



## THE EPISODE OF SAN DAMIANO IN THE SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

Noel Muscat OFM

The document entitled “The Grace of our Origins”, which lays down the preparatory stages for the celebration of the 8<sup>th</sup> centenary of the foundation of the Order of Friars Minor, dedicates the year 2006 to the identity of our Franciscan calling. It invites us to meditate upon Saint Francis’ words during his dream in Spoleto: “Lord, what do you want me to do?”<sup>1</sup> The long hours of soul-searching which Francis went through in the years 1205-1206 find their first answer in the words of the Crucifix of San Damiano: “Francis, don’t you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me.”<sup>2</sup> As a concrete sign of each and every brother’s quest for the identity of his Franciscan calling, the Crucifix of San Damiano will be given to all the brothers of the Order as a token and reminder of their evangelical calling. This gesture provides us with a unique opportunity to meditate upon the significance of the episode of San Damiano in the life of Saint Francis, with the help of the Sources which document this turning point in his search for God.

### **The Church of San Damiano**

The Sources list a number of places linked with the initial process of conversion of Saint Francis. Following the *Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano, and the *Legend of Three Companions*, we can list the following, namely: the town of Spoleto,

---

<sup>1</sup> The quotations from the Sources are taken from: *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I, The Saint; Vol. II: The Founder; Vol. III: The Prophet [abbreviated as FAED], edited by R.J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, W.J. Short, New York – London – Manila, 1999-2001. The Sources here quoted are AP 6: FAED II, 36; L3C 6: FAED II, 71.

<sup>2</sup> L3C 13: FAED II, 76.

where Francis has a vision or dream while on his way to gain knighthood in Apulia;<sup>3</sup> the “cave” near the town of Assisi where the young Francis used to go in to pray and look for a hidden treasure;<sup>4</sup> the basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, where he sits with the poor beggars;<sup>5</sup> the leper hospital of San Lazzaro dell’Arce, where he embraces the leper and serves the other lepers;<sup>6</sup> the church of San Damiano, where Francis hears the invitation of Christ Crucified to repair that crumbling church;<sup>7</sup> the market place of Foligno, where he sells his father’s horse and the bales of expensive cloth taken from his father’s shop;<sup>8</sup> the “hidden pit” in which Francis lay hidden for one month from his father’s wrath;<sup>9</sup> the piazza in front of Santa Maria Maggiore, or the *vescovado*, in Assisi, where he renounces his father’s inheritance in front of bishop Guido.<sup>10</sup>

In all of these places Francis experienced important moments in his process of conversion. However it was in the church of San Damiano that he went through the most profound experience of conversion, when he heard the voice of Christ inviting him to repair that church. So it is important to present briefly the sacred place of San Damiano, before speaking of the icon of Christ crucified and of the actual episode as presented by the Sources.

The church of San Damiano has been the object of various studies.<sup>11</sup> According to the famous Assisi historian, Arnaldo Fortini, the church is mentioned for the first time in a document at the Cathedral Archives of Assisi, dated 1030. Fortini says that the church must have already been built earlier, since Celano states that it was already very old when Francis found it. In the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century San Damiano belonged to a *consortium* of rich families living close to the cathedral church of San Rufino, and by the time Saint Francis repaired it, the church was the property of the bishop of Assisi.<sup>12</sup>

Thomas of Celano writes: “The first work that blessed Francis undertook, after he had gained his freedom from the hands of his carnally-minded father, was to build a house of God. He did not try to build a new one but he repaired an old one. He did not tear out the foundation, but he built upon it.”<sup>13</sup> Besides the obvious theological meaning attached to these words, we note the historical note that Francis repaired San Damiano, by adapting the already existing structure of this Romanesque church.

Historians like Antonio Cristofani and Leone Bracaloni agree that the church of San Damiano was built in successive stages. They note that the original church which

---

<sup>3</sup> L3C 5-6: FAED II, 70-71.

<sup>4</sup> 1C 6: FAED I, 187-188; L3C 12: FAED II, 74-75.

<sup>5</sup> L3C 9: FAED II, 73-74.

<sup>6</sup> 1C 17: FAED I, 195; L3C 11: FAED II, 74.

<sup>7</sup> L3C 13: FAED II, 76.

<sup>8</sup> 1C 8: FAED I, 188-189; L3C 16: FAED II, 77.

<sup>9</sup> 1C 10: FAED I, 190-191; L3C 16: FAED II, 78.

<sup>10</sup> 1C 14-15: FAED I, 193-194; L3C 19-20: FAED II, 79-80.

<sup>11</sup> M. BIGARONI, “San Damiano – Assisi: The First Church of St. Francis,” *Franciscan Studies* 47 (1987) 45-97, with other bibliographical indications.

<sup>12</sup> A. FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Assisi, 1959, Vol. III, 85-91. “Il primo ricordo di questa chiesa si ha nell’atto del 1030 dell’Arch. Catt., con il quale Anastagio di Domenico affranca il suo servo Petruzzolo di Marzulo: *Vos tradedimus domno Runtum presbiter Sacerdote, qui circa sacro santo altare beatum Sancto Damiani, qui est in comitatum asisinatum a Sancto Damiani circa eius predictum altare rogavimus*. La chiesa doveva già essere stata fabbricata da qualche secolo, poiché Celano afferma che, al tempo del Santo, era già cadente per estrema vecchiezza ... Sui primi del sec. XII San Damiano appartiene ad una consortereria di famiglie, alcune delle quali si possono bene identificare per quelle che si stringono attorno alla Cattedrale di San Rufino ... Prima che Chiara vi si trasferisce con le sue suore, è certo che San Damiano apparteneva al Vescovo di Assisi.”

<sup>13</sup> 1C 18: FAED I, 196.

Francis found was made up of two parts, namely a presbytery with a crypt, and a central nave.<sup>14</sup>

From archaeological studies on the site it is now evident that the original church had the structure of a monastic foundation. Bigaroni describes it as a foundation very much “like the nearby church of San Masseo de Platea,” of which the original crypt is still standing. This would have been “the seat of a small community or priory, centre of a farming commune or *platea*, which was a rural complex of land to be reclaimed and cultivated through manual labour under the direction of monks transferred there from a central abbey. Many such places came into existence in the countryside during the Benedictine reform of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In these places the monks sometimes succeeded in bringing country priests into their communities, and these, when monasticism was later in crisis, occasionally became the actual proprietors of the churches with attached benefices.”<sup>15</sup>

What type of work did the penitent-mason<sup>16</sup> Francis undertake when he repaired San Damiano after the invitation of the Crucifix, and maybe also just before Clare began to live in that place in 1212? The present church of San Damiano is considered the end result of Francis’ own initiative to give new life to this dilapidated wayside church, in which he heard Christ’s call to conversion.

