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Gesture as Sermon in St. Francis of Assisi

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"Il gesto come predicazione per san Francesco d'Assisi"
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The importance of the *Legend of Perugia* as a Franciscan source has been more fully appreciated only within the last few years. In a recent study, the present writer attempted to detect in it the positive testimony of those who were eyewitnesses to the last years of Francis of Assisi — those referred to by the phrase "*Nos qui cum eo fuimus*" ("We who were with him"). Again and again we find in this source a series of extremely important clues that portray Francis as father and teacher who always insisted on the importance and necessity of example.[1] In fact, we can say that from the time he resigned as head of the order until the time of his death, Francis desired to place the concrete example of his own life alongside the *Rule*, with its juridically binding norms.

We can say even more: Francis's day-to-day personal actions were an illustration of the *Rule*. It is no accident that he states explicitly in the *Earlier Rule* XVII, 3: "All the brothers should preach by their deeds." Several times he recalls the living example of the brothers, and its practical effect on those to whom they addressed their exhortations to penance.[2]

From the thirteenth century on, gesture (the *exemplum*) gradually became more important as a literary genre, since it contained within itself all the evocative and fascinating power of an episode retold from real life.[3] Considering this, we can fully understand the importance of

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[1] With regard to Francis as exemplar, allow me to refer to my recent work, *"Nos qui cum eo fuimus": Contributo alla questione francescana* (Rome, 1980), where the bib- liography which relates to the various Franciscan sources is mentioned. This will serve us later on.

[2] See Esser, *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi: Neue textkritische Edition*, Spicilegium bonaventurianum, 13 (Grottaferrata, 1976), p. 391. Alongside this fundamental norm, there are a host of them — even if we cannot mention them all here — that outline the way of life of the bothers. We limit ourselves to the *Earlier Rule* VII 16: "And let the friars beware that they not appear sad in their exterior, and like gloomy hypocrites."

[3] The subject of *exemplum* in the preaching of the Middle Ages is so vast that we cannot

the example presented with gestures and deeds from daily life. All the more recent discussions of the piety of the eleventh century and later point out how the faithful of that era attributed much greater significance to actions than to words.

The Gesture in Medieval Oratorical Technique

The problem arises when we wish to be more precise about the meaning and content of the general admonition to preach more by actions than by words. To say that such actions should consist in holy and virtuous conduct is so obvious as to border on the trivial. What needs to be shown is how one can "speak" through a simple action that is clear and persuasive, yet not lacking in substance or meaning.

We possess many anecdotes about Francis, one of which tells how he patched his own tunic and that of one of the brothers as an act of service. Another recounts how he had himself publicly rebuked as a glutton for having taken some broth, even though he had done this on account of his weak condition. We could give many other examples as well. In any case, these actions formed a part of the oratorical technique that characterized life in the Italian commune. We are reminded of this by the well-known statement made by the chronicler Thomas of Spalato in his *History of the Bishops of Salona* [or ancient Spalatum, near Split, Yugoslavia (Dalmatia) — Editor]. Using the terminology of the thirteenth century shows Francis as one who did not address the crowds *secundum modum predicandi* ("after the manner of preaching"); or as we would say, he did not follow the method used by the clergy in their sermons. Instead he spoke *secundum modum concionandi* ("after the manner of oratory"). This was the approach used by speakers in the medieval public assembly or *concione*, where the citizens would discuss and decide the more important questions that

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really give an adequate bibliography — even of a summary nature. We restrict ourselves to the classic, Th. M. Charland, *Artes praedicandi: Contribution à l'histoire de la rhétorique au Moyen Age* (Paris and Ottawa, 1936). In addition to this, especially with regard to mendicant preaching, including Franciscan preaching, we have C. Delcorno, *Giordano da Pisa e l'antica predicazione volgare* (Florence, 1975). With regard to Francis specifically, see Etienne Delaruelle, "Saint-François d'Assise et la pieté populaire," in *San Francesco e la ricerca storica degli ultimi ottant'anni* (Todi: Convegni del Centro di studi sulla spiritualità medievale, 9, 1971), pp. 125–55. See also C. Delcorno, "Origini della predicazione Francescana," in *Francesco d'Assisi e francescanesimo dal. 1216–1226* (Assisi: Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani, Convegni IV, 1977), pp. 125–60. With regard to the importance of deeds rather than words, we refer to our study: *La religion populaire: Problèmes de méthode et d'histoire*, Conférence Albert-Le Grand, 1973 (Paris and Montreal, 1975). To the works on the *exemplum*, which have already been mentioned, we add: J. Berlioz, "Le récit efficace: L'exemplum' au service de la prédication (13–14 siècles)," in *Mélanges de l'Ecole Française de Rome*, Série Moyen Age et Temps Modernes, 92 (1980): 113–46. See also B. Geramek, "L'Exemplum' et la circulation de la culture au Moyen Age," in *Mélanges de l'Ecole Française de Rome*, 92 (1980): 153–79.

