

FROM GRATITUDE TO ADORATION

Reading St Francis's Final Years

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'The Lord Gave Me': Reading the Testament as Theology

NEAR THE END of his life, weakened by illness and almost blind, Francis of Assisi dictated what has come to be known as the *Testament*.¹ It is neither a rule nor a systematic account of his life. Nor is it simply a farewell to the brothers who had shared his vocation. Rather, it is a contemplative act of remembrance in which Francis looks back over the course of his conversion and asks, in effect, what God has been doing all along.

What is striking is not simply what Francis remembers, but how he remembers. Again and again, his recollections are framed by a simple refrain: 'The Lord gave me ...'. The phrase recurs with quiet insistence. 'The Lord gave me some brothers' (n. 14); 'The Lord gave me such faith in churches' (n. 4); 'The Lord gave me, and still gives me, such faith in priests' (n. 6). What appears at first to be little more than a habitual turn of phrase gradually emerges as the key to Francis's entire interpretation of his life.

The *Testament* is therefore much more than autobiography. It is theology in the form of memory. Francis does not recount his achievements or fashion a narrative of spiritual progress. Indeed, he seems remarkably uninterested in presenting himself as the architect of his own conversion. Instead, every decisive moment is remembered as originating in God's initiative. The true protagonist of the *Testament* is not Francis but the Lord.

¹ St Francis of Assisi, *The Testament*, in *Early Documents*, volume 1, *The Saint*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New City, 2001), 124–127 (subsequent references by paragraph number in the text).

This is already evident in the opening lines. Francis begins with the event that has become emblematic of his conversion:

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. (n. 1)

The passage is often read as the story of Francis overcoming his natural revulsion through an act of heroic charity. Yet Francis tells it rather differently. The initiative belongs entirely to God. It is the Lord who gives, the Lord who leads, the Lord who transforms bitterness into sweetness. Francis does indeed act—he shows mercy—but his action is already contained within a prior divine action.

This pattern governs the whole *Testament*. Francis consistently resists any temptation to make himself the principal actor. The brothers who join him are not his achievement; they are given. His reverence for churches and for priests is given. Even the beginnings of his vocation are given. The repeated refrain establishes a distinctive theological grammar in which grace always precedes response.

This way of remembering is deeply biblical. Throughout the scriptures, Israel is repeatedly called to *remember*—not merely to recall past events but to recognise God's faithful presence within them. Memory becomes an act of faith. The mighty works of God are never simply left behind in the past; they continue to shape the identity of the believing community through grateful recollection. Francis stands firmly within this biblical tradition. His remembrance is not nostalgic but theological.

It is also profoundly christological. Francis has learned to understand his own life according to the pattern of the gospel itself, where God's initiative always comes first. Before there is any human response, there is divine gift. Before disciples leave everything to follow Christ, Christ

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has first come among them. Grace is never a reward for generosity; it is its source. This insight may appear simple, yet it has far-reaching consequences. Modern readers are often inclined to admire Francis as an inspiring moral example, a radical ascetic or a lover of creation. While none of these descriptions is false, they can subtly displace the centre of Francis's own understanding of himself. Francis never begins with what he has done for God. He begins with what God has done for him.

The *Testament* therefore invites its readers into a conversion of perspective. It asks us to re-evaluate not only Francis's life but our own. What if the decisive moments in our history are not, in the end, our own achievements or failures? What if the deeper truth of every vocation is that it begins, continues and reaches its fulfilment in the prior generosity of God? Francis's recollections become an invitation to examine our own memories through the same contemplative lens. Seen in this light, the repeated phrase 'The Lord gave me ...' is not simply Francis's way of describing the past. It is the mature expression of a lifetime spent learning to perceive reality itself as gift. The refrain is the fruit of contemplation. It is the language of one who has slowly discovered that gratitude is not merely an appropriate response to grace but the clearest form of theological vision.

The *Testament* does not leave us with a chronology of Francis's conversion so much as with its deepest interpretation. It teaches us that the history of sanctity is, first and last, the history of God's generosity. To understand Francis, therefore, we must first learn to read his life in the same way that he himself did: not as the story of an extraordinary man, but as the quiet triumph of divine grace.

