

Review of The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano

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Abstract: This text focuses on the document *Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano* from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents: Volume I*. In this work, researches of the author Thomas of Celano, the background information and the hagiographical nature of the text have been carried out. A brief summary has been done to conclude the main information. The argumentation parts considered some factual details of the process which Francis received the guidance of the God and also certain important virtues discussed in the document. It takes into account different narration in different text describing the life of Saint Francis and makes justification towards them.

Keywords: Saint Francis of Assisi, Thomas of Celano, Christianity, Church of Saint Damian

1. Introduction

When carrying out research on the Middle Ages, we cannot bypass the religion Christianity and its effect on the history. There are over 10000 saints recognized by the Roman Catholic Church and in this work we only focused on one of the most important one——Saint Francis of Assisi. The whole paper is generally based on the document *The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano*, so there are still limitations to the extent of research. Investigations are also conducted that largely relies on primary sources at the Middle Ages and also authentic sources like the Catholic Encyclopedia. Two important argumentations have been accomplished that primarily concentrate on the process which Saint Francis gradually became a saint and also the important virtues of Christians mentioned in the document.

2. About the Author Thomas of Celano

“Thomas of Celano, Friar Minor, poet, and hagiographical writer”, as quoted in The Catholic Encyclopedia, was born in the city of Celano in Italy in around 1200 and died in around 1255 [1, 2]. Now this city is known as the city of Piscina, in the Province of Torino in Italy. He received excellent education in his youth and therefore his literacy level is above average. The date which Thomas of Celano joined the Franciscan Order is still uncertain these days but it can be narrowed down into a date between 1213 and 1216 [3]. He met Saint Francis after the latter’s unsuccessful trip to Morocco, which he then returns to Italy.

Thomas of Celano completed three biographies of the Saint Francis, the *Vita Prima (The First Life)*, *Vita Secunda (The Second Life)* and *Tractatus de Miraculis (The Book of Miracle)*. After the

death and canonization of Saint Francis, Pope Gregory IX instructed him to write a biography of Saint Francis, which is *The First Life of Saint Francis*. According to Engelbert Grau, the author of “Thomas of Celano: Life and Work”, Thomas of Celano himself “was not an eye witness to the greater part of Francis’s life, he had to depend on faithful and trustworthy witnesses found in Assisi”. [4] So, this text may not be necessarily very reliable and accurate. The Second Life of Saint Francis was written by Thomas of Celano under the request of the Minister General of the Franciscan Order at that time, Crescentius of Jesi. However, this is done with the help of the famous “Three Companions” of Saint Francis. This records the last two years of Saint Francis but we are not certain that Thomas of Celano was around Saint Francis in his last two years. The last book Thomas of Celano wrote was not a technically biography of Saint Francis, but instead a collection of “miracles” happened on Saint Francis.

3. Introduction to the Book

In April, 1226, Saint Francis dictated his last word and expressed his last wish to be buried in Colle d’ Inferno, which is the place where criminals are executed. In his last two years he developed symptoms of dropsy and blindness, he knew that he will die soon. He spent his last days in a tiny hut in Porziuncola, with fail to return to city of Assisi. On the eve of his death, Saint Francis still obeyed his own moral ethics, Lady Poverty. In the Catholic Encyclopedia, it described the event as “He laid down on the bare ground, covered with a borrowed cloth, rejoicing that he was able to keep faith with his Lady Poverty to the end” [5].

He died the next day and his remains were transferred to St. Damian’s temporarily in order for St. Clare to admire his stigmata. Stigmata is a term in Christianity that described the appearance of body marks like wounds and scars in locations corresponding to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ [6]. It was then placed in the church of St. George where Francis was canonized by Pope Gregory IX, 16 July, 1228, also with a tone erected soon to memorize him. The Pope also instructed Thomas of Celano to complete a hagiography of Saint Francis, which later became the First Life of Saint Francis.

Another thing I want to emphasize on at this part is the tone and style in hagiographical literatures. In the prologue it mentioned similarities of this text with *The Life of Saint Martin of Tours* by Sulpitius Severus. Both of the text creates idealized biography of saints and also lowered the position and status of writer. Here I quote a sentence from the prologue, “It’s my desire to explain the acts and life of most blessed father Francis His devout devotion and truth will always be my guide and instructor. I have endeavored to set forth with unskilled words as far as I could.” [7]. It would be helpful to compare the words with a sentence in *The Life of Saint Martin of Tours*, which was completed long time before this text, “I did so, as I am not gifted with much talent, lest my somewhat unpolished style should displease my readers.” [8]. So, there may be inaccuracies in the text or extensions to the life of Saint Francis, and this is probably prevalent among hagiographical literature.

4. Summary of the Text

In the beginning of this text, it criticized the education methodology of medieval times. This is probably due to a low education level in medieval times and the primarily agricultural society that did not require everyone to have high literacy level. In the book, it described the education as carelessly and indulgently. Also, the children may be influenced by parents’ behaviors which also lead to poor early formation of children’s world views. The text is a metaphoric sentence to depict this, which is “For a flawed tree grows from a flawed root, it can only be brought back to the norm of justice under great difficulty”. Saint Francis’s early years were like this, surrendering to his desires and lived indulgently without control. He wasted 25 years in a feckless, winsome but arrogant way.

From my personal perspectives, the first chapter is mostly for educational purposes and lays the foundation of the following text—to indicate the gradual change of Saint Francis with the guidance of God.