The original church of San Damiano consisted of a Romanesque structure, having a presbytery, elevated above a crypt, and a central nave. When Francis found this church it was crumbling because of its age, and he repaired it also with the intention of providing a small monastery for Clare and the Poor Ladies.<sup>17</sup> Being cloistered nuns, the Poor Ladies needed a closed choir, more than a spacious presbytery. Francis restored the church according to the simplicity of his evangelical sensibility, on the model of other rural chapels of the Assisi countryside, such as was the case of the Porziuncola. The church thus became a simple structure, with one central nave and an apse. According to Bigaroni, this church model was already existing in the case of other churches of female monasteries in the Assisi area. A typical example was the church of San Paolo delle Abbadesse, the Benedictine monastery at Bastia Umbra, where Clare took refuge the night she consecrated herself to God in the Porziuncola.

“Within a church of this kind the people would have been at ease, gathered in front of the altar without any divisions, and with the priest as one of themselves officiating for the assembly.

In actual fact, Francis raised the floor of the crypt during his second intervention at San Damiano. He broke down the small naves, substituting a barrel vault; he eliminated the two sets of stairs: those leading to the presbytery and the crypt; he set up the oratory on the upper level in correspondence with the original dome of the apse,

---

<sup>14</sup> A. CRISTOFANI, *Storia della chiesa e del chiostro di S. Damiano*, ed. Ia in *Il Paese*, Perugia, 1875, ed. IIa, Assisi, 1882; L. BRACALONI, *Storia di S. Damiano in Assisi*, ed. Ia Assisi, 1919, ed. IIa Todi, 1926.

<sup>15</sup> M. BIGARONI, “San Damiano – Assisi,” 63.

<sup>16</sup> The term “penitent-mason” is taken from P. BRUNETTE, *Francis of Assisi and His Conversions*, translated from the French original by P. Lachance, Franciscan Press, Quincy University, Illinois, 1997, 47-58.

<sup>17</sup> Clare herself refers to this episode in her *Testament*, 12-14: “For at that time, climbing the wall of that church, he shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby: ‘Come and help me in the work of building the monastery of San Damiano, because ladies are yet to dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout this holy universal Church by their celebrated and holy manner of life.’” *Clare of Assisi. Early Documents*, revised and expanded by R.J. ARMSTRONG, Franciscan Institute Publications, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1993, 57. The episode is originally found in L3C 24: FAED II, 83.

taking care to raise slightly the level of the floor of what had been the ancient presbytery; he covered the newly fashioned oratory with a small ovoid vault and put it in communication with the dormitory through a small door and some steps, in accordance with monastic custom.

What then we see today of the church of San Damiano is nothing more nor less than the result of the work of transformation performed by Francis on a pre-existing architectonic structure of Romanesque-monastic style. This is the church he restored, this the oratory and this the dormitory he constructed for the Poor Ladies. But it is also much more if it has come from the handwork and inspiration of the saint: it is the prototype of franciscan churches as he intended and wished them to be; the type of those many mendicant churches that sprang up everywhere with the approval of the free communes and the concourse of the entire populace which found in them the expression of their own exuberant democratic life consecrated by those democratic religious Orders. Evidently Francis was already expressing his own clear idea of what a church should be for the people of his time: a church with a single hall, where clergy and people could come together in communion of prayer and word.”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Crucifix of San Damiano**

The icon of the Crucifix of San Damiano is nowadays venerated in the side chapel of the basilica of Santa Chiara in Assisi,<sup>19</sup> where the Poor Ladies took it with them in 1260 when they left San Damiano for the new monastery within the town walls. The Crucifix which spoke to Francis, inviting him to repair the church of San Damiano, is an important document of history and spirituality, which merits our attention in order to understand its importance in the life of Saint Francis.<sup>20</sup>

In his monumental work on the life of Saint Francis, Arnaldo Fortini describes the Crucifix of San Damiano.<sup>21</sup> The figure of Christ seems to be enthroned on the cross. Christ's eyes are wide-open, revealing his passion and cross according to the Gospel of John<sup>22</sup> and according to the liturgical expression: *regnavit a ligno Deus*.<sup>23</sup> Christ is

---

<sup>18</sup> M. BIGARONI, “San Damiano – Assisi,” 78-79.

<sup>19</sup> This chapel marks the same spot where the church of San Giorgio once stood. It was in San Giorgio that Francis went to the cathedral school of the canons of San Rufino while still a young boy, and it was here that he was buried from 4 October 1226 until the end of May 1230, when his relics were translated to the new basilica built in his honour by Pope Gregory IX.

<sup>20</sup> Studies on the Crucifix of San Damiano include the following: L. BRACALONI, “Il prodigioso Crocifisso che parlò a San Francesco,” *Studi Francescani* 36 (1939), 185-212; M. PICARD, *The Icon of the Christ of San Damiano*, Casa Editrice Franciscana, Assisi, 2000; T. JANK, *L'icona della Croce di San Damiano*, Edizioni Messaggero Padova, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> A. FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, III, 90: “Il crocifisso è una tavola foggiate a croce. A sinistra del Crocifisso sono la Vergine e San Giovanni; a destra le pie donne, il centurione e una quarta persona appena visibile. Più in giù, in minori proporzioni, le due figure di Longino e di Stefanato, quegli che diede il colpo di lancia e l'altro che porse la spugna imbevuta di fiele e di aceto. Due angeli stanno in piedi alle due estremità, altri quattro gesticolano vivacemente sotto il braccio del Crocifisso. In alto campeggia il Cristo della Risurrezione, circondato da dieci angeli, mentre sopra appare la mano di Dio protesa a stringere la sua. Nel cartello, sulla testa di Cristo, è l'iscrizione: *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*. Alla base delle figure si leggono i nomi in lettere bianche: *S. Maria, S. Ioannes, Maria Magdalena, Maria Iacobi, Centurio*.”

