

OUTCAST, STRIPPED, PIERCED

A Personal Look at the Spiritual Journey of St Francis and His Relationship with Society

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THE EARLY FRANCISCAN BIOGRAPHERS vividly express the struggle and adventure of the life of St Francis. I shall base many of my reflections here on a biography offered by three people who claim to have been with him: *The Legend of Three Companions*.¹ My hope in doing this is that these memories will bear the hallmark, not only of Francis' mature and lucid sanctity, but also of the turbulent, not so intelligible struggles that preceded it. Part of the fascination of these early narratives is that they show Francis to have been fallible, hesitant and provocative. His hard-won victories over himself were the object of vicious social scorn. As a Poor Clare sister, who used to live in a convent in the tranquillity of a Cotswold valley, I felt blessed to possess two founders whose lives had been expressed in such dramatic ways. Indeed, drama was exactly what Francesco di Bernardone was good at producing, to the appreciation and outrage of his contemporaries. Whether Francis' unerringly original performances evoked jeers or applause from his medieval audience, there was no mistaking the theatricality of his example, its power to mesmerize and shock.

Francis acted out the inner mystery of his conversion when he stripped himself of his fine clothes—clothes that his own father, Pietro di Bernardone, had given to him—in the public piazza and then, naked, took protection under the Bishop of Assisi's mantel. The young noblewoman Clare joined the newly fledged Franciscan order upon Francis' advice in an act of disobedient elopement at night, imitating the liturgy of Palm

¹ *The Legend of Three Companions in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, *The Founder*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New City, 2000).

Sunday which describes Jesus as 'leaving the camp'.² The penniless band of vagabonds that she joined did not have a prearranged way of life or even a shelter to offer a woman at that time. Without a conceived future, Clare was temporarily abandoned, lonely and disinherited, in a series of convents while, together with Francis, she waited for God's plan to unfold.³ How was it that a merchant's son, who had once succumbed to the lure of money and fine clothes,⁴ came to be in this strangely authoritative, yet socially precarious, position?

The Early Struggles

The Legend of Three Companions tells us that Francis' 'parents were wealthy and loved him very much'.⁵ In fact, as Francis grew up, they indulged his extravagance to a point that neighbours found excessive.⁶ Meanwhile, medieval Assisi and its rival city-state, neighbouring Perugia, were locked in an intense and costly conflict.⁷ War broke out, and the opportunity to fight at the Battle of Collestrada in 1202 presented itself to Francis as an adventure. Francis, at about 21, understood his vocation in terms of the heroic impact he would make upon the world. As a result of fighting, he was imprisoned in the city of Perugia, where he endured incarceration with a resilience and cheer that his fellow prisoners remembered.⁸ While he was confined, he became seriously ill. This illness continued to affect him for a long time, probably for the rest of his life.⁹ Another of the early biographies mentions, 'Even in the world he was by nature a frail and weak man'.¹⁰

It seems that the state of Francis' health gave his father a welcome opportunity to negotiate the ransom that was needed to bring his son home.¹¹ Francis continued to suffer from this illness back in Assisi, and it lingered on into a sense of apathy and weariness. It was an effort to drag his weakened body around and he found that the sight of the things

² *The Legend of Saint Clare*, in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, The Lady*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong (New York: New City, 2006), 285. The scripture reference is to Hebrews 13:13.

³ *Legend of Saint Clare*, 287.

⁴ *Legend of Three Companions*, 68–69.

⁵ *Legend of Three Companions*, 68.

⁶ *Legend of Three Companions*, 68.

⁷ Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi* (New York: Crossroad, 1981 [1959]), 119–165.

⁸ *Legend of Three Companions*, 70.

⁹ *The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 1, *The Saint*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New City, 2000), 184–185.

¹⁰ *The Assisi Compilation*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, 225.

