The Life of St. Francis of Assisi: A Compendium of the Early Legends

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Translated and Compiled by
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This book is dedicated to
all my Franciscan formators.

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"The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity."

—The Prologue of the Rule of St. Francis

Foreword

Bret Thoman's new book, *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi: A Compendium of the Early Legends*, is an interesting and important work. At first glance, it may appear to be a simple compilation of the events of the life of Saint Francis, extracted from the early biographies. But as any compilation, it reflects the spirituality of the author.

Thoman has a certificate in Franciscan spirituality and a master's degree in the Italian language. But he has also lived the Franciscan charism. For over two decades, Bret Thoman has been a professed member of the Secular Franciscan Order (formerly known as the Third Order of St. Francis). Moreover, he has spent many years visiting Franciscan sites throughout central Italy while accompanying groups and bringing pilgrims into the spirituality of the sites. Thus, the selection of excerpts and the crafting of the chronology of

the events of the life of the Saint give insight into the spirituality and way of thinking of the author. How does he perceive the life of Saint Francis? What does he consider to be the most important moments of his life? How does he divide these moments? How does he begin? How does he conclude? Having lived the Franciscan vocation and walked in the footsteps of the saints, he has keen insight into the answers to these questions.

Thoman has already published very good books on Saint Francis and Clare and has also written on Franciscan spirituality. He has a deep knowledge of Franciscan spirituality and is familiar with the Italian language and culture. However, this latest book is a sort of experiment. He has endeavored to do what practically no one has ever done before. Bret has retranslated the early Franciscan legends, also known as the Sources, and pieced them together to create a new chronological life of Francis. The result is a great harmony among the works of the various early biographers.

While there are plenty of other biographies about Saint Francis in circulation, they usually reflect the life of Saint Francis through the filter of the writers' personal points of view, thus revealing the "colors" of the writers. But Bret has done something different. By

returning to the early legends, Thoman has sought to present the life of Francis as it truly was historically. He has strived to represent St. Francis as he really was, stripped of the revisionism of many modern biographies of the saint. The result is something beautiful. It is as if he has gathered flowers from a meadow, given a special beauty to all of them, and made them into a bouquet.

This work is not a new biography of Saint Francis, but it is a new biography of Saint Francis. This book is not the work of Bret Thoman, but it is the work of Bret Thoman. All four statements are true. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. This work is a lovely collection of flowers, which together form a beautiful bouquet. I am sure that when you read this book, you will encounter this beauty.

—Tibor Kauser, OFS
Minister General of the Secular Franciscan Order

Preface

"Why after you, why after you, why is the whole world running after you?" Brother Masseo of Marignano posed this question to St. Francis, as narrated in *The Little Flowers* (chapter 10). Francis's response was that God chose a vile sinner such as him to confound the nobility and the wisdom of the world. He said that he had been chosen so that everyone would know that every virtue and every good come from God alone and not from any creature, and no person can boast in God's sight.

Whether or not this was the true reason the "whole world" was running after Francis in the thirteenth century is debatable. Ever humble, Francis could not have responded otherwise. He could not have referred to the natural gifts he had possessed since childhood—"cheerfulness, joyfulness, and gentleness," according to the early legends. Nor could he have taken credit for any

of his spiritual charisms, as he fervently insisted that they were gifts from God and pointed to God and God alone.

Still today, people are running after St. Francis. The Poor Little One from Assisi continues to endear himself to the "whole world," including people of every religion and faith (or none at all). And just like Brother Masseo, contemporary people want to know what it is about him that makes him so attractive.

To this end, there is no shortage of research, studies, and books about St. Francis. It seems that new books on St. Francis are published every year. However, the biographies do not all say the same thing. While most claim to present the real St. Francis, the reality is that some modern accounts of the life of St. Francis are so divergent that they seem to have been written about different people.

Much of these discrepancies are due to the bias of the writers. It is said that a biography reveals more about the biographer than the subject. Biographers naturally focus on what interests them. How do they begin the story? What do they emphasize? What do they omit? How do they conclude?

Paul Sabatier (1858–1928) is considered the pioneer of modern Franciscan studies. He was the first

historian to research the life of St. Francis by utilizing the historical-critical method. In 1894, he published the groundbreaking work, *Vie De S. François D'assise* (Life of St. Francis). A French Protestant in the Huguenot tradition, he winced at the "aureole and nimbus" and "hagiographical tinsel" he believed shrouded the authentic story of Francis of Assisi. He believed that the legends put forth by the saint's medieval biographers—which for centuries had framed the official narrative—were written more to bolster the Order's standing and strengthen the friars than to depict the true historical man from Assisi.

While Sabatier was a brilliant writer and systematic historian—and his descriptions of the spiritual life of St. Francis are truly stirring—his personal beliefs and assumptions as a Protestant minister in the Calvinist tradition heavily influenced his work, in particular, St. Francis's relationship to the Catholic Church and the hierarchy. Sabatier saw Francis as a prophetic reformer whose conversion was one of the heart and conscience, totally removed from the "hieratic clerics" of the canonical order.

Today, contemporary biographers continue to write about St. Francis, and many—in the footsteps of Sabatier—continue to do so through the filters of

their spiritual or philosophical worldviews. Their biases have a say in the outcome of their work. In many of the contemporary biographies, Francis has become a standard bearer of one cause or another. Those who are more secular or not religious tend to emphasize the social aspects of St. Francis's life and how he transcended sectarian boundaries. These writers are often turned off by Francis's asceticism and are incredulous regarding miracles. Religious writers whose spirituality tends toward immanence (that is, Christ's dwelling in the world) also see Francis through the lens of social issues and his response to Jesus's requests to succor the Least Ones in Matthew 25. Their focus is on Francis's treatment of lepers and the poor, peacemaking efforts, and ecological concerns.

