

First and Second Lives of Saint Francis Thomas of Celano – Translated by David Burr

Francesco Bernardone was born in Assisi in 1181. His father Pietro was a successful merchant and hoped his son would succeed him in that role. Things turned out differently.

Francis seems to have been a winsome and somewhat feckless young man who threw himself into the social life of his city as enthusiastically as he engaged in its military projects. While taking part in the latter he was captured by the Perugians in 1202 and spent a year in prison. Then, around the age of twenty-three, he underwent a gradual conversion which finally led him to reject his former life and his father's wealth.

*Of the various sources dealing with Francis' life, the earliest biography is the *First Life of Saint Francis* written by Thomas of Celano. It was commissioned by pope Gregory IX and was completed by 1230, just four years after Francis' death and two years after his canonization. Later, in 1244, the minister general of the Franciscan order asked all the brothers to submit any additional information about Francis they might have. Using this material, Celano produced another work which, although usually called his *Second Life of Saint Francis*. is really more of a supplement to the first. It was completed by the middle of 1247.*

Celano's work has the advantage of having been written by an early member of the Franciscan order who could rely on personal experience and the testimony of Francis' close companions. Its major disadvantage is that it is the official biography of a saint. Thus much of what it says, although not necessarily false, is probably something less than the whole truth.

We join Celano at a critical point in Francis' life. The year is 1205. Since returning the previous year from an abortive attempt to win military glory in southern Italy, Francis has been aware that something important is going on within him.

Now perfectly changed in heart and soon to be changed in body, Francis was strolling one day near the old church of St. Damian, which was nearly destroyed and abandoned by all. The spirit led him to enter the church and pray. Devoutly lying prostrate before the crucifix, stirred by unusual visitations, he found he was different than when he had entered.

While he was in this affected state, something absolutely unheard-of occurred. The crucifix moved its lips and began to speak. "Francis," it said, calling him by name, "go and repair my house, which, as you see, is completely destroyed." Francis was stupefied and nearly deranged by this speech. He prepared to obey, surrendering himself completely to the project. But since he considered the change in him to be beyond description, it is best for us to be silent about what

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he himself could not describe. From then on compassion for the crucified one was imprinted in his holy soul and, one may devoutly suspect, the stigmata of the holy passion were deeply imprinted in his heart, though not yet in his flesh.

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Shortly thereafter, Francis took the fateful step that led to a break with his father.

Behold, the blessed servant of the most high was so disposed and strengthened by the holy spirit that the time had come for him to follow the blessed impulse of his soul, progressing to higher things and trampling worldly interests underfoot. It was unwise to delay any longer, for a deadly illness was spreading everywhere. It seized the joints and, if the physician delayed even for a bit, it shut off the vital spirit and snatched away life.

Francis rose, fortifying himself with the sign of the cross, and when his horse was ready he mounted. Taking some fine cloth with him, he rode to the city of Foligno. There, being a successful merchant, he sold all his cloth as usual and even left behind the horse he was riding, having received a good price for it. Then, having left all his baggage behind. He started back, wondering as he traveled what he should do with the money.

Soon, converted to God's work in a marvelous way, he felt it would be burdensome to carry the money for even an hour and, treating it as if it were sand, he decided to get rid of it as fast as possible. As he approached the city of Assisi, he passed the church built in honor of St. Damian long ago, but now about to collapse with age.

When the new soldier of Christ arrived at the church, he was stirred with pity for its condition and entered with fear and reverence. Finding a poor priest inside, Francis kissed his sacred hands and offered him the money he was carrying, telling the priest what he intended to do. The priest was stunned. Astonished by such an incredibly sudden conversion, he refused to believe what he heard. Since he thought he was being deceived, he refused to keep the money that had been offered him. He had seen Francis just the other day, so to speak, living riotously among his relations and acquaintances, acting even more stupidly than the rest.

Francis, stubbornly insistent, tried to prove he was sincere. He begged the priest to let him stay there for the sake of the lord. Finally the priest agreed that he could stay but, fearing Francis' parents, he would not accept the money. Francis, genuinely contemptuous of money, threw it on a windowsill, treating it as if it were dust. He wanted to possess wisdom, which is better than gold, and prudence, which is more precious than silver.

