

## Leper, Leprosarium

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### Introduction

In recounting the life of St. Francis or in indicating the characteristics of his spirituality or the beginnings of Franciscanism, we are constantly confronted with one reality: that of leprosy, of lepers. Saint Francis embraced the lepers, cared for them, bandaged their wounds, healed them; it became his most symbolic, most typical image.

On the other hand, when Francis began to recount his adventure, he reflected on this experience: "Being in sin, it seemed to me very bitter to see lepers; and the Lord himself led me among them and I was merciful with them. When he led me among them, that which seemed bitter for me was changed into sweetness of spirit and body. Then I lingered a little and left the world" (Test 1-4).

To this man of the flesh and of the senses, Christ entered his life through an appeal to his senses and his flesh. He did not reveal Himself to Francis in the spirit prior to striking him in the heart of his flesh; just so, he did not lead him to a knowledge of the Church (the spiritual society to be rebuilt), until he let him see and touch a church (the temple) falling into ruins in its bricks and mortar.

This was the pedagogy of grace used by Christ with St. Francis. He called death "sister" when he surpassed superficial and romantic poetry, and also because his body was decaying little by little. He sang when only a thread of his voice remained: then it was enough to spell out the words.

#### *1. The Embrace of the Leper*

Consider the sources of the biography of St. Francis which narrate his first encounter with the lepers: as an act of heroism, that becomes his first victory

and his first moment of the fullness of joy. It seems to me that there is a strong difference in the sentiment and comprehension of the full significance of this gesture between I Celano and 2 Celano.

Celano, in *The First Life* speaks of Francis's service to the lepers of Gubbio, thus helping us to understand the true nature of the Saint's conversion or metanoia: "As truly loving of perfect humility, the Saint goes among the lepers and lives with them, serving them in every necessity for the love of God. He washes their decomposing bodies and cares for their virulent sores, as he himself says in his *Testament*: 'When I was in sin, it seemed very bitter for me to see lepers and the Lord led me to them and I was merciful toward them.' In fact, the smell of lepers, as he attests, was so unbearable for him that he could sense their presence two miles away so that he corked his nose with his hands. But look at what happened: in time, through grace and virtue given by the Most High, he began to have holy and salutary thoughts, so that one day, while still living in the world, he moved toward a leper: doing violence to himself, he came close to him and he kissed him. At that moment, he decided to despise himself even more, until the mercy of the Redeemer gave him full victory" (1Cel 18).

In *The Second Life* this episode has another twist, more thought out, and at the same time Celano returned to the priority that Francis himself stated in his *Testament*: the embrace of the leper constitutes his real conversion, where he again superbly pointed out Christ's miraculous intervention. "Among all the horrors of human misery, Francis felt an instinctive repugnance toward lepers. But, look, one day while he was horsebackriding in the neighborhood of Assisi, he met a leper. He felt an enormous horror and annoyance; but, not avoiding his promised fidelity, as though transgressing a received order, he got off the horse and ran to kiss the leper. Immediately he climbed back on the horse, looked here and there—the country was open and free of obstacles on all sides, but he did not see the leper anymore. Full of joy and admiration, he wanted to repeat this gesture after a little while: he went to a leprosarium, and after he gave each sick person some money, he kissed his hands and mouth. So he preferred the bitter to the sweet and he virilently prepared to maintain these propositions" (2Cel 9).

Here, the priority of Gubbio is abolished and the sense of the *Testament* is restored, even if the citation is not explicitly made.

## 2. *Francis Sees and Serves Christ in the Leper*

Before the encounter with the leper, Christ pointed him out to Francis; but he did not understand. Now he waited for him at the pass. Francis surrendered: "not avoiding his promised fidelity." Finally he made a promise, but he did not have the courage to put it into practice. There he was, a new Paul of

Tarsus, fallen from his horse. He received an order: get off the horse, do not disobey.