Another issue with the contemporary portraits of St. Francis is the development, nay, the evolution of Francis that has taken place over the years and decades. The more serious Franciscan biographers are well-versed in preceding biographies. But something that is merely suggested in one work becomes probable in the next. By the time it is quoted a third time, it is taken as fact. For example, in the footsteps of Sabatier, many contemporary writers accept as a fact that St. Francis

was fiercely critical of the institutional Church and its wealth.

Elsewhere, other writers believe that St. Francis never received the stigmata. Chiara Frugone, an Italian medieval historian, in her 1993 work, *Francesco e l'invenzione delle stimmate* (Francis and the invention of the stigmata), expressed skepticism regarding the stigmata. While not entirely dismissing the miracle, she believed that the purported miracle was instrumentalized by the Franciscans to bolster the Order's reputation and further their religious and political agendas. By the time Donald Spoto wrote *Reluctant Saint* in 2002, Francis's alleged stigmata were "the scars of leprosy upon his body."

In other contemporary biographies, revealing the historical St. Francis is not even the objective. The spirit of St. Francis is the aim. St. Francis and his deeds have been reimagined for a modern audience. In the film world, Franco Zeffirelli's creative *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972) epitomizes this reinvented Francis. A nature-loving, starry-eyed Francis wanders through fields in what comes across as a sentimental fairy tale more attuned to the countercultural ethos of the 1970s than the ascetic milieu of the early 1200s. It's as if

Francis has been revised to meet the demand of consumers hungry for a new and improved product.

St. Francis's encounter with the Islamic sultan of Egypt has also been reworked. The traditional account—that he went to the Muslim leader to preach Christ crucified, hoping he would convert and be baptized—has been brushed aside. Today, the event is seen as an original example of religious dialogue. Worse, it has led to St. Francis being seen as the model of religious pluralism.

Given so many contradictory—and false—portrayals of St. Francis, is there a way to arrive at the authentic St. Francis—the man the world was and is running after? Yes. The most authentic source of St. Francis is St. Francis himself. If someone truly wants to explore the original ideas, thoughts, values, and beliefs of St. Francis, he should read St. Francis's own writings. However, since St. Francis never wrote an autobiography, the next most authentic source of information about his life is the early biographies—that is, the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century legends. These works reveal the true St. Francis of Assisi. We do not have to explore the original legends in depth to see clearly that many of the contemporary perceptions of St. Francis are patently false.

The hierarchy: In the early legends, there is not one example of St. Francis appearing at odds with the Catholic hierarchy. On the contrary, he constantly appears exhorting his followers to respect priests—even if living in sin!—and to remain obedient to them as superiors. While he fully embraced poverty—in an era when, indeed, many clerics and prelates did not—Francis sought to convert through example, never through polemics.

Ecology: While St. Francis was declared the patron saint of ecologists in 1979 by Pope John Paul II, in many contemporary representations of the saint, his affinity for nature appears to flirt with pantheism. Yes, St. Francis perceived the created world around him fraternally—which is fully expressed in his beautiful prayer, *Canticle of Creatures*—but this is because he saw himself and all creation as created by the same Creator, God. Thus, his reverence for worldly creatures flowed from his worship of God; that is, he saw the goodness of creation as a reflection of the source: its origin in God.

The stigmata: Many contemporary skeptics have gone to great lengths to force a rational explanation regarding St. Francis and the stigmata. However, all the early legends heavily emphasize the event as miraculous.

Shortly after Francis's death, Brother Elias, the vicar, wrote a letter to all the friars, in which he intuited the event as evidence of Francis's particular conformity to Christ. Moreover, there were numerous eyewitnesses—including a pope—who described in detail and swore to what they saw.

The meeting with the sultan: In the early sources (including at least two non-Franciscan chroniclers who were eyewitnesses), the encounter between Francis and the sultan is described as an effort of evangelization. After receiving permission from the local ordinary of Akro (today Acre, northern Israel), Francis went to the sultan to preach salvation through the cross of Christ. He hoped he and Muslims everywhere would be baptized, which would lead to the end of the Crusades. If not, he was prepared to die a martyr. While there is some embellishment as the story progressed over the decades (the later sources claim the sultan secretly wished to be baptized and was done so in a vision on his deathbed, the early legends are of one mind in the depiction of the event. One may infer that the "dialogue" that took place between the two religious leaders led to the institution of the Custody of the Holy Land, which the Franciscan Order continues to administer to this day. However, Francis's intentions were clear.

Above are just some examples of how the historical St. Francis has been rejected in favor of the spirit of Francis. In the same way the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biographers sought to uncover the "real" Francis by stripping away the iconographic embellishment of a bygone era, I believe it is time to do the same today. Paradoxically, by returning to the ancient sources, we will see how many of the narratives that were developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are false. And I also believe it is there that we will find the answer to the question, "Why after you?"

Editor's Note

To create this new compendium, I have selected various passages from the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Franciscan legends, which I ordered chronologically to create a new narrative.

All the passages in this book were taken and translated from the Italian edition of the early Franciscan legends, known as the *Fonti Francescane* (Franciscan sources). The Italian volume—a translation, in turn, of the early sources from Latin—was initially published in 1977 but updated as recently as 2011.