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Francis' father reacted predictably. He locked his son up at home, but Francis' mother let him out while Pietro was away on a business trip. Finally, despairing of private solutions, early in 1206 Pietro brought his son before the bishop of Assisi. Francis again proved equal to the occasion.

When he had been led before the bishop, Francis neither delayed nor explained himself, but simply stripped off his clothes and threw them aside, giving them back to his father. He did not even keep his trousers, but stood there in front of everyone completely naked. The bishop, sensing his intention and admiring his constancy, rose and wrapped his arms around Francis, covering him with his own robe. He saw clearly that Francis was divinely inspired and that his action contained a mystery. Thus he became Francis' helper, cherishing and comforting him.

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Celano now portrays Francis traveling around Umbria, living among lepers, and rebuilding the church of St. Damian. The chronology is vague, but a general life-style is suggested. Francis' sense of his own vocation was still in the process of formation, however.

Meanwhile this holy man, having changed his attire and repaired the aforesaid church, went to another place near Assisi and began to rebuild a certain dilapidated and nearly ruined church, ceasing only when the task was finished. Then he went to still another place called the Portiuncula, the site of a church dedicated to the blessed virgin, the mother of God. This church, built long ago, was now deserted and cared for by no one. When the holy man of God saw how destroyed the church was, he was moved with pity and began to spend a great deal of time there, for he burned with devotion toward the mother of all good. It was in the third year of his conversion that he began to repair this church. At that time he wore a sort of hermit's attire, a leather belt around his waist and a staff in his hands, and he went about wearing shoes.

One day, however, when the gospel story of Christ sending his disciples to preach was read in the church, the holy man of God was present and more or less understood the words of the gospel. After mass he humbly asked the priest to explain the gospel to him. He heard that Christ's disciples were supposed to possess neither gold, nor silver, nor money; were to have neither bread nor staff; were to have neither shoes nor two tunics; but were to preach the kingdom of God and penance. When the priest had finished, Francis, rejoicing in the spirit of God, said, "This is what I want! This is what I'm looking for! This is what I want to do from the bottom of my heart!" Thus the holy father, overflowing with joy, hurried to fulfill those healing words, nor did he suffer any delay in carrying out

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what he had heard. He took off his shoes, tossed away his staff, was satisfied with a single tunic, and exchanged his leather belt for a cord. He made himself a tunic that looked like the cross so that he could beat off the temptations of the devil. It was rough in order to crucify the vices and sins of the flesh. It was poor and mean so that the world would not covet it. With the greatest diligence and reverence he tried to do everything else that he had heard, for he was not a deaf hearer of the gospel but, laudably committing all that he had heard to memory, he diligently attempted to fulfill them to the letter.

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Gradually a small group began to form around Francis. In 1209, when it numbered twelve including Francis, the Franciscan order was born.

Seeing that the Lord God daily increased their number, Francis wrote simply and in a few words a form of life and rule for himself and his brothers both present and to come. It mainly used the words of the gospel, for the perfection of which alone he yearned. Nevertheless, he did insert a few other things necessary for the pursuit of a holy life.

He came to Rome with all his brothers, hoping that Pope Innocent III would confirm what he had written. At that time the venerable bishop of Assisi, Guido, who honored Francis and the brothers and prized them with a special love, also happened to be in Rome. When he saw Francis and his brothers there and did not know the cause, he was very upset, since he feared they were planning to desert their native city, in which God was now doing great things through his servants. He was pleased to have such men in his diocese and relied greatly on their life and manners. Having heard the cause of their visit and understood their plan, he was relieved and promised to give them advice and aid.

Saint Francis also went to the bishop of Sabina, John of Saint Paul, one of the great members of the Roman court who seemed to despise earthly things and love heavenly ones. Receiving Francis with kindness and love, the bishop praised him highly for his request and intention.