¹¹ Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 169.

that used to give him pleasure, the fields and vineyards, no longer did so.¹² Towards the end of his life he would say, 'I was ill from the beginning of my conversion to Christ'.¹³ When his health improved, however, no great spiritual progress was evident in his plans. Perhaps hoping for a return of his former energy and enthusiasm, he took refuge in his younger ideas. Possibly as an outlet for his confused longings and as an escape from sad thoughts, he prepared for another military expedition.

Yet again, his parents indulged him, allowing him to order expensive clothes.¹⁴ Once again, the expedition did not work out as Francis hoped. This time, however, the disruption of his plans had a supernatural cause. In a dream, followed by a mysterious voice speaking to him while he was half asleep, he was ordered to return to Assisi and await a further divine command.¹⁵ Back in Assisi, after this humiliating vacillation, Francis continued to attempt to immerse himself in social pleasures. But the experience of a divine call interrupted his course.¹⁶ Showing more perseverance now in his response to the inner prompting, the young man began to experiment with forms of radical poverty, judging his former self to have been sinful and self-indulgent. He rejected the reverence for money in which he had been brought up. Money was central to his father's vision of the world and to the political sphere of ambitious men to which he belonged.¹⁷ Men such as Pietro, along with their heirs, had the opportunity to grow powerful and wealthy using trade while the authority of the old feudal nobility declined. In his rule for his brothers, based on his own radical departure, Francis was to write: 'Let them not seek to have anything under heaven, except holy poverty'.¹⁸

I have to confess at this point that I did not succumb to the example of the founder as readily as St Clare had done. The stories about Francis' early efforts and mistakes are so engaging and immediate that the aspiring novice tends to feel as if Francis has become her earthly companion as she stumbles along her own thorny path. It is not easy to find a Franciscan novice who is not captivated by St Francis of Assisi. However, for a few years, I was this unfortunate exception. While there was no questioning the dramatic strength and originality of these stories,

¹² *Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano, 184–185.

¹³ *Assisi Compilation*, 211.

¹⁴ *Legend of Three Companions*, 70.

¹⁵ *Legend of Three Companions*, 70–71.

¹⁶ *Legend of Three Companions*, 71–72.

¹⁷ Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 113–118.

¹⁸ *Assisi Compilation*, 123.



St Francis Embracing the Cross, by Castiglione

some of them confused me. I used to wonder why Francis' insights and choices needed to be the occasion of so much self-display. In particular, I was shocked by Francis' humiliation of his father when he discarded the clothes his father had given to him in the piazza. Cloth and the trade in it were the meaning of Pietro's life. The fine cloth in which he had clothed his son, represented to him his life, his work and his paternal duty. Pietro's pain and deep disturbance are documented as the relationship broke down, and Francis embraced destitution.¹⁹

I failed to understand the ways in which Francis linked his private self with his public persona or how this connection

became so fruitful. In addressing these questions, therefore, I am addressing my own long struggle to understand Francis. In trying to write about Francis I will occasionally use the first person in order to enter his experience.

The importance of these questions is proved by the fact that Francis' grasp of the truth for his medieval world remains relevant today; indeed, Francis is the namesake of our Pope. It is clear from the early biographies that Francis endeavoured to give himself to God in public and private acts of self-giving, and that the power of his public gestures was related to the painfully acquired insight of his inner discipline. If the drama of his conversion was acted out in public, it was nourished by hours of private prayer and interior struggle.²⁰ The sources make clear that at the time of his conversion Francis needed privacy in order to come to grips with the traumatic upheaval that was happening within him, and went to great lengths to seek it out.²¹ His new way of life did not present itself to him

¹⁹ *Legend of Three Companions*, 78, 80, 82.

²⁰ *Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano*, 244.