The Italian *Fonti* utilizes a unique numbering system to reference each passage. In this work, I have cited the original source in the footnotes (e.g., the *Legend of the Three Companions*), followed by the corresponding Italian reference number. In this way, someone with access to the Italian edition (and Italian language skills) can look up the passage for more context. The

Fonti Francescane can be found online on a variety of websites.

Regarding language, there are some peculiarities used in the era of St. Francis. For example, the title or greeting, "lord," was used not only for the nobility but also for prelates of high office, such as cardinals and popes. A common form of address for men of lesser rank was Messer, which was used to show respect and politeness, especially towards individuals of higher social status, even in religious offices. This would be similar to "sir" or "mister" in English. In other places, "bishop" is used as a form of the highest respect for a religious or friar. In a letter, St. Francis refers to St. Anthony of Padua in this way, though he was never an ordained bishop.

Regarding St. Francis, there are other potentially confusing titles or references. He was (and still sometimes is) often referred to by his followers as "Father," even though he was an ordained deacon and never a priest; in this context, *Father* refers to his role as founder of the Franciscan Order. In other passages, he is frequently referred to as "blessed." This does not refer to the penultimate stage of the process of canonization; rather, it is a medieval religious title, indicating the state of highest divine favor and grace.

Lastly, in the Italian edition, pronouns referring to God were sometimes capitalized, while in other places, they were not. Here, I translated accordingly, even though it might appear incongruous.

Introduction to the Franciscan Legends

Traditionally, *Vitae* (Lives)—biographies, or more accurately, hagiographies—were written to accompany the canonizations of saints. They were also referred to as legends. This is not to say that they were myths; rather, the stories were "to be read," which is the etymological meaning of the word.

Virtually everything we know about St. Francis comes from the early Lives and Legends from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The first was written just two years after Francis's death. In 1228, the same year in which Francis was canonized, the writing of his life story was entrusted by Pope Gregory IX to Thomas of Celano, an erudite friar and contemporary of St. Francis. Completed in early 1229, Thomas's work enjoys a special place in the annals of Franciscan history as the original *Vita* of St. Francis.

In the 1230s, other important Lives of St. Francis were recorded. The most notable was penned by Julian of Spire. However, he was from Germany, was educated in Paris, and never knew St. Francis. Moreover, his biography essentially repeated that of Thomas. Therefore, it never assumed the importance of Thomas's work. Another early work was *Sacred Exchange between St. Francis and Lady Poverty*. Written in the immediate years after Francis's death, it was not meant to be a biography. Instead, it was an allegory and spiritual exhortation, encouraging the friars to love and embrace poverty. Another early writing is commonly known as the *Anonymous of Perugia*, written in the late 1230s and completed before 1241. It was discovered in the seventeenth century in a Franciscan convent in Perugia, hence its name. It was most likely written by John of Perugia—a friar and close companion of Brother Giles, the third follower of Francis, and an acquaintance of Brother Bernard, the first follower. The object of his work was not so much the life of St. Francis but a history of the beginning of the Order.

Despite the proliferation of these early biographies, none of them ever reached the same prominence as Thomas's. For decades, the *First Life* of St. Francis was commonly accepted as the official biography, especially

since it had the backing of the pope. However, there were weaknesses. Celano was not a close companion of Francis, and his biography was written too soon after the founder's death. It was riddled with gaps.

After the death of Pope Gregory IX, the criticism spilled out into the open. In 1244, during a general chapter in Genoa, the issue was taken up by the friars. The minister general, Crescentius of Jesi, sent out a letter to all the friars, asking those who had known Francis to submit their personal testimonies so that the gaps could be filled. The result was an influx of material. The inhabitants of Assisi shared their memories, challenging Thomas's narrative of the utter wickedness and depravity that prevailed in both the saint's family and Assisian society. John of Perugia's work was likely submitted at this time as well.

All this material was handed over to Thomas of Celano. He was commissioned not to write a fresh, new biography or replace the first one but to fill the gaps in his first work, which had been written almost twenty years earlier. Thus, his second work, *Remembrance of a Desire of a Soul* (commonly referred to as the *Second Life*), was a more thorough biography, as it depicted a more organized version of the life of the founder. When he completed it around 1247, he was

asked to further perfect it by including miracles, which had somehow been omitted. The result was a third work, known as the *Treatise on Miracles of St. Francis*. The trilogy of works on St. Francis by Thomas of Celano remains foundational among all Lives of the saint.

By now, in the mid-thirteenth century, in addition to the official works of Thomas, more biographies of St. Francis began circulating. While some of the ones mentioned above were sound, there were other less reliable narratives.

By the time Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–1274) was chosen as the seventh minister general of the Order of Friars Minor in 1257, an office he held until his death in 1274, the Order was facing serious challenges. Externally, the friars were engaged in a bitter struggle with the secular clergy regarding the mendicants' status in the universities and dioceses. Internally, there were heated tensions, particularly regarding observance of the Rule. As it was, two distinct camps of friars were emerging.

