

## The Illnesses of Francis During the Last Years of His Life

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“Le malattie di Francesco durante gli ultimi anni della sua vita”

*Francesco d'Assisi e francescanesimo dal 1216 al 1226* (1977): 315-62

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Since the end of the nineteenth century several doctors have taken a great interest in the illnesses of St. Francis of Assisi, a fact that can be explained only by a renewed interest in his life and spirit. The first, as far as I know, was the specialist in social and legal medicine, Albert Bournet (1854-1895), who published an entire volume on the subject in 1893 in Lyons.<sup>1</sup> His historical commitment is evident from the fact that he did

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<sup>1</sup>A. Bournet, *S. François d'Assise. Étude sociale et médicale*, Lyons-Paris. In the copy kept in the central library of the Capuchins in Rome, after every two pages there is a blank page. Glued to the frontispiece is a small piece of paper with the words: “The author is honored to humbly ask the esteemed disciples of St. Francis if they would kindly be willing to point out the error(s) and lacunae contained in this little book.” I believe the author’s request—a tribute to his conscientiousness as a scholar—was addressed primarily to Fr. Edouard d’Alençon (see also p. 112, n. 2 in the book). Bournet was very skeptical with regard to the diagnosis of Francis’s illnesses: “My plan cannot include a presentation to the medical public of a study of the illnesses of Francis of Assisi. For lack of documents, I would have to place a question mark after each sentence” (ibid., 128, n. 3). See the review of this study (very short and mostly negative) in *Analecta bollandiana* 13 (1894) 301f; see also O. Schmucki, in *CF* 33 (1963) 215.

research in the archives of Siena in order to shed light on the doctors who cared for Francis in that city when he was ill.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later Theodore Cotelle did a similar biopathographic study, but with a better knowledge of the Franciscan sources. Its ideology stands in sharp contrast to the somewhat rationalistic views of his predecessor.<sup>3</sup>

In 1918 the Roman ophthalmologist Orestes Parisotti dedicated a short monograph to Pope Benedict XV. Written in Latin, it was meant to answer the question of what illness had caused Francis to lose his sight.<sup>4</sup> In 1927 the historian of medicine Lorenzo Gualino attempted to reconstruct Francis's psychosomatic makeup, illnesses and death. It was intended primarily to be a popular work and its style was rather romantic.<sup>5</sup> The short article by the American doctor Edward F. Hartung is a model of precision. He draws a comparison between medieval medicine and the Poverello's infirmities.<sup>6</sup>

Francis's ophthalmia also attracted the attention of another famous doctor, the Swiss ophthalmologist Josef Strebel. In a German journal of ophthalmology he offered this diagnosis: tuberculous iridocyclitis

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<sup>2</sup>See A. Bournet, *S. François*, 169-72.

<sup>3</sup>Th. Cotelle, *Saint François d'Assise. Étude médicale*, Paris 1895. The half-title of the copy in the central library of the Capuchins in Rome contains this dedication by the author: "Affectionate regards to the Reverend Father Édouard of the Capuchin Friars Minor. Angers, 28 October 1895. Dr. Th. Cotelle."

<sup>4</sup>O. Parisotti, *Quo morbo oculi sensum amisit Franciscus ab Assisio*, Rome 1918.

<sup>5</sup>L. Gualino, *L'uomo d'Assisi*. (Piccola Biblioteca de scienze moderne, 347), Turin 1927. The study is mentioned in *CF* 5 (1935). For other works by this author, see *The National Union Catalog. Pre-1956 Imprints*, vol. 221 [London] 1972, 150f; and *Civiltà cattolica* 86/1 (1935) 524f.

<sup>6</sup>E. F. Hartung, "St. Francis and medieval medicine," in *Annals of Medical History* (New York) 7 (1985) 85-91. It is described as "a well-documented study of sources" by R. Brown, "A Francis of Assisi research bibliography, comprehensive for 1939-1969, selective for older materials," in M.A. Habig (ed.), *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Chicago [1973], 1719. See *ibid.*, 1718f, additional bibliography on the illnesses and death of Francis.

[inflammation of the iris], with complications due to secondary glaucoma and enlarged cataracts.<sup>7</sup>

The fullest historical-medical description of the course of the illnesses and their medical treatment was given recently by Professor Sante Ciancarelli.<sup>8</sup> After I wrote my paper I came upon Kenneth Haines's article, in which the author investigates the causes of Francis's premature death in the context of the monastic ideal of holiness. He offers several hypotheses and favors tuberculosis as the basic illness, but he does not do a complete study of the Franciscan sources.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, the complete historical evidence was available to almost none of the doctors who devoted themselves to this famous clinical case from the past. Both Parisotti and Strebel completely missed the anonymous sources from the circle of the saint's companions who were near him day and night, especially during his last illness.

The subject of Francis's illnesses is a typical example of the need for an interdisciplinary study if we are to reach sound conclusions. For research to advance in an area that is as interesting for the history of medicine as for the life of Francis, close collaboration between historians and doctors is an absolute must.

When I was studying the stigmata some years ago,<sup>10</sup> I submitted an interpretive essay on the illnesses of St. Francis prior to 1224.<sup>11</sup> In view of

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<sup>7</sup>J. Strebel, "Kulturhistorisches aus der Geschichte der Ophthalmologie und Medizin. Diagnose des Augenleidens des hl. Franziskus von Assisi. Ein Beitrag zur Behandlung der Augenleiden im Hochmittelalter. Die Todesursache A. Dürers," in *Klinische Monatsblätter für Augenheilkunde* (Stuttgart) 99 (1937) 252-60. The investigation of the cause of Dürer's death takes up less than a page (259f), while the rest is devoted to the ophthalmia and other illnesses of Francis.

<sup>8</sup>S. Ciancarelli, *Francesco di Pietro Bernardone malato e santo*. [Florence 1972]. The reader may refer to my review in *CF* 43 (1973) 405-07. I was unable to look at the second edition of this well-illustrated book, but I am certain the author's biopathographical interpretation remains essentially the same.

<sup>9</sup>K. Haines, "The Death of St. Francis of Assisi," in *FSien* 58 (1976) 27-46. The study contains very interesting comparative material about other saints and sick persons before Francis; it also mentions studies in the history of medicine—especially in the Anglo-Saxon world—that merit the attention of scholars.

<sup>10</sup>Octavianus [Schmucki] de Rieden, "De sancti Francisci Assisiensis

the purpose of this 4<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Society for Franciscan Studies, I would like to begin with a brief summary of this study. Then I will focus on the last two years of Francis's life. I will not deal explicitly with the phenomenon of the stigmata. They are a classic case study of the body-soul relationship in the piety of a mystic,<sup>12</sup> and since permanent wounds in the hands, feet and side are by nature clinically abnormal,<sup>13</sup> they should be included in the present study. But the first case of the stigmata<sup>14</sup> is so complicated—historically, medically and theologically—that a complete study would demand not only a paper but an entire book. Since I do not want to go beyond the time allowed for this lecture, I will omit the rich biographical material on the spiritual dispositions with which Francis bore

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stigmatum susceptione. Disquisitio historico-critica luce testimoniorum saeculi XIII" in *CF* 33 (1963) 210-66, 392-422; 34 (1964) 5-62, 241-338. Trans. C. F. Connors, *The Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute) 1991.

<sup>11</sup>Idem, "De infirmitatibus s. Francisci Assisiensis inde a iuventute usque ad stigmatum susceptionem," in *Miscellanea Melchor de Pobladora*, I, Rome 1964, 99-129. At the kind request of the directors of *Medicina nei secoli*, this study was later translated into French by Capuchins N. Sapin and J. Bayard; Idem, "Les maladies de saint François d'Assise avant sa stigmatisation," in *Medicina nei secoli. Rivista storico-medica* (Rome) 9, 1972 n. 1, 13-57. [An English translation of the French version, by S. Wroblewski, may be found in *Greyfriars Review* 4 (1990) 31-61.] In nn. 13, 52, and 61 I mention other, less comprehensive studies.

<sup>12</sup>As rightly noted by Carl Andresen, "Franz von Assisi und seine Krankheiten," in *Wege zum Menschen. Monatsschrift für Seelsorge, Psychotherapie und Erziehung* (Göttingen) 6 (1954) 33-43, 40: "For this reason [as a crowning of his devotion to the passion of Christ], Francis's reception of the stigmata becomes a classic example for the study of questions regarding the body-soul relationship in piety."

<sup>13</sup>On the much-discussed concept of illness, see L. Segatore - G.A. Poli, *Dizionario medico scientifico-divulgativo*, Novara [1958] 723-25: "In the present state of our knowledge of biology and medicine, illness may be defined as 'a state or manner of being abnormal on the part of our organism, understood as a deviation of the biochemical processes in which life is realized and becomes concrete from their normal course.'" See also L.M. Weber, "Gesundheit, Krankheit und Heilung im Verständnis der Theologie," in *Diakonia* (Mainz) 1 (1966) 132-46.

<sup>14</sup>See O. Schmucki "Stigmatisation," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, IX (1964) 1081f (bibliography).



the martyrdom of his "sister infirmities." I have had occasion to refer to them in a study published not long ago.<sup>15</sup> Finally, I would like to make it perfectly clear that I mean to deal with my topic as a historian; I will, of course, defer to the judgment of doctors in all aspects pertaining to their area of expertise.

### An Overview of Francis's Illnesses Prior to 1225

It is clear from the biographies that "as a young man, Francis was by nature delicate and frail; in the world he could live only surrounded with attention."<sup>16</sup> The same *Assisi Compilation* says that he was "always infirm...and daily until the day of his death grew weaker."<sup>17</sup> Before his death, in a conversation with an unnamed companion, and using a term that is certainly closer to historical fact, Francis says that ever since the beginning of his conversion to Christ he has been *infirmities*, in other words, "very frail" or "sickly."<sup>18</sup>

If our goal is a historical reconstruction of the course of Francis's illnesses, there are obviously certain limits. The biographers' chief aim was religious edification, and as time went by they tended to idealize the saint more and more. Their works provide us details useful for our goal, but these are mentioned only in passing. On the other hand, the extraordinary and converging number of relevant details mentioned for no particular reason guarantees, I think, a rare level of historical credibility.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Idem, "Gli ultimi due anni di san Francesco d'Assisi e il rinnovamento della nostra vita," in *Lau* 17 (1976) 209-50.

<sup>16</sup>Compas 50 [LP 2] "*Compilatio assisiensis*" dagli *Scritti di fr. Leone e Compagni su S. Francesco d'Assisi*, first complete edition from Perugia ms. 1046, with facing Italian version, ed. M. Bigaroni [S. Maria degli Angeli - Assisi] 1975, 112; tr. N. Vian, *I fiori dei tre compagni. Testi francescani latini ordinati con introduzione da J. Cambell*, Milan [1967] 145.

<sup>17</sup>Compas 117 [LP 92]: M. Bigaroni, 870.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 106 [LP 75]: M. Bigaroni, 320; see the article in *Dizionario enciclopedico italiano* VI (1957) 172a: "sick with an ailment that is not grave but long-lasting," and O. Schmucki, *Les maladies de saint François*, 57, n. 105.

