The Little Flowers of Saint Francis

the Little Flowers *of* SAINT FRANCIS

Brother Ugolino

Introduced, annotated, arranged chronologically,
and rendered into contemporary English by Jon M. Sweeney

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CHAPTERS

INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE SPIRITUAL BOOKS ever written, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* was originally penned in the mountains of rural Italy by friends of a deceased saint. Since first committed to paper, these stories of St. Francis have been told in order to inspire. For centuries, people have read *The Little Flowers* to become better followers of Jesus.

The book was originally written in Latin—the lingua franca of all serious Christian work in those days—and given the title *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius*, which translates as "The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions." From that came a translation into Italian—a budding vernacular in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries—as *Fioretti di Santo Francesco d' Ascesi*, or "The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi."* Today we usually call it simply *The Little Flowers*.

Many of the stories in *The Little Flowers* are known to us from other biographical sources written at about the same time. In some cases, the stories here are expanded or made more florid; in other cases, stories here appear for the first time.

Amazingly, this collection wasn't translated and published in English until 1864, more than four

* These are sometimes called *Actus* and *Fioretti*, for short.

centuries after they were first published in Latin and then Italian. Those first decades after it appeared were a time of flowery Victorian and Edwardian writing, and sentimental rhapsodizing on the beauty of *The Little Flowers* was commonplace in spiritual literature. I have a fondness for this sort of literature because of its earnestness, as when one such writer describes the issue of authorship of these tales with these sentences:

> The *Fioretti*, if you must needs break a butterfly on your dissecting-board, was written, as I judge, by a bare-foot Minorite of forty; compiled, that is, from the wonderings, the pretty adjustments and naïve disquisitions of any such weather-worn brown men as you may see to-day toiling up the Calvary to their Convent.[1]

Similar to the rhapsody just quoted, I've long been convinced that the title of this work stands in the way of its becoming more generally popular today. *The Little Flowers*—the title given to it by the editors of the first Italian edition—reeks with sentiment. It is a title that probably only speaks to the already converted. In English, a metaphorical "flower" still feels somewhat one-dimensional, but *fioretti* could just as easily be translated "blossoms," a word that connotes more of a sense of becoming. It might also help to explain that *fioretti* was also common in early Italian to colloquially

connote a collection—somewhat akin to how we might use the adjective "bunch," (another botanical word) today. The negative reaction that the metaphor "little flowers" sometimes inspires made me more than once consider changing the title for the purposes of this new, contemporary English edition of these stories. But that idea was just as quickly discarded; it would be an injustice to so great a classic. Regardless, I recognize how true it is that *The Little Flowers* is perhaps a title that feels irrelevant to many people today who might otherwise benefit from these examples of basic humanity borne in faithfulness to the vision of Christ.

The Question of Authorship

St. Francis died in 1226, and it was not until a century later—during the 1320s—that these tales were first collected in a serious fashion. Together, the stories represent the singular vision of Francis of Assisi for his time. Brother Leo, Francis's closest friend, was surely one of their early authors, but he was not their final editor. Leo mostly passed them on orally to the other friars who were anxious to preserve the original vision of the early Franciscan movement.

It was an anonymous Italian translator—working during the 1370s—who added some additional stories about St. Francis receiving the stigmata, and these are included in some editions. But for reasons of space as well

as an intention to present only the original collection, those stories are excluded here.

The influential seventeenth-century Irish Franciscan scholar Luke Wadding ascribes the original edition of the *Actus* to Friar Ugolino of Monte Santa Maria, whose name occurs three times in the work. Still, most scholars who have studied the text have concluded that it is likely the work of many hands. The first modern biographer of St. Francis, Paul Sabatier, declared the *Fioretti* to be so widely diverse in authorship that it will always remain anonymous. Some of the friars mentioned in the text are probably also among its authors.