Before Francis died, the friars had been commissioned with more significant pastoral roles, and his original vision and form of life were being relaxed. As the Order aged and took on more apostolic works, it became more and more difficult to subsist on alms,

practice manual labor, observe evangelical penance, and live in poor dwellings, all the while adhering to strict poverty. In order to achieve their ministries more practically, the "relaxed" friars (eventually known as the Conventuals) sought to mitigate the vigor of the Rule. On the other hand, there were those friars who sought to continue to imitate the life of the founder to the letter. Among these was a radical branch of friars who had been heavily influenced by the writings of Joachim of Fiore, a firebrand Cistercian abbot and mystic who prophesied that the age of the Spirit was near. Known as the Spirituals, many were promoting a version of St. Francis based on their conviction that the friars had an important role not just in the Church but in eschatological history and the end times.

With this turmoil roiling the Order, it was all the more necessary to capture the essence of St. Francis, especially as some within these factions were promoting a heavily slanted version of the founder to bolster their partisan positions. Thus, in 1260, Bonaventure was given the mandate to compose a new biography. It was a monumental task. In effect, Bonaventure was charged with creating a new Life of St. Francis that could unify the divergent camps within the Order.

St. Bonaventure (canonized in 1381) is regarded as one of the most important philosophers and theologians from the medieval Scholastic tradition. His writings include numerous commentaries, treatises, and reflections. His most well-known work is *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (Journey of the mind into God), a spiritual masterpiece mapping the mystical ascent to God in a series of stages.

The result of Bonaventure's work of St. Francis—*Legenda maior Sancti Francisci* (Major legend of Saint Francis)—was another spiritual masterpiece. His work portrayed Francis as a man of perfect virtue, presented as a manifestation of grace and perfect conformity to Christ. As he was composing the complete Legend, he composed a shorter biography of the saint to be used in liturgical functions and readings. The secondary Legend is known as the *Minor Legend*.

Bonaventure's *Major Legend* was extremely well received by the other ministers of the Order, so much so that just six years after he wrote it, at the general chapter in Paris in 1266, a serious decision was taken: every Franciscan friary was ordered to destroy every biography of St. Francis in their libraries except one—that of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. His biography was

to be considered not just the *official* Life of St. Francis; it would be the *only* Life of St. Francis.

Happily, the older biographies survived, as Franciscan obedience did not extend to Benedictine or Augustinian libraries. Moreover, the collections of writings about St. Francis submitted after the 1244 general chapter in Genoa were cleverly determined not to be veritable biographies and were not destroyed. In any case, only ten years later, the ministers regretted the decision taken, and at the general chapter in Padua in 1276, they issued a counterorder: care should be taken to diligently collect and preserve every writing and biography related to the life of St. Francis.

In sum, Bonaventure's *Major Legend*—while certainly profoundly spiritually and theologically developed—was tamer and more sanitized when compared to the earlier biographies. Bonaventure's personal thoughts on grace, free will, virtue, and moral progress thoroughly inform his presentation of the life of Francis. Indeed, his Life of St. Francis was deeply influenced by his own journey and understanding of Christian spirituality. He spent a significant amount of time in a grotto in the mountain hermitage of Laverna, where he wrote *Itinerarium*. There, in the same spot where Francis received the stigmata, Bonaventure

became convinced that the mystical conformity of St. Francis to the crucifix was not just a unique aspect of Francis's spiritual journey; it was fundamental to every Christian. Thus, the *Major Legend* is less a work by a historian and more that of a refined theologian who saw St. Francis and his role in the history of salvation: the founder of the Franciscan Order is the angel of the sixth seal[1], a true and veritable *alter Christus*.

Regarding Bonaventure's attempts at unifying the Order through his *Legend*, the verdict was mixed. While he shared some of the ideals of the Spirituals, for their leaders, he did not go nearly far enough in establishing St. Francis according to their understanding of the founder's unique place in eschatological history. They viewed St. Francis through an apocalyptic lens. He was the herald of a new era, appointed by God to usher in the "Age of the Spirit," and they, his followers, were part of this new age of holiness.

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1 The sentence is from the Introduction to the "Fonti" in Italian. Though there is not a direction connection between the seals and angels in Revelation, it appears he is indicating St. Francis as one of the final angels playing a significant role in the end times and execution of God's plans. That is how the Spirituals, and Bonaventure, saw Francis's role in salvation history.

Given their radical fervor, the Spirituals frequently criticized the direction of the Order as having become too relaxed and institutionalized. Many in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, including bishops and popes, according to them, were also corrupt. Eventually, the Spirituals were condemned. Pope John XXII issued decrees against them, and some of their leaders were imprisoned and even executed for heresy.

The saga of the Spirituals is important in understanding the development of Lives of St. Francis from the second half of the thirteenth century to the first half of the fourteenth century. Their leaders, such as Ubertino of Casale, condemned Bonaventure's biography, accusing him of having omitted pertinent facts and sayings considered embarrassing or compromising to the leadership of the Order.

In 1305, after having been banished from Florence to Laverna for having criticized the pope, Ubertino wrote the *Tree of Crucified Life of Jesus*. He used the image of a tree as a central symbol to represent the life and crucifixion of Jesus. Writing under the mantle of mysticism and allusion, the work epitomizes the vision and thought of the Spirituals, based on Joachim of Fiore's apocalyptic writings. In Book Five, Ubertino

introduces St. Francis. The founder is described in mystical and prophetic terms as having been generated by Jesus.

Ubertino wrote that Francis's unique privilege was to have "transmitted to holy Church the life of Jesus in the communal and durable form of his Order." Ubertino did not hold back from incessant polemic barbs against Franciscan ministers and institutional prelates.