The God punished him of long illness and weakened body. Under the influence of God's divinity, he started to hatred what he used to do and showed contempt what he used to be obsessed of. However, it's still difficult for him to abandon everything that he was familiar of and he was still trying to avoid the control of God. He still desired glory and wealth and committed a trip to Apulia. The God tried to avoid this by sending him a vision of soldiers to him in the night, but unfortunately, he misunderstood God's messages and thought that the trip would be successful. He didn't know what he was talking about, and it's definitely difficult to completely understand the message of God. Eventually he perceived God's idea and he refused to go to Apulia and rested for a few days to think about it. Saint Francis changed completely after the guidance of god and most importantly, his mind changed entirely to God. One day, the God asked Francis whether he wanted to get married, and his answer was truly the religion that Francis embraced and treasure in the heaven, which is eternal purity and wisdom.

He sold every possession he had in exchange for money and he went to the city Foligno. However, he did not find a way to spend it and he returned his journey to city Assisi. On the way home, he encountered a church which was built in honor of Saint Damian but it was in precarious situation due to its age and it may collapse at any time. Saint Francis walked into the church and found a poor priest living there and he expressed his intention to refurbish and renovate the church with his money. The priest, who had heard of him for a long time as the arrogant and extravagant son of merchants, was astonished by his sudden conversions. Due to fear of his parents, the priest allowed him to stay but he did not take the money.

Just as the priest expected, Saint Francis's father was looking for him full of anger. He hid in a small pit in the church to avoid his father and lived there for a month with very scarce food supply. After the month he walked out of that pit out of courage due to God. His father did not take any pity on him and locked him in a dark room. After a few days, Saint Francis's mum out of maternal distinct, unlocked his chain and freed him. His father, who was obsessed by money, forced Francis to go with him to the bishop and announce that he would hand out his rights of inheritance and return all of his possessions. Out of his expectation, Saint Francis agreed joyfully and took of all of his cloth without hesitation in front of the bishop to show his determination. The bishop understand that Saint Francis did this under the guidance of God and covered him with his cloth.

Now Saint Francis gained his freedom and he began to actually fulfil his promise—to fix the church of Saint Damian. He did not rebuild one, instead he renewed and restored one, as the foundation is laid by God and nobody could lay another one due to respect to Jesus Christ. At last, the text summarized some characteristics of Saint Clare of Assisi, which is also the moral codes that all Christians should obey. First, mutual and spontaneous charity is important as it brought all Christians together to donate money and possessions and unity is always important. Second, the virtue of humility is important for Christians as it shapes people to be gentle and tolerant. Third, chastity and virginity help us to forget earthly thoughts and to revolt against our desires. Fourthly, voluntary poverty also allows Christians to abandon earthly thoughts and that clothes and food cannot satisfy human wants. Fifthly, Christians should attain abstinence and silence so that they have great self-control and self-discipline. Sixthly, virtues of patience help people to maintain calm regardless of physical tribulations or mental vexations. Lastly, they behave everything with thorough contemplation and they know exactly what they should do and should not do. They follow everything completely and joyfully deep down their soul ordered by God.

5. Argumentation

Before reading this passage, I have read another source book written by Thomas of Celano, which is *First and Second Life of Saint Francis*. In this text, God talked to Francis when he was in the collapsed church of Saint Damian and here I quote the words of God, “Francis, go and repair my house, which, as you see, is completely destroyed.” [9]. Also mentioned in the text, Saint Francis was a feckless and winsome person, but after God gave him instructions, he changed and became a saint in the future. From that time, I held thoughts that Francis only became saints with special care of God, but after reading this text, my mind has changed. First, the God visited heart by punishing him with long illnesses, which caused him to introspect what he has done. However, this was not like directly telling him what is good and what is not good, this required him to understand everything by himself. It’s definitely a gradual process, like any normal person, Saint Francis also tried many times to rebel God’s will and still maintained desires for money and glory. An example mentioned in the text is the trip to Apulia [10]. In this stage, God send him a puzzle for him to solve, which is a vision of a picture of soldiers’ arms. Obviously, Francis misunderstood everything, but his wisdom saved him from the cliff and fully devoted himself to God. The little lyric at the end of the paragraph actually explains everything, “It’s very fitting to hand arms to a soldier about to battle with one strongly and fully armed.” The soldier here is Francis and arm is the guidance and power given by God. It’s not God changed him. He changed himself, and God only gave him the “arm” when he is fully mentally armed. So after reading this passage, I perceived that actually all Christians can become saints, it’s not they lack guidance of God. They may probably choose the wrong side when God gave them a puzzle similar to the one God gave to Francis, or they are not mentally prepared to be guided by God.

Another part I want to mention is on page 198-199, the seven important virtues of Saint Clare of Assisi. Firstly, charity is very important for Christianity, as it brings together people. For a religion, unity of followers and solidarity is important, as if all people share the same goal, the religion can grow and expand toward the correct direction. It may also improve the cohesion of followers. Charity can also relate with poverty, as donating wealth and properties can also be seen as a symbol for spontaneous poverty. Humility is also important for Christians, we learn from each other, we learn from the nature. Omniscience and omnipotence are impossible. This virtue also has its connection with patience. Patient people are often modest, as they can carefully teach or listen to the others without any arrogance. So when facing any physical or mental tribulations, patient and humble people can overcome them without changing their spirit.

6. Conclusion

In this work, we analyzed The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano from multiple dimensions. First we explained several important aspects of the author and also the motive of why he completed this work. Then we summarized the document from the view of hagiographical literature and made argumentations toward Saint Francis. This is a detailed study toward the document. Indeed, this paper is not a wholistic study toward the life of Saint Francis. In the future we could investigate more deeply and thoroughly into other primary sources to get a better understanding of the medieval times and also Christianity.

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