

Conditions for Entry to the Third Order of St. Francis under the Direction of the Friars Minor Capuchin of Traditional Observance of Morgon, France

1. Candidates must be above the age of fourteen, in good character, peace-loving, and above all of tried fidelity in the practice of the Catholic Faith and in loyalty to the Roman Church and the Apostolic See. They must be in accord with the doctrinal position of the Capuchin Fathers of Morgon, France and the priests of the Society of St. Pius X.
2. Married women may not be received without the husband's knowledge and consent, unless their confessor judges otherwise.
3. One must not belong to another Third Order.
4. Church law mandates that candidates undertake at least one year of novitiate before making their profession (the Capuchins of Morgon require one and a half years). At profession the candidates promise to observe the Rule for the rest of their lives.

The Rule of the Third Order (in brief)

1. Simplicity and modesty in dress.
2. Keeping away from dances and shows which savor of license and avoiding all forms of dissipation.
3. Temperance in eating and drinking.
4. Fasting and abstinence on particular days.
5. Monthly Confession and Holy Communion.
6. Praying daily one of three Offices approved by the Church.
7. Making a last will and testament.
8. Leading others by setting a good example.
9. Maintaining charity towards others.
10. Refraining from taking unnecessary oaths and using indecent language.
11. Attending Mass daily when possible and attending the monthly meetings.
12. Contributing to a common fund for the needs of poor members and for the dignity of worship.
13. Visiting sick members.
14. Praying for deceased members.



Two Saints in One Flesh

**THE STORY OF THE FIRST TWO
FRANCISCAN TERTIARIES**

Two Saints in One Flesh

*The Life of
The First Two Franciscan Tertiaries
and Their Message for Our Times*

by
Nicola Benson
Franciscan Tertiary

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the Church, to officially offer praise to God in the name of all humanity. Yet, because the laity must live in the busy world, holy Church, wise mother that she is, has given her Tertiary children the choice of a much simpler office suited to their station in life known as the *Office of the Paters* or the *Seraphic Office*. This option makes it possible for persons of virtually any station in life to faithfully pray the daily office.

There are also, throughout the year, eight Franciscan Feasts in which Tertiaries can gain plenary indulgences.

The Fruit of the Third Order

The Third Order of St. Francis has done so much good over the centuries both in the sanctification of souls and in the building up of Christian society that many Popes have been moved to sing its praises. The number Franciscan Tertiaries now listed as Saints or Blesseds is enormous. As to its effect in the social sphere, Pope Pius XI stated:

A most wholesome change in society began to take shape, the new Order founded by Francis spreading far and wide among the peoples of Christendom and gaining in its members, while moral purity followed in the wake of the practice of penance. ... There was a beautiful, glorious revival of the choicest virtues in civil life. In fine the face of the earth was renewed" (Rite Expiatis).

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Learn more about the Traditional Third Order of St. Francis at thetraditionalthirdorderofstfrancis.blogspot.com.

Manger, the Man of Sorrows upon the Cross, as well as the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament. Pope Pius XI has stated that in no other saint have the image of Christ and the ideal of the Gospel been more faithfully and strikingly expressed than in Francis who has been justly styled “the second Christ” (*Encyclicals Auspicato, Sacra Propediem, Rite Expiatis*).

To acquire the Franciscan Spirit Tertiaries are called to “frequently fix their attention on Jesus Christ and endeavor to copy one trait after the other according to their station in life. Prayerful reading of the Gospel and regular meditation will fill their minds with Jesus so as to enkindle love for Him in their hearts, and move their wills to imitate Him. Observance of the letter and spirit of the Rule will detach them from the world and self and awaken a longing and a taste for intimate communion with Jesus” (Ch. 3, T.O. Handbook).

Advantages of the Third Order

Following the spirit and letter of the Rule, members of the Third Order of St. Francis find “a safe refuge in a sinful world and an excellent nursery of the choicest virtues.” “By its wise restrictions and abundant graces the Third Order provides a security akin to that of the cloister.” Thus, the Tertiary vocation “is a great grace, approximating the call to religious life” (Ch. 5, T.O. Handbook). The various apostolates of the Third Order gives the Tertiary many opportunities to merit through the works of mercy.

