CONVERSION IN THOMAS OF CELANO'S *VITA PRIMA SANCTI FRANCISCI*: EXEMPLAR OF NARRATIVE THEOLOGY?

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Saint Francis of Assisi is perhaps the most popular saint in the Christian tradition. In particular, the *poverello* ("little poor man") appeals to those who demonstrate in their lives a particular solicitude for the poor in conformity with modern Roman Catholic social teaching. Indeed, Francis' contempt for wealth is well known. What is not so well known is the dynamic of conversion that led to this contempt for wealth and identification with the poor. Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Francis, was acutely aware of both the place of poverty in the identity of Francis and the role of personal conversion in shaping this identity. In the *Vita prima Sancti Francisci*, Thomas articulates his own understanding of Francis' conversion and how it made Francis into the embodiment of evangelical poverty.

Thomas of Celano was commissioned by Pope Gregory IX to write *Vita prima Sancti Francisci* in 1228 and completed it in 1229 after Francis' canonization.[1] Thus began a long series of lives of the poor man from Assisi, lives written by several members of the Order of Friars Minor. Thomas himself followed the *Vita prima* with three other *vitae* of Francis: the *Legenda ad usum chori* in 1230, the *Vita secunda* in 1247, and, in 1254, the *Tractatus de miraculis B. Francisci* (171). Franciscan liturgist Julian of Speyer composed his own life of Francis in 1234/5, one better suited to public reading at the gatherings of the friars.[2] Henri d'Avranches, well versed in the Latin poets, composed between 1230 and 1235 his *Legenda versificata*, in which he related the life of Francis in verse.[3] In 1266, Bonaventure composed the soon-to-be-official *Legenda maior*, which resulted in all earlier vitae of Francis falling into disuse, including those written by Thomas.[4]

The importance of Thomas' *Vita prima Sancti Francisci* lay in the fact that it "embodies and expresses the original piety saturating and promoting the cult of Francis immediately after he was enrolled in the catalogue of the saints" (Bequette 2). In *Vita prima*, Thomas of Celano constructs the primal image of Francis, meaning that he is "the first to coalesce the acts, events and phenomena associated with Francis into a complete narrative" at a time "when one would expect popular devotion to the new saint to be most energetic" (2).

Contemporary scholarship on *Vita prima* is sparse. Only in the latter part of the twentieth century has this text come under sustained investigation. Francis de Beer's *La Conversion de Saint François* is a comparative study of the conversion accounts in *Vita prima* and *Vita secunda.* Based upon the assumption that conversion enjoys a place of privilege in hagiography, de Beer's study is a solid intertextual and historical examination of the development of Thomas of Celano's understanding of Francis' conversion (13). A second study is that of Engelbert Grau, whose approach is more historical than theological. His concern is what scholars refer to as the "Franciscan question," that is, to determine to what extent a particular text gives us reliable information on the actual life of Saint Francis (177-200). Still another study is the present author's doctoral dissertation, *The Eloquence of Sanctity*, which examines *Vita prima* using ancient and medieval rhetorical categories to ascertain the "primal vision" of the saint constructed and propagated by Thomas of Celano as the cult of Francis was emerging (Bequette 2). While these approaches have obvious merit, none of them is able to illuminate the theological dimension of the text as effectively as narrative theology, which provides categories for studying a hagiographical text that go beyond the conventional ones offered by intertextual, historical, and lexical analysis. Narrative theology is actually a method of doing theology that engages the stories that emerge from within a living community of faith. Thus it is structurally appropriate to a text such as *Vita prima Sancti Francisci.* In the present article I will examine the first six chapters of Thomas of Celano's *Vita prima* using narrative theology as a hermeneutic, concentrating on the section that begins with Francis' birth, relates his conversion, and ends with his being embraced by Bishop Guido of Assisi. My aim is to demonstrate how poverty comes to determine Francis' identity, and how the conversion narrative is crucial to this process. In section one I will construct a hermeneutic of narrative theology. In section two I will conduct an examination of chapters I-VI of *Vita prima,* assessing the text from a narrative theological standpoint. In section three I will provide a summary of my findings and an assessment of their relationship to medieval hagiography.