²¹ *Legend of Three Companions*, 74–75, 78.

as a *fait accompli*. He fought for it, begged God for the insights that he needed to pursue it. '[H]e would take a companion, whom he loved very much, to secluded places, telling him that he had found a great and precious treasure.' And then, 'he would pray to *his Father in secret*, wanting no one to know what was happening within except God alone, whom he consulted about acquiring heavenly treasure'.²²

The enticing aspirations of capitalism were impressed upon Francis' consciousness, and he struggled alone to free himself, using the concept of a nobler form of wealth. The need for a companion on the way, someone that he loved, suggests the loneliness of this transition. The entry into solitude, important as it was for his inner growth, did not encompass Francis' entire sense of God's call. This leads to the question of Francis' complex relationship with his society, which was clearly a troubled one on both sides. Francis rejected many of his society's values, in particular its obsession with the exciting potential of money and its disregard for the poor.²³ Society condemned the recklessness and folly of the way that he had disinherited himself and encouraged others to do the same. Assisi's citizenry did not welcome its uninvited role as benefactor of the disinherited son of Pietro di Bernardone in a spirit of compassion.²⁴

From Francis' point of view, this happened because he chose for it to be so. He knew that he would be socially abandoned and he chose to enter into the life of the poor and of Jesus, so that he could experience what they knew. Nonetheless, the experience must have been terrible for him. Unlike the aspirant who escapes to the seclusion and relative safety of the cloister, Francis continued to operate within the full view of his society, exposed to its incomprehension, indignation and scorn. He had to energize his change of destiny and bear the loss of his benign prospects without the benefit of a new and supportive environment. Having known the popularity and easy companionship that came from his former extravagance and light-heartedness, Francis sought out suffering, hunger and neglect.²⁵ Having disinherited himself, Francis now depended on the society that mocked him to grant him the pittance that would enable him to survive. 'Those who knew him earlier, seeing him now, reproached

²² *Legend of Three Companions*, 74–75.

²³ *Legend of Three Companions*, 78, and *Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano*, 243. He wanted 'to live free'.

²⁴ *Legend of Three Companions*, 78.

²⁵ *Legend of Three Companions*, 71–72.

him harshly. Shouting that he was insane and out of his mind, they threw mud from the streets and stones at him.’²⁶

Francis’ formation programme, following his own lessons in suffering, must be the harshest to have proved its worth. Think of the cruel rhetoric that is still heaped on to the poor in modern British society.²⁷ The early friars who followed Francis were promising young men who had chosen to live as paupers. The biographies make clear that the criticisms hurled at them were merciless; scarcely anyone was willing to give alms to them in their hunger; instead their fellow citizens would jeer at them: ‘You got rid of your own possessions, and now you want to eat those of others’.²⁸

Francis clearly suffered deeply from the social transition to which, later, he would attract followers. In fact, he tested his own, already frail, physical health to breaking point.²⁹ He had revelled in his early role as the life and soul of the party, and had been appealing to his friends owing to his lavish instincts for fine clothes and entertaining.³⁰ Now he could barely force himself to go through with the social humiliations that he was imposing on himself.

While he was working steadily at restoring the church, he wanted to have a lamp burning continually in the church, so he went through the city begging for oil. But when he was approaching a certain house, he saw a group of men gathered for a game. Ashamed to beg in front of them, he backed away. Mulling it over, he accused himself of having sinned.³¹

As a beggar, he had to present himself to the kind of people who had once flocked to join his company. And he struggled with himself. This meant the reversal of the habits of a luxurious way of life. Francis, according to his natural inclinations, had highly refined tastes that he was used to indulging. He was used to filling himself with the delicate foods that he really liked, particularly fine sweets, and rejecting others.³² And he was not familiar with hard physical work. The priest whom Francis was trying to serve as a destitute penitent by rebuilding his church knew how much the transition must be costing and, pitying him, began to prepare food for

²⁶ *Legend of Three Companions*, 78.

²⁷ See, for example, Will Hutton, ‘Osborne’s Cruel Language about the Poor Is Driven by Low Politics’, *The Observer* (30 June 2013), 32.