About the Book

The Little Flowers tells the story of St. Francis and his earliest companions—the men and women of the early Franciscan movement. They are teaching tales, intended to motivate the reader toward holiness. There is never a question as to the sanctity of the subject of these tales; they are not the subject of objective history. They fit historically into the period of writings about Francis that began with St. Bonaventure's "Major Legend," or "Life of St. Francis" (finished in 1263), telling the details of Francis's life while explaining the many-faceted ways of his unusual sanctity. For example, it was in Bonaventure that we first heard a story, probably of dubious foundation in actual fact, that a simple Assisan man used to lay down

his coat in the road for Francis Bernardone to walk on as he passed by, when he was still a young boy. Today's modern reader cannot help sensing some mythmaking in tales such as these, whether they appear in Bonaventure's "Life of Francis," or in *The Little Flowers*. One of the great Franciscan scholars of a century ago, Father Cuthbert, explains this best of all: "Now the writer of the *Fioretti* has no thought of driving anybody; he sets the brethren before us as one who would say, 'Look and see the beauty of their lives and withhold your admiration, if you can!'"[2] (More on this, below.)

The characters in these stories are the closest of friends, working together as comrades, living together as family. The Italian words *frate* and *fratello* are close cousins. Both can mean "brother," although *frate* is a religious brother (or friar) and *fratello* generally indicates a biological brother. The nature of these tales is that the two meanings of *brother* tend to conflate.

There are 53 chapters, most of them quite short. In the earliest manuscripts, the chapters are usually prefaced with a short summary from an editor's hand. I have provided these summaries as well, but only in the form of short chapter titles.

Stories 42–53 are grouped separately from the first 41. This is because while the first 41 are clearly about St. Francis and his earliest companions, the latter group is about friars who were part of the "Spirituals" faction at the time when the *Fioretti* was being composed. These were

men of a later generation. The fact that these later stories are presented together with the earlier 41 is part of the slight polemic surrounding the *Fioretti*, as follows: Within a few years of Francis's death, his followers became deeply divided between a smaller group of those who wanted to remain absolutely faithful to the founder's teachings and a larger group of those who viewed his teachings as more temporary. The latter were the leaders of the order. They revered Francis as much as their traditional counterparts, but viewed his role as founder in a different light. Known as the "Conventuals," these leaders believed that Francis's Rule and Testament were important foundational documents but were also open to interpretation by subsequent generations of friars according to needs of a new day. In contrast, the traditionalists or "Spirituals" felt that Francis's teachings were immovable, almost akin to Scripture, in their most conservative moments.

As often happens in such cases, the two sides tended to move to the ideological extreme edges of their positions. The battle was pitted and fierce between the Spirituals, who were probably named derisively, and the Conventuals, who were in authority. In the midst of this, the *Fioretti* was a text produced by the Spirituals, telling stories mostly about friars who were living in friaries in the Marches, the remote part of Italy where they were sometimes quite literally hiding from their brethren, and was intended to aid their cause.

There are other differences between the tales in part 1 and those in part 2. For instance, in contrast to the brief episodes of part 1, part 2 focuses on lengthy profiles of specific friars—almost mini-Lives of them. And then, theologically, there are some small differences. For example, in part 2 there is a preoccupation with the late medieval doctrine of purgatory (a place where souls must be purified before possibly going on to heaven), which was not made formal in the Roman Catholic Church until 1274 at the Second Council of Lyon, nearly a half century after St. Francis's death.

The Chronological Problem

The Little Flowers never claims to be a work of history. For example, we meet St. Clare in the fifteenth story, after she has already become a sister, and we are never treated to the dramatic story of Clare's first coming to join St. Francis and the early friars—traditionally assigned to March 20, 1212. That comes from other sources. Instead, the first time we meet Clare is when she comes to eat a meal with Francis and his brothers at St. Mary of the Angels in the valley below Assisi. Similarly, in the second story—the one about Brother Bernard's becoming the first follower of Francis—we hear reference to Francis using stones to build churches, and we are introduced to the term *Friar Minor*, both of these things without any additional information or context. A reader

has to turn to the early biographies of Francis for these things. Similarly, the stories in this book do not follow a narrative of any kind. In this respect, they bear all of the marks of a compiled work. Had they been written by one author, that author would surely have striven to link them together more clearly and chronologically.