<sup>19</sup>See also K. Haines, "The Death of St. Francis," 36, who agrees when he states: "The various biographies and texts of the saint provide us, albeit unintentionally, with one of the most detailed medieval medical 'case-histories' that

Francis's health, by no means robust, was first injured during his terrible imprisonment in Perugia. This occurred in 1203-04 after the army from Assisi was defeated at Collestrada near Ponte San Giovanni. We can only guess as to the nature of the illness he suffered at that time. But what we know historically about the almost epidemic spread of malaria in Italy during most of the Middle Ages<sup>20</sup> leads us to believe that while in prison Francis came down with this terrible disease.

The sources, both official and anonymous, agree that "Francis suffered for a long time from his liver, spleen, and stomach, right up to the time of his death."<sup>21</sup> Medical writers who have tried to interpret the pathological symptoms described in the early sources tend to say that he developed a gastric ulcer quite soon. It was an inevitable result of his superhuman activity as an itinerant preacher and was aggravated by an inadequate and unhealthy diet.

In 1215 Francis went to Spain, apparently making the long journey on foot. There, in a place not mentioned, he suffered a complete physical breakdown, either because of a particularly severe case of gastric dyspepsia

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survive, and with the assistance of modern medical knowledge, I believe it is possible to make an educated assessment as to the precise nature of Francis's ailments."

<sup>20</sup>See A. Celli, *Storia della malaria nell'Agro Romano*. Posthumous work with illustrations by P. Ambrogetti and a topographic map, Città di Castello 1925, 177 (explicit testimony for the years 1192 and 1197), 187: "[A]round the middle of the ninth century the situation began to worsen again; in other words a new outbreak of malaria occurred, which waxed and waned throughout the entire Middle Ages, subsiding again during the Renaissance." It is also significant that Henry of Avranches (ca. 1190 - ca. 1272) in 1232/34 spontaneously interpreted the information in Thomas of Celano's *First Life* as referring to a very high fever—almost certainly due to malaria: *Legenda s. Francisci versificata*, lib. I, vv. 70-113, in *AF* X, Quaracchi 1926-1941, 409-11 ("Over sensitive nerves spreads / A freezing sensation, that bristles his head and brings on a tremor." v. 98f, 410 [tr. G. Shanahan]). It should be noted that here, as elsewhere, the poet shows a good knowledge of medicine.

<sup>21</sup>Compas 77 [LP 37]: M. Bigaroni, 214; see also 2Cel 96: "He recited the canonical hours no less reverently than devoutly. For, though he suffered from infirmity of the eyes, stomach, spleen, and liver, he did not want to lean against a wall or a partition when he chanted." See O. Schmucki, "Les maladies," 47 n. 24. Here and for the course of the saint's illnesses until 1224, I am summarizing this study.

or an attack of intermittent fever. His vocal cords also suffered temporary paralysis.<sup>22</sup>

Certain indications point to the conclusion that, after his return to Italy in 1216 or 1217, a sudden and acute attack of some disease forced Francis to accept hospitality in the palace of the bishop of Assisi, Guido II.<sup>23</sup> The wandering life of the early Franciscan fraternity and the precarious living conditions in the "little house" at St. Mary of the Angels<sup>24</sup> easily explain why the friars had to seek aid from a benefactor if one of them became seriously ill.

Even if the reasons that led Francis to agree to stay with the bishop are not spelled out, the illness must have been very serious. In light of what all the sources say about the enduring nature of the pathological changes in Francis's spleen and liver, it is fair to conclude that he had suffered from repeated attacks of intermittent fever, explained by his splenic tumor or enlarged liver.<sup>25</sup>

Whatever the verdict on the hypothesis just proposed, there can be no doubt about the historical value of an explicit testimony concerning a very severe attack of quartan fever during the winter of 1220-21.<sup>26</sup> According

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<sup>22</sup>See Thomas of Celano, *Tractatus de miraculis b. Francisci*, n. 34, in *AF* X, 285: "When St. Francis was returning from Spain, because he could not go to Morocco as he had wished, he fell into a very grave illness. For, after suffering privation and weakness and having been driven from a lodging place by the incivility of the host, he lost his speech for three days." This account is found only here among Celano's three works; see O. Schmucki, "Les maladies," 22-24. Other studies of the trip to Spain are mentioned in *BibFranc* XIII (1964-1973) 583-85.

<sup>23</sup>See O. Schmucki, "Les maladies," 24-27.

<sup>24</sup>See K. Esser, *Anfänge und ursprüngliche Zielsetzungen des Ordens der Minderbrüder*, Leiden 1966, 54-60 ("Nicht-sesshafte Wanderprediger"); O. Schmucki, "'Secretum solitudinis' De circumstantiis externis orandi penes sanctum Franciscum Assisiensem," in *CF* 39 (1969) 5-38, 43-45 ("De sensu domus"); [English tr. by S. Holland in *Greyfriars Review* 2 (1988) 77-132.]

<sup>25</sup>I will return to these symptoms later; see nn. 32 and 108.

<sup>26</sup>Compas 80 [LP 39]: M. Bigaroni, 220-25. "At that time, when he was recovering from a very serious sickness, it seemed to him, as he examined his conscience, that he had become somewhat lax ['because he had had a tiny morsel of food']. Yet he had eaten very little, for due to his numerous, diverse, and long

to the account, as soon as he recovered from his illness a little, Francis went down to the confession of the cathedral of San Rufino with his vicar general, Peter Catanii. There he took off his tunic and ordered the brother to lead him, half naked and with a cord around his neck, to the cathedral square where the people of Assisi had assembled for the sermon. Upon the arrival of this strange procession—by which Francis probably meant to accuse himself, in mimic form, of spiritual fraud<sup>27</sup>—he reportedly said to the bystanders: “You think I am a holy man, as do those who, on the basis of my example, leave the world and enter the Order and lead the life of the brothers. Well, I confess to God and to you that during my illness I ate meat and ate some stew.”<sup>28</sup>

The “tiny morsel” of chicken Francis had tasted during Lent—the compiler says that “he had eaten very little, for due to his numerous, diverse, and long infirmities, he could barely tolerate any nourishment”<sup>29</sup>—was precisely the diet usually prescribed by doctors at the time for cases of quartan fever. Thomas of Cantimpré (1201-1263 or 1270/72), in his famous *Liber de natura rerum*, says: “A proper diet will include the meat of chickens,

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infirmities, he could barely tolerate any nourishment. One day he got up, still suffering from a quartan fever and had all the people assemble in the square for a sermon.” See also 1Cel 52: “Once, when in an infirmity he had eaten a little chicken, after he regained his strength of body he entered the city of Assisi.” Bonaventure, *Legenda maior s. Francisci*, VI, 2, in *AF X*, 582f: “Inflamed with the spirit of true humility, he called the people together in the square of the town of Assisi and solemnly entered the principal church with many of the friars whom he had brought with him. With a rope tied around his neck and stripped to his underwear, he had himself dragged before the eyes of all to the stone where criminals received their punishment. He climbed up upon the stone and preached with much vigor and spirit although he was suffering from a fever and the weather was bitter cold. He asserted to all his hearers that he should not be honored as a spiritual man but rather he should be despised by all as a carnal man and a glutton.” For a historical comment on these passages, see my study: “Les maladies,” 32-34.

<sup>27</sup>See O. Schmucki, “De stigmatum susceptione,” in *CF* 33 (1963) 401. M. Bigaroni, “*Compilatio assisiensis*,” 221/223 n. 136 maintains that Francis assembled the people in the square of San Rufino, while A. Fortini, *Nova vita di san Francesco*, I/2 [S. Maria degli Angeli - Assisi 1959], 135-40, thinks it was the present Piazza del Comune.

<sup>28</sup>Compas 80 [LP 39]: M. Bigaroni, 222-25; Vian, 305.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 220; Vian, 303.

partridges, pheasants, small birds, kid goat; greens, asparagus, borage and chicory, seasoned with fresh herbs or almond milk."<sup>30</sup>

There is no reason to doubt that medieval doctors were able to diagnose the presence of quartan fever in a patient, either from the periodic "febrile attacks, regularly followed by two days of apyrexia,"<sup>31</sup> or from the three stages usually observed in quartan attacks: chills, fever and sweats. And in cases of relapse, a splenic tumor inevitably appeared.<sup>32</sup> We should also recall the testimony of the English Cistercian chronicler, Ralph of Coggeshall (d. ca. 1228), which confirms what we have said so far: "No one can remember so many cases of quartan fever as have appeared this year in all lands and regions, due to the summer's extreme heat and drought."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Thomas of Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum. Editio princeps secundum codices manuscriptos*, [ed. H. Boese]. Vol. I: *Text*, Berlin-New York 1978, lib. I, n. 33, p. 36, ll. 24-26.

<sup>31</sup>See E. Marchiafava, "Malaria," in *Enciclopedia italiana* (Treccani), XXI (1934), 987-1000, 995b; besides the medical bibliography listed in my study, "Les maladies," 53 n. 75, see also P. Tolentino, *Malattie infettive. (Trattato di pediatria e puericultura)*, [Turin 1961], 923-31. I wish to thank the Brazilian malaria specialist, Dr. Marcelo Tricca, of the Checkup Center in the city of Piracicaba, who through the kind mediation of my confrere Odair Verussa responded twice to my questions (23 July and 13 September 1976) and gave me a bibliography on the subject. For his help in obtaining medical literature and for clarifying certain medical questions, I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Maurizio Palombi of Rome

<sup>32</sup>See Thomas of Cantimpré, *Liber de natura*, lib. I, n. 33, ed.cit., 35f: "Quartan fever gives an appearance of decay.... They [its victims] experience attacks of extreme cold. The lips are blue at the onset and blueness is observed in the extremities of the hands and feet.... The spleen is usually swollen" (ll. 1 and 4-6); Vincentius Bellovacensis (Vincent of Beauvais), *Speculum quadruplex, sive speculum maius: naturale, doctrinale, morale, historiale*. II: *Speculum doctrinale*, lib. XIV, c. 14, Dvaci 1624; Graz-Austria 1965, col. 1291 B: "Quartan fever begins with violent shivering that causes the teeth to grind and chatter; there is no such shivering in other fevers. The joints and bones ache and feel heavy. The heat of this fever is much higher than that of a phlegmatic [fever], but it does not become as high as that of a tertian, nor is there as great a thirst, burning, headache and delirium as in a tertian."

<sup>33</sup>Cited by Anna Celli-Fraentzel, "Quellen zur Geschichte der Malaria in Italien und ihrer Bedeutung für die deutschen Kaiserzüge des Mittelalters," in *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften und der Medizin*, IV/4,



I apologize for jumping ahead in the chronology I was trying to follow in my summary. But I wanted to show more clearly the historical context of malaria, and thus it seemed necessary to take certain elements mentioned in the sources and link them together.