<sup>22</sup> John 3,14; 8,28; 12,32.

flanked on his left by the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist, and on his right by Mary Magdalene, Mary of James, and the Centurion who recognized Jesus as the Son of God when he saw him die. On a smaller scale, on both sides of Christ, there are, on the left and right hand side respectively, the traditional figures of Longinus, who pierced the dead Jesus with a lance, and Stephanatus, who offered the sponge with the vinegar to the dying Jesus who cried out that he was thirsty. The arms of the cross show angels, two of whom are at the very edges and another four beneath the arms of Christ, from whose hands, pierced on the cross, blood is trickling down. In the upper part of the Crucifix there is a representation of Christ ascending into heaven, surrounded by ten angels, and above him, the right hand of God the Father ready to welcome him. Latin inscriptions refer the onlooker to the names of the personages, namely *Iesus Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum*, *S. Maria*, *S. Ioannes*, *Maria Magdalena*, *Maria Iacobi*, *Centurio*. Under the feet of Christ, which are also pierced, and have blood flowing down, there are figures of saints, only two of whom are recognizable. According to Bracaloni the saints could have been traditionally present in Byzantine iconography, as well as in the local devotion of the Assisi diocese where the Crucifix was taken. They would include Saint Michael, Saint John the Baptist, Saints Peter and Paul, Saint Rufino and Saint Damian.

The Crucifix of San Damiano is a typical Umbrian Crucifix of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Its prototype is the Crucifix painted by Alberto Sotio in 1187, and now venerated in a side chapel of the cathedral church of Spoleto. The style of these Crucifixes seems to be less Romanesque and more Byzantine. In fact, the region of Umbria, and particularly Spoleto, was the scene of an immigration of oriental hermits, who probably came from Syria, during the iconoclastic crisis. The mountain above Spoleto, Monte Luco, became a type of Monte Athos in central Italy, where many hermits who came from the east chose to live. The Crucifix of San Damiano marks the stage in which the Umbrian painters were producing this oriental type of Crucifixes, and which later gave way to icons of Christ who appears dead upon the cross (*Christus patiens*), as happens from 1236 onwards, particularly in the case of Crucifixes painted by Giunta Pisano and the Crucifix still hanging on the main altar of the basilica of Santa Chiara in Assisi, commissioned in 1260 by Benedetta, abbess of the Poor Ladies after the death of Saint Clare.<sup>24</sup>

When Francis entered the church of San Damiano to pray reverently before this Crucifix, he was gazing upon a typically Umbrian Crucifix, which was painted under the influence of the oriental iconography present in the environment of Spoleto. We understand the theological significance of this Crucifix if we take a moment to refer to the prayer which Francis is said to have composed during these early years of his conversion, and which Kajetan Esser includes among the oldest writings of Saint Francis, giving it the name of *Oratio ante Crucifixum*, or The Prayer before the Crucifix (1205/06):

“Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command.”<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> The expression *regnavit a lingo Deus* (God reigns from the wood) comes from the liturgical hymn for Vespers of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross: *Vexilla Regis prodeunt*, written by Venantius Fortunatus.

<sup>24</sup> L. BRACALONI, “Il prodigioso Crocifisso che parlò a S. Francesco”, 194-205.

<sup>25</sup> FAED I, 40. K. ESSER, *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis*, Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, Grottaferrata, Roma, 1978, 223-224.

The Latin version of the Prayer before the Crucifix was first published by Luke Wadding in the *Annales Minorum*.<sup>26</sup> Girolamo Golubovich then published the version in the Umbrian dialect, which he found in a codex in the library of Saint Isidore's college in Rome.<sup>27</sup>

The Prayer before the Crucifix reflects the reaction of Francis in front of the glorified vision of Christ who seems to protrude from the cross as if he were on a throne of majesty. Christ is the "glorious God" who speaks to Francis, by enlightening him inwardly to aspire for the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, as well as the spirit of profound humility in discerning God's will for him. The end result of Francis' prayer is his innermost wish to have a true sense and knowledge of the divine will which he is called to carry out. It is during this obscure period of his life, when Francis goes through a profound process of conversion, that he meets Jesus Christ who, from the throne of his glorious cross, will remind Francis that God's divine will for him is that of setting out to repair a dilapidated church. The prayer is, in some way, a reflection of what mystical theology would call the way of purification, illumination and union, or the triple way to perfection.<sup>28</sup>

The Crucifix of San Damiano was certainly also venerated for many years by Clare and the Poor Ladies, who lived at San Damiano from 1212 until 1260, when they moved to the "protomonastero" of Santa Chiara in Assisi, taking with them the precious icon, where it still venerated to the present day. The *Legend of Saint Clare* (LSC) speaks about Clare's devotion to the Crucified Christ:

"Crying over the Lord's passion was well known to her. At times she poured out feelings of bitter myrrh at the sacred wounds. At times she imbibed sweet joys. The tears of the suffering Christ made her quite inebriated and her memory continually pictured Him Whom love had profoundly impressed upon her heart. She taught the

---

<sup>26</sup> L. WADDING, *Annales Minorum seu Trium Ordinum a S. Francisco Institutorum*, Tomus I (1208-1220), Apparatus, XVII, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi), 1931, 34-35: "Dum enim die quadam egressus ad meditandum in agro deambulet, juxta Ecclesiam S. Damiani, ad CCCC P. in ipso collis declivio, distantem a moenibus civitatis, quae minabatur prae nimia vetustate ruinam, et in eam instigante se spiritu, causa orationis intrasset, prostratus ante imaginem Crucifixi, non modica fuit in orando spiritus consolationis repletus; et ter sequentem hanc oratiunculam, quam ego inter sancti viri opuscula tomo primo reposui, quanto potuit, recitavit affectu: *Magne et gloriose Deus et Domine mi Jesu Christe, illumina, oro te, tenebras mentis meae. Da mihi fidem rectam, spem certam, et caritatem perfectam. Fac ut cognoscam te Domine, ita ut ego in omnibus omnia secundum tuam scientiam et veram voluntatem perficiam. Amen.* Cum vero lacrymosis oculis intenderet in Dominicam crucem, vocem de ipsa cruce dilapsam ad eum, corporeis exceptit auribus, ter dicentem: 'Francisce vade, et repara domum meam, quae, ut cernis, tota destruitur.' Tremefactus Franciscus, cum esset in Ecclesia solus, stupet ad tam mirandae vocis auditum, cordeque percipiens divini virtutem eloquii, mentis alienatur excessu."

