

THE INTENT OF THE COMPANIONS OF ST FRANCIS

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The main intent of the three companions of St Francis seems to have been to solidify the position of the Friars Minor in the wake of the death of St Francis. They were clearly concerned to establish St Francis as an example to present and future friars, to emphasize the Rule and to legitimize the position of the Order within the Church.

Although they put the fears into the mouths of nameless “brothers”, the companions revealed their own fear of the unknown following St Francis’s death. They wrote “They did not know then what was to happen in the Order after his death” (chapter 68). They understood that many friars would not have the same ferocious discipline of the founder of their order, and in the absence of his example, and would be tempted to stray. They believed this would only become worse after the Founder’s death as new friars who never knew St Francis joined the Order. Thus, this work seems to be an attempt to provide an answer to doubting friars and to solidify the base of the Order. The three companions stressed the importance of St Francis as an example to all friars, especially with regard to humility, poverty and obedience.

From the work, Friars should understand that should they fail to be duly humble or impoverished, they could not rely upon other friars to remonstrate with them and bring them back onto the right path. Instead, they should learn from St Francis and find inner strength to obey rather than wait for external forces to compel them. St Francis refused to “strike and flog” the vices out of recalcitrant brothers during his lifetime (76). Instead, he led by example. Through the tales of the companions, St Francis’s influence could continue to inspire, and his death have less of an impact upon the strength of the Order.

Despite the friendship of bishops and powerful men, St Francis retained his humility. When staying with Hugolino, he continued to beg for alms, and when the

bishop questioned him, St Francis responded that, “it is necessary for me to be the model and example” not only to the friars already within the Order, but also to those that “will be” (61). Many times, the companions reiterated St Francis’s humility in their work but recognize the difficulties for many friars of maintaining St Francis’s exacting standards. Many friars would be “troubled by shame” but should understand from St Francis’s example that subjection to the will of God and to their brothers and the performance of “servile tasks” was a necessary part of being a Friar.

The companions were also at great pains to detail the extent to which holy poverty should govern the lives of the friars. In particular, they make it clear that holding possessions in common was no more acceptable than holding individual possessions. Even during his lifetime, friars questioned St Francis’s will regarding possessions such as books, yet the companions emphasized St Francis’s rejection of items that might have seemed suitable, such as psalters, and of churches and buildings that might have seemed justifiable. In both cases, veering from the original Rule would draw the friars away from true holiness. They did not need learning, nor books and indeed such might inhibit their humility. The companions must have been aware of the great wealth of many monastic Orders in which individual monks did not possess anything, but the monasteries themselves held great wealth and possessions. Many of these monasteries must have seemed to betray their obligation of pastoral care to the poor, and the companions must have been keen to ensure that the Friars did not fall into the same trap. Thus, they underlined the importance not only of individual but also of communal poverty.

The companions used their writing to reinforce the importance of all friars keeping to both the word and the intent of St Francis’s Rule of the Order. The Rule was

extremely harsh, and even during St Francis's lifetime, many objected to its strictness. Yet, St Francis was firm. When rewriting the Rule, ministers of the Order challenged him, but St Francis remained resolute. The companions related that the voice of Christ told the rebels that, "I want the Rule to be observed as it is to the letter, to the letter, and without gloss, and without gloss, and without gloss" (113). Using the not St Francis, but Christ to make this declaration implies the great store the companions set on obedience to the Rule.

The Order expected Friars to be obedient to their superiors and again, the companions use St Francis himself as the example. He submitted to the authority of the Peter Catanii, the Minister-General (105) and to his appointed guardian (106). For all of his eccentricities, St Francis was humble enough to obey, and thus all friars should obey their ministers and superiors. As the Order expanded, it would be increasingly important for the ministers to retain some control over their subordinates, and the companions clearly recognized this.

Yet, obedience went beyond the Order itself. St Francis also demanded obedience to the Church and to

secular clergy within the Church. He himself obeyed Bishop Hugolino when the latter forbade him to go to preach in France (82). The Order was only in its infancy and although accepted by the Pope in 1210, at the time of writing, the companions must have been worried that without St Francis, whom many of the secular clergy and nobility appeared to love, they might fall out of favor. By stressing their obedience to the Church, and their communal poverty, the companions underscored the fact that the Order did not challenge any others in the Church, nor did they intend to attempt to impose their particular values upon the Church at large.

Throughout the work of the companions is a constant understanding of the impending death of St Francis and the resulting difficulties for his Order. They tried to counter this uncertainty with this work, to create an image of St Francis that could live on past his death and continue to inspire and instruct the friars to come, to strengthen the Order and consolidate its place within the greater body of the Church.