Narrative Theology as a Hermeneutic

Narrative theology is particularly strong in the Judaic and Christian traditions, for both affirm the content of divine revelation contained in the Scriptures, which are predominantly narrative in form. Both traditions declare the belief that God has encountered human beings in time. They both give form and coherence to this encounter

through stories: the Creation, the Exodus, the Exile, and the Gospel. In their collective religious experience and the narrative structure through which they express it, Jews and Christians give priority to story.

Based upon this priority, narrative theology makes two assumptions: that personal experience is fundamentally narrative, and that narrative is fundamentally religious.[5] These two assumptions lend themselves particularly to the study of hagiography, for hagiography involves the expression of a communal ideal of sanctity within the biographical drama of a holy man or woman. Hagiography synthesizes the narrative and religious bases of human experience which narrative theology assumes. In the *Vita prima*, Thomas of Celano expresses this synthesis on behalf of the Franciscan Order and the universal Church.

For an articulation of the first assumption of narrative theology, that human experience is narrative in structure, we can examine Paul Ricoeur's study of the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. It is important to remember that the entirety of the *Confessions* is written in the first person. It is a wholly subjective account of the author's experience of God, told within the context of his own life story. Particularly in his musings on time, Augustine encounters a nagging problem: he has an undeniable, subjective experience of time, accompanied by an inability to confirm objectively its existence. Ricoeur writes:

> The skeptical argument is well known: time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain. And yet we do speak of time as having been. We say that things to come *will be*, that things past *were*, and that things present are *passing away*. Even passing away is not nothing. (7)

According to Ricoeur, Augustine finds within his own soul the certainty that time actually "exists." The soul experiences the present, and yet, says Ricoeur, "what is in question here is an entirely different present, one that has also become a plural adjective (*praesentia*), in line with *praeteria* and *futura*, and one capable of admitting an internal multiplicity" (10). The human soul, created in the Image of God, is grounded in eternity. Yet it exists within time and experiences this grounding in infinite division through the categories of *praesentia*, *praeteria*, and *futura*. The soul can only experience these categories in sequence, which manifests the soul's temporality. Ricoeur concludes that speculation on time "is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond" (10). The internal, human experience of time exhibits the fundamental attribute of narrative. I will

argue that the experience of time is a paradoxical interface between the temporal and the eternal. In its personal dimension, narrative theology articulates this temporal/eternal interface within the human soul. This, I believe, is what is going on in the experience of Augustine, and I will demonstrate that this occurs within the conversion experience of Francis.

The second assumption of narrative theology, that narrative is fundamentally religious, finds expression in the work of the Jesuit theologian John Navone, who argues that every personal life story has a religious quality. He says that "in the innermost depth of every person there is alive a fundamentally religious sense" (xv). This religious sense receives expression in what Navone calls the "travel story," for which he provides an interpretive apparatus in a "phenomenology of travel stories," which for Navone is a hermeneutic of narrative theology. The two main categories in Navone's phenomenology are "at-homeness" and "Dwelling." At-homeness refers to the traveler's subjective hope for arrival at a permanent destination, carrying with it the sense of permanence, familiarity, and security. The traveler experiences a sense of at-homeness from time to time amidst the polarities and tensions of the journey. Navone writes:

> Spatio-temporally, we experience the ambivalent sequence of "Now I am here—then I will be there." The experience of moving and its sequence of uprootings and its feelings of not-at-home carry with it a concurrent evocation of what it means to be at home." (153)

The important thing to note is the dialectical relationship between motion and rest, between the journey and the destination. It is the nature of the journey to evoke a sense of its own completion. In the tensions and polarities of movement the traveler recognizes "the realm (or home) in which the world of everyday experiences, with its movements, uprootings and changes, ultimately dwells" (153). This eternal realm is what Navone refers to as "Dwelling." Navone says that Dwelling "grounds our faith in the positive outcome of our ongoing, struggling quest for at-homeness" (154). If at-homeness is the subjective sense of arrival we experience while on a journey, then Dwelling is the metaphysical, hidden goal of the journey that supports this subjective experience. The relationship between at-homeness and Dwelling is one in which the hidden reality of Dwelling evokes a sense of at-homeness within the traveler at key points in the narrative. It is only because there is an ultimate, eternal Dwelling, transcending time

itself, that the traveler is able to experience at-homeness, however fleeting this experience may be.