Since he was a prudent and discreet man, the bishop began to question Francis about many things and tried to convince him that he should try the life of a monk or hermit. Saint Francis humbly refused his advice as well as he could, not because he despised what the bishop suggested but because, impelled by a higher desire, he devoutly wished for something else. The lord bishop marveled at his fervor and, fearing that he might eventually slip back from such high intentions, tried to show him a path that would be easier to follow. Finally, won over by Francis' constancy, the bishop agreed to his petition and attempted to further his plan before the pope.

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At that time the church was led by Innocent III, who was famous, very learned, gifted in speech, and burning with zeal for what ever would further the cause of the Christian faith. When he had discovered what these men of God wanted and thought the matter over, he assented to their request and did what had to be done. Exhorting and admonishing them about many things, he blessed Saint Francis and his brothers, saying to them, "Go with the Lord, brothers, and preach penance to all as the Lord will inspire you. Then, when the Lord increases you in number and in grace, return joyously to me. At that time I will concede more to you and commit greater things to you more confidently."

Like other holy men of the time, Francis and his followers practiced mortification of the flesh, not because the body was considered evil – It, too, was created by God - but because in a fallen world it could distract one from higher pursuits. In Francis' case, such mortification was related not only to the cultivation of spiritual experience, or what was known as the contemplative life, but also to the Franciscan emphasis on humility and the equally Franciscan desire to imitate Christ.

The virtue of patience so enfolded them that they sought to be where they could suffer bodily persecution rather than where, their sanctity being known and praised, they might be exalted by the world. Many times when they were insulted, ridiculed, stripped naked, beaten, bound or imprisoned, they trusted in no one's patronage but rather bore all so manfully that only praise and thanksgiving echoed in their mouths. Scarcely or never did they cease their prayers and praise of God. Instead, continually discussing what they had done, they thanked God for what they had done well and shed tears over what they had neglected to do or done carelessly. They thought themselves abandoned by God if in their worship they did not find themselves constantly visited by their accustomed fervor. When they wanted to throw themselves into prayer, they developed certain techniques to keep from being snatched off by sleep. Some held themselves up by suspended ropes in order to make sure their worship would not be disturbed by sleep creeping up on them. Others encased their bodies in iron instruments. Still others encased themselves in wooden girdles. If, as usually occurs, their sobriety was disturbed by abundance of food or drink, or if they exceeded the limits of necessity by even a little because they were tired from a journey, they harshly tormented themselves by abstinence for many days. They tried to repress the promptings of the flesh by such great mortification that they did not hesitate to strip naked in the coldest ice or inundate their bodies with a flow of blood by piercing themselves all over with thorns.

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Francis would have liked to suffer martyrdom at the hand of the Moslems. He attempted a voyage to Morocco, but became ill in Spain and had to turn back. In

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1219 he went to Syria where a crusade was in progress, and enjoyed the following experience, according to Celano.

In the thirteenth year of his conversion, Francis proceeded to Syria, for great and deadly battles between Christians and pagans were going on there every day. Francis, who was traveling with a companion, was not afraid to present himself before the sultan of the Saracens. But who can say with what constancy of mind he stood before him, with what strength of spirit he spoke, with what eloquence and assurance he answered those who insulted the Christian law? Before he was brought before the sultan he was captured by soldiers, insulted, and beaten with a lash; yet he was not afraid, was not terrified by the threats of torture, and did not grow pale when threatened with death. And though he was reproached by many who were opposed in mind and hostile in spirit, he was very honorably received by the sultan. Trying to bend Francis' spirit toward the wealth of this world, he honored him as much as he could and gave him many presents; yet when he saw that Francis despised such things as if they were dung, he was filled with the greatest admiration and regarded Francis as different from all others. He was moved by Francis' words and listened to him willingly. In all these things the Lord did not fulfill Francis' desire for martyrdom, since he was reserving for him the prerogative of a singular grace.

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Francis' striking rapport with animals is certainly the best-known and perhaps the most attractive aspect of his legend. It has encouraged a recent pope to proclaim him patron saint of the ecological movement. Here are some examples.