Saint Bonaventure helps us to understand that this youth was already advanced enough in the knowledge of Christ and about that which is found in the Bible about Him. He reveals to us more clearly the plans of God and the themes of the initial conversion moving toward perfect conversion.<sup>1</sup> He already demonstrates an intimate anxiety in seeking to name the love of God; a simple man of Assisi, venerating him and foretelling to him what he would complete as a great venture, he lets him suspect "the plans of God for him." Sickness prepares him "to receive the illumination of the Holy Spirit." Dreams put him on alert. But reality must strike him violently in order to force him to decide. "Withdrawing himself from the noise of the traffic and of the people, he devoutly sought divine clemency, which would be kind enough to show him what to do."<sup>2</sup> Everything, except to love the lepers!

"And the Lord Himself led me to them, and I was merciful toward them." Notwithstanding his psychological preparation, it was a sound, hard knock, during the romantic serenity of horsebackriding. "He encountered a leper. That unexpected encounter threw him into horror." But he immediately turned over the proposition of perfection in his mind, the commitment to become the cavalier of Christ. With crude realism, Christ had to draw him close to the embrace of a man infected with leprosy, with the putrid body of bleeding ulcers: not only to contemplate and to meditate upon Him hanging on a painted cross, upon the altar. No, He is there, on the earth, in the body of the leper who appeared in front of him and blocked his way along the street. So he goes in search of Christ, to serve and love Him. "From then on, he put on the spirit of poverty, an intimate sentiment of humility, and a profound piety. While he first abhorred not only the company of lepers, even seeing them at a distance, now, on account of Christ crucified, who, according to the words of the prophet, assumed the despicable look of the leper, he served them with humility and gentleness, with the intent of complete self-deprivation...for he needed first of all to conquer himself, so he got off the horse and ran to kiss the leper" (LM 1, 6).

<sup>1</sup>In Thomas of Celano there is an evident distinction between the two moments of the conversion of Saint Francis: the initial moment (1Cel 119) and its perfection (1Cel 88). Cf. also L. Canonici, *La portziuncola e gli inizi dell'Ordine francescano*, S. Maria degli Angeli, 1963, 62-65.

<sup>2</sup>I will avoid the repetitions of citations: I am using the fundamental texts of St. Francis's *Testament* in Thomas of Celano, Bonaventure. For the section about the lepers of Gubbio, cf. A. Paris *San Francesco e I francescani nella città di Gubbio*, Assisi 1941, 20ff.

It is interesting to note that Saint Bonaventure, wanting to talk of despising self and of identification with Christ, echoes *The Praises of the Virtues* composed by St. Francis: "There is hardly any person in the world who is able to possess only one of you for himself if he does not die. Whoever possesses one and does not offend the others, possesses all and whoever offends one, does not possess any and he offends all of them; and each one destroys vices and sin" (SalVirt 5-8).

When one wants to begin, he needs to be disposed to arrive at the end. The discourse of daily ascension toward perfection returns most frequently to the love of lepers, helping us to appreciate that Saint Francis departed from here to finish where he began (from the leper); and also topographically (from the Porziuncula) and into the external form (nude as before the bishop).

We turn to those initial passages. He found a brother. And he called the leper a brother Christian because he is the closest image to Christ "the suffering servant of God," "a man of sorrows." The whole of theology and all of the Bible becomes familiar to Francis, when he seeks to find and understand where Christ is revealed to him. From here Francis's christocentrism takes flight. He who understood Christ did not need to learn anything else. Francis knew Christ crucified, suffering, a leper: a sorrowful human reality. And in order to be able to identify himself to Christ, he begged for the wounds, in addition to the cross. The passion of the Lord tangibly became the leper for Francis: he could touch, suffer with, and care for the Lord's passion in the leper.