A more even-handed work associated with the tradition of the Spirituals is the *Fioretti* (Little Flowers of St. Francis). Not remotely an intellectual treatise, it is a collection of popular legends and tales about the lives of Francis and the early friars narrated in an earthy, colloquial manner. In line with the spirituality of the Spirituals, it is replete with colorful anecdotes, supernatural visions and miracles, and examples of early Franciscan piety, many of which are situated in the remote, mountain hermitages. *The Little Flowers* was compiled by a friar in the region of the Marches, likely between 1328 and 1337. Perhaps due to the complete absence of polemics (with which Ubertino's work is replete), the *Fioretti* is considered a spiritual classic not just within the Franciscan Order but within Christendom itself.

A number of other texts were once associated with the Spirituals, though the opinion among scholars

today has changed. Returning to the request of Crescentius from Jesi, who sought the submission of testimonies of the life of St. Francis from those who knew him, many of these texts were copied and conserved.

Perhaps the most valuable response was from three early companions of the saint who were residing in Greccio. We know who they were from a letter that accompanied their writings: Brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo. Today, the manuscript they sent is known as the *Legend of the Three Companions*, and it is considered one of the most important early Franciscan biographies.

Another important work that was submitted after Crescentius's request is known as the *Assisi Compilation*. It was traditionally known as the *Legend of Perugia*, since it was discovered in a library in Perugia in 1922. This work is not a biography; rather, it is a compilation of stories and anecdotes sent from those "who were with him." The texts were copied and originally preserved at the Sacred Convent in Assisi.

Another often-cited work associated with the Spirituals is the *Mirror of Perfection*. It was actually composed in 1318, though it was long believed that Brother Leo had penned it one century earlier. (The discrepancy is due to an error in Roman numerals.) The *Mirror of Perfection* consists of a collection of testimonies by those

who knew St. Francis. Due to the choice of certain texts that were included, the work is considered part of the tradition of the Spirituals.

These latter texts present a portrait of St. Francis that differs considerably in style and content from the "official" biographies penned by Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure. They were not commissioned by a pope or the minister general with the task of being accepted as official biographies. Nor were they systematic examinations of the founder in light of a theological program. Instead, St. Francis is presented by his companions, many of whom were with him from the beginning. He comes across as authentic and real.

Unfortunately, since for a long time these works were considered expressions of the thought of the Spirituals, they were seen as the cause of the bitter struggle that consumed the Order for decades, if not centuries. For this reason, they were shunned. When these texts surfaced in dusty convent libraries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern Franciscan historians (such as Paul Sabatier) believed that the true St. Francis had been rediscovered. These modern writers claimed that the portrait of St. Francis as depicted in the official Legends (that is, the works by Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure) had been compromised.

Today, the consensus among Franciscan scholars is that all the biographies are closer to one another than was previously believed. When examined critically—and taking into account the historical moment and by whom the works were created—each contains specific truths. Without a doubt, the early Legends—both the official ones and those written by Francis's close companions—taken together offer a thorough and authentic portrait of St. Francis.

Chronology

CONVERSION (1181–1208)

– 1181/1182: Born in Assisi and baptized with the name John. After his father returned from France, he renamed him Francesco.

– 1198–1200: After the death of Emperor Henry VI (September 1197), the commoners of Assisi destroy the imperial fortress of Assisi and attack the fortified houses of the nobility, many of whom take refuge in Perugia. Francis may have participated in the battle.

– November 1202: War breaks out between Perugia and Assisi, and Francis takes part. The army of Assisi is defeated in the battle of Collestrada.

– 1202–1203: Francis is imprisoned in Perugia for one year. He is released after his father pays a ransom.

– 1204: Francis suffers a long illness.

– Late 1204 or early 1205: Francis sets out to Puglia to fight again, this time in a crusade in southern Italy. In Spoleto, he has a mysterious vision-dream that causes him to change his plans, and he returns to Assisi. His gradual process of conversion begins.

– Summer 1205: Francis encounters a leper, representing the beginning of his penance (conversion), as he wrote in his *Testament*.

– Autumn 1205: In San Damiano, Christ speaks to Francis through the crucifix, telling him to rebuild the church. The conflict with his father begins.

– Early 1206: Summoned by the bishop of Assisi, Francis renounces his worldly inheritance before his father and the townspeople. He leaves Assisi, stopping at a monastery, where he works as a scullion. He continues to Gubbio, where he spends several months caring for lepers. There, he is given a habit by a friend.

– Summer 1206: Francis returns to Assisi donning a hermit's tunic, and he begins to repair the church of

San Damiano. There, he prophesies the arrival of the Poor Ladies.

– Summer 1206–early 1207: Francis repairs two more churches—San Pietro of Spina and Our Lady of the Angels (also known as the Portiuncula).

THE ORDER (1208–1215)

1208

– February 24, 1208 (Feast of St. Matthias): At Mass at the Portiuncula, Francis hears the Gospel in which Christ sends the apostles out with nothing. Receiving his vocation to poverty, he dons a rough habit and a chord and begins to announce penance.

– April 16: Bernard of Quintavalle is the first to follow Francis. Peter of Catanii also follows Francis.

– April 23: Brother Giles is received at the Portiuncula as a follower of Francis.

– Spring: The first mission. Giles and Francis go to the March of Ancona, while the other two go in another direction.

– Summer: Three more brothers join, including Philip the Long.

– Autumn 1208–early 1209: The second mission. Francis sends the friars two by two in the four directions of the world. Francis and a brother reach Poggio Bustone in the Rieti valley. After being assured of the remission of his sins and the future growth of the Order, Francis comforts and encourages his companions.

