

# ELIAS of Cortona

c1180 – 22 April 1253



Anthony Williams, ofs  
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## AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE

(1)

Minister General of the Friars Minor. Born it is said, at Bevilia near Assisi, c. 1180; died at Cortona, 22 April, 1253. In the writings of Elias that have come down to us he styles himself "Brother Elias, Sinner", and his contemporaries without exception call him simply "Brother Elias". The name of a town was first added to his name in the fourteenth century; in Franciscan compilations like the "Chronica XXIV Generalium" and the "Liber Conformitatum" Elias is described as Helias de Assisi, whereas the name of Cortona does not appear in connection with his before the seventeenth century.

From Salimbene, who knew Elias well, we learn that his family name was Bonusbaro or Bonibarone, that his father was from the neighbourhood of Bologna, and his mother an Assisian; that before becoming a friar Elias worked at his father's trade of mattress-making and also taught the children of Assisi to read the Psalter. Later on, according to Eccleston, Elias was a *scriptor*, or notary, at Bologna, where no doubt he applied himself to study. But he was not a cleric and never became a priest.

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Elias appears to have been one of the earliest companions of St. Francis of Assisi. The time and place of his joining the saint are uncertain; it may have been at Cortona in 1211, as Wadding says. Certain it is, however, that he held a place of prominence among the friars from the first. After a short sojourn, as it seems, in Tuscany, Elias was sent in 1217 as head of a band of missionaries to Palestine, and two years later he became the first provincial of the then extensive province of Syria. It was in this capacity that he received Cæsar of Speyer into the order. Although we are ignorant of the nature or extent of Elias's work in the East, it would seem that the three years he spent there made a deep impression upon him.

In 1220-21 Elias returned to Italy with St. Francis, who showed further confidence in him by naming him to succeed Peter of Cataneo (d. 10 March, 1221) as Vicar-General of the Order. Elias had held this office for five years when Francis died (3 Oct., 1226), and he then became charged with the responsibilities of the moment and the provisional government of the Friars Minor.

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After announcing the death of Francis and the fact of the Stigmata to the Order in a beautiful letter, and superintending the temporary burial of the saint at San Giorgio, Elias at once began to lay plans for the erection of a great basilica at Assisi, to enshrine the remains of the Poverello. To this end he obtained a donation, with the authority of the Pope, of the so-called Collis Inferni at the western extremity of the town, and proceeded to collect money in various ways to meet the expenses of the building. Elias thus alienated the zealots in the Order, who felt entirely with St. Francis upon the question of poverty, so that at the Chapter held in May, 1227, Elias was rejected in spite of his prominence, and Giovanni Parenti, Provincial of Spain, was elected second General of the Order.

Thenceforth Elias devoted all his energies to raising the Basilica in honour of St. Francis. The first stone was laid 17 July, 1228, the day following the saint's canonization, and the work advanced with such incredible speed that the lower church was finished within twenty-two months. It was consecrated 25 May, 1230. The hurried, secret, and still unexplained translation of St. Francis's body from San Giorgio planned by Elias took place a few days previously. Soon after this, though there is some difference of opinion as to the exact date, Elias attempted, as it

seems by a kind of *coup de main*, to depose Parenti and seize the government of the Order by force, but the attempt failed. He thereupon retired to a distant hermitage. However this may be, Elias was elected to succeed Parenti as General at the Chapter in 1232, *magis tumultuose quam canonice*, as a contemporary chronicler expresses it; and he continued to govern the Friars Minor for nearly seven years.

During that period the Order was passing through one of the crises of its earlier development. It is well known that even during the lifetime of St. Francis a division had shown itself in the ranks of the friars, some being for relaxing the rigour of the rule, especially as regards the observance of poverty, and others for adhering to its literal strictness. The conduct of Elias after his election as General helped to widen this breach and fan the flame of discord in the Order.

