

From the Testament to the Testaments of St. Francis

RAOUL MANSELLI

“Dal testamento ai testamenti di san Francesco”

Collectanea Franciscana 46 (1976):121-29

Translated by Patrick Colbourne, O.F.M.Cap.

Everyone knows what the Testament of St. Francis is. Even further, it is plainly defined by the saint himself when he says with extreme clarity: “Let the friars not say: ‘This is another Rule’, because this is a remembrance, admonition, exhortation, and my testament, which I, Brother Francis, your little one, make for you my beloved brothers in order that you may observe the Rule which we have promised to the Lord in a better and Catholic manner.”¹ He states it this way because the Testament is a very special fact in his life, insofar as it boasts no juridical implications (“It is not another Rule”). Yet to Francis and his way of thinking it involves a binding force which turns out to be of no less importance or significance (“It is a remembrance, admonition, exhortation”). It fulfills the task of preserving the image of Francis among the friars as a living reality. It is the memento which Francis leaves of himself as his testament.

This memento was not meant to be just a sentimental fancy. It was meant to stay alive among the brothers as an admonition, with respect to the way Francis saw himself, his conversion, his relationship with the church, the revelation which he received “to live according to the manner of the holy Gospel.” It was meant to be a permanent reality which was a challenge in concrete daily life. It is not by chance that this admonition is an exhortation at the same time. There are only a few words, but they have weight which appears worthy of the closest attention, especially when we remember that Francis was in the last years of his life, when he made no secret of the fact that his greatest worry was seeing the order slip towards something which had lost its original substance. Indeed, Francis wanted it to remain a brotherhood, to be poor among the poor, exposed to risk and under the dominion of others, not seeking privileges from the Roman Church, even if that were to save its own life or to further the scope of the most sacred preaching.

However, we do not want to speak about the Testament as such. Famous works on this topic exist already. From the Bull *Quo elongati* by Gregory IX down to our own times, endless discussions have arisen. To make even a quick summary of them here would be presumptuous and not serve our purpose.

The reason why we have taken up the Testament of St. Francis again and have been forced to go through it very carefully is that when we restudied the Assisi Collection, and in particular those passages which began "We who were with him," on three occasions, two of which having the same textual quotations, we found precise reference to decisions which Francis caused to be written down "in his Testament."²

The first of the passages in question appears in chapter 56 of that work. The legend tells how Francis succeeded in obtaining the little church of the Portiuncula from the Benedictine monks of Subasio, and how he regarded it most dearly to the end of his life. It is here that we find the passage which interests us: "We who lived with blessed Francis bear witness that he said with great insistence: 'Of all the churches in the world that the Blessed Virgin loves, she bears the greatest love for this one'. He spoke in this way because of the numerous prerogatives given by God to this friary and because these had been revealed to him in that very place. That is why during all his life he bore a great devotion to and a great respect for the place. And so that the memory of it would remain engraved in the hearts of the brothers, he wished, as his death was drawing near, to have it written down in his Testament that the brothers should do likewise."³

Now if we open the Testament, which we have just mentioned and which is known to us with complete certainty in all its tiny variants, thanks to the editions of Kajetan Esser, we find that the Portiuncula is not mentioned anywhere, not even in the slightest references.

Thus the problem arises as to what this Testament can be and what it means. The clarification seems to come from what follows in the legend where we read: "In fact when he was near death, he said before the minister general and the other brothers: 'I wish to make arrangements regarding the friary of the Portiuncula and leave them as a testament to my brothers so that this place will always be treated by them with great reverence and devotion.'⁴ In our opinion, the passage which follows this is an interpolation.⁵ We give more details on this in a work which is being prepared. Following this, the saint takes up the thread again, giving precise instructions with regard to how the Portiuncula is to be "appointed" so as to remain the typical friary, not just for a time but forever. He prescribes that it must always be "under the direct authority of the minister general, so that he may watch over it with great care and especially that he may gather a good and holy family of religious there."⁶ He does not limit himself to general considerations but goes into precise and unmistakable detail, which is a certain indication of clear vision and purpose which are completely intentional: "Let the clerics chosen be among the holiest and most upright, and also from among those who in the whole order know best how to sing the Divine Office, so that not only the brothers but also the other faithful may listen to them gladly and with much devotion. And

let holy, discreet, and virtuous brothers and lay people be chosen to serve them."⁷ In addition to this, there are instructions for a strict enclosure and for silence.⁸