concerned their commune. This technique aimed to persuade not so much by the power of the discourse as by the manner of one's public presentation, by the gestures that accompanied the words, and finally by some action that would capture the attention or imagination. The best description of *ars concionandi* (the "art of oratory") is found in Buoncompagno of Siena, who devotes an entire book of his *Rhetorica Novissima* to the subject. He emphasizes that anyone who wishes to convince an audience must first make an impression on them in a way that will be most apt to gain their attention and then their assent.[4]

It is worth recalling at this point that Francis undoubtedly had some experience of the *concione*. If he fought against the Perugians at Collestrada, he certainly must have taken part in the *concione* that preceded the battle. Nor should we overlook another clue. It arises from the fact that the climate of Francis's youth witnessed an intense and dramatic political struggle between the nobility and people of Assisi. During this time the *ars concionandi* must have been displayed in all its various forms. There is no doubt, then, that Francis had considerable knowledge and experience of the *concione*, and that he knew how to make good use of it. At the same time he had a practical knowledge of the Assisi populace. Thus he was quite capable of understanding, evaluating, and discerning what was addressed to him while he was still a citizen of the world and son of the wealthy Peter Bernardone. Afterward, on the occasion of his conversion, he was able to grasp the meaning of his fellow-citizens' cruel ironies: their mockery, their insults. Finally he was able to perceive the gradual, progressive change in their attitudes toward him, culminating in the admiration that disturbed him so much in his last years.

The Silent Sermon at San Damiano

We have seen how contemporary bits of evidence allow us to catch a glimpse of the way Francis presented himself to his public. But if we would get to know his preaching, which was accomplished through his actions, it is more interesting and relevant to do a closer evaluation of the *concione*. Better still, we shall examine an 'acted sermon' delivered to the Lesser Sisters, that is, to Clare and her sisters at San Damiano.[5]

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[4] Concerning the forms of oratory at the time of Francis, and in general in the Italian commune, to all the works cited above we add: A. Galletti, "L'eloquenza," *Storia dei generi letterari in Italia* (Milan, 1904–38), pp. 70–107; "Gli ordini mendicanti e il rinnovamento dell'Eloquenza Sacra nell secoli XIII," pp. 602–6. This is old but always useful to position preaching within the larger framework of eloquence in Italy. The quote of Thomas of Salona [Spalato — Editor] is well known to all students of Franciscan history and is mentioned in the articles already quoted in the preceding note. Buoncompagno of Siena must be mentioned explicitly. His works may be found in A. Gaudenzi, *Bibliotheca juridica Medii Aevi: Scripta, anecdota glossatorum*, vol. 2 (Bologna, 1892), pp. 249–97.

To appreciate fully the meaning of this episode, we do well to remember that Francis, not being a priest, was never permitted to preach in the technical sense of the term — a fact pointed out some years ago in a splendid study by Etienne Delaruelle.[6] Like the majority of the Friars Minor, who were a fraternity of laymen with very few clerics, Francis's rank in the church allowed him to speak only on moral matters, restricting him to exhortations to do penance and give praise to God. Any and all subjects of a theological or doctrinal nature were intentionally excluded. Thus our episode acquires even greater significance. Since its passing reference to the presence of the vicar points to a time after Francis's voyage to the Holy Land and resignation as head of the order, it cannot be dated prior to 1221. Moreover, Thomas of Celano's use of the term 'vicar' in the sense of a title makes us think of the time of