That insight opens the way for everything that follows. If Francis's final testimony is shaped by the conviction that 'the Lord gave me ...', a further question naturally arises. How did such a vision come to maturity? How did the young man who once stood before the crucifix at San Damiano praying, 'Give me right faith, certain hope and perfect charity', come to reinterpret the whole of his life as the unfolding of gifts already being bestowed?²

Learning to See: From Petition to Gift

If the *Testament* allows us to hear the mature Francis remembering his life under the simple refrain, 'The Lord gave me ...', the question we need to ask is: how did he learn to speak in this way? Such language did not emerge suddenly in the closing months of his life. It was the fruit of a long apprenticeship in grace, a gradual education of the heart by which Francis learned to recognise God's prior generosity in events that, at the time, he could scarcely have understood.

² St Francis of Assisi, 'The Prayer before the Crucifix', in *Early Documents*, volume 1, *Saint*, 40.



The Miracle of the Crucifix, by Giotto, 1297–1299

already been chastened by defeat, illness and disappointment. Standing before the Crucified, he does not yet know the shape his future will take. He knows only that he must ask:

Most High and glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart.
Give me right faith, certain hope and perfect charity,
sense and knowledge, Lord,
that I may carry out your holy and true command.

The simplicity of this prayer is easily overlooked. Francis does not ask for success, influence or even certainty about the path ahead. Instead, he asks only for gifts that God alone can bestow. Faith, hope and charity are not achievements to be acquired but graces to be received. Even here, at the beginning of his conversion, the initiative belongs to God.

Yet the prayer also reveals Francis at an early stage of his spiritual journey. Its grammar is that of petition. Its repeated 'give me' expresses an authentic poverty before God, but it also reflects the perspective of one who has not yet seen how those prayers will be answered. Francis asks without knowing where obedience will lead. The Lord's answer will come, not in a single dramatic moment, but through years of unexpected encounters, painful reversals and quiet discoveries that gradually reshape his understanding of both God and himself.

Among those discoveries, Francis recalls one above all others. Looking back in the *Testament*, he recalls: 'The Lord himself led me' among the lepers, 'and I *showed* mercy to them'. The sentence is as theologically significant as it is autobiographically simple. Looking back, Francis recognises the encounter with the lepers as God's own initiative. His act of mercy becomes intelligible only because 'the Lord himself led me among them'. Only because God first acted could Francis respond.

This pattern recurs throughout the *Testament*. Faith is given. Brothers are given. A vocation is given. Even those realities that once seemed bitter are remembered as gifts. Gradually, Francis's memory is transformed. Events once experienced merely as circumstances are recognised, in retrospect, as signs of God's generosity. The history of his life is reread as the history of God's faithful initiative. Such remembering is not a denial of suffering or ambiguity. Francis does not erase the cost of discipleship. Rather, he discovers that God's gifts are often recognised only in retrospect. Grace is frequently understood backwards. The prayer, 'Give me ...', is answered in ways that could never have been anticipated when it was first uttered.

Here we may glimpse an important characteristic of Franciscan spirituality. Conversion is not simply a matter of changing one's behaviour, still less of achieving moral perfection. It is a gradual transformation of perception. Francis learns to see differently. The world remains the same, yet its meaning is disclosed anew because it is now viewed in the light of God's prior action. The Christian life begins to appear not as a series of accomplishments but as an ever-deepening recognition that 'the Lord gave me'.

This transformation is reflected not only in what Francis says but also in how he says it. The language of petition is never abandoned; indeed, the disciple never ceases to depend upon God's generosity. Yet as Francis matures, the centre of gravity shifts almost imperceptibly. The insistent 'give me' of the early prayer yields, over time, to the grateful remembrance of the *Testament*. Finally, in the 'Praises of God', even remembrance gives way to adoration.³ The language becomes almost entirely occupied by God, Godself. The movement is subtle but profound. Prayer begins by asking for gifts; it matures by recognising gifts already received; it finds its fulfilment in delighting in the Giver.

³ St Francis of Assisi, 'The Praises of God and the Blessing', in *Early Documents*, volume 1, *Saint*, 109.

Such a development should not be mistaken for spiritual progress in the ordinary sense. Francis does not outgrow dependence upon God; he grows more deeply into it. What changes is not God's generosity but Francis's capacity to recognise it. The education of his desire becomes an education of his vision. He learns to perceive that the God to whom he first prayed, 'Give me right faith', had been giving long before Francis knew how to ask.