²⁸ *The Anonymous of Perugia*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, 41.

²⁹ *Legend of Three Companions*, 81–83.

³⁰ *Legend of Three Companions*, 71.

³¹ *Legend of Three Companions*, 83.

³² *Legend of Three Companions*, 81.

Francis himself. But Francis came to feel that this kindly gesture was preventing him from living like the poor. So instead, he forced himself to beg for scraps.

Whenever he put various scraps in his bowl, many who knew what a pampered life he had lived were astonished at how marvelously changed he was, seeing that he held himself in such contempt. But when he wanted to eat the mixed food offered him, he felt revulsion because he was not accustomed not only to eating such things, but even at looking at them.³³

I would now like to look at three episodes that I consider central to Francis' developing and deepening relationship with God, his society and himself. These are his decision to embrace a leper, his encounter with his father before the bishop and the gift of the stigmata. The body of Francis, in its human vulnerability, is central to each of these incidents. If actors can be described as people who draw on their own personality and resources to address their audience, then Francis was an actor who used the defencelessness of his life. His self-portrait, enacted for the world for Christ's sake, was his real self made poor. It was no actor's mask. Francis' body was put at risk, stripped and pierced in order to bring Christ to the attention of the world.

***His self-portrait
... was his real
self made poor***

The Unbearable

I have described how Francis began to struggle to overcome himself for love of Christ. In this, he was empowered by the conviction and acquired discipline of his conversion. If it seems that his first sustained efforts should have led to a place of peace and self-mastery, this was not the case. Instead, Francis found himself at a point where God was asking him for obedience in a way that he found unbearable. Francis would not be afraid to stand naked before the people of the city on the strength of his conversion, but he was afraid of lepers. The biographies are at pains to stress how deep-seated this aversion was and that at the natural level it was unconquerable.³⁴

Before speaking of Francis' self-conquest, it is worth looking at what the experience of the unbearable has to mean to someone who considers himself honest in his love for God. It means that my own resolve, however sincerely it has been applied to all the tasks presented by God's will, is not

³³ *Legend of Three Companions*, 82.

³⁴ *Legend of Three Companions*, 74.

strong enough to endure all things. And it means that my pious declarations of wanting what God wants, however truthfully I have voiced them, are not the whole truth. I do in fact desperately want something else. I want not to embrace the unbearable.

Before such an ordeal, the acquired discipline of many enthusiastic acts of love and acts of charity might collapse. It was not only the threat of physical dissolution that Francis saw on the leper's disfigured face. His own heroic enterprise for Christ, bravely begun, sincere and costly, was threatened with dissolution arising from his own unconquerable weakness and need. Nonetheless, Francis is commanded to show mercy to a human being. He must choose to follow the law of society or the prompting of God.

One day, while he was praying enthusiastically to the Lord, he received this response: 'Francis, everything you loved carnally and desired to have, you must despise and hate, if you wish to know my will. Because once you begin doing this, what before seemed delightful and sweet will be unbearable and bitter; and what before made you shudder will offer you great sweetness and enormous delight.'

And so:

One day he was riding his horse near Assisi, when he met a leper. And, even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself dismount, and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so.³⁵

Unlike the moment soon to come in the piazza, there would have been an atmosphere of seclusion around this encounter, for the reason that lepers were not permitted in public places. Francis' natural fear arose from good reasons. The risk to Francis' bodily security could not have been more terrifying. The risk was more horrible than the threat of death. To come into contact with the leper was to risk becoming a leper himself and sharing the leper's fate. The statutes of the commune that ran the city of Assisi included these words:

The [chief magistrate] must, a month after taking office, make a scrupulous search for lepers in the city and in the region. And if any leper, man or woman, be living in the city or in the *contado* [region surrounding the city] he is to be hunted out from these places, and from the *castelli* [castles] and from the *ville* [mansions].³⁶

³⁵ *Legend of Three Companions*, 74.