[5] We refer to *2Cel* 207: "De praedicatione quam magis exemplo quam verbis eis fecit." In "Verba fr. Conradi," *Opuscules de Critique*, vol. 1, chap. 13 (Paris, 1903), pp. 391–92, we find this chapter with minor differences attributable to the manuscript tradition. To be precise, Thomas of Celano's chapter 19 comprises the first seven numbers of the *Verba*. In the last lines, paragraph 7 corresponds to *2Cel* 205. We note that the groups of chapters that Celano entitles "Of the Poor Ladies," while undoubtedly referring to the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, is at the same time a collection of directions, admonitions and considerations pertaining to the behavior of the friars toward the abovementioned sisters. It is interesting that these chapters are concerned with justifying the *Ordo Sanctarum Virginum* ("Order of Holy Virgins"). At the same time they try to portray a precise relationship between Francis and the sisters, while emphasizing that "although their father gradually withdrew his corporal presence from them, he extended his affection in the Holy Spirit to care for them." Here Thomas of Celano is thinking more of the reality of his day (the middle of the thirteenth century) than of Francis's actual relationship. Indeed, Celano tends to present a more detached Francis than was actually the case. With great literary elegance he succeeds in counterbalancing the physical separation with the spiritual presence, though not making it sufficiently clear that in the closing years of his life Francis was obliged to move as little as possible and to appear rarely in public. We should not forget the fever that made him physically weak with its frequent recurrences. In any case, there is much evidence that would lead us to conclude that the presence of Francis among the sisters was mainly through letters, although unfortunately only a few remain, as we point out in our *S. Franceso d'Assisi* (Rome, 1980), pp. 145–91. With regard to these contacts with the Poor Ladies, we consider it more important that the recollections of the friars agree, especially in paragraphs 204–6, where the expressions *quidam frater* ("a certain brother") or *alius frater* ("another brother") most likely belong to the testimonies sent to Crescentius of Jesi. We are lead to believe this by the similarity of sentences to certain testimonies that undoubtedly come from Crescentius. This hypothesis is strengthened by the consideration that the following number (207) must belong to the group of testimonies that were sent to Crescentius, inasmuch as it has undoubtedly come from one or more of the sisters. Indeed, whether from the testimony itself, stylistically embellished by Celano, or from the prescriptions of the *Rule*, we must conclude that Francis went alone into the monastery of the sisters. The whole tone of the chapter in Celano implicitly emphasizes this fact. No one else could have related the incident except those who were present, namely, the Poor Ladies. The type of episode and the movement of the sermon are such as to exclude being told by Francis himself.

[6] See n. 3 above.

Brother Elias, rather than the brief period of government of Peter of Catania. If we accept this clue, we find ourselves in the last years of Francis, during the increasingly difficult and crucial time of his illnesses.[7]

Celano tells us that while Francis was staying for a brief time at San Damiano, he was asked repeatedly by his vicar to address the word of God to his daughters. Finally, worn down by the insistence of the vicar, he agreed. When the women of the monastery had gathered to hear the word of God as well as to see their father, he lifted his eyes to heaven and began to pray to Christ. Then he had some ashes brought in, with which he drew a circle around himself on the floor, placing the remaining ashes on his own head. As the women waited for their father, who kept standing silently within the circle of ashes, no little astonishment arose in their hearts. The saint then suddenly arose and to their amazement recited the *Miserere mei, Deus* instead of a sermon. When he had finished he immediately left.

It is worth mentioning the comment on this gesture that Thomas of Celano made in his *Second Life*: "By his actions he taught them that they should regard themselves as ashes, and that there was nothing in his heart concerning them but what was fitting this consideration." Celano tells us quite explicitly here, as perhaps nowhere else, that this was an instruction by means of actions. We suggest without hesitation that this may be an actual reference to the text from the *Earlier Rule* previously cited.

The Symbolism of Ashes

The general meaning of Francis's gesture and silent preaching is surely clear. Celano himself says as much through what he has attributed to Francis and in the fact that his charade had an immediate impact. Francis intended to show that he was all ashes, and that in the sight of God the most he could do was recite the *Miserere*, thus giving an example of humility valid and meaningful for all. It is absolutely clear that Francis's gesture must have derived its significance from the power of his example. Implicitly included are the symbolic meaning of ashes, the symbolism of the circle, and the gesture of sprinkling the ashes on his head while reciting the *Miserere*.[8] It is rather puzzling that

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[7] For these dates we refer to C. Schmitt, "I vicari dell'Ordine francescano da Pietro Cattani a frate Elia," *Francesco d'Assisi e francescanesimo*, pp. 235–63.