### 3. *The More He Advanced in Perfection, the More He Sought Contact with the Lepers*

He anxiously desired to explore even more the depth of humility and to always offer himself to move further into the ascent toward perfection. "Then, full of wonder and joy, he began to devoutly sing the praises of the Lord, proposing that, from then on, he would always raise himself to greater things" (LM 1, 5). In the meantime, in rapid succession, there was the restoration of San Damiano, the nauseating food begged from door to door through the streets of Assisi, the derision from parts of the country, the stones and mud thrown on him by the children, the denunciation of his father in front of the consuls, the process before the bishop, the nudity, the deprivation of his inheritance, the jubilant embrace with poverty, the spontaneous exile from Assisi. The ascent toward perfection continued with the snow of Subasio to the mortifying indifference of the monks of Valfrabbrica. Finally, when he seemed to regain the tranquility of Gubbio, in the house of friends, he felt that he would truly stay there, yet he had to go again to seek out the lepers. He made his novitiate there; there he purified himself from the slags of the world

which he was leaving. "Truly loving perfect humility, the Saint goes among the lepers and lives with them, to serve them in every necessity for the love of God. He washes their decomposing bodies and he cares for their wounds virulently" (1Cel 17).

It is helpful to review certain terms in the vocabulary used in the first biographies in narrating this radical change. The lepers are connected with Francis's "beginnings" (*primordia*) and with humility (*humilitatis primordia*; "the holy lover of all humility" [Ibid; LM 14, 1]); at the same time there was a fresh leap to conquer laziness, the loitering around his initial position, to reach perfection with love; "Neither laziness nor idleness had a place, where the stimulus of love always drove him to greater things" (Ibid). When he was afraid of lingering, he once again began to despise himself (*contemptui*; 1Cel. 103), serving the lepers in ignominy (*contemptibiliter*, Julian of Speyer 67).

He desired victory from every battle, combatting his own nature ("naturally abhorring lepers"). It was here that he was victorious: "The glorious father already was consumed in grace before God, and by his holy works Francis shone among the people of this world; however, he always wanted to begin more perfect works, and like the most learned soldier in the camps of God, provoked the enemy in order to again stir up new wars...with the expectation of a reward that would be eternal...he certainly hoped for a new triumph over the enemy" (1Cel 103).

This description presents us with Francis's true character. Perhaps he is too often seen as the sweet and romantic cavalier, the singer of creation rather than someone who, before all else, aggressively combatted himself in a continuous, graced effort that sustained him against the weakness in his nature, against a small-spiritedness. The essence of sanctity is for him joined with the service of lepers. By nature, he abhorred leprosy and fled from leprosariums; but, aided by grace, he returned to the lepers again, cared for them, loved them, embraced them: he looked after them. At the same time, he also looked after himself; he grasped holiness and perfection.

#### 4. *The Behavior of the Brothers Toward the Lepers*

Service to lepers and the stay at the leprosariums are fundamental facts, not only at the beginning of Francis's conversion but also for the period of novitiate demanded of his followers, at least at the beginning of the Order. "And they must be joyful when they live among persons of little count and despised, among the poor and the weak, among the sick and the lepers and among the beggars on the street" (RegNB 9, 3).

Francis did not want his brothers to regard money as more than the dust of the street, yet he says in *The Earlier Rule* that "for the manifest needs of the lepers, we can seek alms for them"(even money?) (RegNB 8). Even this

enormous repugnance toward money can tumble away, when it would serve to alleviate the suffering of the lepers. He did not make these concessions for the sick brothers; he does make them for the leprous brothers, though. It is a record that helps us even more to understand the horror that Francis had for leprosy as well as the intense love he had for lepers.

But leprosy is also a symbol of an even graver moral disorder: sin. Francis also attended to this other reality. For the spiritual leper (the sinner, the infidel), Francis continued to maintain the same dislike that he had at the beginning for the physical leper.

While composing the Rule at Fontecolombo, Francis had a vision. It seemed to him that he was picking up a lot of breadcrumbs from the ground in order to make a host for his brothers; but when he was about to break up and distribute this host, many who received it with devotion were safe and content; but along with them there were those who despised the received gift. Immediately they appeared infected with leprosy. And a voice from heaven came to him: "Francis, the crumbs of last night are the words of the Gospel, the host is the Rule, and the leprosy is wickedness" (2Cel 209; cf. LM 4, 11).