The Tertiary has more help in the spiritual life than the rest of the faithful. Besides the Rule, so wisely constructed for those who seek holiness of life while living in this sinful world, he also has the “glorious examples of the holy Franciscans to guide him,” and he has claim to a special share in the good works of the Three Orders that will support his efforts. Furthermore, in those places where the Third Order is already established, he has the advantage of “novice instructions and monthly conferences to unfold the beauty and value, the means and obstacles of the spiritual life, and to explain the application of the spirit of St. Francis to modern everyday life” (Ch. 5, T.O. Handbook). And, being in fraternal union with other Tertiaries who hold the same lofty Franciscan ideals is a priceless assistance providing joy and strength to persevere in this holy way of life.

All Tertiaries have the great privilege and duty of joining in the Public Prayer of the Church — the Divine Office. With the clergy and religious throughout the world, they become ambassadors of

Two Saints in One Flesh

IF THERE is one character in the Gospels more than another whose weakness appears to us wholly understandable, it is the Rich Young Man. When preachers make use of his story to extol the virtue of poverty, when they build up the atmosphere surrounding his vocation and show us Our Lord personally choosing this privileged being to be one of His close companions, and finally when they highlight the soul-shattering anticlimax — “he went away sad, for he had great possessions” — they do not always realize that there is another uncomfortable little anticlimax re-echoing in the souls of those who appear to be piously drinking in the sermon. Not many of us have really great possessions; but we usually are quite inordinately sad when called upon to part with any one of them. We cannot help feeling secretly that if the order to surrender everything were suddenly sprung upon us, we might not even display the restraint of the Rich Young Man. Of course, if Our Lord Himself were to speak to us personally, it might be different — but then He hasn’t done so — directly, anyway.

Spiritual Schizophrenia

We proceed to draw comfort from the many people who do respond generously to the Lord’s “Come, follow Me!” and take vows of poverty to serve Him as perfectly as possible. THEY have a vocation, we say, in our departmentalized, twentieth century way, so let them go ahead, and God bless them! They will pray for us, no doubt; while as for us, since we have no vocation, let us turn our attention with impunity to our next pay envelope and what it can do for us.

This schizophrenic idea that the Christian body is somehow divided into those privileged beings who have a vocation and an outer fringe of nondescripts who don't count much either way provided they make a reasonable attempt to keep the Commandments and the Precepts of the Church, is a de-gutted version of Calvinism, with its doctrine of the elect and the damned. We do not go so far as to condemn the outer fringe to hell forthwith; but we do tend to feel that the active carrying out of the Gospel teaching is the responsibility of those professionally dedicated to it; the outer fringe meanwhile continuing free to eat, drink, and be as merry as possible short of mortal sin.

History, Not Grace

History, not grace, has brought about this unbalanced state of affairs. Even a cursory glance at the beginning of Christianity will show that, while the clergy were always a body set apart because of the sacred powers given them by Christ, the very neophytes and catechumens not yet baptized were looked upon as having a vocation: the most wonderful vocation ever known, the call of Jesus to union with Himself by membership in His Mystical Body. St. Paul, writing to his recent converts in Rome, makes his conception of their vocation very plain: "To all God's beloved who are in Rome, CALLED TO BE SAINTS"; and again to the Christians at Corinth: "To the Church of God at Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and CALLED TO BE SAINTS." And lest the early Christians be tempted to imagine vocational responsibility a "closed-shop" business belonging to the clergy, he writes to the people of Philippi: "To ALL THE SAINTS in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons."

Ah, yes, we say (being now on the defensive), that is all very well in theory; but in practice the canonized saints of the Church have mainly been monks, nuns, or hermits — people who have separated themselves from the world, dedicated themselves completely to the pursuit of holiness, and in return received from the Church protection and a certain amount of security and

members, unlike the first two Franciscan Orders, "*open to few...the Third Order... is accommodated to the many*" (Constitution *Misericors Filius*). Even so, the Third Order is not indiscriminately open to all, and there are times of probation (*i.e.* the postulancy & novitiate), before one may be professed for life in the Order.

What is the purpose of the Third Order?

The purpose of secular Third Orders in the Church is the same as that of religious orders and congregations: they promote Christian perfection. And St. Francis had no other end in view when he established his Third Order. It is easily understood, then, that "*the first essential duty of Franciscan Tertiaries [Third Order members] is the striving after perfection by faithfully observing the Rule*" (Ch. 3, T.O. Handbook).

Pope St. Pius X proclaimed that the purpose of the Third Order of St. Francis consists in this: "*that its members put into everyday practice the precepts of Gospel perfection and serve as models of Christian life for the imitation of others*" (*Tertium Franciscalum Ordinem*, Sept. 8, 1912).

What is the Spirit of the Franciscan Order?