Francis's participation in the Fifth Crusade in Egypt<sup>34</sup> (1219/20) was a silent but eloquent protest against attempts to impose the Christian faith by force of arms. It also gave him the contagious "Egyptian disease," in medical terms *trachomatous conjunctivitis*. There is growing support for the opinion that this was indeed trachoma and not some other eye disease, such as the secondary glaucoma following tuberculous inflammation of the iris mentioned by Dr. Strebel.<sup>35</sup> Later I will cite some new evidence to support this interpretation. For now it seems well to cite the compiler's account of how Francis contracted this terrible disease: "In the course of the voyage to preach to the Sultan of Babylonia and of Egypt, he had contracted a very serious disease of the eyes caused by fatigue and especially by the excessive heat he had to endure both in going and in returning."<sup>36</sup>

Francis had stayed in the camp of a fighting army in a part of the Mid East where hygiene was precarious; he was also in direct contact with

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Berlin 1935, 44 or [384]. This study impressively shows that "entire armies, the aristocracy of the German nation, kings and emperors perish in war from a power of nature that could not be overcome through human strength," in other words, from malaria (ibid., 54 or [394]).

<sup>34</sup>See my reconstruction in: "Das Leiden Christi im Leben des hl. Franziskus von Assisi. Eine quellenvergleichende Untersuchung im Lichte der zeitgenössischen Passionsfrömmigkeit," in *CF* 30 (1960) 369-72 [English tr. by I. McCormick in *Greyfriars Review* 4:Supplement (1990) 1-101.]; see the more recent bibliography in *BibFranc* XIII (1964-1973) n. 589-93, and A. Matanic, "Del viaggio di san Francesco in Oriente," in O. Schmucki - F.F. Mastroianni - Idem, *San Francesco d'Assisi, pacificatore e missionario*, Naples 1976, 35-50.

<sup>35</sup>I refer to this in my study: "Les maladies," 27-32.

<sup>36</sup>Compas 77 [LP 37]: M. Bigaroni, 214/216; Vian, 297. Compare what is said by A. Santoni, *Oculistica*, Milan 1968, 264: "Although climate does not appear to have a definite influence on the disease, witness its common occurrence in warm countries such as Egypt and very cold countries such as Poland and Russia, its frequency seems in some way associated with a dry and dusty climate, proven by the greater number of sick who come to the outpatient clinic during the warm months."

the sultan Al-Malik al-Kamil<sup>37</sup> and his court. This immediately leads us to believe that his "eye sickness" was the highly contagious *conjunctivitis granulosa*. Viral in origin, it is characterized by abundant teary secretions, progressive corneal complications, sensitivity to light and consequent impaired vision.<sup>38</sup> The disease found an easy target in Francis's two eyes since frequent malarial fevers plus habitual malnutrition had served to aggravate his anemic and listless state.

At this point a short excursus is necessary concerning his refusal to submit to medical treatment, even though his ophthalmia was generally considered "a very serious disease."<sup>39</sup> After mentioning the various ailments suffered by Francis "for a long time...right up to the time of his death," the compiler adds: "But the love that filled his soul since his conversion to Christ was so ardent that, despite the prayers of his brothers and of many other men moved by compassion and pity, he did not trouble himself about

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<sup>37</sup>See H. L. Gottschalk, *Al-Malik al-Kamil von Egypten und seine Zeit. Eine Studie zur Geschichte Vorderasiens und Egyptens in der ersten Hälfte des 7./13. Jahrhunderts*, Wiesbaden 1958; see the review by G. Fussenegger, in *AFH* 52 (1959) 331-33.

<sup>38</sup>On the symptoms of trachoma, see L. Segatore - G.A. Poli, *Dizionario medico*, 1163; L. Bardelli, *Il Tracoma (contributo alla diagnosi, cura e profilassi). Manuale pratico ad uso dei medici e degli studenti generici*, Florence [1940], with many illustrations; A. Santoni, *Oculistica*, 257-80. Here we should mention the vivid description of Francis's eye sickness provided by Henry of Avranches, *Legenda versificata*, lib. XII, vv. 70-84, in *AF* X, 479f: "Those jewels that adorn the brow, those windows of the soul, / Are shut off by cloud, distressed by a misty veil, / That is to say, an unbearable pain grieves the optic nerve. / A fluid reddens the pupils, and thickened eyelids derange / The vision, and irritation distorts the eye's keenness. / The very pain invites the hands, and scratching fingers / Undo the relief they bring; for noxious is that touching / And it is even aggravating to the existing harm. / Visual power by this is weakened, and as it begins to be / Often done, the inner core of the eyelids itch, / And in the eye's sevenfold skin the fluid is infected. / He is in pain worse than one might credit / A man could feel; he bears in patience all the weariness / Of his bodily frame. And lest he seem not to bear with / A divinely sent affliction, he refuses to call in doctors." The clinical picture that emerges from these verses seems to me consistent with trachoma.

<sup>39</sup>Compas 77 [LP 37]: M. Bigaroni, 214/216.

taking care of his sickness."<sup>40</sup> On Francis's reluctance to accept medical treatment for himself, Professor Carlo Andresen has published a fine study full of acute observations.<sup>41</sup> Giulia Barone also addressed the subject in a short paper given at the 14<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Center for the Study of Medieval Spirituality, held in 1973 in Todi.<sup>42</sup> But it needs to be explored further in light of all the evidence provided by the early sources. Since I cannot do this now because it would take me beyond my allotted time, I would at least like to anticipate what I think a study on the subject might yield.

Andresen is certainly correct to stress the rigorous ascetic ideal to which Francis aspired in imitating the poor and crucified Christ: the perfect subjection of body to soul in the service of God, by which the body truly becomes the soul's brother.<sup>43</sup> But his position as charismatic and juridic head of the fraternity gave him an innate and vivid awareness that he was the visible *forma minorum*.<sup>44</sup> Thus he feared lavishing too much care on Brother Ass<sup>45</sup> by defiling it with medicines. Moreover, a deep faith in God as all-present and at work in him had always been a cornerstone of his religious spirit.<sup>46</sup> Recourse to medical treatment implied a desire to place obstacles to

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 216; Vian, 297-99.

<sup>41</sup>C. Andresen, "Asketische Forderung und Krankheit bei Franz von Assisi," in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (Lipsia) 79 (1954) 129-40; see my summary in *BibFranc* XI (1954-1957) n. 370.

<sup>42</sup>G. Barone, "S. Francesco, s. Bonaventura e la malattia," in *S. Bonaventura francescano*, Todi 1974, 269-78.

<sup>43</sup>C. Andresen, "Asketische Forderung," passim. "As long as the body is ready to be used for the work of asceticism and pious exercise, it is addressed as 'brother' and should behave toward others in sympathetic brotherhood" (135).

<sup>44</sup>These words are applied to Francis in the second *Antiphona ad Benedictus et Magnificat*, which is attributed to Cardinal Thomas of Capua (before 1185-1239): "Salve, sancte pater, patriae lux, forma minorum" (AF X, 387; see A. Ghinato, *Il buon esempio francescano*, Rome 1951; K. Esser, "Die endgültige Regel der Minderen Brüder im Lichte der neuesten Forschung," in Idem - E. Grau (ed.), *Franziskanisches Leben. Gesammelte Dokumente*, Werl in Westphalia. 1968, 83.

<sup>45</sup>See O. Schmucki, "Gli ultimi due anni di san Francesco," 231 n. 71.

<sup>46</sup>As is brilliantly shown by S. López, "Dios mio y todas mis cosas. Transcendencia y exclusividad de Dios en san Francisco," in *Verdad y Vida* 28 (1970) 47-82.

God's work in his life in the form of earthly cares and anxieties.<sup>47</sup> There was the danger of allowing his heart to turn away from the one thing necessary. He was also afraid of violating his beloved Lady Poverty through medicines, many of which must have been expensive, given the precious stones called for in the recipes that have come down to us.<sup>48</sup> Finally, many passages in the sources show that Francis bore his illnesses in close union with Christ crucified; he regarded them as his sisters in praising God. By resigning himself to God's will, even amid the most acute and persistent pain, he hoped to share in the martyrdom he so desired. It is this aspect that stands out in the conclusion of the oft-recalled passage of the compiler:

Every day he meditated on the humility and example of the Son of God; he experienced much compassion and much sweetness from this, and in the end, what was bitter to his body, was changed into sweetness. The sufferings and bitterness which Christ endured for us were a constant subject of affliction to him and a cause for interior and external mortification; consequently, he was totally unconcerned with his own sufferings.<sup>49</sup>

His mystical suffering with Christ crucified not only enabled him to bear his own sufferings more patiently, but even, as it were, to forget them. I see no need to stop to emphasize the great value of this testimony for religious psychology and the history of devotion to the passion of Christ in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>47</sup>C. Andresen, "Asketische Forderung," 188f. I have gathered some of the evidence and commented on it in my study: "Mentis silentium." Il programma contemplativo nell'ordine francescano primitivo," in *Lau* 14 (1973) 199-204 ("Il silenzio mentale"). [English tr. by I. McCormick in *Greyfriars Review* 4:2 (1990) 35-71.]

<sup>48</sup>See, for example, a recipe mentioned by Thomas of Cantimpré (*Liber de natura rerum*, lib. I, n. 33, ed.cit., 36 ll. 20-22): "To reduce the chills before the onset, give the antidote with warm water mixed with 1 dram of powdered lapis lazuli." See the monograph by A. Pazzini, *Le pietre preziose nella storia della medicina e nella leggenda*, Rome [1939].

<sup>49</sup>Compas 77 [LP 37]: M. Bigaroni, 216; Vian, 299. See O. Schmucki, *Leiden Christi*, 376-79 ("Die Leiden der letzten Krankheit als Ersatz für das Martyrium"). K. Haines, "The Death of St. Francis," 30f, shows how many times the great saints of the Middle Ages refused the help of doctors.

### Reemergence of the Illnesses during the Last Two Years of His Life

The period between Francis's reception of the stigmata and his death is marked by a gradual worsening of his illnesses and a rapid decline in his physical strength. Given his utter reserve about this personal experience, we cannot be sure whether the five wounds showed the same characteristics when they first appeared on LaVerna as they did when seen by many witnesses after his death.<sup>50</sup> But several things point to the fact that in their permanent state they resembled nails, except for the wound in his side which "frequently bled" according to Celano.<sup>51</sup> Even though the sources do not expressly say so, these "signs of martyrdom"<sup>52</sup> certainly must have been a source of constant and terrible pain.

After returning from LaVerna to Assisi "he incurred a very severe infirmity of the eyes," as Celano says.<sup>53</sup> He should have said, more accurately, that the trachoma Francis had contracted in the Mideast became acute. Understandably, the brothers around him insisted that he allow a doctor to see him; but Francis, "with his noble spirit fixed on heaven and wanting only to depart and to be with Christ, refused entirely to do this."<sup>54</sup> Then Brother Elias, "whom Francis had chosen to take the place of a mother in his own regard,"<sup>55</sup> compelled him under obedience not to refuse medical treatment but to accept it "in the name of the Son of God."

Professor Andresen, in his study mentioned earlier, has shown how hard it was for Francis to obey this command. To him it must have seemed like a surrender of his ideals of total abandonment to Providence and perfect brotherhood between soul and body.<sup>56</sup> It would be too much to expect a medieval hagiographer to allow us to glimpse the dramatic inner struggle

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<sup>50</sup>I refer readers to what I said in my study: "De s. Francisci stigmatum susceptione," 34 (1964) 323-38 ("Stigmatum sancti Francisci verisimilis forma").

<sup>51</sup>1Cel 95.

<sup>52</sup>1Cel 113.