We can conclude that the embrace of the leper was the beginning of the complete conversion of Saint Francis; the service to the lepers and the living in the leprosariums was the first stable task and the first residence of the Franciscans.

##### *5. Service at the Leprosariums: the Novitiate of the Friars Minor*

Now we can explicitly affirm that these stays at the leprosariums essentially constituted the novitiate for the first friar minors, as the indispensable condition for being accepted into the Fraternity.

We have already pointed out that the love of this fraternal service to the lepers is the measure for advancement into the way of perfection. It is this dominating dream of Francis that re-emerges during his last days, when, in God's light, he once again sees more perfectly, the essential themes of his life and he feels the desire to begin again: "He ardently desired to return to the humble origins of his evangelical journey and, light-hearted with new hope for the immensity of love, he proposed once again to bring his body into the initial obedience of the spirit...he wanted to return to the service of the lepers and to be in contempt, as at one time" (1Cel 103).

We have already said as much. The many episodes of his biographies help us to understand that the love and service of lepers could not be considered marginal, but is fundamental for authentic fraternity with those who suffer.

Perhaps Francis's discourse on cosmic fraternity is given too much importance because it is more blantant and allows for the possibility of a rhetorical interpretation. In *The Canticle of the Creatures*, the Saint calls himself brother

to the elements of creation; but he does not point to all the psychologically and historically important issues of the battle and victory, the commitment of the fraternity to the poor, of the lepers, who were the authentic disinherited at the banquet of life, marginalized from society, lacking civil discourse. Francis drew near to them, to overcome their marginalization. Above all he had a profound theological conviction, based on the Bible, that lepers are authentic images of Christ, smitten by the sins of the world, punished and marginalized for them (Cf. Is. 53, 3-4; Mt. 10, 8; 8,17).

Service to lepers is at the base of the life of St. Francis and also at the base of Franciscan asceticism. It is the norm of life for Franciscans: "At the beginning of his new life, Francis, with the help of God, as a wise builder, built the foundation for himself on solid rock, that is to say, on the profound humility and the poverty of the Son of God, calling his Order Friars Minor by reason of the greatest humility. Right from the start of this movement, he wanted the brothers to stay in the hospices of lepers to serve them, as they submitted to the foundation of humility. When they entered the Order, noble or not, among other things that were explained to them, he told them that it was necessary that they serve the lepers and live in their houses" (SP 44).

He then gave a sublime example of love and humility. After he scolded Brother James the Simple for bringing a leper into the friars' place without counting the risk of contagion, he desired to punish himself for this act of a lack of love, of humiliation of the leper and of the lack of faith in Providence and to fasten the bonds again with the "brother Christian" so that he asked the vicar Brother Peter Catanio: "Let this be my penance: to eat off the same plate with my brother Christian." The author (Brother Leo?) describes it: "Francis sat at the table with the leper and his other brothers. A bowl was shared between the two. Now, the leper was one big wound; the fingers, with which he took the food, were eaten away and bloody, so that every time he lifted them into the bowl, blood poured into it. Brother Peter and the other brothers were appalled to see this sight but they did not dare say anything, for fear of the holy father. He who now writes saw this scene and gives witness" (LP 22; cf. also SP 58).

We could linger over the vocabulary used by Saint Francis in order to underline the value of the expression "brother christian" used for the leper. We only point it out, others may want to develop this concept.

Francis called only God Father; he used mother for himself, presenting himself in that way to the brothers. He also wanted the brothers to be mothers toward one another. Brother is for Francis the one who proceeds from God the Father or has a relationship to Him or receives life from Him. Christian conjured up in him an image possibly nearer to Christ: the Christian most

likely carries the image of Christ in himself as an interior quality or in external wounds. Finally he called Saint Clare Christian, just as he insisted that his own brothers call themselves and show themselves to be Christians in the midst of the Saracens and other infidels; so he called the lepers brothers.