I believe that today's reader is sometimes prevented from the full benefit of *The Little Flowers* by what I call their chronological problem. They simply don't fit a narrative as they have been traditionally arranged. Today's readers would benefit from having these tales put into an approximate order of their happening.

For example, in the traditional order, the transition from chapter 2 to chapter 3 can be alarming. Chapter 2 is the story of Brother Bernard's conversion, while Francis was still very young in his own religious life; but suddenly, chapter 3 begins with: "The devout servant of Christ crucified, Francis, had lost his sight. Nearly blind from all of his severe penances and tears. . . ." This tale is told, not from the 1209 of chapter 2, but from a time at least a decade later. In the present edition, this has become chapter 25. Similarly, chapter 20 in the original ordering is a story of Francis appearing from heavenly glory (after his death) to a young friar; but after this tale come many others where Francis is still alive. All of this is understandably confusing.

This edition of *The Little Flowers* is different. I have arranged the stories in what seems to be the most likely

chronological ordering according to what we know of the life of St. Francis and the lives of his early followers. (Some of the stories take place, in fact, *after* Francis's death.) In addition to including at the end of each story, in brackets—like these: [ ]—the traditional numbering of that story in every other edition of *The Little Flowers*, I have also added in brackets at the beginning of the stories the approximate or traditionally understood date or dates for the events taking place.

Each of the tales is dated according to the general consensus of scholars. My sources are listed at the back of the book in a section entitled "For Further Reading." Most often these dates are approximate; occasionally they are precise; and sometimes they are a combination of both. For example, in the thirty-fourth story, "How St. Francis knew that Brother Elias would leave the Order," we can only approximate the beginning, but then we know precisely the end, since it is the occasion of Brother Elias's deathbed conversion (April 22, 1253).

Controversies behind the Surface of These Stories

Are they true? In many places, one has the feeling in these stories of reading legends more than facts. Some people refer to them in words similar to those of Professor Rosalind Brooke of Cambridge University, who calls them a "remarkable work of historical fiction."[3] Another

recent scholar calls them "typically metaphorical, mythological."[4] It is true that much of what is in here does not appear in other historical sources. However, others take a more sanguine view, as for instance when Raphael Brown offers an explanation for why so much of what is in *The Little Flowers* doesn't appear elsewhere in the historical record:

> How then can we explain the puzzling fact that many of its most interesting stories were not recorded in the first official biographies of the Saint, which were based on the testimony of a number of his companions, including Leo, Angelo, and Rufino? The answer is quite simple. It is really a matter of psychology. The Poverello's best friends would naturally hesitate to mention—and an official biographer would hesitate to describe—a recently canonized Saint of the Church shaking hands with a wolf or eating nothing for forty days or telling his companion to twirl around in a public crossroad or go into a church and preach a sermon while wearing only his breeches.[5]

Still other scholars value these later tellings of early Franciscan events due to the same fact that it was the friends closest to Francis who are doing the telling. What is perceived weakness for some is strength in the opinion of others. One such scholar is Michael F. Cusato: "Even though a very late source, [the *Fioretti*] bears the traces of a long and cherished oral tradition among the friars

who were present with [Francis] on La Verna [for the most important moment of his life, the receiving of the stigmata]."[6]