Meanwhile, at a time when many were joining the brothers, most blessed father Francis was passing through the valley of Spoleto. He came to a certain place near Bevagna, in which a great many birds of various types had congregated, including doves, crows and some others commonly called daws. When he saw them Francis, that most blessed servant of God, being a man of great fervor and very sympathetic toward the lower, irrational creatures, quickly left his companions on the road and ran over to them. When he got there, he saw that they were waiting expectantly and saluted them. Surprised that the birds had not flown away as they normally do, he was filled with joy and humbly begged them to listen to the word of God. Among the things he told them, he said the following: "My brothers the birds, you should love your creator deeply and praise him always. He has given you feathers to wear, wings to fly with, and what ever else you need. He has made you noble among his creatures and given you a dwelling in the pure air. You neither sow nor reap, yet he nevertheless protects and governs you without any anxiety on your part."

Both Francis and his companions agree in reporting that, when he had spoken thus, the birds exulted marvelously in their own fashion, stretching their necks,

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extending their wings, opening their mouths, and gazing at him. Francis walked into their midst, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic. Finally he blessed them and, making the sign of the cross, gave them permission to fly off to some other place.

Rejoicing, the blessed father went off with his companions, giving thanks to God whom all creatures worship. Since he had now been made simple by grace and not by nature, he began to accuse himself of negligence for not having preached to the birds before, since they listened to the word of God with such reverence. And thus it came about that, from that day on, he exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and even nonexistent creatures to praise and love the creator, for every day, when the name of the savior was announced, he himself saw their obedience.

One day he came to a town called Alviano to preach the word of God. Ascending to where he could be seen by all, he asked for silence. The people became quiet and waited reverently, but a flock of swallows building nests in that place continued to chatter away, making it impossible for the people to hear. Francis spoke to them, "My sisters the swallows, it's my turn to speak now, because you've already said enough. Listen to the word of God. Stay still and be quiet until it 's over." To the people's amazement, the little birds immediately stopped chattering and did not move until Francis had finished preaching. Those who witnessed this sign were filled with wonder and said, "truly this man is holy and a friend of the Most High." Praising and blessing God, they devoutly hurried at least to touch his clothing. And it is marvelous how those irrational creatures recognized his affection for them and sensed his love.

Once, when he was staying in the town of Greccio, a hare was caught in a trap and brought live to Francis by a brother. Seeing the hare, the blessed man was moved to pity and said, "Brother hare, come here. Why did you let yourself be fooled in this way?" As soon as the hare was released by the brother, he dashed over to Francis and, without being forced to do so, set tied into his lap as the safest place available. When he had rested there a while, the holy father, stroking him with maternal affection, let him go so that he could return to the wild. Each time he was placed on the ground, the hare ran back to Francis' lap. Finally Francis asked that the brothers carry him to a nearby forest. Something similar occurred with a rabbit, a very undomesticated creature, on an island in the lake of Perugia.

Francis was moved by similar pity toward fish. When they had been caught and he had the chance, he threw them back into the water warning them to be careful not to get caught again. Once, as he was sitting in a boat near a harbor on the lake of Rieti, a certain fisherman caught a big fish commonly called a tench and brought it to Francis. He received it joyfully and kindly, took to calling it "brother," and, having placed it in the water next to his boat, began to bless the name of the

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Lord. For some time, while Francis tended to his prayer, the fish played in the water near the boat, nor did he leave the area until the holy man of God, his prayer completed, gave him permission to go. For glorious father Francis, walking the path of obedience and donning perfectly the yoke of obedience, received from God the great honor of having creatures obey him. For even water was turned into wine for him when he was seriously ill at the hermitage of Saint Urban. When he tasted it he became well so quickly that all believed it to be a miracle, as indeed it was. And he whom creatures obey in this way, at whose nod the elements change themselves to other uses, is certainly a holy man.