<sup>27</sup> G. GOLUBOVICH, "Verba B. Francisci ante Crucifixum," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 1 (1908) 175: "Editores nostri, inter Opuscula S.P. Francisci (in *Biblioth. Franc. ascet. Med. Aevi* t. I, cfr. p. 195) non admiserunt uti genuinas Orationes quadam S. Francisci, quas Waddingus in sua collectione (*B.P. Franc. Ass. Opuscula*, Antverpiae 1623, t. I) facile inseruit, ea ratione ducti, quod nullibi testimonium illarum, neque in antiquis collectionibus vestigium aliquod invenire potuerint. Quidquid sit de autenticitate singularum Orationum quae S. Francisco tribuuntur, placet hic textum quemdam italicum afferre, ne pereat, unius scilicet orationis, quam iamdiu in parva schedula vix duorum digitorum in Cod. 1/65 S. Isidori de Urbe reperimus. Codex et schedula sunt saec. XV: *Verba S. Francisci ante Crucifixum* (*Ex cit. Cod. S. Isidori de Urbe*) *O alto et glorioso dio illumina el core mio. Damme fede dericta, Speranza certa, Carità perfecta, humilità profonda. Senno e cognoscemento che io servi li toi commandamenti. Amen.*

<sup>28</sup> One of the Franciscan saints who wrote a mystical treatise on the Triple way was Saint Bonaventure. SERAPHICI DOCTORIS SANCTI BONAVENTURAE, *De Triplici Via, alias Incendium Amoris*, in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, edita studio et cura PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi), Tomus VIII, 1898, 1-27.

novices to weep over the Crucified Christ ... She repeated more frequently the Prayer of the Five Wounds of the Lord so that she might nourish her mind on the delights of the Crucified without any interruption. She learned the Office of the Cross, as Francis, a lover of the Cross, had established it and recited it with similar affection.”<sup>29</sup>

Although she was ill for most of the time from 1224 onwards, and could not go down to the church of San Damiano, Clare must have gazed countless times upon the Crucifix certainly between 1212 and 1224. It is in this context of her presence close to the venerated Crucifix which spoke to Saint Francis that we can understand her profound devotion to the Passion of Christ.



### The episode of San Damiano in the Sources for the Life of Saint Francis

We now come to the central point of our paper, that is, the analysis of the episode of the Crucifix of San Damiano in the life of Saint Francis, as it is presented by the various Sources of the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. We shall proceed in a chronological order, by looking first at the oldest among them, the episode in the *Legend of Three Companions*, followed by that in the *Memorial of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano, the one in the *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*, also by Celano, and the text of the *Major Life of Saint Francis* by Saint Bonaventure.

#### *Legend of Three Companions, 13*

*A few days had passed when, while he was walking by the church of San Damiano, he was told in the Spirit to go inside for a prayer. Once he entered, he began to pray intensely before an image of the Crucified, which spoke to him in a tender and kind voice: “Francis, don’t you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me.” Stunned and trembling, he said: “I will do so gladly, Lord.” For he understood that it was speaking about that church, which was near collapse because of its age. He*

<sup>29</sup> LSC 30, in *Clare of Assisi. Early Documents*, 283-284. Latin original text in *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di E. Menestò, S. Brufani, G. Cremascoli, E. Paoli, L. Pellegrini, S. Da Campagnola. Apparato critico di G.M. Boccali, Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli 1995 (Medioevo Francescano, testi, 2), 2433: *Familiaris ei planctus Dominicae passionis, quae ex sacris vulneribus nunc myrrhas affectiones exhaurit, nunc dulciora gaudia fugit. Hanc lacryma Christi, passi vehementer inebriat, et quem cordi suo profundius amor impresserat frequenter memoria repraesentat. Docet novitias Christum plangere Crucifixum ... Ut autem Crucifixi deliciis absque intermissione pasceret mentem, orationem de quinque membris Domini frequenter ruminabat. Officium Crucis, prout Crucis amator Franciscus instituerat, didicit, et affectu consimili frequentavit.*

was filled with such joy and became so radiant with light over that message, that he knew in his soul that it was truly Christ crucified who spoke to him.<sup>30</sup>

This text marks the very first time that the episode of the Crucifix of San Damiano is to be found in the Sources for the Life of Saint Francis. The *Legend of Three Companions* (L3C), although depending upon the *Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano (1C) and on the so-called *Anonymous of Perugia* (AP), is essentially the result of an original approach by an author who had access to the letter of Greccio and the documentary material which the three companions, Leo, Rufino and Angelo, sent to the Minister General Crescenzo da Iesi on 11th August 1246.

The context of the episode in L3C is that of the conversion of Saint Francis, to which the L3C devotes the first 29 out of 71 paragraphs. It is preceded by the encounter of Francis with the leper, probably near the leper hospital of San Lazzaro dell'Arce, between the Porziuncola and Rivotorto, as well as by the mysterious experience of Francis who takes an unknown friend to a "cave near Assisi" in order to pray in secret to discover God's will. According to Bigaroni, this "cave" was not a natural cave in the rocks, but refers to the latin term used, namely *crypta quaedam*, namely a crypt, and precisely the dilapidated crypt of the church of San Damiano. It is at this point that Francis' dreams of becoming a knight by going to southern Italy to participate in the crusade with Walter of Brienne are shattered, to the extent that his friends think that Francis has fallen in love, since he used to act so strangely by being joyful and thoughtful at the same time.



In the difficult psychological state he was in Francis one day walks all by himself close to the old church of San Damiano when, according to L3C he is "told by the Spirit" to go inside the church to pray. Inside the church Francis looks at the icon of the Crucified Christ and prays before it. The contents of his prayer are not known to us, but since two of the old manuscripts of L3C present the Prayer before the Crucifix at this point, it is easy to conclude that Francis could have repeated this familiar prayer, in which he asks for enlightenment to discern God's will. It is then that the Crucifix "speaks" to Francis "in a tender a kind voice." It is not our intention to try to explain this mystical experience in its concrete manifestations.<sup>31</sup> The voice of Christ was heard by Francis during an intense