<sup>53</sup>1Cel 98.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>C. Andresen, "Asketische Forderung," 137-40.



Francis inevitably experienced. Celano simply states the outcome: "The holy father then graciously acquiesced and humbly complied with the words of his adviser."<sup>57</sup> The intervention of Cardinal Hugolino surely helped him overcome any final reluctance to accept medical help. Knowing Francis to be "very necessary and very useful to the Church of God," the cardinal "admonished the holy father to take care of himself and not to discard what was necessary in his infirmity, lest his neglect should be imputed to him as something sinful rather than as something meritorious."<sup>58</sup>

The *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius* is a late source and must be used with extreme caution. Yet it may have preserved a historically reliable recollection when it says that the cardinal protector wrote to Francis, ordering him to go to Rieti for the care of his eyes. The statement that Francis, before he set out for the Rieti Valley, went to San Damiano to visit and comfort St. Clare also seems plausible: "And the first night after he went to San Damiano, his eyes became so much worse that he could not see any light."<sup>59</sup> The inability to tolerate light mentioned here is one of the symptoms that accompany trachoma. We learn from the *Assisi Compilation*<sup>60</sup> that it was "very cold" when the attack occurred, in other words, December 1224 or January 1225.

According to the same compiler, Francis found hospitality "near San Damiano," probably in a house used by the friars assigned to take care of the spiritual and material needs of the Poor Clares.<sup>61</sup> Because of his severe

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<sup>57</sup>1Cel 98.

<sup>58</sup>1Cel 101; see also Compas 83 [LP 42]: M. Bigaroni, 230: "Seeing that the saint continued, as he had always done, treating his body harshly and refusing to have his eyes treated, and in view of the fact that he was beginning to lose his eyesight, the bishop of Ostia, who later became pope, admonished him with much love and compassion: 'Brother, it is not good to refuse to have your eyes treated, for your health and your life are very useful, both to yourself and to others. You who have always sympathized with the ills of your brothers, should not have such cruelty toward yourself, for this sickness is serious and you are in a great and evident need. That is why I command you to get relief and submit to treatment.'"

<sup>59</sup>*Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius*, c. 21, n. 1-3, ed. P. Sabatier, Paris 1902, 71f.

<sup>60</sup>Compas 83 [LP 42]: M. Bigaroni, 232.

<sup>61</sup>See O. Schmucki, "Speculum s. Francisci in s. Clara eiusque spiritu

intolerance to light, in one of the rooms they built him a little cell of rushes in order to guarantee absolute darkness. Other important details about the story of his illnesses can be gathered from the account in the same source. The patient lay in the dark, confined to his little cell for more than fifty days, unable to bear the light of the sun or the light of the fire: "His eyes caused him so much pain, day and night, that at night he could scarcely rest or sleep, which was very bad for him and greatly aggravated the sickness of his eyes and his other infirmities."<sup>62</sup> These last words reflect the actual experience of whoever was taking care of him.

Brother Elias visited him, and seeing him suffer so much, ordered him again to submit to treatment. He also said that he wanted to be present when the doctor began the treatment, "in order to see to it that he received the proper care and to comfort him."<sup>63</sup> But the winter weather and the acute state of his illness made it inadvisable to move him to Rieti. Exactly when the long and painful journey to that city took place is impossible to say. The compiler gives only a vague indication of time: "When the preferable season for eye treatment was approaching,"<sup>64</sup> in other words, when it was less cold. On the other hand, it must have been prior to January 31, 1226. Thomas of Celano expressly notes that Francis was received with special respect by Pope Honorius III and the cardinals, especially Cardinal Hugolino.<sup>65</sup>

It is interesting for the history of medicine to read what the *Assisi Compilation* has to say about how a man that sick was transported.<sup>66</sup> Although the illness had become much worse, they placed him in a saddle on horseback, supporting him on two sides during the journey. The following detail indicates the presence of an eyewitness: "His head was covered with a large hood that the brothers had made for him. Since he could not bear

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filiabus relucens," in *CF* 41 (1971) 404.

<sup>62</sup>Compas 83 [LP 43]: M. Bigaroni, 232; Vian, 313.

<sup>63</sup>Compas 83 [LP 42]: 232.

<sup>64</sup>Compas 86 [LP 46]: 246.

<sup>65</sup>1Cel 99; for the time when the curia resided in Rieti, see *ibid.*, 76 n. 4. For questions about the time and place when Francis composed the *Canticle of the Creatures*, see R. Brown, "Appendix VIII: The Canticle of Brother Sun," in O. Englebert, *Saint Francis of Assisi: A Biography*, Chicago [1965], 441-58. See also n. 164 below.

<sup>66</sup>Compas 86 [LP 46]: M. Bigaroni, 246; Vian, 331.

daylight on account of the great pain his illness caused him, he wore a woolen and linen band over his eyes sewed to his hood." Upon arriving in Rieti, the group headed for the hermitage of Fonte Colombo. The compiler gives a plausible explanation of why Brother Elias—no doubt on the advice of Hugolino—sent him to Rieti: "To consult a physician of that city, an eye specialist."<sup>67</sup> Celano says the same thing but adds a further detail: "But it happened that, when many were coming to help Francis with their medicines and no remedy was found, he went to the city of Rieti where a man was said to live who was very skillful in curing this disease."<sup>68</sup>

Thus while lying ill near San Damiano, Francis was unsuccessfully treated by more than one doctor. The fact that he showed no improvement seems to have led Hugolino and Elias to turn to a doctor in Rieti, a rather famous ophthalmologist. Much has been written about this doctor's name and professional qualifications, not always with due regard for historical fact. To say that he was an "eye specialist"<sup>69</sup> certainly goes too far. Ophthalmology did not exist as a special branch of medicine before the end of the thirteenth century, even though treatment of the eye had advanced considerably with the School of Salerno.<sup>70</sup>

In fact this was a general physician with special knowledge and experience in the field of ophthalmology. Unfortunately, Sacchetti's careful archival research on the relationship between the city of Rieti and St. Francis<sup>71</sup> has not led us to the identity of this man. Documents that go back to between 1203 and 1233 speak of a "Maestro Nicola," a municipal doctor of Rieti. But he is not hailed for any special ability in curing diseases of the eye. On the other hand, Sacchetti absolutely denies that at that time such a small city (its population was about 3,000 or 3,500 at most) would have enjoyed the permanent services of another doctor.<sup>72</sup> For this reason he

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 246.

<sup>68</sup>1Cel 99.

<sup>69</sup>We find this, for example, in Bigaroni's translation, *Compilatio assisiensis*, 247.

<sup>70</sup>See A. Pazzini, *La medicina nella storia, nell'arte, nel costume*, II, Milan 1969, 365a.

<sup>71</sup>A. Sacchetti Sassetti, *Anecdota franciscana reatina*, Potenza 1926, 40-44.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 34 and 69.

maintains that "the famous ophthalmologist who operated on St. Francis...was a member of the papal court."<sup>73</sup> Apart from the anachronism of the term "ophthalmologist," we must remember that the papal curia left Rieti at the end of January 1226, and that operations at that time were performed by surgeons or charlatans. It is not impossible that a surgeon especially skilled in treating eye diseases, perhaps someone from the neighboring Umbrian towns of Preci or Norcia,<sup>74</sup> practiced his profession in the area of Rieti, and that his name and other information about his activity have not come down to us.

With regard to the treatment to which Francis was subjected by various doctors, Celano gives some details worth mentioning:

Because the disease had already increased so much, for any remedy at all there was required the most skillful advice and the harshest treatment. Thus it happened that his head was cauterized in several places, his veins opened, plasters put on, and eye salves applied; but he made no progress and seemed only to get worse.<sup>75</sup>

Joseof Strebel lists a whole series of ingredients used by doctors at that time to prepare salves with which they attempted to cure eye diseases.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>74</sup>S. Ciancarelli, *Francesco di Pietro Bernardone*, 105-14: "According to medieval practice, doctors probably had to order the procedure to be done by an itinerant surgeon, one of the many who frequented Rieti and its valley and who came from the neighboring towns of Norcia, Preci and Cerreto in Umbria. In Borgo Preci, site of the first famous Benedictine abbey of San Eutizio, where there lived monks with a knowledge of medicine, a practical school of surgical therapy would later arise" (105/107). See also A. Fabbi, *La scuola chirurgica de Preci*, Preci (Perugia) 1974, which I was not able to consult; see the review in *Rivista della storia della Chiesa in Italia* 29 (1975) 595f. For the history of surgery, see, among others: H Schipperges, *5000 Jahre Chirurgie. Magie-Handwerk-Wissenschaft*, Stuttgart [1967].

<sup>75</sup>1 Cel 101.

<sup>76</sup>J. Strebel, *Kulturbistorisches aus der Geschichte der Ophthalmologie*, 258f. For a better idea of the eye salves and plasters used at the time, allow me to cite some recipes from Thomas of Cantimpré (*Liber de natura rerum*, lib. I, n. 6, ed.cit., 19-21): "Pain in the eyes is caused by blood, so that blood appears around the whites of the eyes; the veins in the corners are puffed up, and the veins in the forehead are swollen. Blood-letting in the neck is an effective remedy; at night apply a piece of soft cloth or

We learn from the compiler that when the surgeon arrived to visit Francis in his hermitage, he found one eye worse than the other. For this reason he told him that he wanted to cauterize "his cheek up to the eyebrow in order to relieve the most affected eye." But Francis felt that he should postpone the operation until the arrival of Brother Elias, who had been detained by his duties as vicar general.

In the end [Francis] was obliged to give in, but he did so especially out of obedience to the lord bishop of Ostia and to the minister general. He found it bitterly repugnant to be so concerned about himself; that is why he wanted the decision to come from his minister.<sup>77</sup>

Both Thomas of Celano and the compiler describe the cauterization in great detail and with substantial agreement.<sup>78</sup> Celano uses the correct term "surgeon" for the person who did the procedure. What stands out above all in the vivid account is Francis's nature mysticism. He addresses Brother Fire as if he were a person, asking him to be "courteous" to him in that hour. The passage also reveals his astonishing will power: "The [glowing] iron was plunged into the tender flesh with a hiss, and it was gradually drawn from the ear to the eyebrow in its cauterizing."<sup>79</sup> The unbelievable endurance of a sick man in such a weakened state left the surgeon speechless. After the

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silk soaked in a mixture of ground endive and egg white.... Also milk from a woman who is nursing a male child, mixed with rose water and used as eye drops.... Beware of very bright air. Involuntary tearing is a sign of too much aqueous humor in the eyes. The head should be purged with paullinia. Bathe the eyes with water in which lentils have been boiled or with warm rain water; or make a compress of mastic and aloes.... For watery eyes, use a mixture of equal weights of rue juice and honey. Eyes that have been anointed never feel pain.... Against red eyes and painful secretions: first you should make a compress of powdered myrrh, barley flour and egg white, then make a plaster over the entire forehead. When you have done this, take an egg and cook it over a very hot fire until it no longer runs and is very hard. Then, having removed the shell, immediately expose the yolk and place a piece of rock salt where the yolk was so that it melts from the heat of the egg. Then press the egg and melted rock salt through a cloth and use the liquid produced as a substitute for eye salve...."