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In arbitrary fashion he refused to convene a Chapter or to visit any of the Provinces, but sent in his place "visitors", who acted rather as tax collectors - for Elias's chief need was money to complete the church and convent of S. Francesco - thus not only violating the rule himself, but causing others to do so also. In many other respects Elias abused his authority, receiving unworthy subjects into the Order and confiding the most important offices to ignorant lay brothers, and when several of the early and most venerated companions of Francis withstood his high-handed methods, they were dealt with as mutineers, some being scourged, others exiled or imprisoned.

Elias's manner of life made his despotism more intolerable. It seems to have been that of a powerful baron rather than of a mendicant friar. We are told that he gathered about him a household of great splendour, including secular lackies, dressed in the gayest liveries; that he kept "a most excellent cook" for his exclusive use; that he fared sumptuously; wore splendid garments, and made his journeys to different courts on fine palfreys with rich trappings. Because of these excesses, which threatened the complete destruction of the Rule, the opposition to Elias became widespread. It was organised by Aymon of Faversham, who, in conjunction with other Provincials from the north, determined to have him removed, and appealed to Gregory IX. Elias excommunicated the appellants and sought to prevent their reception by the Pope. But Gregory received them and, in spite of Elias, summoned a chapter at Rome. Elias resisted to the utmost, and strove to browbeat his accusers, but Gregory called on him to resign. He refused to do so, and was thereupon deposed by the Pope. The English Provincial, Albert of Pisa, was elected General in his stead. This was in 1239.

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Friend and confidant of Saints, Pope and Emperor, Church ecumenist and State diplomat, Minister General of the Franciscan Order, architectural designer, excommunicate and penitent: these are some of the qualities of the person and the highlights of the life of Brother Elias, a towering presence and influence in mid-thirteenth century Europe.

His human qualities and personal talents help explain his friendships and subsequent rise to influence; his later fall from grace with Pope and confreres requires more scholarly attention to draw back the veil of seven and a half centuries that has enshrouded his reputation and discredited him *prima facie* in the eyes of many.

Happily, modern research carried out by lay scholars is helping to sort out the true Brother Elias from the myths, legends and slanders and, to some extent, reinstate a more positive image.

Saint Francis is the idealist, the spiritual animator, the defender of the charism; Elias is the pragmatist, the administrator, the protector of the structure.

Brother Elias is the most discussed and controversial figure, but also the most famous and prominent one in the first part of Franciscan history.

A contemporary of St. Francis, he was among the most beloved of his companions. As Vicar of St. Francis who received the deathbed blessing of the Saint, he announced the miracle of the Stigmata to the Brothers and to the glory of the Poverello he built the largest monument that “was ever erected on the tomb of man”.

Minister General of the Order, he was disputed in the end by part of the Order and eventually falling into the disgrace of the Holy Father, Elias was excommunicated. Although he repented at his death and was absolved from the censure, he was for a long time “forgotten and cursed: every virtue forgotten, every fault enlarged and distorted” by not just a few brothers.

In the early days of the Order, he had the duty to guide and implement its expansion and stabilisation, a task to which he devoted all his capacity and energy.

A friend and confidant of Cardinal Ugolino, who then became Pope, he was an esteemed counsellor followed by St. Clare, who helped him to defend the Franciscan identity of her Order.

Nevertheless, the figure of Brother Elias arrives to us, enveloped in a “dark shadow”, where historical truth remains dimmed by divergence and accusations; considered for centuries almost as a traitor of the Franciscan ideal. It is no wonder then, that in certain historical sources of the 13th and 14th centuries, time and time again we find phrases of approbation and exaltation of Elias, but also silence, one sided judgements and opposition in his regard.

Yet today, with a better understanding and historiographic criticism, a fair rehabilitation of the person and work of Friar Elias can be made, recognizing in him, among other merits, a decisive role in the history of the beginnings of the Franciscan movement and of its organization.

