

DEATH OF A SAINT

October 3, 1226

It was Saturday evening and the Umbrian sun was setting on the little pink town.

“We have to hide his body or we risk losing it forever!”

Brother Elias was barking at three of his fellow friars, and Francis wasn't even dead yet. Their shadows thrown long on the walls of Portiuncula, the little chapel in the Spoleto valley given to them in 1210 by the Benedictine monastery of Mount Subasio, these were the few Franciscans Elias believed he could trust to understand the urgency at hand. Portiuncula lay unprotected, surrounded by woods, close to the highway, a long way in the dead of night from the protective walls of the city.

Elias was a small, spare man who still possessed the black hair of his youth. Beard showed on his chin after only a day without shaving. For fifteen years, he'd been an erudite, quick-witted, brilliant administrator and a skilled entrepreneur. The graciousness in all personal matters for which he had been universally recognized as a younger man had given way to a certain form of native dynamism.

A moon was already visible in the sky just over the shoulder of Mount Subasio. Francis of Assisi lay unconscious on a straw mat in the dimly lit chapel where his religious reform movement had been born sixteen years earlier.

Elias reached over to a side table for a wooden box containing thin tapers. Lighting one, he held its light up to the butt of a second in order to melt drops of wax into each of three candlesticks. Then he placed the first and second candles into their sticks, lit a third, and fixed it as well. Light quickly filled the dark room.

By this time, the moon was a few inches higher in the sky. It was going to be a clear night, and Elias worried about who might snatch the body of his saint. If a burglar would kick down a door to grab an iron pot or a new rug—which he might sell for pennies to a passing trader the following day—what might someone do with the body of the Poverello?

Francis had never wanted possessions of any kind. “We’d then have to protect them,” he once explained to the bishop of Assisi. But now, Francis was himself the possession worth protecting. The world had never seen someone like him, and people were already trading patches of his clothing like jewels.

An hour after Elias’s outburst, Francis took his last breath. Thomas of Celano would write three years later: “Larks are birds that love the daylight and flee the darkness of twilight. But on the night that St. Francis flew to Christ, they came to the roof of the house, even though twilight had fallen, flying around it for a long time making a great clamor. They were either expressing joy or sadness with their singing; we don’t know for sure which.” City officials, Thomas goes on to say, also diligently guarding Portiuncula that night, were astonished at the behavior of the birds. “They were the ones who called others to come and witness to it.”

THE FOLLOWING MORNING

October 4, 1226

After leading his brothers in reciting three *Pater Nosters*, Elias made the Sign of the Cross over the body and ran out into the night. He told no one where he was going. It was none of their business.

. . . *Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo.*
“. . . And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”
Amen. The words floated in the air like swallows.

Angelo and Rufino took turns reading the penitential psalms aloud, but quietly, to each other. Psalm 6, then 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. Then they started again. Brother Leo (the only friend of Francis who ever bothered to preserve a note from him; he, in fact, saved two, and they are the only two autographs of Francis we possess) sat closest to the body, singing the *Agnus Dei*.

These were Francis's best friends, a handful among his first friars, who rarely left his side for two years leading up to his death. They'd been his nearly constant companions since September 1224, when they accompanied Francis to Mount La Verna, “that rugged rock ’twixt Tiber and Arno,” according to Dante, writing ninety years later. There, they bore witness to and became keepers of Francis's dearest secret. It was upon La Verna that something mysterious happened to his body, a spiritual

piercing by God, a physical identification of Francis with Christ, and Francis's friends kept this mystery to themselves.

Angelo, Rufino, and Leo stayed awake throughout the night after their friend died. They prayed, sang, and told stories. Before dawn, they laughed. And with the first sound of magpies pecking in the sunflowers, they hugged each other, weeping like children. Thank God Elias had run out.



Within minutes of leaving Portiuncula, Elias reached the town of Assisi; he began making arrangements and attempting desperately to get word of Francis's death to Cardinal Ugolino, the papally appointed "protector" of the Franciscan Order in Rome. Elias relied heavily on Ugolino and was his one true ally. Born in 1170 in the Papal States, the son of a count and a cousin of Pope Innocent III, Ugolino studied theology and canon law in Paris before being made a cardinal-deacon at twenty-eight by his cousin. Eight years later he was appointed cardinal bishop of Ostia, a diocese within Rome itself (one of seven so-called suburbicarian dioceses). Knowing such an insider was helpful, to say the least. In this instance, Elias knew that he and the cardinal already agreed on what must be done.