For this reason, the *Testament* is not merely a recollection of the past. It is the culmination of a lifetime's contemplation. Memory itself becomes an act of thanksgiving. To remember truthfully is already to praise, because every remembered gift points beyond itself to the Giver from whom all good comes. It is this contemplative transformation that prepares us to understand Francis's final years. The illnesses, losses and diminishment that marked the final chapter of his life did not create his spirituality; they revealed its deepest foundations. The man who would finally receive even Sister Bodily Death with peace had first learned, slowly and patiently, to receive life itself as gift.

The Face of the Giver

If Francis gradually learned to recognise his life as gift, then his remembering had become more than a recollection of the past. It had become a way of seeing. And once Francis learnt to see his life as gift, an even deeper question emerged. Gifts are never simply things received. Every genuine gift reveals something of the one who gives it. To confess that 'the Lord gave me ...' is therefore already to make a confession about Godself. This is perhaps the most profound movement within the *Testament*. Francis is not simply revising his understanding of his own past; he is discovering the character of the God who has been quietly present within it. As memory is transformed into contemplation, so too is theology. The God who emerges from these recollections is neither distant nor reluctant, neither arbitrary nor withholding. God is the One whose first movement towards the human person is always generosity.

That generosity is striking for its quietness. Francis does not describe extraordinary visions or dramatic interventions as the defining pattern of God's action. Instead, he recalls ordinary events that only later disclose their hidden meaning: an encounter with lepers, brothers who unexpectedly arrive, faith deepened through the Church's sacramental life, paths opening where none had seemed possible. The extraordinary

lies not in the events themselves but in the contemplative vision that perceives them as woven together by God's providence.

To speak of providence here is not to suggest that Francis had an explanation for everything that had happened to him. The *Testament* contains no easy optimism, no attempt to smooth over suffering or disappointment. Rather, it witnesses to a deeper confidence: that beneath the contingencies of history there runs a fidelity that belongs to God alone. Francis no longer asks whether God was present at particular moments because he has come to recognise—or rather to perceive—that God was present in them all, though not always in ways he could immediately discern.

Such recognition slowly reshapes every dimension of the spiritual life. Gratitude ceases to be merely an occasional response to particular blessings. It becomes the habitual form of a vision schooled to recognise everything as gift. Poverty is no longer simply the renunciation of possessions but the joyful acknowledgement that nothing essential can be possessed because everything essential has first been received. Even obedience appears in a new light, not as reluctant submission to an external command but as trustful participation in the generosity of the One who always gives first.

It is perhaps here that Francis's understanding of Christ becomes decisive. The God whom Francis encounters is not known through abstract speculation but through the self-giving of the Crucified. From San Damiano onwards, Francis's gaze remains fixed upon Christ, who holds nothing back, whose very life is poured out for the life of the world. In the Crucified, Francis perceives the deepest truth of God: that God's power is revealed as self-emptying love and God's glory as inexhaustible gift.

Seen in this light, the whole of Francis's life takes on a profoundly eucharistic character. The eucharist is not simply one devotion among many; it is the sacramental disclosure of the mystery that the *Testament* has been narrating all along. The God who gives bread and wine transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ is the same God who has quietly been giving faith, brothers, mercy and vocation. The sacrament gathers into visible form the hidden pattern that Francis has gradually learned to recognise throughout his life: God gives Godself before God gives anything else. In the eucharist, Francis recognises in sacramental form the same generosity he has gradually discerned throughout his

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own history. The God who has given him everything else is revealed, finally, as the God who gives Godself.⁴

For this reason, the refrain, ‘The Lord gave me ...’, cannot finally remain a statement about the past. It becomes a confession about the very being of God. Divine generosity is not merely something God occasionally displays; it is the manner in which God is. Francis’s memories have become theological because they have led him beyond the gifts to the Giver, beyond providence to the God whose goodness is the source of every gift. This discovery prepares us for the final years of Francis’s life. As illness, frailty and suffering deepen, the outward circumstances become increasingly austere. Yet inwardly his vision grows ever more transparent. The one who had once prayed, ‘Give me right faith’, now finds himself less occupied with the gifts than with the beauty of the Giver. The thankful vision that had slowly matured through remembrance now flowers into adoration. The language of memory opens naturally into the language of praise.

‘You Are’: The Fulfilment of Praise



The Death and Ascension of St Francis, by Giotto, 1297–1299

If the *Testament* is the mature recollection of Francis’s life, the ‘Praises of God’ reveal its deepest fulfilment. Here the contemplative movement that has quietly shaped the whole of Francis’s journey reaches its fulfilment. The one who first stood before the crucifix of San Damiano praying, ‘Give me right faith, certain hope and perfect charity’, has become the man who can hardly speak of himself at all. Instead, his prayer begins simply:

⁴ Compare *Letter to the Entire Order*, in *Early Documents*, volume 1, *Saint*, 116–121, where Francis exhorts the brothers to contemplate ‘the humility of God’ in the eucharist, concluding: ‘Hold back nothing of yourselves, that He who gives himself totally to you, may receive you totally’.