## **HIS LIFE IN DETAIL**

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Instructed in the “arts” or literary and notary studies in Bologna, he was a cultured man of high intelligence, with cleverness of intuitions and skilfulness of action. After some years of manual labour and of “teaching Latin” to the young people of Assisi, fascinated by the life and teachings of St. Francis, though not numbered among his first twelve companions, Elias entered the Order between 1210 and 1215. From that moment, sharing fully in the Seraphic ideal, he was well known and esteemed among the Brothers, receiving the tonsure or *chierica minore* so as to preach; without, however, becoming a priest. In those years, little by little, between the initial duties and stable responsibilities of preaching, a profound friendship between Elias and Francis was established, together with the founder’s complete trust due to the generous diligence of Elias in favour of the Order which was prodigiously expanding. In this way, Francis desired Brother Elias who was his Vicar, to be his “Minister General”, as he considered and called him, likewise appointing him “as mother to himself and as father of the other Friars”. Furthermore, St. Francis was put under the care of doctors in his last years and felt relieved when in 1226, his illness worsening, Elias ran “very promptly from afar” to visit him and to accompany him back to Assisi. The same Friar Elias, after a vision, revealed to Francis the date of his death two years beforehand; and finally, he received the abundant blessing before the final journey of St. Francis.

In the pages of the first biographer Brother Thomas of Celano, Francis and Elias are described as two spirits, which counterbalance one another and act in complete harmony in guiding the Fraternity. To confirm the respect that Brother Elias enjoyed within the Order, even after St. Francis' death and almost until the end of his Generalate, it is sufficient to recall the authoritative recommendation that St. Clare gave to her sister, Agnes of Prague (between 1235-1238): "So that you are able to more securely travel along the path of the divine mandates, pay attention to the counsels of our venerable father Friar Elias, Minister General, and place them before those of any other, considering them more precious for you than any other gift"

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It was in 1217 when the personality of Friar Elias appeared from behind the scenes of the Franciscan world. In fact, during Pentecost of that year, at the Portiuncula, a very important General Chapter was held in which the Order was for the first time parcelled out into Provinces: seven in Italy and six or seven abroad. These latter-mentioned, however, still did not exist and so the Chapter appointed Provincial Ministers, assigning them a certain number of friars, for the foundation of these new Provinces. It was precisely Friar Elias who was destined to the future Province of the Holy Land or Syria. Without a doubt, it is an example of the great prestige that he had reached and the evidence of St. Francis' admiration and trust in him.

The Province of Syria entrusted to Brother Elias (1217-1220) included a very extensive territory taking in Constantinople, the Greek islands, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Unfortunately, specific testimonies regarding the activity of Brother Elias in this Province did not come to light; however, from what we know of his initiative, capacity for dialog and passionate preaching, one may well affirm that he gave his whole self, with all his talents, to the mission and the occasions of apostolate. He enjoyed the esteem and reverence of the crusaders for his preaching and exemplary Franciscan life. Evidence of this activity and one of the first fruits of his missionary zeal was the entry of Brother Cesario of Spire into the Order; a gifted German cleric, famous preacher and crusader.

There is another important fact, which allows us to open a peephole on the ecumenical activity of Brother Elias. In 1220, he, who was already involved in the reconciliation of the Greek and Latin churches whose relations, following the Crusades, had degenerated, sent to Rome, Brother Luca of Bitonto, theologian and famous preacher (who then succeeded him as Provincial of the Holy Land (1220-1221)), so that he could refer to the Pope on the situations of the two Churches.

Among the various convents opened by Brother Elias during his three years as Provincial, there undoubtedly were those of Constantinople and of St. John of Acre, where St. Francis himself frequently resided during the time he spent in the Holy Land.

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Having returned from the East, rather exhausted, St. Francis immediately called for a General Chapter on September 29, 1220, so as to revoke certain innovations introduced during his absence, provide canonical admission of the Friars to the Order, with a regular Novitiate and Profession, and implement new disciplinary and structural proposals for the fraternity to be considered from now on as an authentic religious Order. However, for all of this, including his precarious health, he did not wish to continue to personally direct the Order and in the same Chapter Francis chose as his Vicar and "Minister General" Brother Pietro Catani, a "gifted and noble" friar, who died just a few months later, on March 10, 1221. St. Francis immediately appointed Brother Elias as his successor.