<sup>30</sup> L3C 13: FAED II, 76. Latin original test: *Paucis autem diebus elapsis, cum ambularet iuxta ecclesiam Sancti Damiani, dictum est illi in spiritu ut in eam ad orationem intraret. Quam ingressus coepit orare ferventer coram quadam imagine Crucifixi, quae pie ac benigne locuta est ei dicens: "Francisce, nonne vides quod domus mea destruitur? Vade igitur et repara illam mihi." Et tremens ac stupens ait: "Libenter faciam, Domine." Intellexit enim de illa ecclesia sibi dici, quae prae nimia vetustate casum proximum minabatur. De illa autem allocutione tanto fuit repletus gaudio et lumine illustratus, quod in anima sua veraciter sensit fuisse Christum crucifixum quae locutus est ei.* L3C 13, in Th. DESBONNETS, "Legenda Trium Sociorum. Edition critique", *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 67 (1974), 38-88 (introduction), 89-144 (critical text). This text in pages 99-100. The same text is also critically edited in: *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di E. Menestò, S. Brufani, G. Cremascoli, E. Paoli, L. Pellegrini, S. Da Campagnola. Apparato critico di G.M. Boccali, Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli 1995 (Medioevo Franceseano, testi, 2), 1386.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Sabatier mentions the episode at San Damiano, but does not refer to the actual words of the Crucifix, presenting the whole scene as a purely internal mystical experience on the part of Francis, which then prompts him to become united with Christ crucified to the point of receiving the stigmata: "Ce regard



moment of prayer, in which he was prompted to go into the church by a spiritual urge and gazed intently upon the large eyes of the icon of Christ Crucified. The words of Christ are a rhetorical question, followed by a mandate: “Francis, don’t you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me.” The fact that the church of San Damiano was crumbling because of age was self-evident for Francis, with the consequent result that he felt he had to do something to remedy the pitiful state of that poor church. The initial reaction of Francis is one of surprise and fear, but he immediately answered in his usual generous sensibility: “I will do so gladly, Lord.” The author of L3C concludes by saying that Francis was convinced in his soul that those were truly the words of Christ Crucified who had spoken to him.

The account of L3C 13 is probably the most original, because its style is direct, simple and to the point. Although it does not reject that the words of the Crucifix were uttered in the aura of a mystical experience of Francis, L3C tries to present the fact as a natural process of discernment of God’s will on the part of Francis. Francis goes into a dilapidated church which he probably knew very well, and prays in front of an icon of Christ Crucified which truly “speaks” to anyone who gazes at it with faith and love. The church was evidently falling into ruins, and Francis discerned that the first thing to do to obey God’s will was to repair that church and take care of that venerated Crucifix. Francis is moved to action by the invitation of Christ. Not only does he joyfully promise Christ to do something to remedy that pitiful situation, but “upon leaving the church, he found a priest sitting nearby and, putting his hands into the pouch, he offered him a handful of coins. ‘My Lord,’ he said, ‘I beg you, buy some oil and keep the light before the Crucified burning continually. When this money runs out, I will again give you as much as you need.’”<sup>32</sup>

It is evident that Francis was simply going through a peak experience in his conversion process. The miraculous element in the narrative regards more the response of faith on Francis’ part than the actual fact of him having audibly listened to Christ Crucified who spoke to him and gave him directions about what he was to do.

### *The Memorial of the Desire of a Soul, 10*

*With his heart already completely changed – soon his body was also to be changed – he was walking one day by the church of San Damiano, which was abandoned by everyone and almost in ruins. Led by the Spirit (Mt 4,1) he went in to pray and knelt down devoutly before the crucifix. He was shaken by unusual experiences and discovered that he was different from when he had entered. As soon as he had this feeling, there occurred something unheard of in previous ages (Jn 9,32): with the lips of the painting, the image of Christ crucified spoke to him. “Francis,” it said, calling him by name (Is 40,26), “go rebuild My house; as you see, it is all being destroyed.” Francis*

---

d’amour jeté sus le crucifix, se mystérieux colloque avec la compatissante victime ne devaient plus cesser. La piété de François a conquis à Saint-Damien sa physionomie et son originalité. Son âme porte dès maintenant les stigmates et comme le disent ses biographes dans une phrase intraduisible: *Ab illa hora vulneratum et liquefactum est cor ejus ad memoriam Dominicae passionis.*” P. SABATIER, *Vie de Saint François d’Assise*, Librairie Fischbacher, Paris, 27th Edition, 64. The episode is, however, mentioned in another important biography among the first modern lives of St. Francis, written by J. JÖRGENSEN, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, Translated from Danish by T. O’Conor Sloane, Longmans, New York – London – Toronto, 1912, 36-40.

<sup>32</sup> L3C 13: FAED II, 76.

was more than a little stunned, trembling, and stuttering like a man out of his senses. He prepared himself to obey and pulled himself together to carry out the command. He felt this mysterious change in himself, but he could not describe it. So it is better for us to remain silent about it too. From that time on, compassion for the Crucified was impressed into his holy soul. And we honestly believe the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh.<sup>33</sup>

The account of Thomas of Celano in the *Memorial of the Desire of a Soul* (2C) is certainly built upon the documentation which the three companions of Greccio forwarded to the Minister General Crescenzo da Iesi on 11 August 1246, the famous *florilegium*, which the Minister subsequently forwarded to Thomas in order to produce a new biography of Saint Francis. Celano, however, presents it in a more mystical approach than we find it in the account of L3C 13. The context, again, is that of Francis who comes back from his encounter with the leper who, according to 2C 9, miraculously vanishes, thus indicating that it was Christ himself who appeared to Francis in the guise of a leper: “Francis immediately mounted his horse and although the field was wide open, without any obstructions, when he looked around he could not see the leper anywhere.”<sup>34</sup>



Celano insists that, after the encounter with the leper, Francis’ heart was “completely changed” as a prelude to the future change in his body, which was to become an icon of the Crucified Christ. The action of Saint Francis who enters the church of San Damiano is the same one described in L3C 13, but Celano adds that Francis “was shaken by unusual experiences and discovered that he was different from when he had entered.” It was at that stage that the voice of the Crucifix is heard by Francis. Celano presents two new details to the story at this point. He tells us that “with the lips of the painting, the image of Christ crucified spoke” to Francis, and that Christ “called him by name.” So we are not only dealing with the sound of a voice coming from the icon of Christ Crucified, but also with the actual vision of the lips moving as Christ spoke. Celano seems to intensify the action of Christ in order to stress on the fact that the voice actually came

