

## Francis' relationship with his father

*Inspiration for this paper came from a comment made by Hugh Beach during last year's study week. I hope the discussion may lead us to think seriously about how we bring up our sons today.*

All the biographers of Francis portray his father, Pietro Bernardone, as the villain, which is very strange when you come to examine the facts. One would expect such establishment figures to support their own generation against insolent and rebellious offspring. However, it seems that no one, not even Bishop Guido, reproached Francis for not following the fifth commandment to "honour thy father and thy mother". Apparently, Pietro was highly unpopular and, whereas his wife Pica was given the title of "domina", he is never accorded the male equivalent. This is also remarkable, considering the high status of a wool merchant and the fact that Pietro owned orchards and farms around Assisi. Mockler suggests that this unpopularity stems from Pietro's infatuation with all things French as well as possible overt sympathy with the Cathar church, a heretical movement of the time. Certainly he was a very strong character whose ideas would have influenced his sons, either to accept or totally reject them. It seems that Francis was terrified of his father for more than half his life. Their relationship seems to have been grounded in control whereas the mother-son relationship was characterised by love and care.

On the other hand, Pica is described as a "gentle and modest woman" by Sabatier (p 6), doting on Francis (possibly her favourite) but "afraid of her husband's temper and shocked by his views" (Mockler p 43) Having given birth to Francis while her husband was away on business, she had the child baptised "Giovanni" but Pietro immediately changed the name on his return to "Francesco" (the Frenchman). In 13<sup>th</sup> century Assisi, women and children enjoyed no rights, being subject to indiscriminate physical and verbal abuse. Interestingly, in Commune documents of the time, Francis' brother Angelo is referred to as "the son of the lady Pica" rather than the more usual attribution "son of Pietro", a further indication of the low esteem in which the father was held.

According to Thomas of Celano, Francis was brought up by his parents "proud of spirit, in accordance with the vanity of the world; and imitating their wretched life and habits for a long time, he became even more vain and proud." (I ch 1 p5) But think how a little boy, aged 6, might be affected, hearing the traumatic and devastating news of the fall of Jerusalem and, as he grew older, dozens of romantic and heroic tales of the third Crusade. What dreams may have formed in his imagination?

Born in early 1182, Francis was educated at the Grammar School of San Georgio (learning some Latin and elementary reading and writing). He left at the age of 14 to spend the following two years helping in the market square – hardly the most exciting employment! In later years, he signed letters (which he dictated) with a simple "T", writing very little in his own hand.

The adolescents of the time "tossed about amid every kind of debauchery, give themselves over completely to shameful practices, inasmuch as they are permitted to do as they please." (Celano I ch 1 p 6.) So the process of growing up to become anything like a decent citizen was a matter of pot luck. Some would say the same thing of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We neglect our sons at our peril!

Celano paints a bleak picture of Francis at this time: “Almost up to the 25<sup>th</sup> year of his age, he squandered and wasted his time miserably. Indeed he outdid all his contemporaries in vanities and came to be a promoter of evil and was more abundantly zealous for all kinds of foolishness. He was the admiration of all and strove to outdo the rest in the pomp of vainglory, in jokes, in strange doings, in idle and useless talk, in songs, in soft and flowing garments, for he was very rich, not however avaricious but prodigal, not a hoarder of money but a squanderer of his possessions, a cautious businessman but a very unreliable steward.” (I ch 1 p6.) Yet in spite of this, Celano goes on to describe Francis as an affable and kindly person even though, as such, he made himself look foolish. Sabatier adds: “In the midst of his excesses he was always refined and considerate, carefully abstaining from every base or indecent utterance.” (Sabatier p 6.)

Francis and his father belonged to the upper merchant class at a time when the nobility was in decline and the feudal system finally ending. Following the destruction of the castle of the Roccio Maggiori by the locals, the mood of Assisi’s inhabitants was clearly upbeat. As war between Assisi and the perennial enemy Perugia (only 16 miles away) broke out, Francis joined the army but was taken prisoner at Collestrada.