[8] We cannot discuss here the value and importance of all the components of this silent sermon. We rely on general indications which are nonetheless valid for the rich series of further indications which accompany them. We find an initial overview in A. Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, vol. 1 (Graz, 1960), pp. 461–70. See also F. Cabrol in *Dictionnaire de l'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, s.v. "Cendres." See also C. Schneider, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, s.v. "Asche." Finally, see a shorter

none of the other biographies of St. Francis mentions the incident. In fact this chapter is not found in the sources that depend on Celano and draw heavily from him, such as Bonaventure's *Major Life*. And so at this point a doubt may arise: perhaps what we have is a beautiful incident rhetorically embellished by Celano, but to what extent it is true no one knows. Yet in spite of Celano's embellishments, which are discernible through the abundant use of rhythmic prose, there are too many elements — internal and external — for us not to believe in its authenticity.[9]

The first argument is based on the very location of the episode in the biography. It suffices to point out that it is found in the second part of the *Second Life*. Here, in an effort to achieve coherent and logical organization, Celano has arranged the testimonies that he received following the request made by Crescentius of Jesi in 1246. This means that the story came to him from someone who must have witnessed the event. From the account it is clear that Francis entered the monastery alone. But since the incident took place inside the monastery, it could have been retold only by one of the sisters who was there. Nothing prevents us from thinking that it might have been Clare herself. We do well to remember that in 1246 she was still alive and very strongly insisted that the image of her beloved father and teacher should corre-

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entry pertaining to the internal history of the church by L. Gougaud, in *Dict. Spiritualité*, s.v. "Cendres." With regard to the circle, we refer first of all to the ample treatise with a rich bibliography, by M. Straberger-Schusser, in H. Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. "Kreis." However, we must say all the works treating of the liturgy speak about the magic circle, magic, and superstition. We refer the reader to them, limiting ourselves to mentioning the classic, J. Caseneuve, *Sociologie du rite* (Paris, 1971). On the importance and liturgical meaning of the *Miserere*, see the testimony of the entire history of Christian liturgy.

[9] As mentioned in the text, the isolated testimony of Celano confirms what we have said above, namely, that the whole section entitled "De pauperibus dominabus" is conditioned by specific events that took place in the middle of the thirteenth century but disappeared later. But for this very reason the episode merits attention, even though in a direction different from what Celano originally intended when he used a group of testimonies sent to him. Therefore, it seems that the use of this text — we refer only to the episode of the silent sermon — is meaningful and important in a remarkable work, the *Verba fr. Conradi*. On the other hand, we would not wish to be overly subtle by suggesting (only as an opinion) that the chapter tries to present Franciscanism in the light of a more profound humility in comparison with other rigorist texts. The fact that the passage in question (by no means a rare text, but taken from the well-known *2Cel*) is missing from other rigorist texts is surely important. Of particular significance is Bonaventure's silence on this point. Curiously there are few recent studies on the rhythmic prose of Celano, so we must refer to B.A. Terrocini, "Il 'cursus' e la questione dello Speculum Perfectionis," *Studi Medievali*, 4 (1912–13): 65–09, which mentions Celano in passing. The book *Het Latijn van Thomas van Delano, bioqraaf van Sint Franciscus* (Amsterdam, 1947), by P. Hoonhout, does not mention the subject.

spond as closely as possible to the ideal of humility and mortification as Francis had lived it.

No less important is the fact that the person telling the story does not in any way water down its presentation of Francis's exemplary action. The moment that it took place it must have seemed an astonishing expression of self-contempt. The narrative explicitly states: "And to the amazement of the sisters..." This reaction preserves a memory of the astonishment that still remained in the heart of the one retelling the incident years later. We get the impression that whoever it was must have been someone whose contacts with Francis were infrequent. This description fits the Poor Ladies, of whom it was purposely said that they desired not only to hear their father but to see him as well. The element of wishing to see him indicates the psychology of a person who is recalling an event that she and the other sisters had experienced together. Thus she is not afraid to reveal her very human curiosity. On the other hand, anyone who knows how Francis was accustomed to treat such weaknesses with condescension but also with severity, will better understand his reaction of silence and a gesture of humiliation.

