

## **The Legend of the Three Companions**

### **Chapter VII**

#### **THE HARD WORK AND FATIGUE INVOLVED IN RESTORING THE CHURCH OF SAN DAMIANO AND HOW HE BEGAN TO OVERCOME HIMSELF BY GOING OUT FOR ALMS**

Therefore, Francis, the servant of God, stripped of all that is of the world, is free for divine justice and, despising his own life, he gives himself to divine service in every way he can. Returning to the church of San Damiano, joyful and eager, he made a hermit's habit for himself, and comforted the priest of that church with the same words with which the bishop had comforted him.

Then, getting up and going back to the city, he began to praise the Lord throughout the piazzas and neighborhoods, like one inebriated with the Spirit. When he finished praising the Lord in this way, he turned to obtaining stones for the repair of the church. "Whoever gives me one stone," he would say, "will have one reward. Whoever gives me two, will have two rewards. Whoever gives me three, will have that many rewards."

Thus, burning with enthusiasm, he also made many other simple statements. Because he was unlettered and simple, the man chosen by God did not speak in the learned words of human wisdom, but in everything was quite simple. Many ridiculed him thinking he was mad, while others, prompted by piety, were moved to tears seeing how quickly he had come from such pleasure and worldly vanity to such an intoxication of divine love. Disregarding their scorn, he thanked God with burning enthusiasm.

It would be long and difficult to relate how he worked on the project, for he, who had been very refined in his father's house, hauled stones on his own shoulders, afflicting himself greatly in the service of God.

The priest judged the work to be beyond his strength, even though he was offering himself so enthusiastically to divine service. Although poor himself, he obtained special food for Francis, for he knew that, while he was in the world, he had lived rather delicately. Of course, as the man of God later admitted, he would frequently enjoy delicacies and sweets, and refrain from disagreeable foods.

One day, when he noticed what the priest was preparing for him, he said to himself: "Will you find a priest like this wherever you go who will offer you such human kindness? This is not the life of the poor that you have chosen. As a beggar, going from door to door, you should carry a bowl in your hand, and, driven by necessity, you should collect the scraps they give you. This is how you must live willingly, out of love for him who was born poor, lived very poorly in this world, remained naked and poor on the cross, and was buried in a tomb belonging to another."

As a result, one day he took a bowl and, entering the city, he went door-to-door begging alms. Whenever he put various scraps in his bowl, many who knew what a pampered life he had lived were astonished at how marvelously changed he was, seeing that he held himself in such contempt. But when he wanted to eat the mixed food offered him, he felt revulsion because he was not accustomed only to eating such things, but even at looking at them. At last overcoming himself, he began to eat, and it seemed to him that no delicacy had ever tasted so delicious.

Then his heart rejoiced in the Lord so much that his flesh, although weak and afflicted, was strong enough to endure joyfully for the Lord anything harsh or bitter. Above all, he gave thanks to God that

He had changed the bitter into the sweet, and that He had comforted him in so many ways. Then he told the priest not to prepare or obtain any food for him in the future.

When his father saw him in such disgrace, he was filled with unusual pain. Because he loved him dearly, he was ashamed and felt great sorrow for him. Seeing his flesh half-dead from excessive affliction and cold, he would curse him whenever he came upon him.

Aware of his father's curses, the man of God chose a poor and looked-down-upon man to take the place of his father, and told him: "Come with me, and I will give you some of the alms that were given to me. When you see my father cursing me, I will also say to you: 'Bless me, father.' You will then make the sign of the cross over me and bless me in his place." The next time this happened and the beggar was blessing him, the man of God said to his father: "Don't you believe that God can give me a father to bless me against your curses?"

Afterwards, many of those who mocked him and saw how patiently he endured every abuse marveled with great astonishment. One winter morning, while he was at prayer, dressed in poor clothes, his carnal brother was passing by, and remarked sarcastically to his companion: "You might tell Francis to sell you a penny's worth of his sweat." When the man of God heard this, filled with a wholesome joy, he answered enthusiastically in French: "I will sell that sweat to my Lord at a high price."

While he was working steadily at restoring the church, he wanted to have a lamp burning continually in the church, so he went through the city begging for oil. But when he was approaching a certain house, he saw a group of men gathered for a game. Ashamed to beg in front of them, he backed away. Mulling it over, he accused himself of having sinned. Hurrying back to the place where they were playing, he told everyone standing around his fault, that he was ashamed to beg because of them. And, in fervor of spirit, he entered that house and, for the love of God, begged in French for oil for the lamps of that church

While laboring with others in that work, he used to cry to passers-by in a loud voice, filled with joy, saying in French: "Come and help me in the work of the church of San Damiano which, in the future, will be a monastery of ladies through whose fame and life our heavenly Father will be glorified throughout the church."

See how, filled with the spirit of prophecy, he truly foretold the future! For this is that sacred place where the glorious religion and most excellent Order of Poor Ladies and sacred virgins had its happy beginning about six years after the conversion of blessed Francis and through the same blessed Francis. Their wondrous life and renowned practices were fully approved by the Lord Pope Gregory IX, of holy memory, at that time the Bishop of Ostia, and confirmed by the authority of the Apostolic See.

#### **Questions for Reflection:**

- 1. In this chapter, we can see how God gave St. Francis the grace to overcome himself. It was, however, necessary that he cooperate with the grace given. How did he do this? How can you do this in your life?**
- 2. What in your life seems bitter to you? Do you trust God enough to embrace that which seems bitter? What can you expect from God when you do this?**
- 3. How did St. Francis handle the curses that his father uttered against him? What lesson can you draw from this?**