eloquent critics. Bert Roest charts the genesis of theological studies in the order from the 1220s and highlights the earlier appearance of schools, beginning with Anthony of Padua, who is regarded as the first lector of the new order.