Every religious order has its specific spirit. It is the founder who, with his particular ideals, outstanding virtues, and activities gives his order its spirit. In St. Francis we see seraphic love, extreme poverty, deep humility, great penance and a chivalrous life according to the Gospel. Yet, how can one concisely express his spirit? Perhaps the best way is to say that his spirit consists in living out fully, the whole Gospel — not only its commands, but also its precepts, ideals and implications. As his first biographer, Thomas of Celano wrote: "*He was the man with the evangelical vocation in truth and in faith the servant of the Gospel. ...His supreme desire, his ardent wish and his highest principle was to observe the Gospel in all things and above all things*" (Ch. 3, T.O. Handbook).

While other founders concentrated on one or the other characteristics of Christ such as zeal for souls or love of prayer, St. Francis concentrated on imitating Christ, the Divine Model as He is pictured in the Gospel. Thus, "*St. Francis approached God through the Sacred Humanity of Christ. This is the Gospel way, the way best adapted to human nature*" (Ch. 3, T.O. Handbook). From this we see the reason for Francis's great devotion to the Babe in the

vocation it surely is. The desire has not yet been widely expressed, but at least it is a little beginning to germinate in the darkness. Let us who may be interested ask the holy pair to pray that in this our century, when the need is so colossal, married couples may be enlightened to make a positive contribution of social charity in the spreading of the kingdom of God on this earth.



ARE YOU CALLED TO JOIN THE THIRD ORDER OF SAINT FRANCIS?*

The Third Order of St. Francis is “a most powerful antidote against all the evils which harass the present age, and...there is no means more apt to lead the world back to a true and solid observance of the Gospel.” “It is Our desire that all Christian families join the Third Order.”

~Pope Leo XIII

What is the Third Order of St. Francis?

“The Third Order Secular of St. Francis is an ecclesiastical association of the laity, originally founded by St. Francis of Assisi. It is a state of perfection for persons living in the world. The religious strive after perfection by observing the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and live in community according to their Rule, whereas the members of the Third Order Secular live in the spirit of the vows in fraternal unity according their own separate Rule” (Ch. 2, Third Order Handbook). Pope Leo XIII explained that while all the Franciscan Orders are ordered to the perfection of their

* The information on the Third Order presented here (even where not directly quoted) was taken primarily from Chapters 2-5 of the *Handbook of the Third Order Secular of St. Francis of Assisi* (out of print), by Basil Gummerman, O.F.M. Cap. Patterson, NJ: St. Anthony’s Guild, 1947.

independence. Where is the saint, we ask, who lived in an ordinary street, married an ordinary wife, brought up an ordinary family, and found sanctity by carrying into effect the teaching of Jesus in the midst of the business and cares of the world?

During a visit to Italy, I came upon such a man and his wife. They were dead, as to their bodies (which is a prerequisite for canonization anyway!) but their spirit so lived on in the little town where they spent their lives that they would seem to have a potent message still for any poor, struggling Christian of the twentieth [and we may add twenty-first] century who may have almost forgotten that he too is “called to be a saint.” For the husband started life as many of us do — wondering what would bring the most money. He was a Catholic of the caliber recognizable in every age: was faithful in external observances of every sort, indeed took rather a pride in so being, and in general followed the pattern that, now as then, causes a man to be thought of as a pillar of the Church.

But let me place him in his own setting, as I found him, so that he may give you his message in his own voice, and you may clasp his hand across the centuries and say over the celestial radio that needs neither time nor wavelengths: “Yes, I see what you mean.” For he is as familiar as that. You shall see.

Medieval Italy

Eight hundred years ago, Italy — a mosaic of city-states, duchies, and republics frequently at war with one another, or with the Pope, or with the Emperor — was, commercially speaking on the crest of a wave. Two Crusades, with more in the offing, had opened up a fabulous East-West trade route, of which Italy’s central position on the Mediterranean made her the pivotal point. Vast fortunes were to be gained then. Some city states held nobility of blood itself in less respect than business success; in places like Venice, Siena, Florence, the merchants were in very truth the princes.

Into this get-rich-quick atmosphere, in a little village called Gaggiano, a child was born in the year 1181 whose parents chose for him the name of Luchesio. It is a remarkable fact that, in a country where so much was destroyed in successive wars, the farmhouse in the Val d'Elsa where this child first saw the light is still standing.

When we study the lives of well-known Saints, we find that they seem often to have been marked out for sanctity from their cradle; and even, in the case of St. Francis and St. Dominic, for example, before they got as far as the cradle. It was quite otherwise with Luchesio, and this is one reason among many why we can feel at home with him. There are no evidences of precocious sanctity, and until he was married and the father of a family, it is obvious that religion was no more to him than a conventional background.