Above all we observe that Francis called the lepers "brother christians" out of respect and veneration because he found in them a more eloquent image and sign of Christ: Christ who suffers; who took on the sins of the world; Christ who atoned with his own suffering; Christ marginalized by society; Christ who needed love.

With the highest veneration (and we state it for a comparison), Francis called Saint Clare "Christian", even if a contemporary sense of antifeminism could be understood in this. Brother Stephen, "a man simple and pure of heart," according to an ancient chronicle, spoke thus: "Blessed Francis did not want to have familiarity with any woman and did not permit women to be familiar with him; he seemed to have affection only for Blessed Clare. And in every way, whenever he spoke with her or spoke about her, he did not call her by her name. But called her Christian." (Frate Stefano, 2692)

It seems to me that he called her Christian because he loved her more than all other women because in her, more than in any other, he discovered the image of Christ; in the same way he called the lepers brother christians because he found in them a more intense conformity to Christ and finally he sought a greater fraternity. Finally, then, it is not a testimony of antifeminism, as it would seem from the words of Brother Stephen, but it is a most eloquent term of endearment for Francis. A theological and biblical foundation sustains this title.

Among all the documentation about the task of Franciscans to imitate their Father Francis in this service to lepers, we can look to the *Chronicles* of Brother Jordan of Giano.

The first Franciscans departed from the Portiuncula for Germany. If they found lodging, it often had to be at the leprosariums and they had to begin their life living among the lepers. Around the years 1223-24, while maintaining a minimum of organization, they held a Chapter at Speyer as had already been done in Italy. But they were not able to find a guesthouse outside the city except at a leprosarium. We recall some of the more notable names in early Franciscanism at that Chapter: Jordan of Giano, Caesar of Speyer, Thomas of Celano, and the famous brother John of Pian of Carpine, who left from that Chapter to establish the first custody in Saxony (Cf. *Chronicles* 33).

Soon after, while at Erfurt, when they wanted a residence from which to depart to spread Franciscanism in Germany, they usually had to content themselves to share the lepers' residence, while they waited for a convent or a



cloister. It is interesting to note the marvels of these brothers, who left the woods of the Portiuncula, in the middle of which they had organized their poor residence among the rovines of the old Benedictine "grancia" affirming that they did not have the slightest idea of what a cloister was (Cf. Chronicles 44).

Finally look to the story: Brother Jordan, with his brothers, was sent on a trip from Magonza in Thuringia to Erfurt on October 27, 1224, the feast of Saint Martin. It was winter, surely not the season to build, so, on the advice of the people and some of the clergy, the brothers found lodging in the house of the priest of the lepers. They waited there, outside the walls, for the citizens to provide accommodations for them" (Chronicles 39). So they began living in the midst of the lepers. It was their new novitiate in Germany!

#### 6. *From Saint Francis to the First Franciscans*

The *Fioretti*, Chapter 25 particularly describes for us the effects of this most interesting love of Saint Francis toward lepers: the healing of the spirit as well as of the body. "When he cured the body, God also cured the spirit at the same time... Not only did Francis willingly serve the lepers but he also ordered the brothers of his Order to serve them for the love of God, whether they were going into or remaining in the world, where Francis wanted us to be known as lepers." He repeats it for us: "The brothers served in a hospice for infirm lepers." But there was a leper there who was impossible to take in, because "he was possessed by the devil," who insulted whoever served him; he beat him and even cursed God. The brothers decided to stop serving him; but they wanted to ask the opinion of Saint Francis. Then the Saint took charge. Full of love, he drew near the leper, tried to make him understand how he could save the spirit through the infirmity of the body. Francis prayed for him a lot. Finally the leper asked that his whole body be washed. "And through a divine miracle, wherever Saint Francis touched with his sacred hands, the leprosy left and the flesh remained perfectly healthy. As the flesh began to heal, so too the spirit. The leper began to heal and to have great compunction and repentance for his sins, and he began to cry most bitterly, so that the spirit was cleansed internally of sin through contrition and tears as the body was cleansed externally through washing with water. Truly repentant and having confessed, the leper worsened with other ailments many years later. He died reconciled with God and men (Fior. 25).