<sup>77</sup>Compas 86 [LP 46]: M. Bigaroni 246/248; Vian, 333. On the concept of *solicitudines*, see n. 47 above.

<sup>78</sup>2Cel 166; Compas 86 [LP 48]: M. Bigaroni, 248-52.

<sup>79</sup>2Cel 166.



cauterization Francis turned to him and said: "If my flesh is not sufficiently burned, burn it again."<sup>80</sup> According to Professor Ciancarelli, the phenomenon of spontaneous analgesia as described by Francis to the friars (who had fled out of compassion) can be fully explained by natural causes.<sup>81</sup> There was certainly no question here of the "soporific sponges" used already in 1150 by surgeons from Bologna.<sup>82</sup>

Regarding the therapeutic value of cauterization, authors who have studied Francis's illnesses differ considerably in their opinions.<sup>83</sup> Thus we must be all the more careful in weighing modern interpretations of what surgeons intended to accomplish by this operation. We can hear the voice of the companions who were caring for Francis in the compiler's statement: "The burn was a long one; it extended from the ear to the eyebrow. For years a fluid accumulated night and day in the eyes; and that is why the doctor thought it well to treat the veins from the ear to the eyebrow."<sup>84</sup> Thus the procedure was meant to draw out the inflammatory liquid carried to the eye by the afferent vessels. Vincent of Beauvais (1184/94 - ca. 1264) says the same thing in his chapter on cauterization:

When it is necessary to treat by cauterizing in places where there is excessive harmful fluid, drying and burning agents are not enough to drive out the fluid; hence fire must be applied, for its end is to dry and to burn.... Extreme putrefaction and an overabundance of fluid render such treatment necessary.<sup>85</sup>

According to the modern ophthalmologist Santoni: "In trachoma large quantities of infectious material are produced by the eye and eliminated with the tears and secretions, which are thus the principal source of infection."<sup>86</sup> In the second stage—which is called conspicuous or

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>S. Ciancarelli, *Francesco di Pietro Bernardone*, 111.

<sup>82</sup>H. Schipperges, *5000 Jahre Chirurgie*, 41.

<sup>83</sup>I refer to this in my study: "Les maladies," 27-32.

<sup>84</sup>Compas 86 [LP 48]: M. Bigaroni, 250/252.

<sup>85</sup>Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum doctrinale*, lib. XII, c. 143, ed.cit., col. 1165CD and ibid., lib. XIII, c. 19: *De Phlegmate*, col. 1181f.

<sup>86</sup>A. Santoni, *Oculista*, 263.

generalized trachoma—"the conjunctiva generally secretes a mucous material, but in some stages there may be striking symptoms of catarrh with abundant secretions that sometimes contain pus."<sup>87</sup> While not denying the presence of severe pain "which extends into the area of the first branch of the trigeminal nerve" in cases where the corneal membrane occurs as a complication,<sup>88</sup> it seems clear to me that the surgeon's main objective would be to block the flow of the pussy secretion into the eyes.

As to whether the extreme remedy of cauterization was indicated, not even all the doctors at that time agreed. Some thought the procedure was totally useless: "This proved to be correct, for it brought him no relief. Another doctor pierced both ears to no avail."<sup>89</sup> Josef Strebel believes that in piercing the two earlobes the surgeon correctly realized that the preauricular gland is connected to the eyelid. He also intended to halt the inflammatory discharge into the eyeballs.<sup>90</sup> Following a different line of clinical interpretation, Ciancarelli says: "He [the surgeon] evidently intended to repair the damage caused by the useless cauterizations, reducing the swelling that had spread to his entire face due to the blockage of many veins and, inevitably, the lymphatic vessels."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 272. Here is a clinical description of the eyes of someone suffering from trachoma (ibid., 268): "Swelling of the eyelids with ptosis [drooping of the eyelids]; conjunctival chemosis [edematous swelling], redness, thickening and velvety appearance of the palpebral conjunctiva; superficial spotty keratitis [inflammation of the cornea]; formation of pussy secretions, at times are abundant; swelling of the preauricular ganglion. The subject experiences photophobia and pain. After a short time, the typical trachomatous membrane appears on the cornea, often accompanied by the presence of nodules." See also n. 38 above.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 277. Following the description by a modern author (St. Piat)—almost as though it were an early source—Ciancarelli (*Francesco*, 108f) says: "In my opinion, he was suffering at the time from glaucoma, a disease characterized by frequent and painful hypertensive relapses at the expense of the eyes, and generalized pain in the head." According to the monograph by L. Bardelli (*Il Tracoma*, 77-91), glaucoma is not one of the complications of trachoma. To suggest hypotheses when the sources are clear is not, I think, a sound principle of historical interpretation.

<sup>89</sup>Compas 86 [LP 48]: M. Bigaroni, 252; Vian, 337.

<sup>90</sup>J. Strebel, *Kulturhistorisches*, 257.

<sup>91</sup>S. Ciancarelli, *Francesco*, 113.

The treatment was such a failure that it must have confirmed Francis's belief that such concerns were useless.<sup>92</sup> Thus it is hard to explain why in the spring of 1226 Brother Elias expected a patient more dead than alive to undergo another exhausting trip to Siena "to find a remedy for his eye trouble."<sup>93</sup> We have no contemporary documents that prove the existence of a Siennese doctor especially skilled in treating eye diseases.<sup>94</sup> Still it is likely that during his frequent journeys to visit the provinces of the Order, the vicar general had heard tell of a surgeon in the field of ophthalmology who worked in that city. During the endless journey that led the party through Narni, Todi, Orvieto and Acquapendente, Francis was accompanied by a doctor friend who was "deeply attached to the Order."<sup>95</sup> When he arrived in Campiglia d'Orcia, Francis and his traveling companions saw the famous apparition of three women "so similar in stature, age, and appearance that you might think that a threefold matter had been perfected by a single form."<sup>96</sup> Assuming that this episode is historically reliable, it seems we must conclude that in the meantime Francis had lost his intolerance to light and regained his vision, at least in part.

In April, while lying in the hermitage of Alberino near Siena, "Francis began to be gravely ill in all the rest of his body; and, with his stomach racked by a long-standing illness and his liver infected, he vomited

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<sup>92</sup>C. Andresen, "Asketische Forderung," 139: "Although he was totally obedient to Elias and Hugo (!) of Ostia, Francis regarded the efforts on his behalf as unnecessary 'hullabaloo' and 'obstacles' to his ascetical striving for perfection. Anyone who reads the accounts of the ever new yet unsuccessful medical procedures, will no doubt be able to understand such a reaction on the part of the saint."

<sup>93</sup>2Cel 93.

<sup>94</sup>See n. 2 above. Henry of Avranches (*Legenda versificata*, lib. XIII, vv. 30-37, in *AF* X, 482) adds a new element that seems to arise not from new historical information but from his poetic imagination: "Since the aforementioned physician is unable to produce / Any remedy, everything he thought up having been tried, / Of yet another doctor there is rumor in town, / One that was practised in aiding eyes that were ailing; / Prudent he was, urbane, senior in years, and dwelt in urban / Siena. To him, also, Francis goes; but none of his cures / Will relieve the pain. Suffering instead his entire body / Pervades, and produces the symptoms that accompany death."

<sup>95</sup>2Cel 93.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

much blood, so that he appeared to be approaching death."<sup>97</sup> The compiler fills in Celano's clinical picture with a few details.<sup>98</sup> This attack is said to have taken place in the same cell, namely, in an individual hut in the enclosed hermitage near Siena,<sup>99</sup> where he had once explained to a benefactor of the Order the requirements of poverty when building dwellings for the friars.<sup>100</sup> "He had an attack of vomiting one night due to his stomach illness. The strain was so violent that he began to spit blood, and this continued throughout the night and into the morning." The brothers were terrified: "Seeing his weakness and the pains caused by his weakness, [they] thought he was going to die."<sup>101</sup> While dictating the so-called Little Testament, Francis is reported to have said: "Because of my weakness and the pain of my sickness I am not strong enough to speak."<sup>102</sup>

The grave symptoms described by the biographers unfortunately lend themselves to differing interpretations.<sup>103</sup> Modern doctors who have examined the case generally say that he suffered from a gastric ulcer, a result of his frail and listless constitution, constant malnutrition, and the unusual psychological and physical stress suffered in his mystical and apostolic life. This led to a sudden laceration of the inner walls of his stomach. Rupture of one or more blood vessels in the stomach wall would have caused the tremendous loss of blood mentioned by the sources.<sup>104</sup> Taking into account

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<sup>97</sup>1Cel 105.

<sup>98</sup>Compas 59 [LP 17]: M. Bigaroni, 150/152; Vian, 187/189.

<sup>99</sup>See O. Schmucki, "Secretum solitudinis," 45-50.

<sup>100</sup>Compas 58 [LP 14-16]: M. Bigaroni, 144-51.

<sup>101</sup>Compas 59 [LP 17]: 150; Vian, 187. Perhaps the brothers were frightened by the unexpected fainting that probably followed the hemorrhage; see A. Bournet, *S. François*, 124; L. Segatore - G.A. Poli, *Dizionario medico*, 1086b. See also Henry of Avranches, *Legenda versificata*, lib. XIII, vv. 38-40, in *AF X*, 483: "The liver fails, the stomach swells, and by dint of both / Ills, blood, nature's seat and food digester, / Is vomited, the veins within the diaphragm being ruptured."

<sup>102</sup>Vian, 189; see also K. Esser, *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi. Neue textkritische Edition*, Grottaferrata 1976, 458f ("Testamentum Senis factum").

<sup>103</sup>A. Bournet, *S. François*, 123 n. 3; L. Segatore - G.A. Poli, *Dizionario medico*, 1253.

<sup>104</sup>See S. Ciancarelli, *Francesco*, 125-27; Th. Cotellet, *Saint François*, 181f.

other symptoms mentioned by the biographers (which I will discuss later), Lorenzo Gualino suggests that this was "an actual malignant tumor, a cancer of the stomach," which would explain the gastric bleeding.<sup>105</sup> Strebel's explanation is rather unusual. Sticking to his hypothesis of secondary glaucoma resulting from tuberculosis iridocyclitis, he thinks the spitting of blood was caused by pulmonary tuberculosis influenced by glaucoma.<sup>106</sup>

I agree instead with Edward F. Hartung that the easiest and most satisfactory explanation of the pathology manifested at Siena is a recurring malarial infection.<sup>107</sup> In light of the biopathographic data available to scholars for critical examination, I think it very probable that Francis contracted chronic malaria, or more precisely, a malaria whose effects were chronic. Since he did not care for himself and remained in malarial regions, he inevitably suffered "further bites from malaria-causing mosquitoes, which led to re-infections." Of necessity the infection stabilized as the disease took its chronic and progressive course, with "permanent lesions at the expense of those internal organs where the parasites became stably lodged.... The liver and spleen—permanently enlarged and hardened—become 'biological reservoirs' for the parasites that cause chronic malaria, which manifests this triad of symptoms: *hepatomegaly* (enlarged liver); *splenomegaly* (enlarged spleen); and secondary hypochromic *anemia*, which often becomes progressively worse and which gives the patient's skin a characteristic bluish-grey color. In the most advanced cases, there are additional symptoms: serious and progressive weight loss, profound asthenia (weakness), breathlessness, swelling in the legs due to edema...."<sup>108</sup> Other attempts at

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<sup>105</sup>L. Gualino, *L'Uomo d'Assisi*, 105. A similar opinion was offered by the medical colleagues with whom N. Tamassia spoke: *S. Francesco d'Assisi e la sua leggenda*, Padua and Verona 1906, 180: "Disease of the stomach and liver is accompanied by the vomiting of blood, a clear sign...that the cancer of the liver has spread to the stomach."