Guelph versus Ghibelline

Gaggiano was not an isolated village, and Luchesio's family was familiar with the often extremely complicated politics of the neighboring towns. It was a time of confused loyalties and shifting allegiances. The Guelph versus Ghibelline dissension had divided Italy for many years, and every local family was on one side or the other. The Guelph adherents professed loyalty to the Pope as a temporal ruler, while the Ghibellines supported the Emperor. Neither side denied the spiritual supremacy of the Pope and the Ghibellines considered themselves just as good Catholics as the Guelphs.

The country community that included Luchesio's family supported the Guelph's, as against the Ghibelline town of Borgo Máuri close by. When Luchesio became a teen-ager, he tried his hand at soldiering, and enjoyed his natural prowess at it so much that he conceived an ambition to make a career of it in the Guelph cause. Not very far away, in the hill town of Assisi, another boy, only a year younger than Luchesio, was also absorbed in knightly ambitions, and we know that God opposed

It is not unknown for saints of the distant past to bear their message into the future — to “keep up with the times,” as it were. In the Middle Ages, when pilgrims made their way on foot to the shrine of St. James at Compostela in Spain, Our Lady was invoked as “La Virgen del Camino”; and she is still giving us her protection as “Our Lady of the Highway.” St. Christopher is perhaps the best-known Saint outside the Church in modern times. Like Our Lady, he has been popular with travelers throughout the ages — and never has their protection been more necessary than in this age of speed.

Luchesio and Bonnadonna bring us a twofold message. First, they show us, by their lives lived in the world that one can fulfill the Great Commandment outside cloister walls. They were essentially lay apostles, and had none of the mentality which assumes that good works are the prerogative of religious orders. They lived a full Christian life, and their deeds were the direct outcome, the coherent expression, of their love for God. We of the twentieth [and twenty-first] century who are only just beginning to realize that all people, ourselves included, are called to the perfect life of charity — love of God and man — can go back seven hundred years for an object lesson.

The second part of the message is that a husband and wife can be an invaluable team in the service of God. The Church has constantly preached the sanctity of the marriage bond; yet up to now the rich field of a shared apostolic activity has been left largely uncultivated. Rather, the emphasis has been on segregation of the sexes in religious confraternities; and while this has its place, it is eminently true that husband and wife working together can accomplish unique good in the lay apostolate. All over the world today the home and the marriage bond, even the very birth and survival of children, are under attack. It would seem that now, as never before, the example of holy Christian marriage needs to be highlighted outside the home.

Together, Luchesio and Bonna blazed a trail for married people. Many couples today dimly feel that they would like help and guidance in completely developing this vocation — for

Father Hildebrand, Guardian of the friars. Bonna was anointed, and for the last time on earth her Lord came to her, who so often had come to Him in His poor. Then, peacefully, she gave back her spirit to God. Luchasio closed the eyes of his wife, and fellow Tertiaries kindly and reverently prepared her body for burial — and hardly was this done when they realized that Luchasio himself was dying. Father Hildebrand, hastily called back, performed the same rites for the husband as he had just performed for the wife. Luchasio died while the prayers were being said.

The miracles worked through the intercession of these two Tertiaries, not only during the years immediately following their death, but down the centuries to the present day, have been as numerous as they are various. The prayers of mothers for their children always receive special attention and prisoners, the blind, the sick, even the dead figure largely in the list.

The Meaning for Us

The life of Luchasio and Bonna, though separated from your by seven hundred years, has a very real significance for us, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why God has allowed their relics to escape the vicissitudes of time. Not very long after their death, one of the many wars between town and town brought a marauding band of German mercenaries to Poggibonzi. They had the usual medieval interest in holy relics, and they delivered a typically medieval ultimatum to the Father Guardian at the Church of San Francesco: as the price of sparing the friary, they demanded the body of a saint. Under this threat the friars gave up the body of Bonna, but detached it from her left arm and hand.

During the Second World War, the church, now known, significantly, as the Basilica of San Luchasio — was severely bombed; yet the chapel which enshrines Luchasio's body suffered no damage, and neither did the sacristy where the arm and hand of Bonna are preserved, and where there is an original portrait of Luchasio.

his design by sending him mysterious dreams, then an illness, and finally by speaking to him from a crucifix in the little ruined church of San Damiano. Luchasio, on the other hand, was deflected from his military career by a process which will appear to us entirely understandable: he fell in love, and his bride-to-be, unlike Francis's, was not Lady Poverty.