You are holy, Lord God alone, who does wonderful things.

And it continues in the same rhythm:

You are love, charity;
You are wisdom,
You are humility,
You are patience,
You are beauty,
You are meekness,
You are security,
You are rest,
You are gladness and joy

The change is both striking and quiet. Francis no longer speaks primarily about the gifts he has received, nor even about the story through which he came to recognise them. His attention has become wholly occupied by God Godself. The gaze that had first learned to recognise God's gifts now rests upon God alone. The language of petition has yielded to the language of thanksgiving, and thanksgiving has opened into pure praise.

This is not the abandonment of the earlier stages of his journey but their fulfilment. The God to whom Francis once cried, 'Give me ...', is now recognised as the God who has always been giving. Freed from anxiety about himself, Francis discovers the deepest freedom of all: the freedom simply to delight in the One from whom every good and perfect gift comes. Such praise is not an escape from the realities of life. The 'Praises of God' belong to the closing years of Francis's life, years marked by physical suffering, increasing blindness, misunderstanding within the fraternity and the hidden wounds that culminated in the stigmata. None of these realities is denied. Yet neither do they become the centre of his attention. Even amid weakness, Francis's gaze remains fixed upon the inexhaustible goodness of God.

This helps us to understand one of the most remarkable features of Francis's final years. The *Canticle of the Creatures* is often admired as a hymn to nature. Yet its first movement is not towards creation but towards God:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honour and all
blessing.⁵

⁵ *The Canticle of the Creatures*, in *Early Documents*, volume 1, Saint, 113–114.

Only because creation is first received from God can Brother Sun, Sister Moon and even Sister Bodily Death be welcomed with gratitude. Francis does not romanticise the world. He receives it. The same contemplative vision that had first learned to recognise grace within Francis's own history now embraces the whole of creation as gift.

By this point, the movement traced throughout this essay becomes clear. Francis begins by asking for gifts. He learns, slowly and often painfully, to recognise the gifts already given. He learns, in consequence, to see the Giver within the gifts. Finally, he forgets himself in praise of the Giver. The story of his conversion is therefore not the story of increasing spiritual achievement but of increasing transparency before God. As God's generosity becomes ever more evident, Francis himself recedes from the centre. This, perhaps, is the enduring significance of the *Testament*. It is not simply the last testimony of a medieval saint but an invitation to a way of seeing. Francis teaches us that memory itself may become contemplative, that gratitude may become a form of theological knowledge, and that praise is the truest response to the God whose generosity always precedes our awareness.

Readers formed within the tradition of the Spiritual Exercises may recognise here a familiar rhythm. Ignatius of Loyola's *Examen* likewise begins, not with moral scrutiny, but with gratitude: with the patient recollection of the God who has already been present and active throughout the ordinary events of the day. Francis and Ignatius travel by different paths, shaped by different historical moments and spiritual charisms. Yet both bear witness to the same evangelical truth: grace is always prior. God is already at work before we learn to recognise God's presence. If Ignatius offers us a daily discipline for discerning that hidden generosity, Francis offers the contemplative vision towards which such discernment tends. He reminds us that the deepest purpose of the spiritual life is not self-improvement but the gradual conversion of our perception, until we too begin to recognise that every authentic good has first been received.

Francis's final testimony is not that he accomplished great things for God, but that he gradually learned to recognise the God who had first loved, guided and provided for him. The refrain, 'The Lord gave me ...', becomes at last more than a memory. It becomes a way of seeing, a way of praying, and ultimately a way of living. Perhaps that is the enduring gift of the *Testament*. It invites us to return to our own histories with greater attentiveness, asking not first what we have done,

but what God has been doing all along. Such a question does not lead us away from the ordinary events of life but more deeply into them, where grace is often hidden in plain sight, awaiting recognition. And when that recognition flowers into gratitude, and gratitude into praise, we may find ourselves receiving the blessing with which Francis greeted those he met and which continues to echo through his writings:

Dominus det tibi pacem—May the Lord give you peace!⁶

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⁶ *Testament*, n. 23.