Once again it is the exemplary aspect of his behavior that serves as an internal argument confirming the importance of the incident. Ashes, which symbolize humiliation, were always regarded by Francis as a sign of penance and mortification. This is apparent from the various other episodes in his life that involve their use. Such incidents are inspired no doubt by biblical texts, particularly those from the Old Testament, in which ashes enjoy a special role, especially the gesture of sprinkling them on one's head. This gesture becomes even more meaningful when we consider the use of ashes in the liturgy of the eleventh century.[10]

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[10] We are referring to *lCel* 110, and *2Cel* 195, 207. Regarding v. 195 (which tells of Francis's action, when in response to a lay brother who asked for a Psalter he offered him ashes), we should compare this passage with the original Leonine version contained in the *Manuscript of St. Isidore* 1/71, *LP* 104, *SP* 4, and the *Little Manuscript* 151. These sources contain no mention of a lay brother (it is hard to understand why he should not read the Breviary as prescribed by the *Rule*) but of a novice, for whom there was as yet no obligation of the Breviary itself. In this episode, Francis does not offer him ashes, but in perfect parallel to the incident at San Damiano he sprinkles them on his own head, using the same motion that he probably repeated before the sisters. Indeed, he wipes the ashes on his head with a circular motion, as if he were using them to wash himself. The transformation that we see in Celano's version confirms what we have already noted in our *Nos qui cum eo fuimus* regarding his literary and non-literary manipulations. In the number in question Celano is reacting to a tendency that arose following the deposition of Elias. The new tendency was to reduce the importance of the lay brothers in the order, whereas Elias had done the opposite, for which he was rebuked by Salimbene de adam, (*Cronica*, ed. G. Scalia [Bari, 1966], pp. 143–47). Regarding the authenticity, value and importance of this Leonine text, see Edith Pásztor, "Frate Leone, testimone di S. Francesco," *CF* 50 (1980): 35–84, especially pp. 72–74. In other words, what appears to be an

From that time on, positive evidence exists for the ritual of tracing a cross of ashes on the forehead of the faithful by the priest with the words: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Francis's frequent use of ashes throughout his life suggests a continuing awareness of the symbolism that rests on these premises. He begins with the gesture of sprinkling ordinary food with ashes lest it be an occasion of gluttony. The result is twofold: the food is made less appetizing, and gluttony is punished by an act of self-denial.

Equally important for Francis and the brothers is the incident that took place at Greccio — also during the last years of his life. It was Easter, and the brothers were about to celebrate with a small feast by decorating their simple table. Francis arrived without being seen by the others. He did not join them but showed up later, wearing a poor man's hat that covered his face, making it impossible for them to recognize him. Then he asked for and received alms, presenting himself for what he really was — a poor sick man. He was given a bowl of food, which he took. Then sitting down on the ground, he placed the bowl in the ashes, saying: "Now I am sitting as a true Friar Minor." Finally he revealed himself and rebuked his brothers for having set a fine table without keeping in mind that they should be poor — really poor — if they wished to obtain alms by going from door to door. It is interesting to observe here that in the *Legend of Perugia* the fact that Francis sat in the ashes is suggested by the words "near the fire." This is taken up and made explicit by Thomas of Celano, probably because it recalls the Old Testament, as already mentioned. We need not be surprised at this. But there is no doubt that ashes had to be present as an essential element in the sermon to the Poor Clares.[11]

The symbol of ashes recurs every time Francis wishes to give an example of humility and mortification. On one occasion he explains how a man who is really wise should conduct himself as a true Friar Minor. Such a man presents himself at a general chapter dressed in

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invitation to humility in the Leonine text becomes in Celano a silent reproof for those who ask for what they should not have. Francis's personal gesture becomes an instruction given to someone else. This is not a mere literary reworking, but a statement in support of the new "politics" in the order, aimed at denigrating the lay brothers and emphasizing the process that would later result in the clericalization of the Friars Minor. For the liturgical ceremony of ashes, see A. Franz, in n. 8 above.