At this point we see a connection emerge between Navone's phenomenology of travel stories and the interface of time and eternity. Integrating the two ideas, we might say that the phenomenological categories of the travel story exhibit temporality as movement, uprootedness, and "feelings of not-at-home," which dialectically evoke a sense of at-homeness. At-homeness, in turn, is the subjective experience of the calling of the eternal, a calling that alludes to the traveler's arrival at a final destination. At various points in the journey, Dwelling will reveal itself, make its own reality felt, in the traveler's experience of at-homeness. Working from this synthesis, I will now demonstrate what I believe is a crucial feature of narrative theology: the interface between the temporal and the eternal, with its evocation of at-homeness, in the experience of the subject of the narrative.

Thomas of Celano's *Vita prima Sancti Francisci*

Although the entire text of *Vita prima* could be fruitfully studied from the standpoint of narrative theology, chapters I-VI of Book One, in which Thomas narrates the story of Francis' conversion, constitute a coherent literary unit. There are three outward journeys that Francis makes in this section, each corresponding to an inward journey effecting a change in Francis himself. The first journey is from Assisi to the cave where he prays to know God's will. The second is from the cave to the church of San Damiano. The third is from San Damiano back to Assisi at the residence of Bishop Guido. I will limit my study to these three journeys, examining how the hope of eternal salvation, which symbolizes the realm of Dwelling, manifests itself in Francis' experience of at-homeness, an experience that will, at the same time, reflect the interface between the temporal and the eternal within Francis himself. Moreover, we shall see that it is this progressive interface that transforms Francis into the embodiment of evangelical poverty.

Thomas begins his narrative by situating the young Francis in the town of Assisi. Francis is a licentious youth among his pecrs, all of whom share in his reckless lifestyle. Together they make up a community of those who "content themselves with just the name of Christian (*christiano nomine*)" (183).[6] Francis is "not greedy but extravagant (*prodigus*), not a hoarder of money but a squanderer (*dissipator*) of his property, a prudent dealer but a most unreliable steward (*vanissimus dispensator*)." He is also a charismatic figure, a natural leader attracting many followers:

> Many went over to him, the partisans of evil and the inciters of crime. Thus with his crowded procession of misfits he used to strut about impressively and in high spirits, making his way through the streets of Babylon [*agens per medium Babyloniae platearum*]. (184)

The metaphorical linkage between Babylon and Assisi, a town populated by nominal Christians like Francis, conjures up two associations. First there is the idea of a sinful culture.[7] In this culture, *per medium Babyloniae platearum*, Francis is most comfortable. Yet we suspect that he does not quite belong here, for Babylon also evokes the idea of exile. With this connotation Thomas introduces the model of a travel story or journey at the very beginning, leading us to expect Francis to be called out of Assisi, out of "Babylon." He closes the first chapter with the expectation of God's imminent action in Francis' life:

> Then the Lord looked down from the heavens, and for the sake of His own name he removed his anger far from him, and for His own glory He bridled Francis's mouth so that he would not perish completely. The hand of the Lord was upon him, a change of the right hand of the Most High, that through him the Lord might give sinners confidence in a new life of grace; and that of conversion to God he might be an example. (184)

In the first chapter, then, we have Francis leading a life of dissipation in his hometown, seemingly experiencing at-homeness with his friends. God, however, has other plans and is on the point of intervening with "a change of the right hand."

In the second chapter Thomas begins to narrate Francis' conversion. Thomas situates it in the midst of Francis' life of dissipation. Francis is "still boiling in the sins of youthful heat." Thomas continues:

> At the very time when he, not knowing how to become tame, was aroused by the venom of the ancient serpent, the divine vengeance, or rather the divine anointing, came upon him. This aimed, first of all, at recalling his erring judgment by bringing distress to his mind and affliction to his body, according to that prophecy: *Behold I will hedge up your path with thorns, and I will stop it with a wall.* (184)

Francis' journey towards conversion thus begins with an act of God. His journey will be an inward-outward one, one that exhibits the struggles within his soul. God afflicts Francis with an illness. During his convalescence, Francis begins a period of intense introspection:

