FEMALE MENDICANCY: A FAILED EXPERIMENT?
THE CASE OF SAINT CLARE OF ASSISI

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It was so straightforward in the beginning. Francis of Assisi had found his way out of what we might today call post-traumatic stress syndrome. After being captured and imprisoned for a year following the Perugians’ defeat of the Assisi commune, he attempted to go to Apulia to resume his quest for knighthood, but became ill after a day’s journey.\(^1\) Returning home, Francis found himself preoccupied and wanting solitude. He became especially obsessed with giving food and money to the indigent: “his whole heart was intent on seeing the poor, listening to them, and giving them alms.”\(^2\) The son of a wealthy textile merchant, Francis began to despise wealth, giving money away to the needy, purchasing furnishings for neglected churches, and even, when on a pilgrimage to Rome, exchanging his luxurious clothes—albeit only temporarily—with a beggar.\(^3\)

Floundering in this way, Francis, in his Testament, recalls the turning point:

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\(^1\) *Legenda trium sociorum* 2–3 (hereafter *L₃S*). Unless otherwise noted, Franciscan sources used in this essay are found in *Fontes Franciscani* (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1995). The *Legend of the Three Companions* was commissioned by the Franciscan Minister General, Crescentius of Jesi, in response to the mandate of the Genoa Chapter of 1244. Concerned that the brothers who had known Francis during his lifetime were dying, the delegates to the General Chapter requested that these early brothers write their remembrances. The agenda of the writers of *Legend of the Three Companions* was to compose a more accurate biography of Francis than Thomas of Celano’s *First Life* and to include facts concerning Francis’s early life in Assisi that would have been known only by his first companions. For a critical analysis of *The Legend of the Three Companions* and its place within the “Franciscan Question,” see Jacques Dalarun, introduction to *François d’Assise vu par les compagnons* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf—Les Éditions franciscaines, 2009), 11–57.

\(^2\) *L₃S* 3:9: ita nunc cor suum totum erat intentum ut pauperes videret vel audiret quibus eleemosynas largiretur.

\(^3\) *L₃S* 3:10.
When I was in sin, it seemed very bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed them mercy. When I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. Afterwards, I delayed a little and left the world.4

After his famous rejection of his father before the bishop of Assisi, Francis spent about three years as a hermit seeking God's will.5 While in this state, he continued the reconstruction of the Church of San Damiano that he had begun before his conversion. Other people joined him in this project:

Filled with joy, he would cry loudly in French to those who lived near and those passing by the church: “Come and help me in the rebuilding of the Church of San Damiano. For in the future it will be a monastery of ladies whose fame and life in the universal church will be glorified by our heavenly Father.”6

What is more certain is that Francis seems to have begun the work of building a woman's monastery before he had brothers. Evangelical groups

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4 Testamentum 1–3: Quia cum essem in peccatis nimis mihi videbatur amarum videre leprosos. Et ipse Dominus conduxit me inter illos et feci misericordiam cum illis. Et recedente me ab ipsis, id quod videbatur mihi amarum, conversum fuit mihi in dulcedinem animi et corporis; et postea parum steti et exivi de saeculo.

5 L3S 8.

6 L3S 7:24: clamabat alta voce in gaudio spiritus ad habitantes et transeuntes iuxta ecclesiam, dicens eis gallice: ‘Veni et adiuvate me in opera ecclesiae Sancti Damiani quae futura est monasterium dominarum, quam fama et vita in universali ecclesia glorificabitur Pater noster caelestis.’

It is difficult to know for certain whether this pericope reflects historical fact, or is, rather, a mere literary device used by the author of The Legend of the Three Companions to link Francis's rebuilding of the Church of S. Damiano with the conversion of Clare. See Jacques Dalarun, Francis of Assisi and the Feminine (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2006), 196–198. Dalarun's analysis becomes more attractive if one also notes that the author of The Legend of Clare did not insert this pericope into his text, even as he highlighted other connections between Francis and Clare revolving around the Church of San Damiano such as Francis's repairs on the church, his experience of God's direction given to him from the San Damiano cross at the start of his conversion, Clare's settlement at San Damiano, and the founding of the Order of Poor Ladies in this church. Legenda S. Clarae Assisiensis 10.

The Legend of Saint Clare, hereafter LCl, was commissioned by Pope Alexander IV. The author of the Legend states that he obtained his information for the Legend from Clare's process of canonization and from oral interviews that he personally conducted.