³⁶ Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 210–211.

Legally, a leper became a dead person. Think of a death-row prisoner in the USA. The goods of lepers were taken from them. They lived in exclusion. They were declared officially dead in a public church ceremony.³⁷ They no future. They were sentenced for life.³⁸

Later on, Francis saw this embrace as definitive for his conversion and, at the same moment, he defined his own relationship with the world: he 'left the world'.³⁹ By this, he seems to mean that, in handing himself over for the sake of the leper in his need, he departed from the values of his world so irrevocably that he would not return. Though he would continue to live before his society, with all the humiliation this implied, in an irrevocable sense he had moved out. Through this gesture he seems to have grasped the depth of his own need for penance, the unconditional extent of Christ's command to show mercy to the other person, and the limitless extent of the love of God. Discovering his own capacity for a response in mercy with God's help became a source of delight within him, to the point that the idea of embracing a leper lost its horror. Brothers in formation were obliged to attend to lepers as a condition of their novitiate.



St Francis in Prayer, by Castiglione

[A]t the beginning of the religion, after the brothers grew in number, [Francis] wanted the brothers to stay in hospitals of lepers to serve them. At that time whenever nobles and commoners came to the religion, they were told, among other things, that they had to serve the lepers and stay in their houses.⁴⁰

³⁷ Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 208–210.

³⁸ Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 210.

³⁹ Francis of Assisi, *The Testament*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 1, 124.

⁴⁰ *Assisi Compilation*, 123.

Francis had offered himself for love of a fellow human being. In this way he responded to the harshest prohibition of his society. And Francis' treatment of the leper invited his society to look at something it has refused to see, that is, its own inhumanity.

The Commitment

The Franciscan historian Fortini describes how Francis had not escaped his father's passion for making money. The 'family fever for money was in his blood and many times drove all other thoughts out of his mind'.⁴¹ This helps explain the intensity of the converted Francis' revulsion against money.

In the midst of this turbulent reversal of values, Francis' relationship with his father broke down. Pietro, instead of resolving their differences privately, as he surely would have done had he hoped to heal the relationship, demanded a legal ruling on the fact that Francis had taken money from him for the Church and had not returned it. First of all, Pietro attempted to procure a civil ruling on the matter from city magistrates. However, the magistrates evaded making a decision because Francis was in the service of God.⁴² Pietro then turned to the bishop of Assisi. The bishop summoned Francis and ruled that he should lawfully return the money he had taken to his father. The citizens of Assisi were not indifferent to this spectacle. In response, Francis stripped naked and, according to *The Legend*, turned to the assembled crowd:

Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Until now I have called Pietro di Bernardone my father. But, because I have proposed to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so upset, and also all the clothing which is his, wanting to say from now on: '*Our Father who are in heaven*', and not '*My father, Pietro di Bernardone*'
....

Then his father, overcome with unbearable pain and anger, took the money and all the clothing.⁴³

To be stripped, as Francis knew, means to enter into a new relationship with society. It means to look at my world, which has held me secure, and no longer be secure there. It means to look out at a world where others know where to go and how to go on living, since they have what they need, and I do not.

⁴¹ Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 113.

⁴² *Legend of Three Companions*, 79.

⁴³ *Legend of Three Companions*, 80.

The narrative continues:

While he was carrying these home, those who were present at this spectacle were indignant at [Pietro], for he left nothing for his son to wear. Moved by piety, they began to weep over him.

Public sympathy seems to have turned in Francis' favour for the first time. His vulnerable body and the radical commitment that called for such a witness had moved the crowd. *The Legend* insists that the drama contains a supernatural meaning that goes beyond the rebellion of the son and the furious incomprehension of the father. 'The bishop ... clearly understood [Francis'] deeds were prompted by divine counsel, and realized that what he had seen contained no small mystery.'