<sup>106</sup>J. Strebel, *Kulturhistorisches*, 256f.

<sup>107</sup>E. F. Hartung, "St. Francis and medieval medicine," 88b: "The hematemesia described is also characteristic of this stage of the disease," that is to say, the malignant stage of malaria. "We have seen that all of Francis's illnesses, with the exception of the eye malady, may be explained with good reason on the basis of quartan malaria of a chronic malignant type" (90b).

<sup>108</sup>L. Segatore - G.A. Poli, *Dizionario medico*, 720f. See also M. Giordano, *Patologia, parassitologia ed igiene dei paesi caldi*, Rome 1950, 410-20 ("Malaria cronica -



interpretation fail to explain the "infected liver" mentioned by Celano in connection with Francis's illness in Tuscany, as well as the general comment that he "suffered a great deal for many years in his stomach, spleen and liver."<sup>109</sup>

At the time of the critical night in Siena, Francis's physical deterioration had already reached the point of malarial cachexia, "an extreme decline in an organism's general state of nutrition, sanguinification and strength."<sup>110</sup> Perhaps this explains the protracted vomiting of blood, since chronic malaria can produce symptoms of internal bleeding.<sup>111</sup>

As soon as he heard the alarming news that Francis was worsening, Brother Elias hurried to his bedside from the distant place where he was. A sign of the deep trust that existed between the saint and his vicar general can be seen in the fact that his arrival caused an immediate (though temporary) improvement.<sup>112</sup> We have no information about how the delicate job of moving the patient was accomplished; they probably chose the road through Rapolano Terme and Foiano della Chiana. Celano says only that Francis grew worse after the journey: "Arriving [at Le Celle near Cortona], he remained there for some time; and while he was there, his abdomen began to swell, and his legs and feet too, and the ailment of his stomach began to grow worse and worse, so that he could hardly take any food."<sup>113</sup> These symptoms, too, correspond perfectly to those of malarial cachexia. Besides the enlargement of the spleen and liver, "the patient has a repugnance for food, especially for meat; there is dyspepsia, nausea, sporadic vomiting....

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cachessia malarica"); P. Tolentino, *Malattie infettive*, 934f. Obviously I do not intend to provide readers with a full clinical bibliography; I will limit myself to referring, by way of example, to recognized and serious treatises. English studies are mentioned by Haines, "The Death of St. Francis," 41 n. 113.

<sup>109</sup>Compas 119 [LP 95]; M. Bigaroni 380; see also *ibid.*, 81 [LP 40]: 226; 2Cel 96 and 130.

<sup>110</sup>L. Segatore - G.A. Poli, *ibid.*, 196a.

<sup>111</sup>M. Giordano, *Patologia*, 410f, 420: "In some cases complications due to hemorrhaging can be observed: gingivitis, hematemesis, melena, purpura etc."

<sup>112</sup>"Upon hearing this, Brother Elias hurried to him with great haste from a distant place. Upon his arrival, the holy father recovered so much that, leaving that city, he went with Elias to Le Celle near Cortona" (1Cel 105).

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*

Hemorrhages, nosebleeds, bloody urine etc. also occur from time to time, increasing the anemia. In addition to ascites [accumulation of fluid in the abdomen], there may also be more or less extensive edema, even to the point of anasarca [general accumulation of fluid]."<sup>114</sup>

At Francis's explicit request, Brother Elias made all the necessary arrangements for transporting him to Assisi.<sup>115</sup> But since war between Perugia and Assisi "had flared up again at that time,"<sup>116</sup> the group of friars—besides Elias himself, Francis was accompanied by the brother infirmarians and perhaps even the doctor friend—certainly had to avoid the enemy city and chose a detour. Perhaps they went through Mercatale, Umbertide, Gubbio, Valfabbrica and Assisi.<sup>117</sup> Again we would like to know how Brother Elias solved the practical problem of transporting a man so gravely ill over roads that were anything but smooth—whether it was on a saddled mount or on a stretcher carried by friars or two horses.

### Final Illnesses and Death of St. Francis

Upon his return from Tuscany, perhaps in May or June of 1226, Francis was taken first to St. Mary of the Angels. But later—certainly before the winter cold reached its peak—the brothers took him to Bagnara, which is situated on a hill about 7 kilometers from Nocera Umbra. There a house for the brothers had recently been built.<sup>118</sup> The doctor, who probably advised Francis to avoid the extreme summer heat of the Spoleto plain, was thinking of the better climate in that place. It is hard to say just how long this change of climate lasted, since the compiler's words, "And he lived there for a certain time," are not exactly a model of clarity. But instead of a hoped-for improvement, Francis's stay there led to an unexpected worsening. His legs

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<sup>114</sup>F. Reo, *Malattie predominanti nei paesi caldi e temperati*, Turin 1897, 335.

<sup>115</sup>1Cel 105.

<sup>116</sup>A. Fortini, *Nova vita*, II, 463.

<sup>117</sup>See G. de Agostini's map of Umbria in the volume by P. Sella, *Rationes decimarum Italiae nei secoli XIII e XIV*, Vatican City 1952.

<sup>118</sup>Compas 96 [LP 59]: M. Bigaroni, 278; see also *ibid.*, 279 n. 182, and *Guida d'Italia* by the Touring Club Italiano, *Umbria*, Milan 1950, 221f.

and feet began to show signs of dropsy: "But because his feet and legs had begun to swell due to his dropsy, his condition worsened."<sup>119</sup>

Ciancarelli, true to his clinical interpretation, strongly maintains that Francis was suffering from edema caused by hunger "due to the scarcity or lack of specific foods such as meat, eggs, fish."<sup>120</sup> Edema, which is "a puffiness or swelling of the tissues caused by an abnormal amount of serous liquid,"<sup>121</sup> is "merely a secondary clinical sign of other fundamental pathological conditions."<sup>122</sup> Depending on the cavity in which the plasma discharge collects, various medical terms are used to describe it. In this case, where the serous liquid is present in the cavities of the joints, the edema is called hydrarthrosis or articular dropsy. But no doubt Francis also showed signs of anasarca, a generalized accumulation of fluid throughout the body.<sup>123</sup>

What we know from the sources leads us to believe that the origin of his dropsy should not be attributed to mechanical causes such as cardiac decompensation or a tumor. Rather it was a disease-related cause, "consisting in alterations of the vasal wall,"<sup>124</sup> owing, among other things, to an ailment of the liver. But according to modern and recognized medical experts, "there is an etiological link between malaria and cirrhosis...and, directly or indirectly, malaria can be a cause or a concomitant cause of cirrhosis of the liver."<sup>125</sup> Medieval medicine already knew this, and Vincent of Beauvais is a witness when he writes:

All [dropsies] are the result of long illness. Dropsies occur because of prolonged tension in the diaphragm, and in those suffering pain caused by the liver or spleen, in those afflicted with gout, and from drinking large

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<sup>119</sup>Compas 96 [LP 59]: 278.

<sup>120</sup>S. Ciancarelli, *Francesco*, 128-30, 128.

<sup>121</sup>L. Segatore - G.A. Poli, *Dizionario medico*, 379a.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 602a.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 602a, 597f, 74b.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 602a.

<sup>125</sup>M. Giordano, *Patologia*, 417.

quantities of water during attacks of prolonged quotidian and quartan fevers.<sup>126</sup>

The people of Assisi were alarmed when they learned of the appearance of such troubling symptoms. The podestà, Berlingiero di Iacopo of Florence, sent a solemn delegation of knights to take Francis and escort him on the easy road which, even in the Middle Ages, linked Nocera and Assisi. The sad return, including the famous stop at Satriano, must have taken place around the end of the August.<sup>127</sup> It seems almost an act of fate that Francis's nomadic life, begun at St. Mary of the Angels when he heard the Gospel of the sending of the disciples, is not interrupted even during the last stage of his illnesses.

Since Guido II was away (he had gone on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Michael the Archangel on Mt. Gargano in Puglia<sup>128</sup>), Francis was housed in one of the rooms in the bishop's palace, where he could be treated more easily by the doctor or the infirmarians. Obviously, it was not Francis who made this arrangement but the civil authorities, who feared "that he might die during the night without their knowledge and that the brothers would secretly take his body away and bury it in another city. So they decided to keep a sharp lookout every night near the palace."<sup>129</sup>

The patient's clinical condition continued to grow worse: "Meanwhile, as his infirmity increased, all his bodily strength failed and, destitute of all his powers, he could not move himself at all."<sup>130</sup> Confined to bed by his "sister infirmities" and unable to move, Francis must have found it hard having to depend on the help of four close companions. These brothers, Angelo Tancredi, Rufino of Assisi, Leo, and either John de Laudibus or Masseo of Marignano, "tried with all vigilance, with all zeal, with all their will to foster the peace of mind of their blessed father, and they cared for the infirmity of his body, shunning no distress, no labors, that they

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<sup>126</sup>Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum doctrinale*, lib. XIV, c. 110, ed.cit., 1354d.

<sup>127</sup>Compas 96 [LP 59]: M. Bigaroni, 278-83; 2Cel 77. See. A. Fortini, *Nova vita*, II, 462-70.

<sup>128</sup>2Cel 220.

<sup>129</sup>Compas 99 [LP 64]: M. Bigaroni, 290-92; Vian, 23; see also 1Cel 108.

<sup>130</sup>1Cel 107.

might give themselves entirely to serving the saint."<sup>131</sup> What Francis reportedly said to the infirmarians "one night when the pain prevented him from sleeping," gives us an important clue as to his state of mind:

My dearest brothers and my little children, bear with joy the pain and fatigue that my infirmity causes you. The Lord will take the place of his poor servant to recompense you both in this world and in the next; he will credit you with the good works that you have to neglect in order to take care of me.<sup>132</sup>

The Franciscan sources are stingy when it comes to giving the name or personality of the doctors who treated Francis during his confinement. In the single case where the compiler mentions a certain doctor Bongiovanni of Arezzo "who was a close friend of blessed Francis,"<sup>133</sup> a number of hermeneutical problems arise. Arnaldo Fortini (whose starting point, however, is the text of the *Mirror of Perfection*<sup>134</sup>) maintains that a copyist mistakenly read "Bonus Ioannes de Areço" instead of "Bonus Ioannes Maraçonis" or "Maragonis." This man was a doctor and notary of Assisi, and archival documents referring to him are found from the years 1217-59. But such a major textual error—in itself rather unlikely—seems to be excluded absolutely in the older text of the *Assisi Compilation*, which beyond the shadow of a doubt reads: "Bonus Ioannes de civitate Aretii."<sup>135</sup> Ugo Viviani thinks that this Bongiovanni of Arezzo was the ophthalmologist who treated Francis's eye illnesses. He bases his conclusion on the fact that "the son and nephew (both doctors) of the saint's doctor, Bongiovanni of Arezzo, both cultivated a special love for ophthalmology, even writing treatises on the subject."<sup>136</sup> The names of the son and nephew are "Magister Michael de

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<sup>131</sup>ICel 102; for the identity of the brother infirmarians, see *ibid.*, 80 n. 1, and especially E. Grau, *Thomas von Celano. Leben und Wunder des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi*, Werl in Westphalia 1964, 173 nn. 98-101. The author believes (173 n. 101) that the brother in question might be Masseo rather than Brother John.