> He went outside one day and began to gaze upon the surrounding countryside with greater interest. But the beauty of the fields, the delight of the vineyards, and whatever else was beautiful to see could offer him no delight at all [*in nullo eum potuit delectare*]. He wondered at the sudden change in himself, and considered those who loved these things quite foolish. (185)

In the midst of his familiar surroundings at Assisi, Francis begins to experience the disquiet of conversion germinating in his sense of delight. He begins to be alienated from the very things that he had formerly enjoyed, and is no longer able to delight (*delectare*) in them. The delight in fact is transformed into contempt, for Thomas tells us that "he began to regard himself as worthless and to hold in contempt (*in contemptu quodam habere*) what he had previously held as admirable and lovable, though not completely or genuinely" (185). His sense of at-homeness in Assisi, where he has up to now spent his life in carnal and temporal dissipation, has been disturbed by an unseen movement of the eternal within his soul. We thus encounter in Francis' illness and his convalescence the first interface between the temporal and the eternal, which is the catalyst in narrative theology.

Francis is not yet fully converted, however. He returns to reflecting on worldly matters, and he hears of a certain Assisian nobleman planning a military venture to Apulia in search of money and fame. Francis makes plans to go with him. But at this point Thomas relates a second intrusion of the eternal into Francis' life. One night in a dream Francis sees his home bedecked with weapons, saddles, and other instruments of war. He ruminates on the meaning of the dream, and is told "that all these arms were to be for him and his soldiers" (186). Although he initially understands this to be a portent of success for the military expedition, Francis finds himself unable to muster the necessary fervor to go through with it. Thomas clarifies the intrusive nature of the vision by making explicit its spiritual significance:

> It is a fine thing that at the outset mention be made of arms, and very fitting that arms be handed over to a solder

> about to do battle with one strong and fully armed. Thus, like a second David [*quasi alter David*] in the name of the Lord God of hosts from the long-standing abuse of its enemies, he might liberate Israel. (186)

God interrupts the life of the carnal Francis and gradually converts him by redirecting his natural temperament. Francis will undertake battle, as he had originally and impulsively planned, but on the spiritual level as a "second David" (*quasi alter David*), the enemy being Francis' own carnal will, as we shall see later.

At this point we see an undefined phenomenon take shape within Francis that provides the point of contact for the new calling from God. Thomas calls this phenomenon a "pearl" (*margarita*) and a "treasure" (*thesaurus*). Thomas gives a hint as to the nature of the phenomenon when he writes:

> He retired for a short time from the tumult and business of the world and was anxious to keep Jesus Christ in his inmost self. Like an experienced merchant, he concealed the pearl he had found from the eyes of mockers and selling all he had, he tried to buy it secretly. (187)

Taking with him a close friend from Assisi, Francis retires to a cave near the city. It is here that he wages the battle to which his dream alluded, the battle with his carnal will. Thomas writes:

> He consulted God alone about his holy purpose. He prayed with all his heart that the eternal and true God guide his way and teach him to do his will. He endured great suffering in his soul, and he was not able to rest until he accomplished in action what he had conceived in his heart. Different thoughts followed one after another, and their relentlessness severely disturbed him. He was burning inwardly with a divine fire, and he was unable to conceal outwardly the flame enkindled in his soul. He repented that he had sinned so grievously and that he had offended the eyes of majesty. While his past and present transgressions no longer delighted him, he was not yet fully confident in refraining from future ones. (187)

Francis' carnal life still has a certain grip on him, for he lacks the assurance that he will not undergo a relapse, an assurance that only an

eternal, providential God can give. Thus he must do battle with his own will, attempting to bring it into conformity with the will of God, so that he can accomplish "in action" what he has conceived "in his heart." The familiarity and attachment of Francis' old life has been shattered; yet the treasure he has discovered and which germinates a new vocation within him has not yet given him a clear direction or assurance of completion. Francis has undertaken the journey that typifies narrative theology in general and conversion narrative in particular. At this point in the narrative, however, the new sense of security he seeks, which only can only be found in eternal Dwelling, still eludes him.