Thus it is evident here that there is a wish to make the Portiuncula the model friary and that it remain such forever.⁹ The saint says more than once: "When one of the brothers of this friary dies, the minister general will call another holy brother to replace the deceased, in whatever friary he may be found."¹⁰ In other words, we are dealing with a reality which is intended, we repeat, not only for the Portiuncula but even more for the entire order, as is clearly indicated by the statement: "Because, if the brothers and the friaries where they reside stray some day from the purity of life and holiness that are befitting, I wish that at least this community be a beautiful mirror of the order, a candelabra before the throne of God and the Blessed Virgin. May the Lord, thanks to it, have mercy on the sins and failings of the brothers. May God always guard and protect our order and its little nursery!"¹¹

If we examine the whole passage and go over the instructions of St. Francis point by point, we must say that this is the Testament which related to the Portiuncula. If we stay alert, we find here the remembrance, the admonitions and the exhortation described in the other Testament which is published and well known. This brings us to two considerations. One relates to the history of the order. The other concerns the texts to which the term Testament is applied. As we shall see later, we must admit the existence of at least one other Testament.

But let us come to the point which is one of the most interest to us, namely, the point which relates to the significance of the Portiuncula and its importance in the history of the order. Some years ago when speaking of the blessing which St. Francis imparted when he was dying, I took the opportunity to point out that in his profound knowledge of nature and human weakness, the saint did not want to limit himself to considering his order as a congregation like others, governed by a series of regulations called the Rule, which, because of his instinctive reservations regarding legalism and law, he saw as something dead, without drive or religious and spiritual spontaneity.¹² It is not by chance that he puts the Testament alongside the Rule as a witness to his life, his way of acting – not of his law but of his ideal, through which he left the friars such an autobiographical and authentic signpost that it could not be falsified by any point of view taken in a narrative. Now, at the moment of his death, when he blessed Bernard of Quintavalle, his first follower, as we shall see, and is widely accepted by certain scholars, among whom I am pleased to note Hurburt Grundmann, Francis wished to leave a living example of his life. Bernard's biography demonstrates to us that he took his position seriously, to the point of not hesitating to state it before the minister general, to Brother

Elias, who did not enjoy recognizing it. Thus we gather from the final directives of St. Francis that he experienced worry, which was quite logical.

He had witnessed too many orders that had distanced themselves from their original impulse and primitive fervor, and had settled into the peaceful journey of daily life. The most recent of these was the Cistercians. Francis wanted to save his order from this process of returning to what was everyday by placing a series of weighty and considered measures alongside the normative regulations to preserve exemplary ideals, individuality and concreteness. The ideal life was conveyed in the Testament which, although it lacked juridical value, was meant to be a daily example, as is clear from the fact that he mentions that the friars "should always have this writing with them together with the Rule."¹³ And in all Chapters which they hold, when they read the Rule, let them also read these words."¹⁴ Thus the Testament has the same value as an example as did the blessing of Bernard, the first disciple, within the order.

What we have said here is confirmed and sealed in a certain sense beyond the possibility of doubt by what the Assisi Collection says about the Portiuncula.¹⁵ The saint makes a gift of the Portiuncula and leaves it to the friars as the exemplar of a friary – a model one from which the entire order must draw inspiration, "a candelabra before the throne of God and the Blessed Virgin, through which the Lord will pardon the defects and faults of the friars and always preserve and protect the order and its little nursery." We note here the vibrating of the deepest feeling of the saint regarding the church which was not his but rather was confided to his small but exemplary community, so that he wanted it to last in order that his ideal, his way of life, his way of piety would not die with him.

We see here in the whole series of events which we have pointed out, the drama of Francis confronted by the expansion of the order, which he had certainly anticipated, but concerning which he also saw the limits and dangers. He thought of applying a remedy by calling upon the strength of the spirit, in which alone he believed, to set an example which was a permanent fact, a reality, which would continually renew itself in a fresh and vital disposition of soul.

Thus the Portiuncula is the object of the second Testament of Francis. It was developed to prevent and eliminate as far as possible whatever threatened the truth and sanctity of the Friars Minor.