During the time when, as we have seen, the venerable father Francis preached to the birds, he went about through cities and towns scattering the seeds of his blessing everywhere. Coming to the city of Ascoli, he preached the word of God fervently as usual. Through a change wrought by the right hand of the Most high, the people were filled with so much love and devotion that they trampled one another hurrying to see and hear him. And thirty men, clerics and laymen, received the habit at that time. So great was the faith of men and women, and so great was their devotion to the holy man of God, that they considered fortunate anyone who could at least touch his clothes. When he entered a city, the clergy rejoiced, the bells rang, men exulted, women cheered, children applauded, and often, taking branches from the trees, they went to meet him singing. Heretical depravity was confounded, the faith of the church was extolled, and while the faithful engaged in jubilation heretics went into hiding. For so many signs of sanctity appeared in him that no one dared to oppose his words. Indeed, the attention of the crowd was directed at him alone. He felt that the faith of the Holy Roman Church should be observed, honored and imitated above all things, since in it alone lies the salvation of those who are to be saved. He felt great affection for priests and every ecclesiastical order.

The people offered him bread to bless, stored it away for a long time, then were cured of various illnesses when they ate it. In their overwhelming faith they often cut off parts of his clothes, so much that he was often left nearly naked. And what is even more marvelous, if the holy father touched some object, it in turn became the means by which health was restored to others.

Thus a certain woman from a little town near Arezzo was pregnant, and when it was time for her to deliver she remained in labor for several days in incredible pain, hanging between life and death. Her neighbors and family heard that Saint Francis was to pass that way as he journeyed to a certain hermitage. They waited, but he went by another route.

He had gone on horseback because he was ill. When he arrived at his destination, he entrusted the horse to a brother named Peter, who was to bring it back to the man who had loaned it. On his way, Peter passed through the village where the woman lay suffering. When the men of the village saw him, they

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hurried up to him thinking he was Francis, but they soon learned the truth and were deeply disappointed.

Finally they began to ask one another if same thing might be found which Francis had touched with his hand. After searching for a long time, they came upon the reigns of the bridle, which he had held while riding. Removing the bridle from the horse's mouth, they placed the reigns on the woman. Immediately the danger passed. She bore the child safely and joyfully.

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His highest intention, greatest desire, and supreme purpose was to observe the holy gospel in and through all things. He wanted to follow the doctrine and walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to do so perfectly, with all vigilance, all zeal, complete desire of the mind, complete fervor of the heart. He remembered Christ's words through constant meditation and recalled his actions through wise consideration. The humility of the incarnation and the love of the passion so occupied his memory that he scarcely wished to think of anything else. Hence what he did in the third year before the day of his glorious death, in the town called Greccio, on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ, should be reverently remembered.

There was in that place a certain man named John, of good reputation and even better life, whom the blessed Francis particularly loved. Noble and honorable in his own land, he had trodden on nobility of the flesh and pursued that of the mind. Around fifteen days before the birthday of Christ Francis sent for this man, as he often did, and said to him, "If you wish to celebrate the approaching feast of the Lord at Greccio, hurry and do what I tell you. I want to do something that will recall the memory of that child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by." Upon hearing this, the good and faithful man hurried to prepare all that the holy man had requested.

The day of joy drew near, the time of exultation approached. The brothers were called from their various places. With glad hearts, the men and women of that place prepared, according to their means, candles and torches to light up that night which has illuminated all the days and years with its glittering star. Finally the holy man of God arrived and, finding everything prepared, saw it and rejoiced.

The manger is ready, hay is brought, the ox and ass are led in. Simplicity is honored there, poverty is exalted, humility is commended and a new Bethlehem, as it were, is made from Greccio. Night is illuminated like the day, delighting men and beasts. The people come and joyfully celebrate the new mystery. The forest resounds with voices and the rocks respond to their rejoicing. The brothers sing,

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discharging their debt of praise to the Lord, and the whole night echoes with jubilation. The holy man of God stands before the manger full of sighs, consumed by devotion and filled with a marvelous joy. The solemnities of the mass are performed over the manger and the priest experiences a new consolation.

The holy man of God wears a deacon's vestments, for he was indeed a deacon, and he sings the holy gospel with a sonorous voice. And his voice, a sweet voice, a vehement voice, a clear voice, a sonorous voice, invites all to the highest rewards. Then he preaches mellifluously to the people standing about, telling them about the birth of the poor king and the little city of Bethlehem. Often, too, when he wished to mention Jesus Christ, burning with love he called him "the child of Bethlehem," and speaking the word "Bethlehem" or "Jesus," he licked his lips with his tongue, seeming to taste the sweetness of these words.