Francis finds this security when the uncertainty of his holy purpose is solved. "One day" says Thomas, "when he had invoked the Lord's mercy with his whole heart, the Lord showed him what he must do" (188). Filled with joy, Francis reveals some of his plan to others, speaking cautiously and obscurely about his "hidden treasure." The assurance that he will never return to his past sins is given when God shows him what he is to do, for it is in consequence of this revelation that Francis is filled with joy and is finally able to rejoin the company of others. He has a clear calling and direction, and although at this point Thomas still has not told us what this is, Francis knows and is able to act with confidence. Francis has now subdued his own will to the will of God, and thus the conflict with his carnal will is over. Francis is subjectively experiencing the first intimations of at-homeness, rooted in the realm of Dwelling, indicated in the narrative as the providential will of God.

Francis decides not to go to Apulia, promising "to do great and noble deeds at home" in Assisi (188). People ask him if he intends to marry, to which he responds: "I will take a bride more noble and more beautiful than you have ever seen, and she will surpass the rest in beauty and excel all others in wisdom." Thomas finally identifies for his readers the treasure and spouse of which Francis has been speaking:

> Indeed the unstained bride of God is the true religion that he embraced, and the hidden treasure is the kingdom of God, that he sought with great longing. For it had to be that the gospel be fulfilled in the one who was to be in faith and truth a minister of the gospel. (188)

In the journey from Assisi to the cave, Thomas has brought Francis through the initial stage of his conversion. In this journey we have two instances of the interface between the temporal and the eternal, combined with corresponding changes in the person of Francis. First,

we have the situation of Francis in his hometown of Assisi, which is likened unto the "streets of Babylon," evoking the ideas of sinfulness and exile. Francis' situation here is suggestively tentative and transitory. We suspect that he does not truly belong here, and that he will be called out. Then we see the interruption of the eternal in "the right hand of the Most High," which brings illness upon Francis. The illness works within him a change of perspective reflecting an Augustinian *contemptus mundi* and thus intensifying the suggestion that Francis does not belong in his present state. He is no longer able to delight (*delectare*) in what he had previously enjoyed, and begins to hold such things *in contemptu.* Francis has been affected by an eternal influence and therefore holds transitory things in contempt.

The second instance is more extended, spanning the period from Francis' dream to the end of his struggle in the cave near Assisi. He has relapsed into his former state of mind. Yet again, the eternal intervenes. In his dream he is told that the weapons he sees are to be "for him and his soldiers." Francis does not complete the military expedition, for his temporal aspiration has been taken up and assumed in a calling from the eternal. In this assumption, Francis' worldly expedition will become a spiritual one. He is to become a spiritual soldier "about to do battle with one strong and fully armed," becoming *quasi alter David.* The opponent in the battle is Francis' own carnal will, a battle he takes up in the cave near Assisi. It is here that the interface between the temporal and the eternal becomes the most acute. The two sides of the interface are his life of sin and his new calling, understood as a "hidden treasure" (*thesaurus*). It is not until Francis comes to know what exactly this treasure is that he is able to resolve the struggle. When it is shown him what he must do, he is given the assurance of perseverance therein. He leaves the cave and speaks figuratively to his associates about his "hidden treasure," and promises to "take a bride more noble and beautiful" than they have ever seen.

Thomas finally discloses the truly eternal nature of the treasure Francis has found and of the bride he intends to take. The treasure is "the kingdom of heaven," an allusion to Matthew 6:19-21, where worldly, corruptible treasure is contrasted with incorruptible treasure in heaven.[8] The bride Thomas calls "the unstained bride of God" which is "the true religion." This is a combined allusion to James 1:27, which defines pure and uncorrupted religion as that which avoids contamination from the world,[9] and Ephesians 5:25-27, which describes the church as the bride of Christ, holy and unblemished.[10] Francis receives the confidence of steadfastness when he fully understands his calling: commitment to the eternal, incorruptible

kingdom of heaven, and to the unstained bride of Christ, which is the eternal, revealed faith of the Church. It is the understanding of this calling that dissipates the residual allure of the life of sin. Eternal certainty has triumphed over temporal anxiety. This assurance gives Francis the confidence to continue his journey, since he now has an intimation of his final destination and the assurance of arrival. In Navone's terms, the kingdom of God, which is the Dwelling Francis ultimately seeks, has given Francis his first subjective experience of at-homeness. It is through this experience that Francis is liberated from this past life in Assisi and is made confident by the certainty of his own sanctification.