Having said this, it must also be stated – this is our second consideration – that the Assisi Collection mentions a Testament in two other chapters. In chapter 57, where a desire for very poor dwellings is expressed, a passage belonging to the group which contains the phrase "We who were with him" states: "As death approached, he insisted that it be written in his Testament that all the cells and houses of the brothers were to be constructed solely of

earth and wood in order better to safeguard poverty and humility."¹⁶ In chapter 106, almost the same words return: "Thus he had it written in his Testament that the houses of the friars be made of earth and wood as a sign of holy poverty and humility and that the churches which were built for the friars should be poor."¹⁷

A comparison of these two passages shows that there was a Testament when these prescriptions were set down, which are totally in accord with the ideals of Francis. However, the problem is that this passage is not contained in the Testament which is known to us. Therefore, we must conclude that there was another Testament, in which, as far as we may presume, instructions or at least detailed counsels were given as to what the dwellings of the friars should be. There is no doubt that such instructions would have contained these words of St. Francis, since they are in complete agreement with the deliberate continual wishes of the saint, which is evident from a number of testimonies, among which we limit ourselves to mentioning only the one contained in the so-called Little Manuscript, in which Francis rejects the house which the citizens of Assisi built for him near the Portiuncula. He had even decided to tear it down and had begun to do so with his brothers, until he was told that the house did not belong to the friars but was the property of the town of Assisi. He answered those who said it was for the greater comfort of the friars by saying that he preferred the friars to be uncomfortable but giving good example on poverty and humility.¹⁸

If we are not mistaken, we find ourselves faced with a third Testament which is also important, because it relates to the very essence of Franciscan life.¹⁹

At this point we must ask ourselves a question. Could the passages in question have been left out of what is the complete Testament of Francis, so that from a certain time onwards only that was retained which appeared to be appropriate? We may certainly put the question, but we believe that it is to be answered in the negative, because the manuscript traditions of the Testament are unanimous in excluding any omissions or manipulations. The most telling argument is that of all the friars who refer to the Testament of St. Francis, none raises the accusation that it was arbitrarily cut, modified or added to in any way. The juridical standing and the spiritual importance of the Testament have been discussed and contested, but its completeness has never been questioned. We must therefore shift to another position which holds that there were other Testaments besides the "great Testament," in which the saint left special instructions and which made up the complex of his last will and testament in the most general sense of the word. The companions of Francis themselves confirm that this is what happened with the testamentary instructions relating to the dwellings of the friars.

In chapter 106, to which we have made reference, they state that the prescriptions concerning modest and humble dwellings caused dissension between the friars and Francis, who was suffering and near death. Aware of human frailty, he mitigated his instructions and was content with general statements in his Testament.²⁰ After establishing that the houses were to be made of earth and wood, the companions continue: "He wished that the reform begin with dwellings of earth and wood and from all the good example given at St. Mary of the Portiuncula, which was the first place where the friars lived and where the Lord began to multiply the friars so that this could be a continual reminder to the rest of the friars who had entered and who would enter the order. However, some said to him that it did not appear good to them to build the friars' houses of earth and wood, since wood was dearer than stone in many places and provinces. Blessed Francis did not wish to argue with them, since he was very sick and close to death and lived only a little while longer. Therefore, he later wrote in his Testament: Let the friars beware that their churches, houses and everything else which is built for them be not accepted unless they are in accord with the holy poverty which we promised in the Rule, and let them live there as guests, like travelers and pilgrims."²¹

To emphasize further the meaning of this change, this condescension to those who wanted a less rigorously poor standard of living, the companions add: "We who were with him when he wrote the Rule and all his writings, witness that he had many things written in the Rule and his other writings to which certain friars were opposed, especially the prelates." The companions note that we are dealing with things which would have been very useful, opportune and necessary for the good of the whole order. However, Francis "gave in, although unwillingly, to the wishes of the friars."²²

Undoubtedly we have here a characteristic trait of Francis and his dramatic situation. Although he practised rigorous asceticism, which he also wanted practised within the fraternity, he knew how to set limits, when he saw that his rigor could not be followed by others. Clearly a full realization of the reality of human beings emerges here which Francis wishes to respect with complete fraternal charity.

In the existing tradition, we already admit the existence of another Testament which Francis had written at Siena during a crisis in his health.²³ He sent for a friar called Benedetto da Pirato, who always assisted him and said Mass. He dictated a very short Testament to him: "Because I am unable to speak on account of the weakness and pain of my illness, I set out my will briefly in these three sayings for my friars - that as a sign of the memory of my blessing and my Testament they always love and serve each other, always love and serve Lady Poverty, and always be faithful and subject to prelates and all clerics of holy mother church." At this point we

understand the meaning of the word Testament to Francis and we realize a new precision and depth to it.