1209

– Spring: The friars return to the Portiuncula. More enter, now numbering twelve.

– Spring: Francis writes a brief *Rule of Life* "according to the form of the Holy Gospel" and presents it to Pope Innocent III, who approves it orally.

– Summer: On the way back to Assisi, the friars stop temporarily near Orte. Then, they settle in a hut in Rivotorto near Assisi.

– September: Emperor Otto IV passes Rivotorto.

– 1209 or 1210: Forced to leave Rivotorto, the fledgling group settles by the small church of St. Mary of the Angels (also known as the Portiuncula). After receiving permission from the Benedictine abbot of San Benedetto (whose Order owned the property), St. Mary of the Angels becomes the mother church of the Order.– 1209 or 1210: The beginning of the Third Order.

1211 or 1212

– Summer: Francis tries to reach Syria, but headwinds push the ship onto the coast of Dalmatia. Francis returns to Ancona.

1212

– March 18–19: On the night of Palm Sunday, Francis welcomes Clare at St. Mary of the Angels, gives her the tonsure, and vests her in a religious tunic.

– Summer: Francis returns to Rome to inform Innocent III on the developments of the Order. He meets Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli, a Roman noblewoman and benefactress of the Order.

1213

– May 8: In San Leo of Montefeltro, Count Orlando offers Francis the mountain of La Verna overlooking his territory of Chiusi.

– 1213 or 1214: Francis attempts to reach Morocco again in order to preach to the Muslims; he attempts the route by land from Spain, but an illness forces him to return to Assisi.

1215

– November: the Fourth Lateran Council takes place in Rome. Francis likely attends and possibly meets St. Dominic. Afterward, inspired by the teachings of the council, his "Eucharistic crusade" begins.

GROWTH (1216–1223)

1216

– July 16: Pope Innocent III dies in Perugia and is succeeded by Pope Honorius III.

– Late summer: Pope Honorius approves the Plenary Indulgence attached to the Portiuncula, also known as the Pardon of Assisi.

1217

– May 5: At the first general chapter, the friars initiate the first missions beyond "the Alps and the Seas" (that is, northern Europe and the Holy Land).

1218

– June 11, 1218: Honorius III publishes *Cum dilecti*, assuring bishops of the full catholicity of the Friars Minor.

1219

– May 26: At the Pentecost chapter, during the Fifth Crusade, a second mission of the friars beyond the Alps and Seas is decided. Friars leave for Germany, France, Hungary, and Spain. Five friars, led by Br. Berard, leave for the Holy Land.

– June 24: Francis sails from Ancona to Acre (Akko), in today's northern Israel, and then Damietta, where the Crusaders are deployed against the Muslim army.

– Autumn: Francis meets Sultan Malik-al-Kamil, where he is graciously welcomed. After he preaches the Gospel, there are no conversions, and Francis returns to the Crusader camp.

1220

– January: Br. Berard and the other friars are martyred in Morocco; they are known as the Franciscan Protomartyrs.

– Spring or summer: Informed that the "vicars" left in charge in Italy had introduced arbitrary provisions into the Rule, Francis returns to Italy via Venice. Cardinal Hugolino is appointed Protector of the Order.

– September 22: In his papal bull *Cum secundum*, Pope Honorius III directs the Franciscans to begin a one-year novitiate for new friars.

– 1220 (or 1217 or 1218): Francis renounces his role governing the Order, entrusting it to Peter Catanii as vicar.

1221

– March 10: Peter of Catanii dies, and Brother Elias is appointed vicar.

– May 30: Another general chapter, called the Chapter of Mats, takes place. A formal Rule is approved though not confirmed with the official papal bull. This unapproved Rule is known as the Rule of 1221.

– 1221: Pope Honorius III approves *Memoriale propositi*, which is considered the first Rule of the Order of Penitents—later called the Third Order of St. Francis and today the Secular Franciscan Order).

– 1221–1222: Francis preaches in southern Italy.

HOLINESS (1223–1228)

1223

– Early part of the year: Francis retreats to Fontecolombo with Brother Leo and Brother Bonizzo to draft the definitive Rule.

– June 11: The Rule is discussed at the general chapter and submitted to the pope for approval.

– November 29: Pope Honorius III formally approves the Rule with the bull *Solet annuere*. It is known as the Rule of 1223, or the Approved Rule.

– December 24–25: In Greccio, Francis serves Mass with live animals, creating the first creche, or nativity scene.

1224

– June 2: At the general chapter, it is decided to send friars to England.

– July or August: In Foligno, Brother Elias prophesies that Francis has two years to live.

– August 15–September 29: During a fast from the Assumption to the Feast of St. Michael, Francis receives the stigmata at Mount Laverna. The feast is observed on September 17, though it likely occurred on September 14.

– October–November: Francis returns to the Portiuncula, ministering in the upper Tiber Valley.

– December 1224–February 1225: Riding on a donkey, Francis preaches through Umbria and the March of Ancona.

1225

– March: At San Damiano, Francis's eye condition worsens. At the insistence of the bishop and Brother Elias, Francis consents to treatment, but weather is inclement and treatment is postponed.

– April–May: In San Damiano, Francis receives the divine promise of eternal life. The next morning, nearly blind, he composes the *Canticle of the Creatures.*

– June: Francis adds the "forgiveness" stanza to the *Canticle*, which leads to a reconciliation between the bishop and mayor of Assisi.