Bonnadonna was, in fact, of noble birth, belonging to the great Segni family. Their escutcheon of three golden roses could be seen on their palace wall in the town of Borgo Máuri, and their seigniorial woods had been given to provide the foundation of the new fortress-town of Poggibonzi, upon the gentle hillside beyond. Apparently, this gentle little patrician lady was prepared to love a brave, handsome, soldierly commoner, but she drew the line at marrying a Guelph. So a compromise was arrived at: Luchasio, while privately retaining his papal loyalty, would lay aside his arms and devote himself to a peaceful career.

As a beginning, he took his bride to Gaggiano, perhaps hoping to farm and inherit the paternal acres. But the plan was not carried out. It may be that the peasants at Gaggiano resented Luchasio's defection from the Guelph forces (there are the suggestions of a quarrel with a neighbor). It seems more likely that the dainty little daughter of the Segni found country life too rough for her, and yearned for her Borgo Máuri connections. In any event they left the farm, and Luchasio tried his hand at commerce in his wife's hometown. He found — no doubt — to his surprise, and certainly to his delight — that money came his way easily, and he began to prosper.

Mammon Takes Over

As part of Bonna's marriage dowry, her relatives had presented her with a fine house in Poggibonzi, and now that Luchasio had accumulated some capital, the pair decided to live there. Luchasio, no doubt making use of his farming connections at Gaggiano, opened a pork butcher's shop, and was soon doing a thriving trade in the rapidly growing town. Making money

presently began to exercise a powerful fascination over him, and here again we see the difference between him and Francis, and similarity between him and ourselves.

Nothing succeeds like success. Besides supplying the wants of his fellow townsmen, Luchasio saw his chance to enter the export trade, since there were regular trade routes between Poggibonzi and Sicily, France, the Netherlands, and even the East. For this, he acquired a knowledge of foreign exchange — no minor achievement in those days, when every republic in Italy and many cities had their own coinage. And this knowledge, in turn, opened up to Luchasio the ability to add money-changing to his other activities. He was fast becoming a very rich man.

He was also becoming a living example of what Our Lord meant when He said: “You serve God and Mammon.” He served Mammon until he became enslaved to the pure desire for gain. People outside his orbit, even though they might be pawns in his business dealings, came to mean less and less to him, until finally they had no more importance than the academic one of whether they were debtors or creditors in his ledgers. At the same time it never occurred to him that he was anything but “a good Catholic.” He and his wife were well-known figures in their rich apparel at High Mass on Sunday’s and feast days. They walked proudly among the leading citizens in religious processions. No doubt Luchasio even felt that his increasing wealth was in some sense a reward for the regularity of his outward service of God.

Meanwhile, he reasoned in a way entirely familiar to us. Here he was, Luchasio, once a farm boy, now, entirely owing to his own industry and shrewdness, a wealthy and powerful man. He had married into the nobility; and whereas he had once felt humiliated at being a poor commoner, unable to keep his wife in the luxury to which she had been born, now he could make it up to her by seeing to it that she was the most richly dressed woman in town. And how Bonna loved all this! The house that she had presented him with as her dowry must be furnished with a luxury undreamt-of even by the Segni — surely a natural ambition.

in the wards. Bonna went to the poor in their own hovels, looking after the children whose mothers were too sick to take care of them, feeding them, and teaching them their prayers.

Seekers gathered round Luchasio to be taught the Rule and practice of the Third Order. His penances were many, and his prayer became almost uninterrupted. The property at Gaggiano and Borgo Máturi he sold for the benefit of the poor, keeping only one little field by the river, which he tilled himself.

He and his wife still lived in the big house in Poggibonzi, for that belonged to Bonna, and Luchasio would not even suggest its disposal. But the day came when she told him that her uncles were willing to buy the house; and buy it they did on August 13, 1227. Bonna gave the money to Luchasio, asking that it go toward a hospital for the sick poor. Together, then, husband and wife went to live in a little hut near their riverside field.

Ten, twenty, thirty years passed, during which the holy couple divided their time between prayer in the church of the Franciscans (where they heard Mass every morning and followed the Divine Office with the friars), and their chosen work. Luchasio begged for his poor all through the countryside, himself seeming, with his patched garments and bare feet, the poorest of them all. Bonna continued to tend the sick, with all the wearing tasks that entailed. Their lives achieved that perfect balance prescribed by the Great Commandment of the Law: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole soul,...and thy neighbor as thyself.” They did it simply, a step at a time, and they did it with a constantly increasing joy. As husband and wife they achieved a unity of soul rarely enjoyed on earth.

