

Final Months and Days of Francis of Assisi on Earth

“I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do. Now glorify me, Father, with you.” *[John 17: 4]*

Once, when the brothers were staying in Foligno, Brother Elias had a dream. An elderly priest clothed in white appeared to him and said, “Arise, Brother, and say to Brother Francis that eighteen years are now completed since he renounced the world and gave himself to Christ, and that he will remain in this life for only two more years; then the Lord will call him to himself and he will go the way of all flesh.” Francis spent these last two years in great pain and suffering from his ailments, though he never complained. In fact, when he realized that Sister Death was approaching, it filled him with great joy, and he praised the Lord.

After receiving the cross on his body on the mountain of Laverna, Francis went to the Rieti valley where he met Cardinal Hugolino, the bishop of Ostia and guardian of the Franciscan order. There Francis predicted that the cardinal would one day be the bishop of the entire Church. On March 19, 1227, the cardinal was elected pope, taking the name Pope Gregory IX. Cardinal Hugolino had always had a filial affection for Francis and he suffered greatly for Francis’s physical conditions. In Rieti, the cardinal encouraged him to receive treatment to try to regain his eyesight. Francis agreed, though the procedure frightened his brothers. Thus it happened that his head was cauterized in several places, his veins opened, plasters put on, and eye-salves applied. But it did not help, and Francis’s condition worsened.

Next, Francis went to Siena and there he began to finally succumb to the evil that was overtaking him. His stomach was racked with illness and his liver was infected causing him to vomit much blood. He may have had tuberculosis or possibly even leprosy. Brother Elias heard what was happening and came quickly to be with him. Together they went to the Celle, a hermitage outside the city gates of Cortona. There his abdomen began to swell, along with his legs and feet. His stomach ailment grew worse and he could hardly eat. Francis knew he was dying, and he asked to be taken back to Assisi.

It was Autumn and the days were shortening. The cold rainy season had begun early that year, and the fragrance of smoke from the wood-burning stoves filled the air. The leaves, already changing colors, were dying and falling to the ground foreshadowing the bitter Umbrian winter that was soon to set in.

Francis went to the bishop of Assisi and stayed with him. There he added the final lines to his Canticle of Creatures: “Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whose embrace no living person can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Happy those she finds doing your most holy will. The second death can do no harm to them.” He requested that when his time should come, Brother Angelo and Brother Leo sing to him the Praises of Sister Death.

His desire was to return to the place where his movement had its beginnings and where his spiritual life had come into being. It was the place he loved more than any other – the Portiuncula. He believed that this particular church was endowed with special graces and blessings. He often told the brothers, “See to it that you never abandon this place. If you are driven out from one side, go back in at the other. For this place is truly holy and is the dwelling place of God.” It would be the place where he would give back to God the last thing he possessed in this world: his life.

He was carried on a litter from Assisi down to St. Mary of the Angels. When they arrived on the



plain halfway between Assisi and St. Mary's, near the hospital of San Salvatore, he asked the bearers to stop and set the litter on the ground. He turned and faced Assisi, and, though he was almost completely blind, he raised himself up a little and blessed his beloved Assisi, saying, "Lord, it is said that in former days this city was the haunt of wicked men. But now it is clear that of Your infinite mercy and in Your own time, you have been pleased to

shower special and abundant favors upon it. Of Your goodness alone, you have chosen it for Yourself, that it may become the home and dwelling of those who know You in truth and glorify Your holy Name, and spread abroad the fragrance of a good report, of holy life, of true doctrine, and of evangelical perfection to all Christian people. I therefore pray to You, O Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies, that You will not remember our ingratitude, but ever be mindful of Your abundant compassion which You have showed towards it, that it may ever be the home and dwelling-place of those who know You in truth and glorify Your blessed and most glorious Name for ever and ever. Amen."

His last day on earth was October 3, 1226, when Francis was 44 years old. His last desire was to be stripped and laid naked on the bare ground next to the church of the Portiuncula. "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (*Genesis 3:19*) He wished to return to that fertile Umbrian soil that had produced so many saints before him and from which he himself came. He called his brothers together, consoled them and exhorted them to love God. Francis then spoke to the friars with fatherly affection and consoled them for his death and exhorted them to love God. He told them to remain faithful to poverty and the faith of the Roman Church. He gave the Gospel preeminence over any other rule of life. He listened to the Gospel of John where it begins: "Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father." Then he uttered his final admonition, "I have done what was mine to do; may Christ teach you what you are to do."

Though his earthly body was at the end, his soul experienced a new beginning. Francis rejoiced as he closed his eyes. As the sun disappeared behind the hills beyond Perugia in the west, the light in Francis went out. His earthly pilgrimage was finished, though his heavenly one continued. A great flock of larks began circling and singing overhead with unusual joy, strange in that they usually preferred the light of day and avoided the night. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." The cross was not the final vocation – the Resurrection was.

[References used: Celano, *First Life*, Chapter 8: 109; *Mirror of Perfection*, 124; John 13: 1; Celano, *Second Life*, Chapter 162, 214 and Bonaventure, *Major Life*, Chapter 14, 4; Psalm 116: 15; Adapted from Chapter XVII of "The Road to Peace in Assisi" by Bret Thoman, O.F.S.]