– June–July: Following a letter from Cardinal Hugolino, Francis goes to Rieti, where he meets the papal court.

– July–August: Urged by Cardinal Hugolino, Francis goes to Fonte Colombo to undergo eye treatment. A doctor cauterizes his temples, without improvement.

– September: Francis moves to San Fabiano near Rieti (today, it is the Sanctuary of La Foresta) for more doctor visits, all to no avail. He restores the trampled vineyard of the poor priest.

1226

– February 6: Francis leaves the Rieti Valley.

– April: Francis goes to Siena for further medical treatments; he dictates a brief testament.

– May–June: Francis goes to a hermitage near Cortona, referred to as the "Cells."

– July–August: For respite from the summer heat, Francis is taken to Bagnara, in the mountains east of Assisi.

– Late August or early September: Francis's condition worsens, and he is taken first to the castle settlement of Nottiano, then to the bishop's palace in Assisi. At the announcement of his approaching death, he dictates the last stanza of his Canticle.

– September: Sensing that death is near, Francis is taken to the Portiuncula. He stops to bless the city. Around this time, he dictates his final *Testament*.

– October 3: Francis dies at the Portiuncula after sunset on Saturday, October 3, or, according to the medieval liturgical computation, on Sunday, October 4.

– October 4: Francis's body is transported to Assisi. On the way, the procession stops in San Damiano so St. Clare and the sisters can pay homage to him. Then he is buried in the church of San Giorgio, now incorporated into the Basilica of St. Clare.

– October: Brother Elias writes a letter to all the friars, informing them of Francis's death and reception of the stigmata.

1227

– March 19: Cardinal Hugolino, the Protector of the Franciscan Order and personal friend of Francis, is elected pope, taking the name Gregory IX.

1228

– July 16: Pope Gregory IX comes to Assisi to preside over the canonization of Saint Francis.

– July 19: Pope Gregory publishes the papal bull *Mira circa nos*, confirming the inscription of St. Francis in the Register of Saints and the celebration of his feast on October 4.

1229

– February 25: Pope Gregory IX approves Thomas of Celano's first biography of the saint, the *Life of Blessed Francis* (today known as the *First Life*), which the same pontiff had commissioned.

1230

– May 25: St. Francis's remains are translated from San Giorgio to the basilica erected in his honor. His relics remain there today.

Prologue

April 29, AD 1228

The pope entrusts Thomas of Celano with the task of writing the Vita*, or First Life of St. Francis.*

At the invitation of the glorious Lord Pope Gregory, I have undertaken to diligently narrate the deeds and life of our most blessed Father, Francis. I have tried to do so orderly and with devotion, always choosing truth as my teacher and guide. But since no one can retain by heart all of his works and teachings, I have limited myself to faithfully transcribing at least those things that I myself have gathered from his own voice or learned from the accounts of tried and sincere witnesses, setting them down in the best way that was possible to me, although so inferior to the merit of the

subject. Would that I could truly be a worthy disciple of him who constantly avoided difficult language and the ornaments of rhetoric![2]

2 Celano, *First Life*, 315.

Part I:
Conversion

In the World

Winter AD 1181–1182

Pica was nearing the end of her term. Her relatives and the women of the neighborhood were looking after her, as all joyfully anticipated the birth of her first child. Her husband, Pietro [di Bernardone], was in France dealing with commercial interests. However, when her term came to pass, the women became anxious and began to fear for Pica's health. Then suddenly, a mysterious pilgrim came to the door of the house, bearing a message for the young expectant mother: She would be able to deliver only in a stable. At that, Pica was taken to the family stable next to the house, where, among an ox and a donkey, she gave birth to a son.[3]

3 From a fifteenth-century legend.

AD 1182

Baptized by his mother with the name John, his father calls him Francis.

Born in the city of Assisi, in the area of the Spoleto Valley, he was first called John [after the Baptist] by his mother, then Francesco by his father [who had been away in worldly France], and certainly, as to the sound, he kept the name imposed by his father, but as to the meaning, he also fulfilled that given by his mother.[4]

Therefore, the name John is appropriate to the mission that he later carried out, while that of Francis [is appropriate] instead to his fame, which soon spread everywhere after his complete conversion to God. Beyond the feast of any other saint, he considered most solemn that of John the Baptist, whose illustrious name had impressed on his soul a sign of arcane power.[5]

Francis is known for generosity but not obedience to God.

In his youth, he was brought up in vanities, among the vain sons of men. After a summary education, he was destined for the lucrative business of commerce.

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4 Bonaventure, *Minor Legend*, 1330.

5 Celano, *Second Life*, 583.

Yet, through divine assistance and protection, he did not follow the unbridled instincts of the flesh, although [he was] among licentious youths. Moreover, although [he was] among merchants intent on gain, he did not place his hope in money and treasures.[6]

Vivid as he was with intelligence, he began to practice his father's profession, the cloth trade, though in a completely different manner. Francis was much more cheerful and generous, given to playing games. He would wander around Assisi day and night with a group of likeminded friends. He was so liberal in spending that he would squander all the money he earned or could acquire on feasts and other things. For this reason, his parents scolded him for his excessive spending on himself and others, as if he were the descendant of some great prince rather than the son of merchants. But since they were wealthy and they loved him dearly, they let him carry on in that behavior, not wanting to sadden him. His mother, when she heard the neighbors talking about the young man's prodigality, would answer, "What do you think of my son? He will be a son of God yet, by His grace."

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6 Bonaventure, *Minor Legend*, 1330.