<sup>132</sup>Compas 86 [LP 47]: M. Bigaroni, 248; Vian, 333.

<sup>133</sup>Compas 100 [LP 65]: 294.

<sup>134</sup>A. Fortini, *Nova vita*, II, 539f; SP 122, 1, ed. P. Sabatier, Manchester 928, 342: "A doctor from Arezzo named John Buono."

<sup>135</sup>Compas 100 [LP 65]: M. Bigaroni, 294.

<sup>136</sup>U. Viviani, "Sulla identificazione dei vari medici di s. Francesco d'Assisi,"



Orto Aretinus" and "Bonus Ioannes de Orto Aretinus." The coincidence of names in contemporary documents from Arezzo and the *Assisi Compilation*, as well as the son's and nephew's interest in ophthalmology is attractive; but obviously this is no more than conjectural.

The text of the conversation between Francis and the doctor is either slightly corrupt or else something was known at the time that eludes us today. The patient says to his visitor: "What do you think, Finiatu, of my dropsy?"<sup>137</sup> Francis, recalling a text of the gospel that was especially dear to him, "No one is good but God alone" (Lk 18:19), avoided calling him by the title "good" which was reserved to God alone.<sup>138</sup> The simplest solution to the problem is offered by Codex Little, where we read "fin Johanni." <sup>139</sup> We should also note the insistence on his dropsy, which at the time seems to have been the center of everyone's attention.

The doctor, with the ability that is the mark of a skilled physician, avoided giving him an answer: "Brother, with the grace of God, all will be well."<sup>140</sup> But Francis recognized the ruse and insisted that he tell him the whole truth. "The Lord, by his grace and in his goodness, has so closely united me to himself that I am as happy to live as I am to die."<sup>141</sup> Seeing the sick man's great courage and determination, the doctor told him plainly: "Father, according to our medical science, your disease is incurable, and you will die either at the end of September or the fourth day of the Nones of October."<sup>142</sup> The answer makes it clear that the meeting took place in September. It is also clear that the accuracy of the second predicted date of

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in *Atti e memorie della Reale Accademia Petrarca di Lettere, Arti e Scienze*, n.s. 28-29 (1940) 221-34, especially 228f; see also A. Bournet, *S. François*, 125 n. 2.

<sup>137</sup>Compas 100 [LP 65]: M. Bigaroni, 294.

<sup>138</sup>Other codices speak of "Bem vengate" (various spellings); see P. Sabatier, ed.cit., 342 n. 6. Adopting this reading, A. Fortini (ibid., 540) maintains that Francis addressed the Assisi doctor with the name "of his paternal uncle, Benvegnate," in order to avoid the divine epithet "bonus."

<sup>139</sup>See P. Sabatier, ibid., and R.B. Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli sociorum s. Francisci*, Oxford 1970, 200 n. a.

<sup>140</sup>Compas 100 [LP 65]: M. Bigaroni, 294f.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., 294/296; Vian, 27/29.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid., 296.

death comes from the historical event itself. The doctor probably said: "Francis, you will die either at the end of this month or the beginning of the next." The compiler adds: "Then blessed Francis who was lying on his bed in an extremely weakened condition, extended his arms and raised his hands toward the Lord with great devotion and respect, crying out, his body and soul permeated with joy: 'Welcome, Sister Death!'"<sup>143</sup> Even death, "terrible and hateful to all,"<sup>144</sup> which for him is the gateway to glory, becomes his sister, and he receives it with words and gestures "like a welcome guest."<sup>145</sup> Due to his waning physical strength, he could not rise from his bed and kneel to give thanks to God, as he surely would have done in this deeply emotional moment, had he been able.

Around the end of September, sensing that the end was near, Francis reportedly asked the brothers present to "take him as quickly as possible [from the bishop's palace] to the place of St. Mary of the Portiuncula, for he wished to give back his soul to God in that place where...he first knew the way of truth perfectly."<sup>146</sup> Since "he could not have endured going on horseback, because it would have aggravated his very painful illness," he had them carry him on a stretcher.

Since those who were carrying him took the road that went past the hospital [San Salvatore delle Pareti], he told them to put the stretcher on the ground so that he would be facing Assisi. For all practical purposes he could no longer see by reason of his long and serious eye sickness.<sup>147</sup>

Francis had already declined to the point that he had to be carried on a stretcher. On the other hand, he could still raise his head and shoulders a little, perhaps with the support of one of the brother infirmarians. The detail given us by the compiler about the condition of Francis's eyes is important. The corneas had become more or less opaque as a result of the cicatrized trachoma, resulting in near-blindness.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup>Ibid.

<sup>144</sup>2Cel 217.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid.

<sup>146</sup>1Cel 108.

<sup>147</sup>Compas 5 [LP 99]: M. Bigaroni, 6-9; Vian, 73.

<sup>148</sup>See A. Santoni, *Oculista*, 276.

After a moving prayer to Christ on behalf of his beloved city,<sup>149</sup> Francis was carried to St. Mary of the Angels, where he was probably housed in a hut near the shrine of our Lady.<sup>150</sup> There, one night, he was "so weighed down with sickness and pain that it was almost impossible for him to rest or sleep."<sup>151</sup> The next morning—perhaps Friday, September 25—he blessed all the brothers present, whom he regarded as representing the whole Order. Then, mistakenly believing it was Thursday, he also wished to imitate the Last Supper. He asked them to read him the Gospel of the washing of the feet (Jn 13:1-15). "Then, he had breads brought in and he blessed them. Since he was too weak to break them himself, he had them broken by a brother, took the pieces and gave one to each of the brothers, recommending that they eat all of it."<sup>152</sup> I cannot do a complete analysis of the special implications of this text for an understanding of Francis's religious spirit.<sup>153</sup> Here I would simply point out that his hands had become so weak that he could no longer break a loaf of bread. On the other hand, the fact that he had lost all sense of time can be considered important.

Between Saturday, September 26, and October 3, Lady Jacoba Frangipane de' Settesoli of the Normanni family arrived at St. Mary of the Angels. She had come to visit her dying friend one last time. Obviously I will not be able to go into all the details provided us, more or less unanimously, by the compiler and Thomas of Celano.<sup>154</sup> I would merely like to stress the profoundly human element in the account. Sensing one last wish of Francis, the lady had brought with her "almonds, sugar or honey,

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<sup>149</sup>Compas 5 [LP 99]: 8f.

<sup>150</sup>See O. Schmucki, *Gli ultimi due anni*, 232 n. 78.

<sup>151</sup>Compas 22 [LP 117]: M. Bigaroni, 62.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid., 64. Note the acute psychological insight in the description of the blessing: "Then, beginning with one brother, he blessed them all.... He also blessed all those who were living in the Order or who were to enter it until the end of the world. He seemed to have compassion for himself because he could not see his sons and brothers before dying." I think Francis regretted not so much his near-blindness as the fact that he could not gather all the brothers of his Order to his bedside, since they were already scattered throughout Europe.

<sup>153</sup>See O. Schmucki, "Gli ultimi due anni," 234.

<sup>154</sup>Compas 8 [LP 101]: M. Bigaroni, 14-21; 3Cel 37-39 in *AF X*, 286f; see O. Schmucki, *ibid.*, 234f.

and other ingredients" to make for him once more the little cakes that the Romans call *mortariolum*.<sup>155</sup> "The lady made the cake for the holy father one day as he desired. But he hardly touched it, for with each day his body weakened from his great illnesses and death approached."<sup>156</sup> More from joy at her visit than from hunger, the dying man conquered his overwhelming nausea and tasted a little of the sweets. Seeing the rapid and steady decline of his physical strength, no one could doubt any longer that death was near.

In connection with the story of Francis's illnesses, we should also recall the episode of how one night he developed a craving for parsley. He called the brother cook and humbly asked him to get him some. But the brother objected that he had picked so much in the garden that it would be very hard to find any in daylight, much less in pitch darkness. Francis, who loved very much to see his sons obey promptly without questioning an order, asked him to bring him the first herbs he laid his hands on.

The brother went into the garden and picked the wild herbs which he first happened on though he could not see them, and he brought them into the house. The brothers looked at the wild herbs, turned them about carefully, and found among them some leafy and tender parsley. The saint ate a little of it and was much comforted.<sup>157</sup>

Codex Little<sup>158</sup> places this episode in the bishop's palace and adds another detail that seems credible to me. Francis is reported to have said:

I would like to be refreshed, brothers, and to eat something, if I can manage it.

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<sup>155</sup>Compas 8 [LP 101]: 16f; see Édouard d'Alençon, *Frère Jacqueline. Recherches historiques sur Jacqueline de Settesoli, l'amie de saint François*, Paris-Rome [1927], 26f n. 3: the confection *mortariolum* must be regarded as different from *mustacciuola*, whose name is derived from the Latin *mostaceum*. One author who depends entirely on this work is G.E. Lovrovich, *Jacopa dei Settesoli. Ai Terziari d'Italia nel 750° anniversario della morte di san Francesco*, [Marino 1976]; his work contains some illustrations that are of historical interest (pp. 2, 13).

<sup>156</sup>Compas 6 [LP 101]: M. Bigaroni, 20.

<sup>157</sup>2Cel 51.

<sup>158</sup>See A.G. Little, "Description of a Franciscan Manuscript, formerly in the Philipps Library, now in the possession of A.G. Little," in *CF*, I, Aberdeen 1914, 96f; R.B. Brooke, *Scripta Leonis*, 296-99.

His companions said to him: "What would you like to eat, father?"

If I might have some parsley perhaps I could eat a little bread with it.<sup>159</sup>

It is evident from the whole account that the plant in question was *Petroselinum hortense frondosum*, a member of the *Umbelliferae* family. This aromatic plant is used as a condiment and medicine; medieval cooks and pharmacists were well acquainted with its various uses.<sup>160</sup> Here Francis, who was suffering from such loss of appetite that he could hardly eat solid food any more, hoped to overcome his nausea with the help of this aromatic plant.

The same day Francis tasted some of the little cakes (*mortariolum*) made especially for him by Jacoba de' Settesoli, he recalled the first brother the Lord had sent him. He said, "That cake would please Brother Bernard." And he had him called to his bedside immediately. When Bernard arrived, he asked him for a special blessing as a sign of affection.

Blessed Francis could no longer see, for he had long lost his sight. He stretched out his hand and laid it on the head of Brother Giles, the third brother, who at the moment was close to Brother Bernard. Francis thought he was placing his hand on Brother Bernard's head. But in feeling, as the blind do, Brother Giles's head, he recognized his mistake through the power of the Holy Spirit and said: "That is not Brother Bernard."<sup>161</sup>

Obviously it is not my intention here to reconstruct historically the entire moving scene of the blessing of Brother Bernard, or to examine the

<sup>159</sup>A. G. Little, *ibid.*, 96; R. B. Brooke, *ibid.*; Vian, 65.

