

The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

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Spirituality and the Places of Our Lives LA MADDALENA Lepers and Evangelization



Chapel of La Maddalena: Leper Colony where Francis ministered to lepers.

Francis writes in his Testament:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.
(Early Documents I, 124)

There were several hospitals for lepers in the Assisi region during the time of St. Francis. The one that played a large role in his life was called San Lazzaro of Arce, renamed Santa Maria Maddalena. Tradition tells us there were two chapels on this property. One was named San Rufino d'Arce and served the needs of the male lepers. The other was called Maria Maddalena and cared for the spiritual needs of the women. Or some would claim that San Rufino d'Arce served lepers who were poor while Maddalena catered to those who came from a wealthy background. La Maddalena remains a place of prayer and devotion for the local residents of the area. San Rufino d'Arce is now cared for by Franciscan sisters who live in a convent connected with this chapel. Both chapels still exist in the valley below Assisi. They lie about half way between San Damiano and the Porziuncola.

A road in the Umbrian valley connects the village of Saint Mary of the Angels and the city of Foligno. Along that road lies the Maddalena chapel. Nearby is a spur that cuts off from this main road and takes one towards Assisi. It is probable that on this road Francis met the leper as described in *The Legend of the Three Companions*:

“One day he was riding his horse near Assisi, when he met a leper. And, even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself dismount, and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. After he accepted a kiss of peace from him, Francis remounted and continued on his way. He then began to consider himself less and less, until, by God’s grace, he came to complete victory over himself.”

(Early Documents II, 74)

The embrace of the leper was a major uncovering moment in Francis’s conversion journey. In that encounter something shifted radically inside his heart and transformed his vision of reality. This was the turning

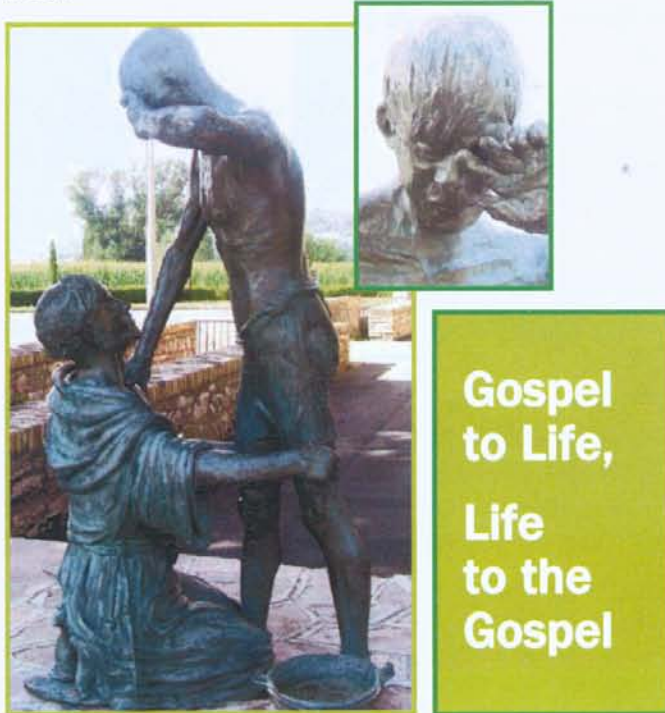


The road on which Francis met a leper.

in his heart that would make all the difference and this turning was now set in motion. In addition Francis felt a new power within for shortly afterwards he began to live among the lepers. He began to “show mercy.” Some would translate these words to read: “he would practice mercy towards them.” And once Francis got past this experience, and knew

deep in his being what it meant to practice and offer mercy, it was a logical step for him to begin reaching out in a similar manner to everyone: robbers, the poor,

Saracens, the arrogant, the powerful. All were deserving of respect, honor, inclusion and acceptance. Each one had worth and Francis was now empowered to affirm that truth.



Francis caring for a leper.

This experience gave Francis a soul-stirring encounter with the Gospel of Jesus. His embrace of the leper was an experience of “reading the gospel” in a most unique way. It led him from gospel to life and life to the gospel. Francis began to understand how the poor and outcast evangelized him.

This reminds me of a similar moment in my own life. In the 1970’s and 1980’s a group of friars took up residence in a somewhat inner city area of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On a corner of our block was a large three story building that became home for adult men that no one wanted. A man by the name of Larry lived there and took a liking to me. If Larry was outdoors as I came out of our home, he would run up to me and with a loud voice, and choice language, ask me how I was, how was the Pope and the president. Thus we carried on our conversations.

Larry, however, took a shower perhaps once every two weeks, rarely shaved, and had a terrible skin condition over his arms, neck and other parts of his body. It got to a point that on leaving the house I would first stick my head out the front door to see if Larry was there. What grew in my awareness, however, was that every time I saw Larry I felt confronted with the gospel. Each time my response pointed me towards the gospel, or away from it.

The poor and the outcast make us face up to the gospel whether we like it or not. We confront this truth over and over, wherever we encounter them, and in our daily decisions on how we will respond to those in need, anywhere in the world. It does put living flesh on the Secular Franciscan Rule:



View of Assisi from leper colony. Lepers could never return to their home town.

*The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people. ... Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to **careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel.** Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters. (Chapter II The Way of Life)*

Some scholars believe that in the early days, before Clare and her sisters were fully cloistered, Francis and the brothers would come from the Porziuncola, and Clare and her sisters from San Damiano to minister to the lepers. The leper colony was a short walking distance from either of the two places.

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