Remaining in captivity for a year, while attempting to keep his fellow prisoners’ spirits high, his release commanded a high price because of his background. Only when he became very sick (aged 22) did Pietro agree to pay the ransom.

Reverting to his old ways and rejoining his former companions for a while, Francis set out walking one day leaving the city by the Porta Nuova. Before him lay the countryside, sparkling with beauty. Instead of being inspired, Francis suddenly realised the miserable emptiness of his life, feeling a sense of disgust and being “overwhelmed with the weight of a new suffering.” (Sabatier p 10.)

Despite the experience, however, Francis returned to dream his old dreams of joining a gallant knight by volunteering to fight alongside Sir Walter of Brienne. This proved an absolute disaster. Less than 24 hours into the expedition, at Spoleto, Francis was overtaken by a fever, returning home, much to the disappointment of his father. Was he homesick or had he realised the futility of it all? There was no chance of a merchant’s son being knighted but Francis needed this experience to unsettle him. This event in his life enabled him to set out on the road which eventually led to sainthood. We all need to be unsettled from time to time, to be challenged to see the direction our lives are taking. He heard a voice telling him to return home and wait to be told what to do next.

A great change began to appear in the character of Francis. He spent time walking in the countryside in the company of a new friend (totally unlike his former companions). Was this the future Brother Elias (Bombarone da Beviglia)? In spite of his continuing boastfulness, a sense of desperation began to emerge. Francis was invited to a great banquet where he was elected “king of misrule” (- at which the king had to pay the bill!). This was a turning point in his life. As the festivities progressed, Francis seemed to lag behind in a daze, rooted to the spot, apparently unaware of what was going on around him. Replying to a taunt that he must be contemplating taking a wife he replied: “I am thinking of taking a wife more beautiful, more rich, more pure than you could ever imagine.” (Celano I ch 1 p11.) We may assume this to be “Lady Poverty”.

During a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis exchanged clothes with a beggar for one day and, on returning home, he increased his kindly acts towards the poor. But his new lifestyle,

wandering the fields alone or with Elias, rendered him of little use to his father, as the gulf between the two men widened.

Pica felt powerless to bring them together. It was at this time that the call came from the crucifix at San Damiano to “go and repair my house”. The story of the stolen cloth and horse, sold at Foligno, and the priest’s refusal to accept the money from the sale is well-known. One can only imagine the level of Pietro’s fury, which increased when the intolerable youth went into hiding!

We may well ask whether that pre-arranged “cave refuge” suggests a more sinister motive than simply escaping a father’s wrath. Given all that had gone before, was this calculated as a final insult. Perhaps not, but Mockler suggests that, while Francis hated his father, he also longed for his approval. (p 43.)

Finally, Francis returned home wearing a hermit’s habit, looking so pathetic that all who knew him began pelting him with mud, as if he were a madman. What was going through his mind? His crime was “wasting the family substance” as Hugh Beach describes it (p 3). Reacting as one might expect, Pietro “glaring at him wild-eyed and savagely” was perfectly within his rights (according to local custom) of locking up the wretched boy in the cellar. At the same time, we hear that he attempted “by words and blows to turn his spirit back to the vanities of this world.” (Legend 6.117.)

Here we have a classic example of two headstrong and ambitious men displaying unrealised expectations, mistaken assumptions and unresolved tensions. Neither was willing to give way, so we may assume the only guaranteed outcome was that Francis would never follow his father into the business.

There was no excuse for Francis behaving as he did. Mockler writes: “Instead of showing the slightest gratitude to his parents for a cosseted upbringing, he had despised his father’s profession, had come back all the same to live unabashedly off his family, repaid Pietro Bernardone for his tolerance by stealing and selling his goods, refused to hand back his father’s money even when the person for whose benefit he had allegedly taken it had refused to accept it, created an open scandal, disappeared for a month without the least consideration for his very worried mother – and finally, after all his boasting of princesses and treasures had come back yet again looking dirtier and more ragged than any tramp, without a word of regret or apology, expecting, to judge from his brazen air, the fattened calf to be slaughtered once more.” (p 81.)