Sister Death

Great as had been their privations, labors, penances, their health and strength were unimpaired until they both were nearly eighty years old. Then, one April morning, Bonna was unable to rise. Seeing her weakness, Luchasio, himself unwell, went for

God meant them to make the ultimate sacrifice of leaving each other to take the vows of religion.

Already in the towns Francis was now passing through, this spiritual unrest was becoming vocal, and often when he had ended a sermon he found himself besieged by hosts of men and women clamoring to be allowed to follow him. Gently and without surprise, he explained that they could not forsake their God-given duties, but nevertheless they need not despair. “God has called all without exception to the perfect life,” he said. “Even those in the world may aspire to it. Be patient and I will write a Rule for you, and you shall be my brothers and sisters.” Whether it was in Borgo Máture, or as some say, at Cannara, that Luchesio and Bonna approached Francis, certain it is that they were received as if he already knew of their holy lives. Luchesio explained their desire to be Franciscans in earnest, even if it should mean the sacrifice of leaving each other. But Francis said no; as two in one flesh, they could be Franciscans and help each other to sanctity.

If this scene took place in Borgo Máture, we can imagine Francis that evening climbing the hill from the old town past the new town Poggibonzi, onward and upward to the friary at Santa Maria (soon to be renamed San Francesco). There in the Friars’ church he would spend the night in prayer. One biographer describes the scene next morning, when amid the huge crowds that collected, Francis discerned Luchesio and his wife, and a little group of their friends. He led the way into the church, where with his own hands he clothed them in the poor habit of the Third Order of Penance. So to Luchesio and Bonna fell the honor of being the first Franciscan Tertiaries.

From this day forward they lived in the true spirit of St. Francis, spending their free time in prayer in the friars’ church. Many were the ways they found to express their love for souls. Keeping only one room for themselves, they made the rest of their attractive home into a refuge for the sick poor, whom they nursed with their own hands. Luchesio still visited the hospitals tending the sick and helping with the often very unpleasant work

Their two fine sons must be well provided for, which meant acquiring more money and land — and what can we find to blame in that?

Like the Rich Young Man

Do we not reason similarly, whatever our means, every day of our lives? Our house must have all the latest labor-saving devices; our children must surpass the other children in the quality of their toys, their bicycles, their cars, the amount of their spending money. It is thus we earn the respect of our neighbors; it is thus we make known what important people we are. Therefore — let us pile up the wealth! If we do happen to remember at times that Our Lord seemed rather categoric[al] about His teaching, “You cannot serve God and Mammon,” we hastily push it to the back of our minds as one of those cryptic sayings not meant to be taken literally.

Had Luchesio one evening, as he made his way in his silk and velvet apparel up the hillside to his luxurious home, met his Lord there beside the olive trees and heard Him say, “Sell whatever thou hast, and give it to the poor, and come, follow Me” — it seems highly likely on the evidence that once again Christ would have been left watching a retreating figure. Once again He would have uttered the words we all try to ignore: “With what difficulty will they who trust in riches enter the kingdom of God!” And we can imagine the eyes of infinite Mercy and Love looking down through the ages into the souls of all the “poor little rich” creatures like ourselves, who have become entangled in our possessions. May we awaken to our spiritual destitution in time to hear His voice comforting our fear: “With God all things are possible”!

Brinkmanship

Jesus did not stop Luchesio on the road to Poggibonzi, his hour of grace had not yet struck, and before it did he was to catch a glimpse of the abyss into which his chosen mater, Mammon,

would eventually have hurled him. Modern politics has invented a new word, “Brinkmanship”; but very many Christians now in heaven were only too familiar with the practice during their earthly pilgrimage. Up to this time, Luch시오 had not knowingly done what was positively dishonest or unjust. But when money rules, the demarcation line between justice and oppression becomes blurred. We tend to imagine that monopoly is a modern term; that the Small Trader, the Combine, and the Merger only appeared in the twentieth century. In fact, the jungle of competitive trading has been “red in tooth and claw” ever since density of population made organized trading a necessity.