[11] With regard to this episode (*2Cel* 61, and *LP* 74), we mention a contrast which deserves more development. It is sufficient here to point out that the adjustment is more concerned with the telling than with the essential content. It is worth referring to what we have said above to confirm once more the literary character and thus the secondary character of the story-telling in Celano, in contrast to what is contained in the *Legend of Perugia*. This is not the place to raise the other question of the origin and derivation of the passages in the *Legend of Perugia*, which do not begin with *Nos qui cum eo fuimus*. The same applies to the other episodes which we shall indicate below.

sackcloth, with ashes sprinkled on his head, "and to the astonishment of all, preaching mostly by actions, he shortens his words." Again we have this clear motif, obviously scriptural in origin and directly linked to the episode of the silent sermon at San Damiano.[12]

Perhaps the most eloquent example of the use of ashes as a symbol is found in Francis's preparation for his own death. As he felt death approaching, he prepared himself for it with complete awareness and total serenity. After he had spoken to his brothers:

> He ordered the book of the Gospels to be brought, and commanded that the Gospel according to St. John be read from the place that begins: "Six days before the Passover, Jesus, knowing that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father." The minister general [Brother Elias] had intended to read this Gospel, even before he had been commanded to do so. This passage had also appeared at the first opening of the book earlier, although the book was the whole and complete Bible in which this Gospel was contained. Francis then commanded that a hair shirt be put upon him and that he be sprinkled with ashes, for he was soon to become dust and ashes.[13]

This entire series of testimonies is surely not a matter of chance. Its precise purpose links it to a tradition that is no less clear and precise. The essential lines of this tradition are worth recalling, since it leads back to the Old Testament and allows us to trace a certain development in Francis's personal piety.

First of all, we must remember that the use of ashes on his food probably goes all the way back to his youth. The *Legend of the Three Companions* (adding certain details to the *First Life of Celano*) says that sometimes when he sat down to eat with seculars they would offer him food that was pleasant to his taste. He would eat a little and then find some excuse so that it would not look as though he had left it unfinished for reasons of mortification. When he ate with the brothers he frequently put ashes in his food. To conceal his penance he would tell them that Brother Ash was chaste. So far we are dealing on a religious and ascetical level, where ashes are simply a means for performing strict penance, of which they were considered an essential part. Later this penance acquired an ecclesiastical aspect, and through church practice and the liturgy a scriptural element as well. We are not referring to the symbolism of ashes, but to gestures that are undeniably

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[12] *2Cel* 191. This chapter in Celano has a parallel only in the *Fioretti*. It is opportune to note that we find ourselves once more face to face with a sermon on mortification given by a wise man who expresses hmself by the gesture of sprinkling ashes on his head.

[13] *lCel* 110. This episode is repeated only by Bonaventure. This should cause us no surprise, but rather help us understand that on this point Celano had nothing to add to what had been sent in by those who had personal recollections or details.

derived directly from the Bible, such as the sprinkling of ashes on one's head.[14]

At this point it is important to note — also for a better appreciation of the meaning of the sermon at San Damiano — that the one and only element Francis took from the Bible was the gesture of placing the ashes on his head.

Interestingly enough, ashes, which for Francis are often the symbol of penance, are explicitly associated with penance only twice in the New Testament. We are referring to Matthew 11: 21, where Jesus, when His preaching of penance is not received, issues this condemnation: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." The same condemnation is repeated in Luke 10: 13.

Popular Piety and the Creativity of Saint Francis

Returning to Francis, we can say that his link with the biblical tradition is indisputable. But for that very reason we cannot help but notice that certain aspects of his religious universe go beyond these simple links to the Bible. They are situated instead in the world of popular tradition. This fact obliges us to examine at least briefly the piety of Francis. It moves on two levels that converge but are also quite distinct. On first level — the older and more original — we can detect the piety of a layman who shared the culture of the merchant class. It was a culture linked to the great international wool trade, whose most notable representative in Assisi appears to have been Peter Bernardone. At this level, Francis's piety was definitely linked to the popular culture of the time, a culture that was interwoven with elements and gestures of a magical nature.

On the other hand, a second level developed, which slowly reached maturity after his conversion. More and more he began to forge positive links to authentic ecclesiastical culture, though this was not of a particularly high quality. This second level conflicted with the first and limited its influence, but without managing to eliminate or supplant it completely. That seems to be the conclusion we can draw from the silent sermon at San Damiano. In fact, if we check there some of the elements that must go back to the Bible, they are the gesture of sprinkling the head with ashes and the recitation of the *Miserere*.