Only one week earlier, four different men—younger friars hand-picked by Elias—had stood outside the stable doors of a local blacksmith in nearby Foligno.

"What are we doing here?" one asked, looking around at the others. The question went unanswered.

"One . . . two . . . *three!*" Elias called out a moment later, and at once, the four hoisted a massive sarcophagus to their shoulders. Taking three steps toward the double carriage before them, they lowered it slowly onto the back of it. The double team trotted a step forward for balance, and one horse let out a whinny.

Guido, the youngest of the friars gathered there, paused a moment, bending at the waist to kiss the handle he'd just set down. Elias yelled "Come!" in Guido's direction, and Guido jumped up to join the others. They all walked like Roman soldiers beside the carriage for the two-hour journey back to Portiuncula, where Francis lay dying.

That same moment, back at Portiuncula, Francis was asking his brothers to help him lie down on the bare ground.

"Take off my clothes," he begged. "I want to feel the ground on my skin."

The friars did as he asked, but looking at each other, some wondered, *Is he mad with fever?* Angelo, Rufino, and Leo did not wonder—they knew.



A week later, these three helped carry Francis's body into town in the morning after watching over it for the night. Elias had returned from whatever he was doing, instructing the friars that they were to take Francis to the church of San Giorgio.

"He will be safe there until we know better what to do," Elias said.

Angelo, Rufino, Leo, Elias, and a few others gently lifted Francis onto a cot they had fashioned out of branches and began carrying him down the road to Assisi. They knew that Francis had wanted to embrace death like a sister and experience it as a natural part of life that leads to something else. Giotto would immortalize this embrace as a gesture between the friar and a figure of death in his famous fresco *St. Francis and Death*, on the wall beside what later became the doorway from Magdalen Chapel to the north transept in the Lower Church of San Francesco. But back on October 3, 1226, people were lining the road from the valley into the city. They'd heard the news during the night that Francis was nearing the end. They were holding candles, singing

hymns, and waving branches in a scene reminiscent of the way a few residents of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus to their city before Passover.

A path cleared on the winding way down to the convent at San Damiano. Even greedy, grieving peasants had some manners. At San Damiano, the friars stopped to see Clare. They set down the body of their founder and removed the grille that usually separated the men from the women. For two hours, Clare and the other women took turns talking to Francis, blessing him, touching his head, weeping, and praying for him. Some prayed quietly to him, as if he'd already been made a saint.

Clare's grief was probably increased by worry over what was happening to the movement that she and Francis had founded. Elias and Cardinal Ugolino were slowly and deliberately steering things away from the original Rule. Cardinal Ugolino's power in the Church was increasing. *He may even become pope one day*, Clare thought to herself.

The friars left San Damiano with the body en route to the church of San Giorgio (today a chapel within the Basilica of Santa Chiara), where Elias had already arranged for the holy remains to lie in state. Some knew that this was where Francis had first preached the Good News just after he exchanged the leather belt and look of a hermit for the robe of a simple friar, complete with a rough cord and sandals. People jostled each other for a chance to touch the cot, even the body. Occasionally Elias slapped their hands away with a juniper stick he'd picked up on the road. He kept looking nervously over his shoulder, fearing that someone from Rome might come forward, demanding to take the body of this obvious saint to the Lateran or Old St. Peter's. He wouldn't allow that to happen. Francis was to the Umbrian hill towns what Jesus was to the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

By the time the procession reached the city, bitter tears were replaced with joy and gladness, according to Thomas of Celano's

account. From Francis's place of burial in San Giorgio, Celano went on to say, "he enlightens the world."¹

Before he died, Francis asked Elias to pass something along to all of the friars.

"Bless them all on my behalf," he said, "and tell them that they have nothing to fear and have done nothing wrong."²

Then, their grave walk over by dusk, Elias retired to his room. There, he began to compose a letter. His emotion poured out in a way that would surprise the brothers who knew him best. "Before I say anything, I sigh, and for good reason," he emoted. "My groans are gushing forth. The comforter is far from us, and he who once carried us like lambs has fled to some far off country." He included other beautiful turns of phrase, such as "His presence was a light, and not only for those of us who were near, but to those who were far from us both in calling and in life."³ But also in that singular letter, Elias told the world a secret that Angelo, Rufino, Leo—and Francis himself—never wanted anyone to know.