St. Francis was aware of the closeness of his death, of the evolution of the order, and of human weakness which could intervene to change or modify his ideal. Against this complex psychological background he was anxious to condense his life-experience so that it would not be lost, so that it could be summarized and so that it could be passed on to those who were to come. There was also the vivid realization – and this is important – that his experience went beyond his fragile humanity and could serve as an example to others. The greatest drama for Francis – a drama of which he was completely aware – was that of his own self-esteem as it swung between humility and vainglory. Thus the Testaments were intended as essential, summary and decisive statements of his life. The whole personality of Francis emerges from what we have seen so far from the lepers and his conversion to fraternal charity and respect for the Roman church. It is presented in a synthetic yet all-embracing resumé.

Thus we have reached the spirit of Francis in its fundamental traits when we find him faced with “our Sister Bodily Death.” At that point even the verses of the Canticle of Brother Sun seem to take on new meaning. He recognizes that “a new man can rise” from death. He also recognizes that “the second death can do no harm.”²⁴ Between the Testament and these verses lie the texts which we have tried to gather, examine and discuss here. They could certainly be studied at greater depth and linked to witnesses of the day and the circumstances which surround them. However, they are undoubtedly considered as essential testimonies to the ideal of St. Francis.

There is one more question which may appear as a preliminary but which we ask here at the end for reasons which we are about to state. Are the three passages from the Assisi Collection where the Testament is explicitly mentioned, namely chapters 56, 57, and 106, authentic? That is, can they be used to guarantee the existence of this Testament?

We should remember that the Assisi Collection is a collection of texts which are much discussed and will continue to be discussed, but whose importance is becoming even more clear among students of early Franciscanism. Within this collection of chapters, a certain number of testimonies appear in the “We who were with him” group. We are dealing with unexceptionable testimonies because they are taken and incorporated, even though no mention is made of this, in the *Second Life* by Celano, as we shall show in a work which we are writing, now in its final pages.²⁵ The three passages which we have mentioned are supplied by three persons who lived with Francis, as they state, during the last years of his life, up to his death. Their names are of no importance to us. However, their testimony is safe. The testimony regarding the Portiuncula is, therefore, not the invention of a historian, but comes from the testimony of someone

who lived through the final dramatic moments of the earthly passing of Francis of Assisi.

Notes

1. See K. Esser, *Das Testament des Heiligen Franziskus von Assisi. Eine Untersuchung über seine Echtheit und seine Bedeutung* (Münster, 1949), pp. 45, 102, hereafter cited *Das Testament*.
2. We are dealing with the legend which is contained in *Manuscript 1046 della biblioteca Comunale di Perugia*, which was discovered by Delorme and published between 1922 and 1975 at least five times. See F. M. Delorme, "La 'Legenda Antiqua S. Francisci' du Ms. 1046 de la bibliotheque communale de Perouse," *AFH* 15 (1922):23-70, 278-332; idem, *La 'Legenda Antiqua S. Francisci'. Texte du MS 1046 (M. 69) e Perouse* (Paris, 1926); J. Cambell, *I fiori dei tre Compagni* (Milan, 1966); R. B. Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli sociorum S. Francisci* (Oxford, 1970); M. Bigaroni, "Compilatio Assisiensis" degli *Scritte di fr. Leone e Compagni su S. Francesco d'Assisi* (Assisi, 1975). Of the five editions, I use the last here, because it reproduces the text as it is found in the manuscript, truly giving, as we read in the subtitle, the "first complete edition." In this way we finally have the possibility of following the order of succession of the chapters as the anonymous editor wished, without arbitrary retouching and regrouping, and the possibility of examining the chapters in their complete text, without cutting or rearranging, which are two basic conditions for research when dealing with a collection brought together from various traditions. From now on, I shall always quote the number of the chapter and the number of the page from this edition. With regard to the group of passages containing "We who were with him," obviously for the sake of brevity we cannot enter into the whole problem here, but allow me to refer you to R. Manselli, "Nos qui cum eo fuimus - Saint François et le temoignage des trois compagnons," in *Archivio di Filosofia* (1972):505-16. Idem, "Francesco d'Assisi," *Atti del II convegno internazionale* (Assisi, 1975), pp. 274-82. The three references on the testamentary decisions of Francis are found in Bigaroni, chapters 56, 57, 106, on pp. 120, 142, 322.
3. See Bigaroni, chap. 56, p. 130.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 132.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 134.
8. "It is my wish that no brother nor anyone else enter this friary, except the minister general and those who serve the brothers. Let the brothers of this friary speak to no one, except to those who serve them and the minister general when he visits them. It is also my wish that the lay people who serve them bring them no word or news of the world that is not beneficial to their souls. If it is my wish that no one enter this friary, I do so in order to make it easier for the brothers to keep their purity and holiness. If no useless or harmful word to the soul is uttered there, this place will remain pure and holy to the sound of hymns and the praises of the Lord" (see *Assisi Collection*, ed. Bigaroni, chap. 56, p. 134).
9. The editor points out a lacuna in the manuscript between "fratrem" and "migravit" (see *ibid.*).
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. See Raoul Manselli, "L'ultima decisione di S. Francesco. Bernardo di Quintavalle e la benedizione di S. Francesco morente," in *Bulletino dell'Istituto Storica Italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio Muratoriano*, 78 (1967):137-53.