The appointing of Brother Elias as Vicar of the Order marked an important date in the history of the Franciscan foundation. With his distinctive character and intelligence, he found himself governing the Order in one of the most delicate moments of its first important development: be it for the numerical and geographical extension, be it for the more precise formulation of the primitive Rule and the more concrete organization of the life and activity of the friars. The solicitous presence of the new Vicar was made evident especially in the General Chapters of that time, beginning with the one of Pentecost in 1221. During this Chapter, St. Francis, sick and seated at the feet of the Vicar, would pull on his tunic, to give him some of his suggestions. In this Chapter, the so-called “Regula non bullata” was discussed and welcomed as a general rule made of 23 chapters; the account of the martyrdom of the first five friars martyred in Morocco in 1220 was also read and the numerous group of friars for the foundation of the German Province, to be led by Brother Cesario of Spire, was chosen.

Five years later, the stigmatized and dying Francis, bestowed upon the person and work of his Vicar the demonstration of his profound gratitude: *“I bless you, o son, in all and for all, and as the Most High, under your direction, made numerous my brothers and sons, so unto you and in you I bless them all. In Heaven and on earth may God bless you, King of all things. I bless you as I can, and more than that which is in my power, and that which I cannot do, may He who can do everything accomplish it in you. May God remember your work and your task and reserve for you your recompense on the day of the retribution of the just. May you find whatever blessing you desire and may all of your just petitions be answered”*.

Brother Elias then communicated to the entire Order the sad news of the blessed transitus “of our brother and father Francis” in a penetrating “Letter”, making known to them also the extraordinary miracle of the stigmata. He then called for a General Chapter to be held at Pentecost of the following year, on May 30, 1227, in which the gifted jurist, Brother Giovanni Parenti, was elected as Minister General. During the Chapter, in agreement with Pope Gregory IX, the hoped-for canonization of the founder was most likely spoken about, with the resulting construction of the Church where his tomb would be. This new duty, was then immediately assigned to the mastery of the ex-Vicar Brother Elias by whom, precisely for that construction on March 29, 1228, from Gregory XI a piece of land was received at the western extremity of Assisi, the so-called “Collis inferni” or “Hill of hell”. The following April 29 the Pope officially decreed the erection and the day after the canonization of St. Francis (July 16-17, 1228) he consecrated the foundation stone.

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To Brother Elias we owe the merit and diligence of that titanic undertaking: the construction of the lower Basilica during the first two years (1228-1230) and of the upper Basilica during his Generalate (1232-1239). On April 22, 1230 the Pope declared the Basilica of St. Francis property of the Holy See and “Caput et Mater” of the entire Franciscan Order. The following May 25, the remains of the Saint were solemnly buried.

A few months after the transferal and burial of St. Francis, Brother Elias, together with the authorities of Assisi, gave a precise account of these events to the Pope. Elias then withdrew to the hermitage called “Celle di Cortona” until the year 1232 when he was elected by acclamation Minister General during the Chapter of Reiti.

The Generalate of Brother Elias could be nothing less than the continuation of his vicariate. Brother Elias had not changed, but changed were the atmosphere and surroundings. The Order had begun to open itself to theological studies with St. Anthony (1223-1224) and Brother Elias promoted and increased this initiative and openness of the Order with the purpose of forming and

better-qualifying the Friars in their service to the Church. It included the promotion of the ordinary studies in all of the Provinces and of the initial university courses in Paris and in England. During his Generalate, with the cooperation of able Provincial Ministers who were closely monitored by him, Brother Elias was able to plant the Order in various new nations: Hungary, Poland, Scandinavia., Ireland, Scotland, Lithuania..., at the same time dividing certain already existent Provinces in Italy and elsewhere.

At the climax of his Generalate (between 1235-1238), illustrious testimonies arriving from very diversified places and persons (including St. Clare, Robert Grossatesta, Fredrick II), emphasized the fame, authority and esteem held for Brother Elias. St. Clare exhorted St. Agnes of Prague to remain faithful to her vocation and to the counsels of “our venerable Father Friar Elias, Minister General”.