Francis had stripped himself for love of Christ in a way that was surely intended to evoke Jesus upon the cross. The breakdown in the relationship between Pietro and Francis, sad as it was, emphasizes the Fatherhood of God. And Francis' body, defiant testimony to the fact that he no longer has an earthly father or any kind of material security, was stripped before a society that had become obsessed by the allure of wealth, status and money. Think of the unquestioned status and influence that money procures today. To have money in our society is to have a voice and future. Francis declared literally that he had nothing except his status as a child of God, and it is on this status, in all its frailty, that he would stake his life. He would act in solidarity with the poor and said,

'Anyone who curses the poor insults Christ whose noble banner the poor carry, since Christ *made himself poor for us in this world*.' That is also why, when he met poor people burdened with wood or other heavy loads, he would offer his own weak shoulders to help them.⁴⁴

As for Pietro, he was appalled and humiliated by the way of life that his son had embraced and could no longer pass him without cursing him.

When his father saw [Francis] in such disgrace, he was filled with unusual pain. Because he loved him dearly, he was ashamed and felt great sorrow for him. Seeing his flesh half-dead from excessive affliction and cold, he would curse him whenever he came upon him.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano, 248.

⁴⁵ *Legend of Three Companions*, 82.

The Cross

The prevailing image of the crucifix at the time of Francis did not encourage emotional interaction. Christ was depicted without any evidence of physical anguish. Often he appeared triumphant while hanging on the cross. This portrayal invited only a formal, limited response, emphasizing Christ's remote victory and the emotional distance between Christ and the struggling human beings he had redeemed. Francis' intense prayer and dialogue with the figure on the San Damiano crucifix at the outset of his conversion,⁴⁶ took place before a portrait of the crucifixion that did not invite compassion because it showed no pain.⁴⁷

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St Francis in Prayer, by Castiglione

But Francis came to an understanding of the interior and exterior tortures of Jesus out of his own deeply empathetic experiences. His awareness would communicate the reality of that agony for others. This kind of interaction is recorded through his reactions, his spoken words and some of his writings. Two years before his death in 1226, something supernatural happened which externalised his inner state. Francis had been given a mountain on which to pray by a friend, Count Orlando, who hoped in this way to save his soul.⁴⁸ In the primeval, unprotected atmosphere of the mountain, with its tall trees and mysteriously formed rocks, Francis would enter into long periods of deep contemplation.

⁴⁶ *Legend of Three Companions*, 76.

⁴⁷ Susan W. McMichaels, *Journey out of the Garden: Saint Francis of Assisi and the Process of Individuation* (New York: Paulist, 1997), 83–84.

⁴⁸ *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 3, *The Prophet*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New City, 2000), 453–454.

One morning, around the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, while [Francis] was absorbed in prayer on a slope of Mount LaVerna, two years before his death, a seraph with six wings appeared to him. Within its six wings there was the form of a very beautiful, crucified man, whose hands and feet were extended after the manner of a cross, and whose features were clearly those of the Lord Jesus

When the vision disappeared, a marvellous glow of love remained in his soul, but, even more marvellous, an impression of the stigmata of our Lord Jesus Christ appeared in his flesh. Until his death, the man of God, unwilling to divulge God's sacrament, concealed it to the best of his ability, although he was unable to cover it completely since it became known to at least his intimate companions.⁴⁹

Francis had stood naked before the people of Assisi, unashamed in the triumph of his love for God, but the wounds of Christ upon his body wounded him with shame. Within the limits of his nomadic life, he struggled for the privacy he needed to conceal the stigmata. His body had been unprotected before ridicule, but he tried to protect the signs of his intimacy with Christ.

To be pierced by Christ means to be altered from within. I see the world from the perspective of Christ's wounds and in this way I am wounded. I am ashamed at the extent of God's love for me and wish to conceal what I have been given. Though I can endure for others to see me in my human weakness, for them to look upon the marks of Jesus on my unworthy body is too much for me to bear.