He was not only a spendthrift in dining and entertainment, but he also went beyond all limits in his dress. He had more sumptuous clothes made than were appropriate [according to his social position]. In his quest for originality, he was so vain that he would sometimes sew precious fabrics and coarse cloth together in the same garment. All the same, by nature, he was gentle in his behavior and manner of speaking. And following a choice born of conviction, he addressed no one with insulting or foul words. On the contrary, although he was a shining and dissipated young person, he was determined not to respond to those who initiated lewd discourse. Thus his fame spread throughout almost the entire region, and many who knew him predicted that he would accomplish something great.[7]

The hand of the Lord rested upon him, and the right hand of the Most High would transform him, so that, through him, sinners might rediscover the hope of living again in grace, and he might remain for all an example of conversion to God.[8]

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7 *Legend of the Three Companions*, 1396–1397.

8 Celano, *First Life*, 321.

November AD 1202

Francis fights on behalf of Assisi against Perugia and is imprisoned for one year.

During the battle between Perugia and Assisi, Francis was captured with many of his fellow citizens and taken prisoner to Perugia. Being noble in manner [and dress], they locked him in prison together with the knights.

At a certain point, while his fellow prisoners were sad and dejected, Francis, cheerful and jovial by nature, did not seem sad but cheerful. One of his companions then told him that he was foolish to act cheerful while in prison. But Francis countered in a vibrant voice, "What do you think of me? You all should know that I will be adored throughout the world."

A knight of his group insulted one of his fellow prisoners. For this reason, all the others sought to isolate him. But Francis continued to befriend him, exhorting everyone to do the same. After one year, peace was negotiated between Perugia and Assisi, and Francis returned to Assisi together with his fellow prisoners.[9]

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9 *Legend of the Three Companions*, 1398.

Francis encounters a poor man in his shop.

One day, he was in the shop where he sold fabrics, completely absorbed in thoughts related to such business affairs, when a poor man appeared asking for alms for the love of God. Intent on dreams of wealth, Francis sent him away without giving him anything. As the beggar walked away, the young man [Francis], touched by divine grace, began to reproach himself as a villain for his great wrongdoing, saying to himself, "If that poor man had asked for a contribution in the name of some count or great baron, you would certainly have given him what he asked. How much more should you have done so, since he asked in the name of the King of kings and the Ruler of the universe?" For this reason, he resolved in his heart that from then on, he would refuse nothing that was asked of him in the name of such a great Lord. And calling the poor man, he gave him alms generously.[10]

A poor man pays homage to Francis in the streets.

There was a very simple man from Assisi who was educated, as is believed, by God. Every time he met Francis in the streets of the city, he took off his cloak

10 *Anonymous of Perugia*, 1490.

and spread it at his feet, proclaiming that Francis was worthy of all veneration because soon he would accomplish great things, for which he would be honored and glorified by all Christians.[11]

Francis encounters a poor knight in the streets.

One day, Francis met a poor and nearly naked knight. Moved by compassion, out of love of Christ, he generously gave him the well-kept clothes he was wearing. Was his gesture less than that of the most holy St. Martin [who divided his cloak with a sword to give half to a poor man]? The deed and generosity were the same, only the manner is different: Francis gives his clothes before the rest, while the other gives them at the end, after having renounced everything. Both lived poorly and humbly in this world but entered Heaven rich. That one—a knight but poor—clothed a poor man with part of his clothes; this one—not a knight but rich—clothed a poor knight with all of his clothes. Both, for having fulfilled the command of Christ, merited being visited by Christ in a vision, who praised the one for the perfection he had achieved and invited the

11 Bonaventure, *Major Legend*, 1029.

other [that is, Francis], with great kindness, to complete in himself what he still lacked.[12]

AD 1203

Francis is struck with a long illness.

But Francis still did not yet know God's plans for him. Busy with his [earthly] father's will in external activities and dragged downward by our nature corrupt from its origin, he had not yet learned to contemplate celestial realities, nor had he become accustomed to savoring divine realities. And since fear makes one understand the lesson, the hand of the Lord came upon him, and the intervention of the right hand of the Most High struck his body with long infirmities in order to render his soul disposed to the anointing of the Holy Spirit.[13]

AD 1204

[Struck by a long illness,] he began effectively to reason differently from the usual way. When he had recovered a little, to regain his strength, he began to

12 Celano, *Second Life*, 585.

13 Bonaventure, *Major Legend*, 1030.

walk around the house here and there with the aid of a cane. One day, he went out and admired the surrounding countryside more attentively. But the beauty of the fields and the pleasantness of the vineyards—all that is pleasant to look at—no longer delighted him anymore. He was astonished at this sudden change and considered all those who have their hearts attached to goods of this kind to be foolish.

From that day on, Francis began to take no account of himself and to consider with a certain contempt that which he had previously admired and loved—not, however, in a perfect and real way, because he was not yet free from the bonds of vanity, nor had he completely shaken off the yoke of perverse slavery. To abandon habits is indeed very difficult. Once they have taken root in the soul, they are not easily uprooted. The spirit, even after distancing [vices] far away, returns to its primitive attitudes, and vice mostly ends up becoming second nature. Therefore, Francis still seeks to remove himself from the divine hand. Almost forgetful of his Father's correction, with fortune smiling upon him, he caresses earthly thoughts. Unaware of the will of God, he still promises to achieve great feats for worldly vainglory.[14]

14 Celano, *First Life*, 323–324.