<sup>33</sup> 2C 10: FAED II, 249. Latin original text: *Mutatus perfecte iam corde, in brevi mutandus et corpore, ambulat die quadam iuxta ecclesiam Sancti Damiani, quae fere diruta erat et ab omnibus derelicta. Quam cum, spiritu ducente (cf. Mt 4,1), causa orationis intraret, ante crucifixum supplex et devotus prosterneretur, et visitationibus pulsatus insolitis, alterum quam ingressus fuerat se invenit. Cui protinus sic affecto, quod est a saeculis inauditum (cf. Jn 9,32), imago Christi crucifixi, labiis picturae deductis, colloquitur. Vocans enim ipsum ex nomine (cf. Is 40,26): “Francisce,” inquit, “vade, repara domum meam, quae, ut cernis, tota destruitur.” Tremefactus Franciscus stupet non modicum, et quasi alienus a sensu efficitur in sermone. Ad obediendum se parat, totum se recolligit ad mandatum. At vero quia ineffabilem sui mutationem persensit, quod exprimere ipse non potuit, expedit nos silere. Infigitur ex tunc sanctae animae Crucifixi compassio, et ut pie putari potest, cordi eius, licet nondum carni, venerandae stigmata passionis altius imprimuntur.* THOMAE DE CELANO, *Vita Secunda Sancti Francisci (Memoriale in Desiderio Animae)*, 10, in *Analecta Franciscana, sive Chronica aliaque varia documenta ad Historiam Fratrum Minorum spectantia*, edita a Patribus Collegii S. Bonaventurae, Tomus X, Legendae S. Francisci Assisiensis saeculis XIII et XIV conscriptae, Ad Claras Aquas, Quaracchi (Firenze) 1941, 136-137. The same text is also critically edited in: *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di E. Menestò, S. Brufani, G. Cremascoli, E. Paoli, L. Pellegrini, S. Da Campagnola. Apparato critico di G.M. Boccali, Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli 1995 (Medioevo Francescano, testi, 2), 452-453.

<sup>34</sup> 2C 9: FAED II, 249. This image is probably taken from the life of Saint Martin of Tours, which provided Celano with a model when he wrote the life of Saint Francis.

from the Crucifix of San Damiano, so much so that the very lips of the painting appeared to be moving as Francis was gazing at the icon and listening to the words of Christ. Moreover, Christ called Francis by name. The expression is taken from the first canticle of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 40,26. It is definitely a reference to a specific vocation and mandate that Francis receives at the very moment he listens to the voice of Christ coming from the Crucifix. Whereas the L3C 13 lays emphasis on the willingness of Francis to obey Christ's call: "I will do so gladly, Lord," 2C 10 tells us that "Francis was more than a little stunned, trembling, and stuttering like a man out of his senses." Francis seems to be aware that the invitation of the Crucifix was not simply a call to repair that material church, but was rather a specific vocation to do something much more complex and demanding in his life. Like all the prophets of the Old Testament, Francis is hesitant and stutters.

Celano is respecting the hidden mysterious significance of the episode. Although he states that Francis "prepared himself to obey and pulled himself together to carry out the command,"<sup>35</sup> he continues: "He felt this mysterious change in himself, but he could not describe it. So it is better for us to remain silent about it too." The result of this mysterious encounter was that of marking Francis with an intense love for Christ Crucified, in such a way that even his body was to become marked with the signs of the Passion: "From that time on, compassion for the Crucified was impressed into his holy soul. And we honestly believe the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh."<sup>36</sup>

*Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis, 2*

*The new man (Eph 4,24), Francis, became famous for a new and stupendous miracle. By a singular privilege, not granted in previous ages, he appeared marked, adorned with the sacred stigmata, and conformed in this body of death (Phil 3,10.21; Rom 7,24) to the body of the Crucified. Whatever human speech can say about this will be less than the praise it deserves. No explanation should be demanded, because it was a wonder. No example should be sought, because it was unique. All the striving of this man of God (1Sam 9,6), whether in public or in private, revolved around the cross of the Lord. From the earliest days when he began his knightly service for the Crucified, various mysteries of the cross shone around him. At the beginning of his conversion, when he had decided to take leave of the allurements of this life, Christ spoke to him from the wood of the cross while he prayed. From the mouth of Christ's image a voice declared: "Francis, go, rebuild my house, which, as you see, it is all being destroyed." From that moment the memory of the Lord's passion was stamped on his heart with a*

---

<sup>35</sup> Celano uses the expression *totum se recolligit ad mandatum*, which is strikingly similar to what Francis prays for in the Prayer before the Crucifix: *ut ego in omnibus omnia secundum tuam scientiam et veram voluntatem perficiam*. The will (*voluntas*) of Christ signified for Francis a command (*mandatum*) of Christ.

<sup>36</sup> Celano speaks about *compassio*, compassion, for Christ Crucified, which is considered by him to be one of the distinguishing virtues of Francis, who is always full of tenderness for all kinds of suffering. Even L3C 14: FAED II, 76, presents this attitude of Francis: "From that hour, therefore, his heart was wounded and it melted when remembering the Lord's passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart. This was brilliantly shown afterwards in the renewal of those wounds that were miraculously impressed on and most clearly revealed in his body."

*deep brand-mark, and as conversion reached his deepest self, his soul began to melt, as his beloved spoke (Sg 5,6).*<sup>37</sup>

Thomas of Celano presented his *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* (3C) for approval in the Chapter of Metz in 1254, after having been insistently asked to write an account of the miracles attributed to Saint Francis' intercession, by the Minister General John of Parma and the brothers. Contemporary studies about 3C show that it is meant to be a completion of 2C and, indeed, of the entire *corpus* of the writings of Thomas of Celano.<sup>38</sup> Celano dedicates chapter 2 of this Treatise to the theme of the stigmata of Saint Francis. The text we present here is the opening paragraph of this section. It adds no particular information regarding the episode of the Crucifix of San Damiano, but it does present some interesting insights.

Francis is presented as a "new man" who becomes famous because of the miracle of the stigmata which he receives on La Verna in September 1224. Celano wants us to look at the body of the stigmatized Francis as an icon of the Crucified Christ. Francis is "conformed in this body of death to the body of the Crucified." This is the great mystery about Francis' conformity to Christ, which no human speech can ever express. Francis is presented as a knight of Christ, whose only arms are those of the cross: "From the earliest days when he began his knightly service for the Crucified, various mysteries of the cross shone around him." The intention of Celano is, therefore, that of presenting the whole life of Francis as a journey of service of Christ Crucified. The point of arrival for Francis was certainly the stigmatization on La Verna. But Celano shows that it had a beginning in the episode of the Crucifix of San Damiano which spoke to him, inviting him to repair that church.