There's no question that these stories are the result of more than a century of brewing in the hearts and spirits of the early Franciscan movement. For that reason they are simultaneously mistrusted as historical fact and venerated for their ability to communicate something at least as important. Nevertheless, for the casual observer or reader, or the one drawn to spiritual literature for its more literary values, this little book is often the only introduction they receive as to who St. Francis was. For the past 150 years, scholars and readers of all kinds have looked to these stories for hints as to Francis's personality, as much as for confirmation of some of the actual happenings of his eventful life. On this subject Hilaire Belloc once wrote this:

> If there is one thing that people . . . have gone wrong upon more than another in the intellectual things of life, it is the conception of a Personality. . . . The hundred-and-one errors which this main error leads to include a bad error on the nature of history. Your modern non-Catholic or anti-Catholic historian is always misunderstanding, underestimating, or muddling the role played in the affairs of men by great and individual Personalities. That is why he is so lamentably weak upon the function of legend; that is why he makes a fetish of

> documentary evidence and has no grip upon the value of tradition. For traditions spring from some personality invariably, and the function of legend, whether it be a rigidly true legend or one tinged with make-believe, is to interpret Personality. Legends have vitality and continue, because in their origin they so exactly serve to explain or illustrate some personal character in a man which no cold statement could give.[7]

There is no document or collection of documents that has had as much impact on our collective and cultural understanding of Francis of Assisi and the personality of the early Franciscan movement as *The Little Flowers*.[8]

As an example of this, the stories here, unlike those in the first biographies of St. Francis written by Thomas of Celano, often take on a deliberate pedagogy. For example, "Three murderous robbers become Franciscan friars" (chapter 29) has the structure in its second half of an analogical journey that was never intended to be factual, but rather a teaching tale. Does that make it any less valuable as evidence of what Francis and his early companions were like? I don't think so.

What makes these stories relevant today is the power with which they grab hold of the reader, sometimes by the fantastic claims they make for the life of St. Francis and his first followers, to change one's life before God. Hyperbole—if that's what it's called—has always been a rhetorical device and a symptom of deep belief; and

it can be a tool of transformation. It all reminds me of the story from the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the young monk who says in frustration to the elder monk, "What more can I do? I've done all of the spiritual practices. I've said all of the prayers!" And the elder monk holds out his arms, fingers spread dramatically, and replies, "You can become all flame!" Tradition has it that the elder's fingers appeared to be bursting with fire at that moment.

A further word needs to be said about the controversies brewing in the late thirteenth and then fourteenth centuries between the "Spirituals" and the "Conventuals"—those two groups within the Franciscan Order that were in great tension at the time the *Fioretti* was first written down. The serious rift between these two factions comes through clearly in chapter 33, for example, which reads like a polemic for the Spirituals' cause. And then nowhere in this book is the tension more clear than in the story from part 2, "When God showed Brother James of Massa true secrets" (chapter 48). The vision recounted there is one that graphically depicts the tension between the Spirituals, represented by minister-general Brother John of Parma (1247–57), and the Conventuals, represented by Brother Bonaventure, who replaced Brother John in the role of minister-general of the Order. *The Little Flowers* represents the Spirituals' perspective on the life of St. Francis, and when we encounter the themes of evangelical

poverty, faithfulness to the original Rule of Francis, the bad character of Brother Elias, and Francis's likeness to Christ, we are receiving a particular perspective. The Spirituals so identified their founder with Jesus Christ that they were thought to have gone to heretical extremes by others. When in the story "St. Francis keeps Lent on an island in Perugia" (chapter 17) the anonymous Spirituals authors write, "It is believed that Francis only ate the half in reverence to the fasting of our Lord, who for forty days and forty nights took nothing at all; so Francis took half a loaf in order to avoid the sin of pride, that he might not follow too closely the example of Jesus Christ," they are comparing their revered founder to Jesus in ways that understandably made more mainstream Franciscans (as well as a few popes) uncomfortable.