<sup>160</sup>See *Nel mondo della natura. Enciclopedia di scienze naturali*. [Botanica. Direzione: A. and V. Motta], VIII, Milan [1963], 274f. I owe this information to the kindness of university student Paolo Pineider (Rome). The therapeutic effects of parsley were known to medieval medicine. For example, this diet was prescribed for liver ailments: "Parsley, borage, boiled meat, dilute clear red wine" (Thomas of Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum*, lib. I, n. 48, ed.cit., lines 32f). Similarly: "For stomach pain, crush equal weights of seed from fennel, celery, wormwood and parsley; mix the powders with melted wax and unsalted butter; spread a piece of linen cloth and sprinkle it with the powders and mix; then warm it over a fire and lay it on the stomach" (*ibid.*, lib. I, n. 55, ed.cit., 62, lines 28-32).

<sup>161</sup>Compas 12 [LP 107]: M. Bigaroni, 32-39.



deeper meaning of the words addressed to the whole Order. Professor Raoul Manselli has dealt masterfully with these things in a study published recently.<sup>162</sup> Our attention is drawn to the fact that, at least according to this testimony, Francis's blindness had become total and definitive.

During the final years of his life and especially as he went to meet Sister Death, Francis showed a constant and lively interest in the future of his fraternity, an extraordinary strength of will in bearing the terrible pain, and a wonderful spirit of joy. These attitudes contrast starkly with his state of cachexia, which is characterized by diminished mental ability, apathy and even depression.<sup>163</sup> Perhaps the most convincing sign of all this is his *Canticum of the Creatures*, which he composed during a serious attack of ophthalmia at San Damiano and which he had the friars sing often during his final illness.<sup>164</sup> Thomas of Celano is to be believed when he writes: "He spent the few days that remained before his death in praise, teaching his companions whom he loved so much to praise Christ with him."<sup>165</sup>

As for his clinical state during those last days, what Celano summarizes in two sentences does not seem excessive:

In all truth, not a single member in him remained free of the greatest suffering and, as the natural warmth was gradually lost, he approached nearer to the end each day. The doctors were amazed, the brothers astonished, that his soul could live in flesh so dead, for, the flesh having been consumed, nothing but skin clung to his bones.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup>R. Manselli, "L'ultima decisione di s. Francesco. Bernardo di Quintavalle e la benedizione di s. Francesco morente," in *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo e l'Archivio Muratoriano* 78 (1967) 137-53; see *BibFranc* XII, n. 615.

<sup>163</sup>P. Tolentino, *Malattie infettive*, 934.

<sup>164</sup>See for example, 1Cel 109; Compas 99 [LP 64]; M. Bigaroni, 292; see F. Bajetto, "Un trentennio di studi (1941-73) sul Cantico di Frate Sole. Bibliografia ragionata," in *L'Italia francescana* 49 (1974) 5-62, 56f (Indice analitico: Luogo di composizione del Cantico). B. Hanssler, "Erlöste Schöpfung. Der Sonnengesang des hl. Franziskus," in *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 5 (1976) 431-40, 436, rightly says: "Ordinarily, the first thing to succumb in such conditions [of weakness and illness] is the relationship with nature."

<sup>165</sup>2Cel 217.

<sup>166</sup>1Cel 107; see also Brother Elias, *Epistola encyclica de transitu s. Francisci*, n.

This testimony agrees perfectly with our knowledge of the clinical picture of malarial cachexia, which is characterized by severe weight loss, "in contrast to the abdominal swelling caused by splenomegaly, hepatomegaly" and widespread edema.<sup>167</sup> This syndrome, together with the trachoma, justifies the apparently emphatic statement of generalized pain. The mention of abnormal skin color complements another passage from Celano that speaks of the change in color of Francis's flesh: "Naturally dark before," after his death it became extraordinarily white.<sup>168</sup> This unusual appearance also fits perfectly with the symptoms of intermittent chronic fever: "In patients with chronic malaria...the color of the skin and mucous membranes is pale, sometimes bluish-yellow."<sup>169</sup>

On one of the last days of his life, Francis provided his closest brothers with a chance to observe easily and clearly the unattractive appearance of an extremely thin body, with its swollen abdomen and limbs and its unpleasantly dark skin. Adopting a monastic practice for the dying, "he had himself placed naked" on a hair shirt, that is, a coarse cloth made of goatskin, sprinkled with ashes in the form of a cross. In keeping with his poetic genius, he wished to unite himself in a scenic-symbolic act with Christ on the cross, in his utter poverty.

Placed thus upon the ground, with his garment of sackcloth laid aside, he raised his face to heaven as was his custom, and giving his whole attention to that glory, he covered the wound in his right side with his left hand lest it be seen. And he said to his brothers: "I have done what was mine to do; may Christ teach you what you are to do."<sup>170</sup>

From the words spoken to Francis by his personal guardian—perhaps Brother Angelo Tancredi—we gather that, in taking off his clothes,

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6, in *AF X*, 527: "As long as his soul still was in the body, he was not handsome of appearance; but his countenance was unattractive, and none of the members of his body was spared acute sufferings."

<sup>167</sup>P. Tolentino, *malattie infettive*, 934.

<sup>168</sup>2Cel 217a; 1Cel 112; see also Brother Elias, *ibid.*, 527.

<sup>169</sup>M. Giordano, *Patologia*, 411.

<sup>170</sup>2Cel 214.

he also wanted them to remove the cap of sackcloth he wore to cover the huge wounds from his cauterization.<sup>171</sup>

None of the biographers provides information that would give us a clear idea of Francis's agony and moment of death. Since their intention in describing his life was primarily to edify their readers, they tend to emphasize the religious elements. Thus Celano writes:

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 1226...on Sunday, October 4 [that is, Saturday, October 3, around sunset]...in the city of Assisi, where he was born and at St. Mary of the Portiuncula where he first planted the Order of Friars Minor, our blessed father Francis went forth from the prison of the flesh twenty years after he had given himself perfectly to Christ, following the life and the footsteps of the Apostles.<sup>172</sup>

After all I have tried to explain, the determining cause of St. Francis's death seems clear to me: *consecutive malarial cachexia* in which "the processes of disassimilation prevail over those of assimilation" with total decline of the organism's powers, until finally the brain cells cease to live.<sup>173</sup> In light of what all the early sources for the life of Francis explicitly say, either about his quartan fever or his grave illness of the liver and spleen, as

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<sup>171</sup>2Cel 215. For Angelo Tancredi, see R. Pratesi, "Angelo da Rieti (Angelo Tancredi)," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, III, Rome [1961], 233f; R. Brown, "Appendix VII: Companions," in O. Englebert, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, 431f: "...accompanied him [Francis], perhaps even as personal guardian..., during the stay in Fonte Colombo and Rieti in 1225, and during his last days in Assisi in 1226..." (Ibid., 432). S. Clasen ("Einführung," in Idem - E. Grau, *Die Dreigefährtenlegende des heiligen Franziskus*, Werl in Westphalia 1972, 59f) says the same thing: "Perhaps he was also the former guardian of the Portiuncula, who gave a habit to the dying Francis who had allowed himself to lie uncovered on the ground sprinkled with ashes."

<sup>172</sup>1Cel 88. On Francis's death, see the bibliography in n. 6 above; O. Schmucki, "Gli ultimi due anni," 224 n. 51; N. Tamassia, *S. Francesco d'Assisi e la sua leggenda*, 179-91 ("La morte di s. Francesco"); D. Neri, "Iconografia del transito di s. Francesco," in *Studi Franc.* 23 (1926) 495-517, 6 plates.

<sup>173</sup>See s.v. "cachexia" in *Dizionario enciclopedico italiano*, II, Rome [1955], 584f; L. Segatore - A.G. Poli, *Dizionario medico*, 196a and 784f; M.P. Engelmeier, "Sterbehilfe," in *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift* (Linz) 124 (1976) 336-47, 337f ("Zum Begriff des Sterbens," under the medical profile).

well as what we know about medieval medicine, to deny the primary influence of malaria on the course of Francis's illness and death would be contrary to the historical evidence.<sup>174</sup>

Except for a few passing remarks, I have not been able to describe here Francis's interior attitude as he faced the martyrdom caused by his many illnesses.<sup>175</sup> But despite these limits imposed by the huge size of my topic, what stands out is his constant inner union with Christ crucified, which gave him the strength to bear with heroic patience such many, long and terrible sufferings. Perhaps no other testimony stresses so much the frequency of illness in his life together with the inner source that enabled him to bear "infirmity and tribulation"<sup>176</sup> as one of the sayings of Blessed Giles:

They asked him what he thought of St. Francis, and at the mention of that name he was all aglow. He responded: "We should never mention that man without smacking our lips with relish. He lacked only one thing, a strong

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<sup>174</sup>This statement, of course, is directed against Ciancarelli's reconstruction (*Francesco di Bernardone*, passim) and also against K. Haines ("The Death of St. Francis," 40-43), who, although he knows what the Franciscan sources say about Francis's malaria, excludes it as a cause of his death. Frankly, I do not find his reasons convincing: "Hartung claimed that the whole of Francis's medical history is explainable solely on the basis of his contracting malaria. This is not convincing; I believe that the Poverello contracted a more virulent disease which was the eventual and actual cause of his death, rather than malaria which is rarely fatal 'per se'" (42). We need only read an article in a medical dictionary to realize that untreated malaria, followed by re-infections, leads to a state of cachexia that is inevitably fatal, if we remember how powerless medieval medicine was against this terrible scourge (see nn. 20 and 33 above). For attempts to treat malarial fever with arsenic, see A. Celli, *Storia della malaria nell'Agro Romano*, 181.

<sup>175</sup>The reader may consult the bibliography and information given in my study: "Gli ultimi due anni," 245-49. Nor have I been able to expand my treatment to include the influence of Francis's many illnesses and premature death on the Franciscan Order. For some indications, see K. Haines, *ibid.*, 45f.

<sup>176</sup>St. Francis, "Cantico delle creature," in G.V. Sabatelli (ed.), *San Francesco d'Assisi, Gli scritti*, S. Maria degli Angeli-Assisi [1971], 176.

body. If he had been robust like me, surely the world could never have been able to keep pace with his flaming spirit."<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup>Blessed Giles of Assisi, *I Detti*. Translation and Prologue by N. Vian, appendix 1, n. 6, Milan [1964], 168 [English tr. by I. O'Sullivan]. For the Latin text, see *Dicta beati Aegidii Assisiensis sec. Codices mss. Emendata et denuo edita*, Quaracchi 1905, 108. See. L. Hardick, *Erläuterungen*, in P.A. Schlüter, *Leben und "Goldene Worte" des Bruders Ägidius*, Werl in Westphalia 1953, 131-36 ("Das Bild des hl. Franziskus von Assisi," in the *Dicta*), and J. Cambell, "Gilles d'Assise," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, VI, Paris 1967, 879-82. I must thank Dr. Guido Berardis and my confrere Costanzo Cargnoni for the Italian revisions of the text and the critical apparatus.