The San Damiano Crucifix, as it were, marks for Francis the beginning of a following of Christ (*sequela Christi*), which characterizes all the episodes of his life. One could speak of San Damiano as the point of departure and of La Verna as the point of arrival of this mystical journey of union with the Crucified Lord.

---

<sup>37</sup> 3C 2: FAED II, 401. Latin original text: *Novus homo (cf. Ef 4,24) Franciscus novo et stupendo miraculo claruit, cum singulari privilegio, retroactis saeculis non concesso, insignitus apparuit, sacris videlicet stigmatibus decoratus, et configuratus in corpore mortis huius (Fil 3,10. 21; Rom 7,24) corpori Crucifixi. De quo quidquid humana lingua dicatur, minus erat a laude condigna. Non est quaerenda ratio, quia mirabile, nec petendum exemplum, quoniam singulare. Totum viri Dei studium, tam publicum quam privatum, circa crucem Domini versabatur; et a primaevo temporis quo Crucifixo coeperat militare, diversa circa eum crucis mysteria praefulserunt. Cum enim in principio suae conversionis vitae huius illecebris valefacere decrevisset, orantem eum Christus de ligno crucis alloquitur, et ab ipsius ore imaginis vox ista dilabitur: "Francisce," inquit, "vade, repara domum meam, quae, ut cernis, tota destruitur." Ex tunc profundo caractere impressa fuit cordi eius memoria dominicae passionis, et alta in sese conversione reducta, liquefieri coepit anima eius, ut dilectus locutus est (cf. Cant 5,6). THOMAE DE CELANO, *Tractatus de Miraculis B. Francisci*, 2, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 272-273. The same text is also critically edited in: *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di E. Menestò, S. Brufani, G. Cremascoli, E. Paoli, L. Pellegrini, S. Da Campagnola. Apparato critico di G.M. Boccali, Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli 1995 (Medioevo Francese, testi, 2), 645-646.*

<sup>38</sup> J. DALARUN, *La Malavventura di Francesco d'Assisi*, Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana (Fonti e Ricerche 10), Milano 1996, 97-119.

*Major Life of Saint Francis, II,1*

*For one day when Francis went out to meditate in the fields (Gn 24,63), he walked near the church of San Damiano which was threatening to collapse because of age. Impelled by the Spirit, he went inside to pray. Prostrate before an image of the Crucified, he was filled with no little consolation as he prayed. While his tear-filled eyes were gazing at the Lord's cross, he heard with his bodily ears a voice coming from that cross, telling him three times: "Francis, go and repair my house which, as you see, is all being destroyed." Trembling, Francis was stunned at the sound of such an astonishing voice, since he was alone in the church, and as he absorbed the power of the divine words into his heart, he fell into an ecstasy of mind. At last, coming back to himself, he prepared himself to obey and pulled himself together to carry out the command of repairing the material church, although the principal intention of the words referred to that which Christ purchased with his own blood (Acts 20,28), as the Holy Spirit taught him and as he himself later disclosed to the brothers.<sup>39</sup>*

Saint Bonaventure wrote the *Major Life of Saint Francis* (LM) in 1260-63. The Seraphic Doctor depends heavily upon other pre-existing biographies of Saint Francis, and particularly upon 2C, not only for the information he gives, but also in the same use of words. Bonaventure, however, is a mystical theologian, and his presentation of Francis in the LM is not primarily intended to give a historical and chronological account of the life of Saint Francis, but rather to present Francis to the brothers as a model of Christian perfection, through the hierarchical virtues and through his union with Christ Crucified.

The elements which make the episode of San Damiano in the LM unique are the following. Francis goes out to meditate, and therefore is moved to prayer even before he comes to San Damiano. Once inside the church he gazes at the image of the Crucified, with "tear-filled eyes" and merits to receive great "consolation as he prayed." In other words, Francis goes through a mystical experience in front of the icon of Christ Crucified. It is at that moment that "he heard with his bodily ears a voice coming from that cross, telling him three times." Francis distinctly hears a voice which speaks to him from the icon of the Crucifix, and repeats the invitation to repair the church of San Damiano for three times. This detail, characteristic of Bonaventure's account, is linked with the Trinitarian theology of the Seraphic Doctor. The attitude of Francis in front of the invitation of Christ is also one of surprise and fear, as is in the case of 2C, but at the same time Bonaventure adds that Francis "fell into an ecstasy of mind." The latin

---

<sup>39</sup> LM II,1, in FAED II, 536. Latin original text: *Dum enim die quadam, egressus ad meditandum in agro (cf. Gen 24,63), deambulet iuxta ecclesiam Sancti Damiani, quae minabatur prae nimia vetustate ruinam, et in eam, instigante se spiritu, causa orationis intrasset; prostratus ante imaginem Crucifixi, non modica fuit in orando spiritus consolatione repletus. Cumque, lacrymosis oculis intenderet ih̄n dominicam crucem, vocem de ipsa cruce dilapsam ad eum corporeis audivit auribus, ter dicentem: "Francisce, vade et repara domum meam, quae, ut cernis, tota destruitur!" Tremefactus Franciscus, cum esset in ecclesia solus, stupet ad tam mirandaw vocis auditum, cordeque percipiens divini virtutem eloquii, mentis alienatur excessu. In se tandem reversus, ad obediendum se parat, totum se recolligit ad mandatum de materiali ecclesia reparanda, licet principalior intentio verbi ad eam ferretur, quam Christus suo sanguine acquisivit (cf. Act 20,28), sicut eum Spiritus sanctus edocuit, et ipse postmodum fratribus revelavit. S. BONAVENTURAE, *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, II,1, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 563. The same text is also critically edited in: *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di E. Menestò, S. Brufani, G. Cremascoli, E. Paoli, L. Pellegrini, S. Da Campagnola. Apparato critico di G.M. Boccali, Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli 1995 (Medioevo Francescano, testi, 2), 786-787.*

expression *mentis alienatur excessu*, refers to the state of mystical union of the soul with God, seen in the fact that Francis literally goes out of himself during this intense moment. Bonaventure is quick to add the hidden meaning of Christ's words: "the principal intention of the words referred to that (Church) which Christ purchased with his own blood."<sup>40</sup>

Bonaventure also copies Celano's expression: *ad obediendum se parat, totum se recolligit ad mandatum*, with the same insistence upon the term "command" (*mandatum*) which refers to the divine will upon Francis, which marks the object of his Prayer before the Crucifix of San Damiano.