THREE-AND-A-HALF YEARS LATER

May 22, 1230

Upon the rock that perches Assisi above the plain below, at the southwestern corner of town, is a promontory named by Roman city planners the *Collis Inferni*, the “Hill of Hell.” It was a place where criminals were executed, their bodies tossed over the side, left to rot in the sun and rain out of view. Children were told by their mothers never to go near that miserable place hanging above the valley.

The Romans modeled the Hill of Hell after Gehenna on the outskirts of the Old City of Jerusalem. “It is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell,” Jesus preached in the first century (Mt 5:29). Except that the word translated “hell” is, in the original, *Gehenna*, a place name that was familiar to first century residents of Jerusalem. So, there are ancient foundations for the idea that the unrepentant and the heretic could not, according to medieval laws, be buried in holy ground. That is why places such as the Hill of Hell existed in medieval towns: the bodies of those who died outside the Church had to be buried somewhere.

Ironically, there was no corresponding law against burying a good Christian in such an unclean place.

Only five months after Francis’s death, Cardinal Ugolino was elected to the chair of St. Peter. Taking the name Pope Gregory IX, he built his papacy from the beginning upon his reputation

as friend of the greatest saint since the apostles. Some said that Francis had turned to Ugolino for fatherly guidance for his order, to protect it and its ideals from those who would steer it down ungodly paths. Others saw things differently—that Ugolino, together with Elias and others, seized this control and were themselves party to steering the friars away from the ideals of their founder.

Less than eighteen months after Francis's body was laid in its wooden tomb at San Giorgio, Elias acquired the Hill of Hell in a series of land grants from prominent Assisian citizens. On April 29, 1228, Pope Gregory IX issued a papal bull announcing that plans were underway to build a great church, there, transforming the land to the glory of God.¹

Both Gregory and Elias remembered conversations with Francis about sin, the body, and death. Perhaps they believed that burial on the Hill of Hell was in keeping with Francis's desire to be regarded as the lowliest of all. Medieval people often pondered how they might appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ after death. The belief was that a dead person, body and soul, would go to judgment to face the question of eternal destiny, and it was important to make the right impression. Even the sixteenth-century German emperor Maximilian I, who was no saint, left instructions that, in death, his head should be shaved, his teeth smashed in, and his body burned. Despite what the earthly record might show, Maximilian wanted to at least seem physically penitent when he appeared before God.²

"We will make Assisi the new Jerusalem," Elias was saying to all who would listen. He was devoted to the places he and Francis had shared, especially their beloved Assisi. It was more beautiful than Compostela, closer than Jerusalem to the center of the Holy Roman Empire, devoid of Rome's stench and menace, and deserved—Elias believed, because of Francis—to become the world's pilgrimage destination.

With pilgrims come coins—stitched into their belts or folded into their shoes. Pilgrims possessed gold and silver and quietly carried it to where it might do them the most good. Assisians needed their gold, now more than ever. Even Solomon had to beg and hoard in order to build a temple. A couple of lines from Shakespeare capture the sentiment of what was cusping: “Th’ abuse of greatness is when it disjoins / Remorse from power.”³



Pope Gregory arrived in Assisi on July 16, 1228, intent on putting Elias’s plans into action. In a papal bull three months earlier, he’d announced that the Inferno hill was to be renamed Paradise and offered forty days of indulgence to anyone who helped fund the construction.⁴ During an elaborate ceremony at San Giorgio, he pronounced Francis a saint of heaven, which was a surprise to no one. A few months earlier, Celano had written in his *First Life* of Francis: “New miracles are constantly happening at Francis’s tomb. The blind have recovered sight, the deaf their hearing, the lame their ability to walk, the mute their voices, even those with gout start to jumping; and lepers become clean. His dead body heals those who are alive.”⁵ San Giorgio was a busy marketplace of miracles for nearly two years; the evidence for the pope’s declaration was overwhelming.

Two days later, on July 18, the pope laid the foundation stone on a vast platform where this new paradise was under construction; while Francis’s body still lay in a wooden tomb upon the floor in the crypt of San Giorgio, Elias was named the architect of the new basilica. It was as if the vision of Ezekiel of a valley of dry bones was becoming a reality, taking place in Umbria. “I will make his name great on earth, as it is now in heaven,” vowed Elias.

A new church building of the magnitude of the Basilica of San Francesco was not undertaken lightly. From the start, Elias

and Gregory envisioned this place as a new tabernacle of Moses, a divine space where God would dwell with his people. It would quite literally be a gateway to heaven, having as its foundation the bones of the saint whom they knew so well. Within two years, the Lower Church was completed, and six years later, the Upper Church was under construction, to be adorned several decades later with frescoes by Giotto and other great artists depicting soon-to-be iconic scenes from the life of Francis and his brothers. Gold-leaf paintings even adorn the ceilings—all to honor a man who didn't even want his brothers to own their own breviaries.