Moved by motherly compassion, Pica releases Francis in Pietro’s absence who, on his return, beat his wife and denounced his son before the civil authorities. But Francis made an astute move, claiming that, as a hermit and servant of the Most High, his case should be heard before the Bishop. The Legend describes vividly the final confrontation between the two.

“Then the man of God got up, joyful and comforted by the bishop’s words, and, as he brought the money to him, he said: ‘My Lord, I will gladly give back not only the money acquired from his things, but even all my clothes.’ And going into one of the bishop’s rooms, he took off all his clothes, and, putting the money on top of them, came out naked before the bishop, his father and all the bystanders, and said: ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Until now I have called Pietro di Bernardone my father. But,

because I have proposed to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so upset, and also all the clothing which is his, wanting to say from now on: Our Father who art in heaven and not My Father, Pietro di Bernardone.” (Legend 6.20 and Crosby p 75.)

As the crowd dispersed, Francis was sent out to face the world dressed in a farm labourer’s tunic. “It was cold and he was now very definitely alone.” (Mockler p 83.) From this point Pietro Bernardone is not mentioned again either in the writings of Francis or his biographers.

So Francis urged his followers to call God “our Father”. Yet, as Julio Mico observes: “when he prayed alone, he rarely invoked God as Father.” (Quoted by Crosby p 76.) In his writings, Francis uses the term “father” over 100 times when he refers to God. His use of “father” in an earthly sense only appears 3 times: leaving your father to follow Jesus and calling no one on earth by that name.

At the same time, Francis frequently uses a mother’s love for her child as a model for the kind of love to be shown between the brothers. Writing to Brother Leo he claims to be speaking “as a mother would.” The Rule for Hermitages, involving four brothers, includes the injunction: “Let the two who are mothers keep the life of Martha and the two sons the life of Mary.” These roles were to be reversed, as time moved on, by mutual agreement.

Francis never refers to God as “mother” but always as “father” in the sense that God is Creator. There is a strong link in Francis’ mind between creation and the fatherhood of God which applies not only to humans but to all creatures. Thaddie Matura has examined Francis’ use of the word “pater” concluding that

“when God appears as Father in the writings of Francis – and this is very frequently – the fatherhood is rarely placed in direct relationship with human beings. God is father because of the mystery of the Trinity, above all because of the Son and His relationship to Him. These are the relationships that Francis sets forth, meditates on, and admires. They are the unique and loftiest examples of what we can become by the grace of the Spirit who dwells in us.” (Crosby p 77.)

For Francis, imperial rule, experienced by societies in an abusive hierarchical system like the Pax Romana with a Caesar figure demanding unquestioning obedience, was to be replaced by a kind of heavenly patronage in which all are treated with respect within a peace born of mutual love. “Oh, how glorious and holy and great it is to have a Father in heaven” (Matura p 128) said Francis in his second letter to the clergy; which means, of course, that we are all brothers and sisters, including the elements and the animals. Francis is always Brother Francis.

Let me conclude with the delightfully pertinent and concise verdict of Hugh Beach on Francis as a peacemaker (from his Assisi Booklet no. 2):

“The judgement on Francis as a peacemaker on the domestic scene is therefore bad. He was a source of trouble from the start. He seems to have had no inkling of the injunction to “honour thy father and thy mother”. For the first 25 years of his life he was as dysfunctional a son as any family might dread acquiring.”

Peter Dunbar TSSF

## Bibliography

Ed. Armstrong, Hellmann and Short  
Francis of Assisi: early documents volume 2 – The Founder  
New York: New City Press, 2000  
(including Thomas of Celano: “The Life of St Francis”  
and “Legend of the three companions”).

Beach, Hugh  
Francis as peacemaker – Assisi booklet number 2  
Third Order distribution, St Mary’s Convent, Freeland, 2000.

Crosby, Michael H  
Finding Francis, following Christ  
Orbis, 2007.

Mockler, Anthony  
Francis of Assisi: the wandering years  
Phaidon, 1976.

Sabatier, Paul  
The road to Assisi  
Paraclete Press, 2003.