Another theme bubbling beneath the surface of these stories is the demonizing of Brother Elias—the second appointed minister-general of the Friars Minor (in 1221). Elias was an early companion of St. Francis and traveled often with him, and became Francis's vicar before the saint's death. However, after Francis's death Elias ruled the order in controversial ways, marginalizing some of Francis's closest friends (the Spirituals), supervising the building of the inappropriately ornate Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, and then aligning himself with Emperor Frederick II, an action that led to his excommunication. For these reasons, we see a reinterpretation of Elias's earlier days

with his close friend Francis in many of the stories in *The Little Flowers*. Elias becomes almost a devil lurking, waiting to pounce, even though other sources tell us that Francis and Elias were the closest of friends for most of their time together.

Above all, the most persistent theme of the Spirituals was the importance of absolute poverty on the part of a true follower of St. Francis of Assisi. Soon after Francis's death, many of his followers began to interpret the call to poverty to mean something other than, or "less than" owning literally nothing, storing nothing, preparing not at all for what might be needed tomorrow. In this way, the Spirituals felt that they were being faithful not only to Francis but to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. One can see the authors of these tales pounding away on that theme, for example, in the agenda-filled tale "St. Francis interprets a vision of Brother Leo" (chapter 33).

Other Themes

St. Francis's love for poverty comes through loud and clear in *The Little Flowers*. Slightly beneath the surface in this love is his hand-in-hand championing of local workers, his desire to dispose of extraneous "things," a life of full simplicity, and the rights of ordinary people versus the powerful. He was remarkably ahead of his time in these respects. See "St. Francis praises holy poverty,

and lifts Brother Masseo into the air" (chapter 6) for an example of some of this.

There are also moments in these stories where the reader might be surprised by the language used by St. Francis and his friars. Francis was an earthy man just as he was a man of great holiness. He was frank and forthright. And occasionally he was even crass. In "Brother Rufino is severely tempted by the devil" (chapter 9), you'll see that he was just "common" enough to use one scatological word to forcefully get his very important point across!

In addition to occasional earthly language, there are also sometimes frank discussions of sin and temptation that are unique in late medieval religious literature. For instance, the presence of sexual temptation—even what we today would call sex addiction—is unmistakable in the long tale "The remarkable life of young Brother Simon" (chapter 15). One of the features of the early Franciscans—and surely one of the reasons for the enduring qualities of this classic work—was the way they refused to sugarcoat the troubles that face anyone attempting to live an authentic Christian life.

Another theme that comes through in *The Little Flowers* is St. Francis's unique relationship to religious authority. Many scholars believe that this is a side effect of the Spirituals who compiled and edited the stories rather than an accurate and factual telling of how it truly was. For whatever reason, Francis often seems to "go out on his

own" religiously in these stories. Again, see "St. Francis praises holy poverty, and lifts Brother Masseo into the air" (chapter 6) for an example.

A few of the tales are almost genres unto themselves. The most obvious examples of this are "The remarkable life of young Brother Simon" (chapter 15) and "The holy life of Brother John of Penna" (chapter 46), both of which read like short hagiographies, or Lives, of saints. These two narratives match closely the otherworldly, more fantastic, hagiographical style and substance of those saint stories that were collected in Jacobus of Voragine's famous book, *The Golden Legend*. Jacobus did his work in the century before Brother Ugolino pulled together the first Italian edition of *The Little Flowers*. After the Bible and perhaps the *Imitation of Christ*, *The Golden Legend* was the most-read book of the late Middle Ages.

About This Edition

The 53 tales of this edition of *The Little Flowers* form the traditional core text of the work found in any complete edition. Following the 53 stories are brief biographical sketches of the friars and other notables mentioned in the tales.

In these contemporary English renderings, I have been faithful to the spirit of the stories, and I have compared translations among several excellent editions from the last century. I have attempted on rare occasions to

remove the occasional repetition in the original stories. In a few instances I have condensed a paragraph into a sentence or two, but only when it would result in no loss of content, context, or meaning.