Then begins the second journey, from the cave to the church of San Damiano. Here the change in Francis is reflected in his indifference toward money. Having achieved the direction and confidence he needs, Francis sets out for Foligno, taking with him fine cloth for sale. At Foligno he sells the cloth and his horse, and, starting back to Assisi, he begins to wonder what to do with the money obtained from the sale. Thomas tells us: "In a wonderful way, in an instant, he turned completely to the work of God" (189). As he makes his way back to Assisi, the spiritual burden of the money becomes too great for Francis: "reckoning all its benefit to be like so much sand, he hurried to get rid of it." Thomas uses the simile of sand, which would be both a heavy and an unnecessary burden on a journey, to emphasize the burden and the worthlessness of money to Francis on his spiritual journey. As he approaches Assisi, Francis discovers a church dedicated to St. Damian, "threatening to collapse because of age" (189). Then Francis "the new soldier of Christ," moved to pity for the sake of the church, enters it "with awe and reverence." Here he meets a priest and offers him money for the repair of the church, but the priest refuses, having seen Francis the day before carousing with his friends. Francis tries to convince the priest of his seriousness, begging to be allowed to stay in the church. The priest allows Francis to remain, but still refuses to accept the money out of fear of Francis' father. Francis then decides to simply rid himself of the money:

> The true scorner of money [*pecuniam contemptor*] threw it onto a window opening, since he cared for it as much as he cared for dust. For he desired to possess wisdom, which is better than gold, and to acquire understanding, which is more precious than silver. (190)

In this second journey, particularly in Francis' desire to stay in a poor, dilapidated church, we see his experience of at-homeness made concrete. He is drawn to the church on account of its poor state, sensing a need to make his abode there. The kingdom of God, which is the realm of Dwelling, evokes an experience of at-homeness in the poor, run-down church. In addition, we see the interface between the temporal and the eternal in Francis' concern for the church. He feels pity for the church of San Damiano, for it was "threatening to collapse because of age." Time has ravaged a church dedicated to an ancient martyr. Yet Francis enters the church "with awe and reverence," seeing it as a house of God, the locus of the eternal.

Moreover, we see the temporal–eternal interface in Francis' indifference to money. When he throws the money on the windowsill of the church, caring for it as if it were dust, Thomas calls Francis *contemptor pecuniam*. As a youth in Assisi he had been *prodigus* and *dissipator* of his property, reflecting in his own character the wasteful dissipation of temporality. His change of title to *contemptor pecuniam* continues to reflect a wasteful attitude toward money, only this wastefulness is rooted in the eternal. Stemming from Francis' previous discovery of the treasure of the kingdom of heaven, he now desires the immaterial, unchanging riches of wisdom and understanding, despising their worldly, temporal counterparts (gold and silver) as if they were dust. The *contemptus mundi*, which began at the start of Francis' conversion, has come to a more explicit development as he continues on his journey.

But there is a tension and tentativeness in Francis' stay at San Damiano, whence begins the third journey from the church of San Damiano to the residence of Bishop Guido of Assisi. When Francis' father hears of what his son is doing, he reacts as would any parent whose child is throwing away the family fortune. Hearing of the conditions in which Francis has been living, his father is "touched inwardly with sorrow of heart and deeply disturbed by the sudden turn of events" (190). With the help of friends he seeks out Francis, who takes refuge in a hiding place at San Damiano. Anxiety makes its way into the sense of at-homeness Francis had been experiencing at the church. Overcome by fear, Francis prays for deliverance:

> He prayed with flowing tears that the Lord would free him from the hands of those persecuting his soul and that he could favorably fulfill his fervent wishes. Fasting and weeping, he earnestly prayed for the Savior's mercy, and,

> lacking confidence in his own efforts, he cast his care upon the Lord. (191)

While hiding in the church, Francis undergoes a change that drives away his anxiety: "Though staying in a pit and in darkness, he was imbued with an indescribable happiness never before experienced." He suddenly abandons the pit; he is called out of the security of San Damiano to face the animosity of his father. He endures the insults and abuse of his neighbors who, believing him to be insane, throw mud and stones at him. His father apprehends Francis, drags him home, and "with no pity, he shut him up for several days in a dark place, striving to bend Francis' will to his own, he badgered him, beat him, and bound him" (192). We notice here that Thomas makes a curious allusion to the cave in the first journey. In the cave, Francis struggles with his own will to bring himself in subjection to the will of God. In his father's house, in a parallel manner, his father violently struggles with Francis, seeking to bring his son into subjection to his own will.