“Why should I defend them?” Elias said to anyone who challenged his decisions. “It was our Lord himself who praised the man who builds a house upon a firm foundation, secured deep in the rock below! When the rains come—and they will come—that house will be safe.”

The basilica became one of the greatest architectural and artistic achievements of the Middle Ages, even though the Franciscans who oversaw its design and construction assured themselves that their church stood apart from the ostentation of French Gothic, then in vogue. (Their building left off façade towers and kept the windows on the façade only circular.) There is no denying the tremendous talent that Elias possessed for architecture and organization. Apses and transepts were his gift; they are magnificent. The speed and efficiency of the construction were remarkable. The only accurate comparison and medieval precedent for Elias—a monastic religious leader who was also architect of a great church—is Abbot Suger at Saint-Denis outside Paris, a century earlier.

In April 1230, Gregory IX would honor Elias by declaring through another papal bull that the new basilica was the mother church for all Franciscans, a title that had previously been used by the Poverello for his beloved tiny chapel, the “Little Portion,” *Portiuncula*. This disgusted a handful of Francis's closest friends.

Three years' worth of pilgrims had flowed to San Giorgio from all parts of Christendom, but Elias believed that resting place was only a temporary solution. God's protective arm had kept danger from visiting his friend's remains, but there also was a question of paying proper respect. Elias was determined to secure Francis's honor and legacy for all time. Rotten Perugians threatened Assisi at every turn and surely wouldn't hesitate to take the hill town's most blessed hero.

The body of the greatest saint since St. John the Evangelist was to be transferred in its coffin to the crypt of the Lower Church before a gathered assembly that included cardinal legates sent by Pope Gregory IX, members of the papal curia, friars, bishops, invited guests, and townspeople. A ceremony was planned for May 25, 1230.

Bonaventure, in the penultimate paragraph of his "official" *Life of Saint Francis*, writes that on that day as "the holy treasure . . . was being removed" to its new resting place, God "deigned to work many miracles, so that by the fragrance of the healing power of Francis's body the hearts of the faithful would be drawn closer to Christ."⁶ But as most of the thousands of friars who were gathered (the Pentecost general chapter meeting was set to begin the following day) would never realize, Francis's body was not there. Elias had secretly buried it two days earlier.

Or so he said. The exact location of the body of Francis would remain a mystery for six hundred years.

On May 23, 1230, Elias pounded in the rock below the altar in the Lower Church, finishing preparations that had already been extensive and detailed. He worked hard at Francis's final resting place: a stone sarcophagus, wrapped by a cage of iron bars, in a cavern hewn from the mountainside. In the dead of night, Elias was the last person to seal up that rocky tomb. Reaching into his cassock pocket, he took out a handful of coins. Holding them up, just enough to catch the flickering light of a candle, he paused a moment to consider the silver. The Franciscan

Rule forbade a friar from even handling money. But Elias gently placed the coins beside the dead hand of his friend. Whether this was a strange gesture of repentance, a prescient recognition that someone in the future would someday need to authenticate the body of Francis, or a gift of misunderstanding, we'll never know for sure.⁷

"I am sorry, Holy Father," I imagine he said. "Forgive me now for what I must do."

Two days later, a purple-draped, oxen-drawn wagon carried the sturdy wooden coffin that had witnessed many miracles at San Giorgio to the Lower Church of San Francesco. The crowd tried to touch what they believed contained the holy relics of their holy brother and favorite son all along the way. Walking solemnly behind that carriage was an orderly gathering of friars and bishops and cardinals. Trumpets blew. Less than a handful of those present knew it was all for show.

Pilgrims' guides and pamphlets would for centuries indicate only that the tomb of St. Francis was located "under the high altar" of the Lower Church; not unlike St. Peter's bones, which have for two thousand years been considered the very foundation of his basilica in Rome.

Certain Franciscans and popes would know the precise location of the body in subsequent centuries. This knowledge was passed down, like all the most intimate secrets of the Church, in private conversations from one dying minister general, cardinal protector, or pope to the next. The rest of the world was left to believe that in burial, just as in life, Francis was like Christ. As Bartholomew of Pisa put it, late in the fourteenth century, "As Christ's tomb was sealed and watched by guards, so St. Francis's tomb has been sealed, to prevent his body ever being visible to anyone."⁸