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1 Maurice Hewlett, *Earthwork Out of Tuscany—Being Impressions and Translations of Maurice Hewlett with Illustrations by James Kerr Lawson* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1902), 38.

2 Father Cuthbert, OSFC, "The Teaching of the *Fioretti*," *The Catholic World*, 89 (1909): 190.

3 Rosalind B. Brooke, *The Image of St. Francis: Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 246.

4 Alessandro Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love: Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 49.

5 Raphael Brown, ed., *The Little Flowers of St. Francis: First Complete Edition* (New York: Image Books, 1958), 27–8.

6 Michael F. Cusato, *The Early Franciscan Movement (1205–1239): History, Sources, and Hermeneutics* (Spoleto, Italy: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'alto Medioevo, 2009), 212.

7 Hilaire Belloc, *Selected Essays*, ed. J. B. Morton (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 141.

8 For this reason I find it astonishing that neither the *Fioretti* nor its author merit an entry in the 1,290-page, two-volume reference work *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz (New York: Routledge, 2004).

PART I
STORIES OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND HIS EARLY COMPANIONS

CHAPTER I

How St. Francis came to have twelve companions

[FEBRUARY 24, 1209]

THE FIRST THING YOU MUST KNOW IS THAT ST. FRANCIS was beautifully conformed to Christ in all of the acts of his life. Just as Jesus began preaching and chose twelve disciples to turn away from the world and follow him in poverty and virtue, so too did Francis have twelve companions who followed him when he began to found his Order.

Just as one of Christ's disciples would be a disappointment to God and eventually hanged himself by the neck, so did Francis have a companion such as this, Brother John of Capella, who left the Order and, in the end, hanged himself. To the chosen this remains a lesson for the need of humility and fear. For none can be certain of their own righteousness or their ability to persevere to the end.

Just as the apostles of Christ were renowned for their holiness and example, filled with the Holy Spirit, so too were the first companions of Francis. From the original apostles until now, we have not seen such holy and humble men. One of them, Brother Giles,

would be raptured like St. Paul up to the third heaven.* Another, Brother Philip, would be touched on the lips by an angel with a coal of fire, just as the Prophet Isaiah once was.† Another, Brother Sylvester, spoke with God like a friend, as Moses himself had done. Yet another, by the pure clarity of his mind, soared like an eagle to the light of divine wisdom, just like John the Evangelist. That was Brother Bernard, the most humble of men and yet the most profound of explicators of the meaning of Holy Scripture. And yet one more—Brother Rufino, nobleman of Assisi—was canonized in heaven while he still lived in this world. In these ways, the first companions were each marked with a singular holiness. About these marks, there is much more to tell.

[#1 of 53]

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* "The third heaven" is an uncommon term, but is an allusion to 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 where Paul speaks of himself and his experience on the road to Damascus: "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person . . . was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (cf. Acts 9:1–9, 22:6–11). The "first" heaven was the atmosphere of earth; the "second" heaven was where the sun, moon, and stars do their work; and the "third" was regarded as the abode of God.

† "Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out'" (Isa. 6:6–7).

CHAPTER 2

The conversion of the first, Brother Bernard

[ca. APRIL 1, 1209–APRIL 16, 1209]

THE FIRST COMPANION TO JOIN ST. FRANCIS WAS Brother Bernard of Assisi. His conversion happened like this.

It was in the days when Francis was still wearing his secular clothing, even though he had begun to renounce the things of the world. He had been going around Assisi looking mortified and unkempt, wearing his penance in his appearance in such a way that people thought he had become a fool. He was mocked and laughed at, and pelted with stones and mud by both those who knew him and those who did not. But Francis endured these things with patience and joy, as if he did not hear the taunts at all and had no means of responding to them.

The noble Bernard of Assisi noticed all of this. For two years, he watched Francis as he was scorned by the townspeople—the same people who respected Bernard as one of the wisest and wealthiest men around. Despite the torment, Francis always seemed patient and serene. Bernard pondered these things in his heart. He said to himself, *This man must have grace that comes from God alone*.