As in the cave, this parallel experience produces a change in Francis. He is a prisoner in his father's house, but his mother, seeing that Francis cannot be dissuaded from his new vocation, frees him. He immediately returns to San Damiano, but the nature of the place, the sense of at-homeness that it had for Francis, has changed due to a change that has taken place in Francis:

> Since he had passed the test of temptations, he now enjoyed greater freedom [*maiore enim libertate*]. Throughout these many struggles, he began to exhibit a more joyful appearance. From the injuries inflicted he received a more confident spirit [*securiorem ex iniuriis receperat animum*] and, free now to go anywhere, he moved about with even greater heart. (193)

Francis' father, upon discovering that Francis has gone, renews the pursuit. Having endured the adversities inflicted by his father, in particular the ironic imprisonment in what used to be his own home, Francis now returns to San Damiano. But it is no longer a place of hiding. Francis now has greater freedom (*maiore libertate*) and "a more confident spirit" (*securiorem animum*). He goes out to face his father and defiantly declares that "he would gladly suffer anything for the name of Christ." His father demands the return of the money Francis acquired from the sale of cloth at Foligno, the same money Francis had thrown onto the windowsill at San Damiano. When Francis retrieves

the money, his father's rage is partly alleviated. His father then brings Francis before Guido, Bishop of Assisi, in order to make him publicly renounce his inheritance. Finally, in the presence of the bishop, Francis manifests his complete disregard for property and for everything representative of his early life in Assisi:

> When he was in front of the bishop, he neither delayed nor hesitated, [he neither waited for nor uttered words], but immediately took off and threw down all his clothes and returned them to his father. He did not even keep his trousers on, and he was completely stripped bare before everyone. (193)

Thomas immediately gives us the reaction of the bishop, who "observing his frame of mind and admiring his fervor and determination, got up and, gathering him in his own arms, covered him with the mantle he was wearing." Thomas continues:

> [The Bishop] clearly understood that this was prompted by God and he knew the action of the man of God, which he had personally observed, contained a mystery. After this he became his helper. Cherishing and comforting him, he embraced him in the depths of charity [*in visceribus charitatis*]. (193-94)

At this point Francis' father ceases to play an active role in the narrative, as if to reflect Francis' adoption by the bishop. Francis has renounced every last vestige of his old life and home and has been received by Bishop Guido into "the depths of charity." Thomas now gives his own interpretation of the event, writing in the present tense so as to bring us into the scene itself. The present tense also carries with it a sense of arrival. Francis now experiences a more profound and lasting sense of at-homeness, a pledge of arrival at his final destination in the kingdom of God:

> Look! Now he wrestles naked with the naked. After putting aside all that is of the world, he is mindful only of divine justice. Now he is eager to despise his own life, by setting aside all concern [*sollicitudinem*] for it. Thus there might be peace for him, a poor man on a hemmed-in path [*ut sibi pauperi pax esset in obsessa via*], and only the wall of flesh would separate him from the vision of God. (194)

Looked at from the perspective of narrative theology, in the third journey Thomas does two things. First, he brings Francis to experience a new, more secure sense of at-homeness. The sense of at-homeness he experiences at San Damiano is transitory, for he must cast his care upon the eternal Lord and go out to face his father. Francis finally arrives at the residence of Bishop Guido of Assisi, who embraces Francis in "the depths of charity." In the fatherly embrace of the bishop, Francis has found a new, more lasting sense of at-homeness which suggests the end of his status as an exile from "the streets of Babylon." In the embrace of the bishop Francis has come even closer to the security of true Dwelling.