From what Saint Francis and his brothers did, we can conclude that the service of the lepers can be considered among the charisms of the Franciscan vocation. We know that many times during his life Francis and the early brothers rendered habitual or occasional service in numerous leprosariums:

for example, Borgo San Sepolcro (2Cel 95, LM 10, 3) or San Tommaso near Santa Maria Rossa between Trevi and Bovara (LP 23, SP 59).<sup>3</sup>

At the time of Saint Francis, besides the leprosarium of the Arce and of Selvaggrossa, there was one located under the street which leads from the Portiuncula toward Tordandrea, less than a kilometer from the Portiuncula, to the left of the street that goes to Tordandrea, where today there is a house known as "the hospice."<sup>4</sup> And Brother Giacomo the Simple would come here to take a leper "full of ulcers" to the Portiuncula, meriting the rebuke of Saint Francis.

The studied accounts of the biographies have pointed to other places: Santa Maria Maddalena and San Rufino of Arce in the vicinity of Rivitorto; it also seems that the hospice of San Salvatore of Pareti, along the actual street from Assisi to Santa Maria of the Angels, even if known as a hospice, was never a leprosarium.<sup>5</sup>

Instead a leprosarium is identified that probably was founded by Saint Francis, or through Sant Francis, where the brother lepers were guests in a particular way: the hospice of San Lazzaro del Valloncello in Valneria. Since it is well documented and could have an importance, albeit relative, to the conduct of the first Franciscan convents it would be good to give some more precise information. Immediately we state that for such a leprosarium we could also refer to *Bullarium Franciscanum*, which reports two related bulls: one from May 23, 1262 (Urban IV) and the other from March 28, 1266 (Clement IV). In these two documents the popes exempt *the house of lepers* from "the tenth" and from some other taxes, above all on account of their extreme poverty and directly place them under the protection of Saint Peter.<sup>6</sup>

The leprosarium of Saints Lazzaro and Maurizio of Valloncello was established on September 24, 1218, with the concession of a vast area from the property of Razzardo of Roccapazza to the priest Bono in order for him to

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Also A. Bonaca *Le memorie francescane di Trevi*, estratto da *Studi Francescani*, XIII, n. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Fortini, *Nova vita*, cit., II, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup>F. Santucci writes: "The majority of Assisi guide writers continue to write that the leprosarium of San Salvatore of Pareti (differently than Joergensen, Englebert and, in a contradictory way, Fortini affirm) could not have been a leprosarium because it is very near to the urban center and because now of the ancient sources — and by ancient I mean those from 1200s and from 1300s — hint at San Salvatore of Pareti as a leprosarium" (a comment in *Assisi al tempo di san Francesco*, Atti del V. Conv. Intern. Della Soc. Intern. Studi Franc., Assisi, 1978, 47 and also *L'Ospedale di San Salvatore delle Pareti presso Assisi non era un lebbrosario*, in "Atti. Acc. Roperz.," VII, n. 6, 1982, pp. 29-47).

<sup>6</sup>Cf. *BF* II, 144 (1262) and *BF* III, 76 (1266). On San Lazzaro of Valloncello, see L. Canonici *L'Umbria con frate Francesco*, Assisi 1979, 145 ff.

build a church and a hospice for the use of lepers and other infirm persons as well as healthy people. A rock is still visible there. It is inscribed in gothic characters documenting its erection in 1218. Every tradition concurs with the account about the work of Saint Francis and the Franciscans toward the lepers in this place. On the other hand, in 1345, the bishop of Spoleto believed that "the lepers' hospice of San Lazzaro of Valloncello was founded by Saint Francis for the use of the poor who were ill and above all for the Friars Minor inflicted with leprosy...And in that place many brothers of the Order of Friars Minor, infected with such sickness, still remain." From proceedings held in 1344 it is observed that the hospice was constructed by Saint Francis who "many times went there to wash the feet of the lepers and to visit them" and again, "there was a unique hospice to care for the friar lepers and the poor who lived in the whole region."