But Bernard decided to put the younger man's saintliness to a test. He asked Francis to join him one night for dinner, and they ate together at Bernard's table.

Then, Bernard invited Francis simply to spend the night; he had prepared a room for Francis in his home, in fact, in his very own chamber. This was a part of the test as well.

In that room a lamp burned low all night long. Francis entered the chamber first, and quickly flung himself into bed, pretending that he was eager to drop off to sleep. Then, Bernard came into the chamber prepared for bed, and he too lay down. Before long, Bernard was pretending to be asleep, even going so far as to let out loud sounds of snoring. Hearing such noises coming from the other end of the chamber, Francis got out of his bed and threw himself to the floor to pray.

Francis turned his face toward heaven and raised his hands fervently to God. "My God, my God!" he cried out.

He began to weep, and he prayed in this way all night long until the morning light.

Why did Francis pray these words, "My God, my God!"? Like a prophet, he could see the great things that God would accomplish through him and through the movement that he would begin—and Francis was considering his inadequacy to do what needed to be done. This was his call to God for help.

Bernard of Assisi saw all of this from the other end of the chamber. The words and spirit of Francis touched

him deeply, and in that moment, Bernard felt inspired to change his own life also. By the light of morning, Bernard said, "Friar Francis, I have decided to follow you in your work, to live with you your life, and to leave behind the things of this world."

Francis was elated. He said, "Lord Bernard, what you propose doing is of such importance, and will be so difficult, that I think we should seek together from our Lord Christ how we are to do it. Let's go together to the house of the bishop and hear Mass, and remain in prayer until the time of Tierce, asking God to show us his will three times in the reading of the missal."* And so they went together to the bishop's house and they heard Mass, and they stayed at prayer until the hour of Tierce, and then they asked the priest to take up the missal three times for them.

The priest made the sign of the cross over the book, and opening it the first time he read, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21). Then the priest opened the book for a second time. There occurred these words: "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money" (Lk. 9:3). And last, the third opening of

* Tierce is one of the appointed canonical "hours" of monastic daily prayer, usually at 9 AM. A missal was the book a priest used for celebrating the Mass. In the thirteenth century, this would have included much of the text of the New Testament (what is now usually included in a separate book called a Lectionary).

the book revealed: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34).

When they had heard all of these words, Francis said to Bernard, "This is the wisdom that Jesus Christ has given to us. You should go and do exactly what you have heard. And thanks to God for showing us the true way of life!"

Bernard left immediately to gather all of his possessions. He owned many things, and some he distributed to the poor. Some he sold. And with the money that he earned, he gave liberally to widows and orphans, prisoners and pilgrims. In all of this, Francis was by his side.

While they were distributing money to the poor in Assisi, a man named Sylvester saw and said to Francis: "You never paid me for all of those stones that I gave you to repair churches." Francis was amazed at the man's greed at such a moment as this. He thrust his hand into Bernard's pocket, which was filled with money, and then thrust a handful of money into Sylvester's pocket, saying, "If you ask for more, I will give that, too." Sylvester turned and went home.

Later than evening, Sylvester thought about what he had done, and reproached himself. For three nights, then, he had a dream from God. He saw a cross of gold coming from the mouth of Francis; its arms reached from east to west, and the top of the cross went all the way to heaven. Sylvester knew that the Lord was touching him,

and for God's glory he too gave away all that he had to the poor and became a Friar Minor. In some of the stories to come, you will see how Sylvester became a holy man and spoke as an intimate friend with God.

In the same way, Bernard received much grace from God once he'd given everything away. He became a friar with the gift of contemplation. Francis used to say that Brother Bernard should be held in reverence by the others because he was the first to live according to the poverty of the Gospel, holding back nothing, offering himself naked into the arms of the Crucified, glory be to him forever and ever. Amen.

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