Now, at the height of his career, Luch시오 suddenly saw a further opportunity. In Italy’s frequent ruinous wars, grain was habitually scarce; harvests were pillaged by foraging soldiers or fired by retreating enemies. It struck Luch시오 that a merchant with the foresight to buy up all available stocks in the cheapest markets in time of plenty would be able to put other grain sellers out of business, and to charge whatever price he liked when famine struck. To Luch시오, in his windowless iron tower of self-complacent profiteering, it seemed a wonderful idea; and no doubt the further developments, so familiar to international armament manufacturers, also occurred to him: the interest in wars for their own sake, the agents to spy out the likely theaters of conflict, the bribery to prevent interception plans. Yes the whole corrupt system would be dimly apparent to him as he steadily approached the Brink. It was at this point that God made use of the human instruments that were to capture for Him one of the holiest husband-and-wife teams the Church has known — and strangely enough, one of the few. Luch시오’s grain speculations, with their sequel of hardships for the poor and impoverishment for local merchants, soon began to be talked about; secretly at first, for the victim cannot afford to offend the exploiter, but with growing resentment and fear. Finally one of the victims, whose family was starving, saw the prosperous merchant coming down the street from Mass. Full of reckless anger, and having nothing more to lose, he stood in Luch시오’s path and snarled at him: “You think you are a just man, don’t

and began to dress in the plainest of clothes, she felt that the time had come for an understanding.

Luch시오 was ready. He told her gently that he wanted to live henceforth for Christ only, and to devote himself to the service of Christ in the persons of His poor. Then Luch시오 added something: that he needed the help and support of his wife as never before. Bonna could not but respond. Though everything connected with his change of life went counter to her worldly tastes and desires, she clung to the one thing that matter most to her. Her husband loved her and wanted her help: she would try to give it with all her heart. Luch시오 was overjoyed. He knew that there were many things that Bonna could do for the needy much better than he could. Moreover, he would now be able to tell hungry people to come to the house for food; he had refrained from doing this hitherto out of delicacy since the house was Bonna’s marriage-portion. Soon the poor of the neighborhood were flocking to the house, knowing they would not go away empty. Soon, too, husband and wife, united as before in all things, walked hand in hand on the road to sanctity.

The Order of Penance

Francis had visited the Val d’Elsa six years ago. Now he was rumored to be on his way again. In the interval, his reputation for sanctity had increased, and numbers had come from all sides to put themselves under his Rule, which the Pope had now approved. He had formed both a First Order, for men who wished to live in absolute poverty like himself, the better to imitate Christ; and a Second Order of Poor Ladies, headed by the noble Clare of the Scifi. But Francis’[s] tremendous influence was also felt by the ordinary people, those bound by domestic ties to live in the world. Mothers of Families, fathers with children to support, teen-agers, old folk, cripples — all were stirred to try to emulate him. Even Luch시오 and Bonna, as the climbed together the upward path of holiness and charity, felt the desire to be wholly of Francis’[s] following, and wondered if

Bonna was indignant. He had never been dishonest, she maintained, and his reputation was high with all the other merchants. Luch시오 explained that since he had listened to Francis of Assisi, he had begun to look on the whole commercial scene, not from the point of view of profit but from the all-embracing point of view of eternity; and from that vantage point, he, Luch시오, had been most sadly out of focus. Bonna could not, or would not, see any sense in what he was saying, and for the first time, the coldness of misunderstanding spread through the beautiful house that their marriage had brought them. How human they were, this thirteenth-century man and wife, not dreaming that their tender little story would come down as an example and a challenge to people living in a continent not even discovered when their earthly struggle was being fought out.

No one can go ahead of grace; and Luch시오, who deeply loved his wife, was wise enough not to force the issue by argument. Instead, he betook himself to prayer. Francis had left behind him a small group of friars to consolidate his work in the region, finding shelter for them on the hilltop above Poggibonzi, where for centuries there had been a shrine of St. Mary of Camalda. Hither Luch시오 would come to pray, feeling happy and encouraged by the presence of Francis'[s] disciples. As they were trying to build a little church with their own hands, Luch시오 spent many an evening carrying huge stones and carting dirt from the building site. Poor Bonna's feelings can be imagined when she heard that her husband was working like a common laborer. Furthermore, the gossips told her, he had even been seen in the poorest quarters of the town, carrying sacks of grain to dirty little hovels.

The atmosphere in the house grew more and more strained. Bonna watching him narrowly, noticed that he no longer seemed to relish the rich dishes she had always prepared for him, but wanted only the simplest food. Sometimes she awoke in the night, and saw in silhouette the kneeling figure of her husband, and knew instinctively that he was praying for her. Finally, when Luch시오 left off his rich apparel, his furs and gold chain,

you? You can kneel full of confidence before the good God — but I can tell you you're no better than a murderer, for you have taken my livelihood away from me!"