The Jesuit Father Pietro Pirri in his study concludes: "It is certain that the hospice, although eventually governed in an autonomous way by those who lived there, was for many years under the jurisdiction of the Franciscan Order."<sup>7</sup> Father Agostino da Stroncone, in his *Seraphic Umbria* (a. 1290) affirms: "Our brothers had the care of the hospice of San Lazzaro in Valloncello, in the Diocese of Spoleto; the Pope conceded that in time of interdict they could celebrate there," etc. (MF III, 90). We also report that Pope Eugene IV said: "From the beginning Saint Francis, while he was still living, and after him quite a few rectors and treasurers set up and built the hospice of Valloncella, for the reception of and hospitality toward lepers."<sup>8</sup>

We explained that in the directories of Franciscan convents, San Lazzaro of Valloncello, is listed as *a hospice*, and attributed to the Custody of Montagna or in that of Regno (Eubel).<sup>9</sup> An absolute innovation is that such a hospice is seen to be regulated more or less as actual hospices in which the brothers were there as chaplains or as patients, religious and laity, men and women living together.

An interesting episode handed on to us by Saint Bonaventure in one of his sermons about Saint Francis helps us to understand that the Saint, with much conviction, inculcated in the brothers the obligation to serve the lepers, so that the same Cardinal Ugolino (later Pope Gregory IX) felt the obligation of imitating this work by having nearby the lesson of his great friend: "Gregory

<sup>7</sup>P. Pirri, *San Lazzaro del Valloncello. Memoria d'un grande lebbrosario francescano nell' Umbria*, in "Arch. Per la storia eccles. Dell'Umbria," II, 1915, 37-99.

<sup>8</sup>Etsi ex debito, 6 June 1432.

<sup>9</sup>*Analecta Franciscana*, IV, Quaracchi, 1906, 511.

IX, full of wisdom, wanting to sustain the familiarity which he had with blessed Francis, became his imitator and brought into his room a leper, whom he served, dressed as a brother. One day the leper asked him: 'But the Supreme Pontiff has only this old man to look after me? He is very tired!'" (*Miscellanae Bonaventuriana* 2698).

We have already pointed out the fact that the assistance to the lepers and to other gravely ill patients or to the marginalized must be considered among the charisms of Franciscanism. In reality, in almost every century, in every nation, in homeland and in mission territory, this was the most important, primary, more christian responsibility of the sons of Saint Francis. After leprosy, another primary concern was the plague. The work of fraternal assistance of the Franciscans in the quarantine stations, in the period of the plagues, is famous. Alessandro Manzoni immortalized the Capuchins of Lombardy for their assistance in the pestilence of 1629-30. Also in the documents of another province (e.g. Umbria), we find Friars Minor died of the plague in Lombardy in those years; and from all these sources we know that they contracted the infection while lovingly assisting the sick: testimony that the Franciscans of all provinces and from the whole family were always meeting in places where their presence was more urgently needed, where the ardor of charity was more urgent.

Many times we found notices of Franciscans who died among the lepers or among other infected persons in mission territory. Most of these documents are among the Arabs of the Holy Land, where the Franciscans have the task of caring for the sanctuaries where Christ lived as well as for the leprous and plagued bodies of the brothers in whom Christ revealed himself most eloquently.

Today, too, the Friars Minor care for lepers in Africa, Asia, America, Europe, and Australia. The Secular Franciscan Order, spurred on by their confreres in the First Order, gave a significant example, with the institution of a national juvenile center "For the Hungry and the Lepers." And these witnesses could be multiplied.