Bonaventure's account of the episode of San Damiano opens the way for later developments on the theme of Francis' conformity to Christ Crucified, particularly in the *Book of Conformities* of Bartholomew of Pisa, compiled towards the last decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup>

### **The significance of the episode of the Crucifix of San Damiano**

In his Testament Saint Francis speaks about his experience of conversion. He starts off with an allusion to his service to the lepers as the beginning of his life of penance. Immediately after Francis speaks about his devotion to churches, where he became aware of the presence of Christ: "And the Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would pray with simplicity in this way and say: 'We adore You, Lord Jesus Christ, in all Your churches throughout the whole world and we bless You because by Your holy cross You have redeemed the world.'"<sup>42</sup> This prayer, taken from the liturgy of the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, reminds us of one of the first churches to which Francis became very fond, namely the church of San Damiano.

In this poor church, Francis discovered the icon of the Crucified Christ, which became an object of deep veneration on his part. Witness to this is the Prayer before the Crucifix of San Damiano, which was composed round about 1205, and ranks among the oldest writings of Saint Francis. The dilapidated church of San Damiano, in which Francis found the Byzantine Crucifix and a poor priest, provides the setting for the episode of Francis' calling to repair that church, given by the Crucified Christ who speaks to Francis from that icon.

---

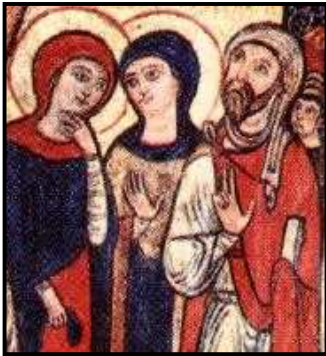
<sup>40</sup> Bonaventure depends upon 2C 11: FAED II, 250: "He then runs quickly to fulfill the rest, working tirelessly to rebuild that church. Although the divine word spoken to him was really about that Church which Christ acquired with His own blood."

<sup>41</sup> BARTOLOMEO DA PISA, *De Conformitate Viæ Beati Francisci ad Vitam Domini Iesu*, Liber III, XXXI, 5, in *Analecta Franciscana* V, 379-380: *Quomodo Iesus crucifixus et in forma crucifixi beato Francisco toties apparuisset, nisi beatus ipse Franciscus ipsius Crucifixi amicissimus fuisset? Apparuit enim Christus crucifixus beato Francisco, 'primo vice quadam dum sequestratus oraret, ut dicit I pars Maioris Legendæ; ad cuius conspectum liquefacta est anima eius et memoria passionis eius cordis visceribus impressa medullitus,' ita ut dum recordaretur, a fletu vix se continere valeret. Secundo in ecclesia Sancti Damiani oranti, quando Crucifixus ei dixit ter: 'Francisce, vade, repara domum meam quae labitur.' De quo dicit II pars Legendæ Maioris. Tertio quando eunti de Perusio versus Sanctam Mariam de Portiuncula, in cruce aurea Christus confixus apparuit, ipsum beatum Franciscum praecedens, facie ad ipsum beatum Franciscum revoluta; ut clare socius eius frater Leo conspexit (Actus, c. 38, n. 5 sqq., Chron. 24 gen. p. 68; AF IV, 189). Quanto idem beato Francisco Christus ut Crucifixus apparuit in sacro Monte Alvernae, quando stigmata ei impressit et dedit.*

<sup>42</sup> *Testament of Saint Francis*, 4-5: FAED I, 124-125.

The lepers, the churches, the image of Christ Crucified, and the poor priest, become like stepping stones on the way of Francis' conversion to the evangelical life. The end result would be the discovery of the book of the Gospels, first in the church of San Niccolò and then at the Porziuncola, which would provide Francis with the full revelation of his calling to the evangelical way of life. But two years before this happened in 1208, Francis went through the experience of a first calling in San Damiano. The invitation he received from Christ was that of repairing that dilapidated church. Francis took this task very seriously, until he realized that it was just a sign of a more profound and meaningful commitment, namely, the call to repair the living Church which Christ ransomed by His own blood.

The full significance of the San Damiano episode, as we find it in the Sources, becomes clear when we place it in between the call to penance and the call to the evangelical way of life. San Damiano provides the context in which Francis is called to live his penitential and evangelical calling, namely, in the Church. From his intense love of Christ Crucified, his veneration to poor priests, his courageous renunciation before the bishop of Assisi, Francis passes on to understand his calling and that of his brothers as a calling to repair the Church, in other words, to present the Church with a new way of Christian life, rooted in the *apostolica vivendi forma*, in the apostolic way of life of the Gospel.



The icon of Christ Crucified of San Damiano remains to this very day a sign of the full significance of the evangelical calling of Francis and the Friars Minor. The invitation to repair the Church by being part of the Church was fundamental in the success of Francis' mission and that of his Order during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The discernment process which Francis went through when he prayed in front of the Crucifix of San Damiano revealed to him that his specific vocation would be that of restoring Christ's Church. San Damiano provides the setting for the Christian proposal of Francis and his brothers, as well as for its subsequent female expression in the case of Clare and the Poor Ladies.

In the light of what the San Damiano Crucifix meant for Francis and his radical choice of evangelical life, we can understand the specific call of all his followers as being that of continuing along the road he traced for them. The reason why the Franciscan Order has always struggled to come to terms with its specific identity has been largely linked with the way it has regarded its ecclesial mission. The Church has always regarded the Franciscan Order as a result of its own making, in the sense that the evangelical form of life professed by Francis and his Order was ratified by the highest authority of the Church with the most solemn canonical document possible, namely a papal bull. At the same time, this recognition meant also that the Order had to be of service to the Church which approved its way of evangelical life. This has led to tensions in the history of the Order, which mainly concerned the split between faithfulness to Francis' original ideals and faithfulness to the concrete needs of the Church.

If Francis could very well say that no one showed him what he had to do, but that it was God Himself who revealed to him the Gospel way of life, it was the same Francis who submitted this way of life to the judgment and approval of the Church. His life was totally spent on being of service to the poor and crucified Christ, present in poor churches, in the human misery of its ministers, in the hunger and thirst of the faithful for

God's word and the sacraments, for justice and peace in society, and for a more humane natural environment. In this way Francis rebuilt and restored the dilapidated Church of the Crucified Christ. As we Franciscans remember the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the episode of the San Damiano and as we gaze in contemplation upon the image of the Crucified Christ who spoke to Francis, we also are called to become more aware of new ways in which we can be of service to Christ, to His Church, and to the global human fraternity.