The poor man turned on his heel and stamped back into his empty store; and Luch시오 stood as if thunderstruck staring after him. This encounter with reality showed him in one searing illumination the path down which Mammon was leading him. Now or never he must turn back. But how? As he made his way to the lovely home that was his wife's dowry present, he felt that he could not speak of his trouble to her. Much as these two loved each other, the disparity in their rank had remained a fact of their married life; Luch시오's effort to bridge the gap by surrounding his wife with luxury had been one of the things that started him on his money-making career. How would she feel if she were told that families were starving in order that hers might prosper? No, he could not tell Bonna — not yet.

"You cannot serve God and Mammon." For the first time in his life, Luch시오 realized that serving God meant more than kneeling in church every Sunday at Mass. At the very least, it meant being just to those other souls for whom Christ died. It meant more than kissing the Crucifix on Good Friday; it meant recognizing the Crucified in those poor people starving through Luch시오's own greed.

The Little Poor Man

Luch시오's conscience had been deeply stirred, but he was so far like ourselves that for the moment he did nothing about it. Then, passing through the market place one day, he heard in the midst of excited conversation the name of Francis of Assisi. "He is coming to the Val d'Elsa!" people were saying. "He's bound to pass this way! He has been to Cortona, to Florence, and to Pisa and now he's only ten miles away at San Gemignano!"

Francis of Assisi! Like everyone else in Italy, Luch시오 knew the name well. Francis could have been a rich man in his

own right by now, for he was the only son* of a great cloth merchant Pietro Bernardone. But in one dramatic gesture he had given up all right to his patrimony and chosen to follow Jesus in absolute poverty. Luchasio had respected the action at the time, but he smiled at the naïveté of proposing to carry out literally the evangelical counsels of perfection in the midst of colorful, bargaining, money-making, thirteenth century Italian society.

Nobody smiled any longer, for already people were familiar with the brown-robed brothers who followed Francis in poverty and simplicity, preaching penance with great effect to rich and poor alike. Such an impact had not been made on society since the time of St. Paul. And now the Little Poor Man was actually coming in to the Poggibonzi district. Luchasio, perturbed by his own problem, felt that he must hear what Francis had to say.

The day came when the bells of San Gemignano pealed out the joyful news that the Poverello was there with his friars. From all the mountain villages around, folk flocked into the little township. The public square, where Francis would preach, was soon crowded. When Luchasio first set eyes on the Little Poor Man of Assisi, he must have been impressed by the fact that Francis, if he had chosen, could have been twice as rich as Luchasio with half the effort, since he had but to inherit an established and prosperous business. Yet there he was in his poor, threadbare, patched garment, possessing nothing, his face alight with a joy that Luchasio had never known, the unshadowed joy of the complete love of Christ.

Sermons always make dull reading. For with a sermon, as with every other form of oratory, the personal quality of the preacher is the only effective factor. Sanctity cannot be conveyed in cold print. And as with the Curé of Ars, whose sermons, sometimes barely audible converted thousands, yet on paper seem mere catechetical clichés, so with St. Francis. The extracts that have come down to us reveal little of his utter

* EDITOR'S NOTE: According to St. Francis's first biographer, Thomas of Celano, St. Francis had at least one younger brother.

sincerity, his complete dedication, the penetrating power of his burning love.

The theme of St. Francis'[s] preaching was always penance. Not "penance in fancy dress," which so many in the Middle Ages were prone to practice to an exaggerated degree; but penance which means a change of heart, accompanied by a practical intention to right the wrong done before the change of heart happened. This is the acid test of conversion. We all know how we will flock to a new devotion, undertake a new novena, sign up for a pilgrimage, practice some extra denial for Lent; but how often do we right the repented wrongs of the past, the unkind words spoken, the mean action, the bad example given? Yet unless our acts of piety inspire us to this, they are merely sentimental projections of our ego which can hardly effect much for eternity.

Conversion

Luchasio was deeply impressed by the simple words of Francis. Had it not been for his encounter with the ruined trader so shortly before, his self-complacency might not have let him see where to begin. As it was, he was quite clear in his mind as to what had to be done. Not for him the mystic flights heavenward, the fasts and hairshirts of the saints. Like Zacchaeus of old, he had to begin with the prosaic duty of restoring the means of livelihood to those he had wronged. He chose to do it personally and, he hoped, quietly, beginning with the one who had so bitterly accused him.

But in a little town like Poggibonzi, such unusual proceedings as rich merchants restoring money to petty traders could not pass unnoticed, and soon rumors began to reach Luchasio's wife of what he was doing. Never in their married life had they hidden anything from each other, and Bonna was afraid. She questioned him. Could it be true that he was giving large sums of money away? Yes, he quietly answered. He was trying to make up for some of his inhuman business dealings.