The gifts of the Almighty are multiplied here and a marvelous vision is seen by a certain virtuous man. For he saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger, and he saw the holy man of God approach and arouse the child as if from a deep sleep. Nor was this an unfitting vision, for in the hearts of many the child Jesus really had been forgotten, but now, by his grace and through his servant Francis, he had been brought back to life and impressed here by loving recollection. Finally the celebration ended and each returned joyfully home.

The hay placed in the manger was kept so that the Lord, multiplying his holy mercy, might bring health to the beasts of burden and other animals. And indeed it happened that many animals throughout the surrounding area were cured of their illnesses by eating this hay. Moreover, women undergoing a long and difficult labor gave birth safely when some of this hay was placed upon them. And a large number of people, male and female alike, with various illnesses, all received the health they desired there. At last a temple of the Lord was consecrated where the manger stood, and over the manger an altar was constructed and a church dedicated in honor of the blessed father Francis, so that, where animals once had eaten hay, henceforth men could gain health in soul and body by eating the flesh of the Lamb without spot or blemish, Jesus Christ our Lord, who through great and indescribable love gave himself to us, living and reigning with the Father and Holy Spirit, God eternally glorious forever and ever, Amen. Alleluia! Alleluia!

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Two years before Francis gave his soul back to heaven, while he was staying in a hermitage called "Alverna" after the place where it was located, he saw in a vision from God a man with six wings like a seraph, standing above him with hands extended and feet together, affixed to a cross. Two wings were raised over his head, two were extended in flight, and two hid his entire body.

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When the blessed servant of God saw these things he was filled with wonder, but he did not know what the vision meant. He rejoiced greatly in the benign and gracious expression with which he saw himself regarded by the seraph, whose beauty was indescribable; yet he was alarmed by the fact that the seraph was affixed to the cross and was suffering terribly. Thus Francis rose, one might say, sad and happy, joy and grief alternating in him. He wondered anxiously what this vision could mean, and his soul was uneasy as it searched for understanding. And as his understanding sought in vain for an explanation and his heart was filled with perplexity at the great novelty of this vision, the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet, just as he had seen them slightly earlier in the crucified man above him.

His hands and feet seemed to be pierced by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing in the palms of his hands and on the upper sides of his feet, the points appearing on the other side. The marks were round on the palm of each hand but elongated on the other side, and small pieces of flesh jutting out from the rest took on the appearance of the nail-ends, bent and driven back. In the same way the marks of nails were impressed on his feet and projected beyond the rest of the flesh. Moreover, his right side had a large wound as if it had been pierced with a spear, and it often bled so that his tunic and trousers were soaked with his sacred blood.

Alas, how few were worthy of viewing the wound in the side of this crucified servant of the crucified Lord! How fortunate was Elias, who was worthy of seeing it while the holy man lived, but no less fortunate was Rufinus, who touched the wound with his own hands. For once, when the aforesaid brother Rufinus put his hand on the holy man's chest in order to rub him, his hand fell to his right side, as often occurs, and he happened to touch that precious wound. The holy man of God suffered great anguish from that touch and, pushing the hand away, he cried out to the Lord to forgive him. He carefully hid the wound from outsiders and cautiously concealed it from those near him, so that even his most devoted followers and those who were constantly at his side knew nothing of it for a long time. And although the servant and friend of the most high saw himself adorned with many costly pearls as if with precious gems, and marvelously decked out beyond the glory and honor of other men, he did not become vain or seek to please anyone through desire for personal glory, but, lest human favor should steal away the grace given to him, he attempted to hide it in every way possible.

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During this period Francis' body began to be beset by more serious illnesses than previously. He suffered frequent illnesses because for many years he had castigated his body perfectly, reducing it to servitude. For during the preceding eighteen years his flesh had scarcely or never found rest, but traveled constantly

throughout various wide areas so that the prompt, devout and fervent spirit within him could scatter God's word everywhere.

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