Not surprisingly, the early Franciscan community was fascinated by Francis' secret and tried to prize it open.⁵⁰ Having neglected his body for years, Francis was by now extremely ill. For once, he did not help them. He would no longer invite the world or his companions to look at him. This suggests the extent to which Francis was himself overwhelmed by the stigmata. On this matter he had lost the actor's buoyancy that, albeit with effort, had enabled him to facilitate a dialogue with his society using his own discoveries. He did not make any attempt to interpret his encounter with Christ for the benefit of the world. He sought no audience. The experience of being pierced was simply too much for him. The stigmata reveal the broken Francis, anxious for the privacy he needed to conceal

⁴⁹ *Legend of Three Companions*, 108.

⁵⁰ *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, 334–336.

what his love for God had done to him. Yet, the wounds upon his body made him into an exhibit.

Francis' dying body was literally an image of Christ crucified. Knowing this, he asked for his body to be laid naked on the ground just before and then after he had died.⁵¹ 'After his most happy passing, all the brothers who were present, as well as many seculars, clearly saw his body unmistakably adorned with the wounds of Christ.'⁵² The image that Francis himself had been desperate to conceal during his lifetime was understood to be a gift to his society and was made known as such when it was decided that his body should be displayed after his death.⁵³ The decision was made upon the advice of Francis' close friend, Lady Jacoba, who judged that Francis' pierced body was 'for all to see'.⁵⁴ After Francis had died: 'Outside, in the autumn night, people were flowing in from all directions, coming from the city, the villages, the fields. A great throng wanted to see and venerate the Man of the Stigmata.'⁵⁵

The body of the self-dramatist has been transformed into a drama that illumined for his society what it has failed to understand. '*All the people saw him glowing with remarkable beauty.*'⁵⁶ Care was taken to include Clare and her cloistered sisters. 'The brothers lifted his holy body from the stretcher and, raising him in their arms, they held him in front of the window [behind the convent grille] for over an hour.'⁵⁷

It was the truth of the stigmata that impressed itself on Francis' contemporaries as a great shock. Like our own, it was a society that was passionate about money and scorned the poor. As in our society, the truth about Jesus' death on the cross out of love for humankind was ignored and dismissed as a basis for social conduct. Now it was the 'undeniable truth of those stigmata [that] appeared most brilliantly Thus, those who had been [Francis'] detractors ... became faithful heralds and promoters of his fame.'⁵⁸ In Francis' emaciated and tortured body, pierced as though with nails, society was shown the graphic image it had suppressed. It gazed as though at Jesus, nailed naked to the cross. According to his

⁵¹ *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano, 388.

⁵² *Legend of Three Companions*, 108.

⁵³ *Legend of Three Companions*, 108.

⁵⁴ *The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, 419.

⁵⁵ Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 619.

⁵⁶ *Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano, 280.

⁵⁷ *Assisi Compilation*, 129.

⁵⁸ *Legend of Three Companions*, 108–109.

biographer Celano, Francis' body looked 'as if he had hung on the cross with the Son of God'.⁵⁹

The Franciscan story is, then, a most dramatic one, speaking urgently to the world in its worldliness. It is a story in which the destiny of a human person is at stake in his vocation to belong to Christ. This drama is enacted against the background of a society that, initially, lacks sympathy. Yet, in turning away from society, Francis speaks to society with an authenticity that society itself cannot finally ignore. Finally, society realises that Francis' discredited, marginalised life was speaking about itself. It was out of this painful and often tragic dialogue that the Franciscan story emerged. That story is with us still. Pope Francis has said he wants a Church 'that is poor and is for the poor'.⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ *Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano, 261.

⁶⁰ Lizzy Davies, 'Pope Francis Declares: "I Would Like to See a Church that Is Poor and Is for the Poor"', *The Guardian* (16 March 2013).