13. We should not let ourselves be misled by the fact that there are normative expressions in the Testament, even though they take the form of a counsel. They always deal with life experiences which are translated into a counsel. Thus, for example, when it states that the friars "wherever they may be shall not dare to ask any letter from the Roman curia," this is certainly giving a counsel, but above all it transmits a biographical experience which indirectly includes the pope and cardinal protector. In order not to say "I have renounced" or "I do not want privileges from the Roman curia," it goes on to say: "I firmly command under obedience" that the friars do not ask, thus limiting the matter to the order. But when we situate ourselves in the exact moment when this happened to Francis, the sense of the whole of this paragraph in the Testament becomes clear. It is hardly necessary to say that the Testament from the very first line should be read while keeping what the Germans call *Sitz im Leben* in mind, that is, the historical circumstance in which the words were spoken or written, and in which certain actions were carried out. The same could be said of other passages, as, for example, the one regarding the interpretation of the Rule "simply and without gloss and with holy actions." See Esser, *Das Testament*, pp. 43, 46, 102.
14. *Assisi Collection*, ed. Bigaroni, chap. 46, p. 102.
15. *Ibid.*, the whole of chap. 56, pp. 124-40.
16. *Ibid.*, chap. 57, p. 142.
17. *Ibid.*, chap. 106, p. 322.
18. We refer to chapter 66, A.G. Little, "'Description of a Franciscan Manuscript' formerly in the Phillipps Library. Now in the Possession of A.G. Little," *CF* 1 (1914):87. Bigaroni took this from her to complete chapter 56 of the Assisi Collection (see pp. 134-38).
19. The second is the one called the Testament of Siena. We deal with this later in n. 23.
20. See *Assisi Collection*, ed. Bigaroni, pp. 322, 324.
21. See Esser, *Das Testament*, pp. 42, 101-2. Note that the word *paupercula* is missing after *habitacla* in the Assisi Collection.
22. See *Assisi Collection*, ed. Bigaroni, p. 324. On condescension in Francis, see also *idem*, chaps. 50 and 101, pp. 108-12, 296-302. On the way of life of the community of St. Mary of the Portiuncula, see *idem*, chap. 74, p. 202 (a chapter which does not belong to the group containing "We who were with him"). It deals with a visit from Cardinal Hugolino which he made together with a large following of soldiers, monks and clerics wishing to visit the dormitory of the friars: "Seeing that the brothers slept on the ground on poor and miserable pallets covered with a little straw, with no pillows and with a few remnants of frayed blankets, he began to weep bitterly in the presence of all and cried out: 'See where the brothers sleep! And we, miserable creatures, who concede too much superfluous comfort to ourselves, what will happen to us?' He was greatly edified, and so were those with him. He saw no table, for the brothers ate on the ground. Although this friary from its very beginning had many more visitors than any other friary in the order - all who entered the order took the habit there - the brothers of this friary always ate on the ground."
23. See *Opuscula Sancti Francisci Assisiensis* (Quaracchi ad Claras Aquas, 1949), pp. 173-75. See also *2SP* 175-77; *Assisi Collection*, ed. Bigaroni, chap. 59, pp. 150-52. The variants of the name are: di Piratro, de Prato, and de Piratio.
24. See V. Branca, *Il cantico di Frate Sole* (Florence, 1950).
25. As we are dealing with a publication which is soon to be published, it did not seem proper to me to burden this study with details of the reciprocal relationship of the sources which contain the chapter containing "We who were with him" and different variants. For the three chapters of the Assisi Collection which deal with the Portiuncula, see *2SP* 55, 9 and 11. See also *2Cel* 19, 59. See also W. Goetz, *Die Quellen zur Geschichte des hl. Franz von Assisi. Eine kritische Untersuchung* (Gotha, 1904), especially pp. 166-68, 185-89.