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[14] *lCel* 51, which should be compared with *L3S* 15. We should point out that the latter tends to place Francis's gesture even more definitely in a penitential dimension: "He would sprinkle ashes ... trying to hide his penance by saying to the friars that Brother Ash was chaste."

But there is no way of tracing to biblical texts the circle Francis draws around himself with ashes, even though he does place the remaining ashes on his head. Once again we are up against a different cultural reality, a distinct tradition. In a happy act of typical creativity, Francis has combined popular tradition with a biblical gesture accompanied by the recitation of a Psalm. Let us say without hesitation that the circle of ashes has nothing to do with belief in the symbolism that arises from the powers attributed to circles. These powers go back to a long and old tradition of magic ritual. Briefly, the circle involves the ability to separate the outside from the inside and the inside from the outside. The one inside the circle is like a prisoner of that which encircles him; he shares, as it were, in its nature.[15]

It is more interesting to note that by drawing a circle of ashes around himself Francis has somehow modified its primitive and more usual significance as a defense against magical powers, or as a boundary of the sacred. Of course this notion was operative at one level of his consciousness, a level from which the memory and experience of ancient traditions could not be erased. But the gesture has acquired a new meaning, for in using it Francis has transferred it to a spiritual and psychological level. It has become a symbol of something that is enclosed. Moreover its act of enclosing defines it and creates a reality whose concrete expression is ashes. These in turn are accompanied by living speech, at once imperative and imploring, expressed in the recitation of the *Miserere*.

Thus we are brought face to face with one of the many creative actions performed by Francis. Having an importance and meaning that go well beyond the individual event, they are meant to be visible, tangible expressions of psychological levels so deep that they cannot be attained through the power of the human intellect. These levels of the psyche become intelligible only through the power and validity of the symbols used. There is no need to insist on Francis's creative ability if we just think of the well-known example of the crib. With apparent facility, through its visual representation of the birth of Christ, it aims to teach a lesson on the Incarnation of Christ the God-Man. Once again it operates on two levels, one intuitive and immediate, the other symbolic, evocative, didactic.

We must add another consideration regarding this creativity. In its origin and formation, the interplay between intuitive representation and symbol remains at a level of understanding accessible to all. Such a creative act forms part of a style of discourse especially suited to those who have had no theological education. It speaks to those who

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[15] Regarding the magic circle, we refer to what we have already said in n. 8 above.

remain at a level of piety based on sentiment and intuitive perception. Because of the interplay between intuitive representation and symbol, the creative act assumes a higher meaning. It is raised to the level of an example and an admonition, even for those who have a theological and systematic knowledge of the faith.

To refer to a point already mentioned, Francis's symbolic world is such that it is impossible for him to admit any distinction between what today is called the upper class and the lower class. No matter whether he is addressing the simple faithful or great theologians, he does not raise this question. We should not underestimate this. By a deliberate choice, his language is able to speak to one group as well as the other. It is capable of expressing the popular religious consciousness, but at a level that leads us to suspect that he is well above the called popular culture.

From this comes an observation, commonplace perhaps, but certainly relevant. The silent sermon of Francis at San Damiano was not the casual event that is presented to us in the account of Celano. Rather it reveals the complex working of a mind that intends to speak to a well-defined audience, including the people of different levels that comprise it. Indeed, no matter what their education, all of the sisters who were at the presentation given by their father and spiritual teacher must have understood what Francis intended to say to them.

Therefore, this silent sermon has a value that goes even beyond its undoubtedly great significance. On the one hand, it enables us to discern a real-life aspect of Francis's preaching method heretofore poorly recognized. On the other, we can see Francis's own spiritual development. But most of all, if we consider the complex of elements that comprise it, it shows us the possibility of communication through symbolic gestures. In silence and through silence — the solitary *Miserere* confirms the silence — a symbolic gesture acquires an impressive power of persuasion.

For this reason the episode we have been discussing deserves careful rethinking. This should help us to understand better the reasons for Francis's exceptional appeal, which managed to overcome the obstacles of ridicule, a bad public reputation, and the hostility of Assisi. No less important is the fact, psychologically complex, that this sermon is not an act of masochistic humiliation but a gesture of example, exhortation, and love. Let us recall the sad circumstances to which Francis was reduced during these years!