The second thing Thomas does is manifest the effect of the eternal on Francis' own person through his relationship to money. Whereas in Assisi Francis had been *prodigus*, Thomas now gives him the title *pauper*. In the presence of the bishop he renounces any material connection to his father, even to the point of stripping himself naked. It is here that we see the concluding interface between the temporal and the eternal in Francis' conversion. The interface occurs in Francis' concern or *sollicitudo* for his own flesh. The eternal treasure, the *thesaurus*, of the kingdom of God confronts or interfaces with care or solicitude for the flesh, for temporal life itself, an interface that finds resolution in *paupertas*, poverty. It is in evangelical poverty that the temporal and the transitory are finally taken up and assumed in the eternal. Given its eternal nature, evangelical poverty is also the essence of the Dwelling that evokes Francis' sense of at-homeness in the embrace of the bishop. Having renounced all property and all concern for the flesh, Francis is finally at rest. He has ceased being *prodigus* and has become *pauper*, naked, utterly poor, owning nothing but the treasure of the gospel and residing in the security of the Catholic Church, personified by Bishop Guido and illustrated by his being covered with the bishop's own mantle. In the conversion sequence of *Vita prima*, Thomas thus makes the case for absolute, evangelical poverty by equating it with the eternal Dwelling of the kingdom of God and by portraying Francis as its complete embodiment.

Conclusion

In a hagiographic narrative, the saint is someone whose life is seen by the community as a temporal point-of-contact for the transcendent and eternal. Saints' lives articulate this contact and interface. Moreover, the hagiographer portrays the saint as the exemplar to which a community looks for guidance on the path to

holiness; his or her function is to lead the community to salvation, which is the eschatological realm of Dwelling. He or she is also a pledge of this realm, promising arrival at the final destination for those who persevere in following the saint's example. It could be said that one of the marks of a saint is to be the embodiment both of Dwelling (the final destination) and of at-homeness (the assurance of arrival).

In the section of text discussed here, Thomas of Celano narrates Francis' conversion from a life of carnal dissipation to one of evangelical poverty. In his narrative, Thomas relates Francis' transformation from *prodigus* to *pauper*. It is in this transformation that the narrative theology categories most profoundly manifest themselves. While Francis is *prodigus*, temporal dissipation dominates his life and identity. When he has finally become *pauper*, however, the eternal, incorruptible *thesaurus absconditus* of the kingdom of God has freed him from this temporal dissipation. He is now a poor man, free from the allure and corruption of material possessions that are themselves subject to corruption. In addition, we see Francis experience a profound sense of at-homeness when, having renounced all material security, he rests in the embrace of the Church. Poverty has become the heart of Francis' new identity as well as the substance of his sense of at-homeness, which in turn suggests the nature of the eschatological realm of Dwelling, which he, the Franciscan brothers, and the Church seek. Francis has become the exemplar of sanctity in terms of the ultimate Dwelling that the entire pilgrim community seeks, and in terms of the experience of at-homeness, giving the community the confident assurance it will arrive at its final destination. In this manner, saints' lives, and particularly the life of Saint Francis, translate into the personal dimension the broad contours of that narrative we call salvation history.

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Notes

[1] Introduction, *The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano* in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 1999) 1: 172.

[2] Introduction, *The Life of Saint Francis by Julian of Speyer* in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* 1: 363.

[3] Introduction, *The Versified Life of Saint Francis by Henri d'Avranches* in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* 1: 423.

[4] Introduction, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 40.

[5] See Stanley J. Hauerwas, ed., *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997).

[6] All translated quotations are from Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Volume I. Latin text is from *Fontes Franciscani*, ed. Enrico Menesto and Stefano Bruni (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncula, 1995).

[7] Babylon as a metaphor for a sinful culture is a common motif in medieval hagiography. See note (a) in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* 184.

[8] "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where rust and moth consume, and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither rust nor moth consumes, nor thieves break in and steal. For where thy treasure is, there also will thy heart be."

[9] "Religion pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to give aid to orphans and widows in their tribulation, and to keep oneself unspotted from this world."

[10] "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, cleansing her in the bath of water by means of the word; in order that he might

present to himself the Church in all her glory, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she might be holy and without blemish."

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