Similarly, from Germany where he was participating in the transferal of the remains of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the Emperor Fredrick II humbly acknowledged the holiness of our “Minors” in a letter dated the May 17, 1236, asking Brother Elias for the help of the prayer of all the friars for himself.

With the same esteem, in 1238, Pope Gregory IX sent Brother Elias to the Court of the Emperor Fredrick in Cremona so as to strengthen the relations between the Church and the Empire; however, the Emperor did not back down from his line of political conduct.

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Meanwhile, owing to this position of prestige and of remarkable and advantageous government, although somewhat subjective, *without the celebration of General Chapters* and with the growing *clericalization of the Order and dedication to studies*, the first dissents of “zealot” friars in Italy and of the intellectual friars abroad were made manifest. The intellectual friars desired greater consideration for themselves in regards to the numerous lay friars or Brothers and, above all, a more democratic way of governing; with constitutional norms and the regular celebration of general chapters. The dissatisfaction of friars and Provinces was motivated also by the impellent begging for alms or money for the Basilica of Assisi. What is more, following accusations of some grave abuses, Brother Elias sent visitors he could trust to various Provinces who carried out severe orders; visitations which, although justified, aggravated the “bad mood”. Thus, complaints and various accusations against Brother Elias were sent in 1238 to the Pope.

Therefore, in 1239 the General Chapter was reunited in Rome, in the presence of the Pope. After heated discussions and repeated accusations, energetically denied by Brother Elias, he was “acquitted”, or rather, discharged from his office by the Pope, as he was “no longer accepted by the majority of friars”. The well deserving Friar Alberto of Pisa, a priest, was elected as Minister General; he had already been minister of seven Provinces, and most recently of England (1236-1239).

On that Pentecost, May 25, 1239, Friar Elias ceased to be “the father of all the friars”, as had been willed by St. Francis. With the consent of the Pope, the Chapter appointed him as custodian of “his” Basilica of St. Francis, which by now was almost completely built, with its two levels and looming bell-tower, but he remained only a few months in Assisi; then, being already 70 years old, he retired to the hermitage called “Celle” of Cortona with a group of Brothers.

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But, towards the end of 1239, summoned to Pisa by Fredrick II, Elias went there with the hope of fostering some kind of agreement or reconciliation between the Pope and the Emperor, who had been solemnly excommunicated in the first months of that year. It was a wrong step since he did

this without the permission of the new Minister General. Called to Rome by the Pope who had just been informed, Elias headed off; however, as he arrived in Viterbo, warned that a conspiracy was being prepared in Rome, he turned back, writing nonetheless a letter to the Pontiff to explain what he had done, and entrusting it to the Minister General for its delivery. But the Minister died in Rome on January 23, 1240, “among the English friars”, with the letter in his pocket, not brought to its destination.

Having returned under the protection of the Emperor of Pisa and then to Cortona, Brother Elias did not remain inactive. He was, in fact, sent to the East by Fredrick II during 1241-1242, and was able to happily conclude his mission of reconciliation between the Latin Emperor of Constantinople, Baldwin II, and the Greek Emperor Vatacius of Nicea. At the beginning of 1244, Elias was again in Cortona, carrying with him an illustrious relic of the Holy Cross of Christ, given to him by the Emperor of Constantinople, relic that still remains there today: a precious treasure of the church in Cortona.

In the meantime, after the death of Gregory IX, Innocent IV was raised to the Pontifical throne; he issued a new excommunication for the permanence of Brother Elias beside the Emperor, considered as insubordinate, and also deprived him of the religious habit.

Even amid these continued misunderstandings, Brother Elias always felt part of the Order. Indeed, on June 23, 1245, having received some land in donation from the county of Cortona, Brother Elias built a new beautiful church dedicated to St. Francis with a convent for the Friars Minor. In the church he laid the relic of the Holy Cross and various relics of St. Francis: the tunic of his “transitus”, the damask pillow carried by Lady Jacopa of Settesoli to the dying Saint.

In those years the new Minister General, Brother Giovanni of Parma (1247-1257), according to certain historians, sent his close friend Brother Gherardo of Modena to Friar Elias, inviting him to fully re-enter the Order and make amends with the Church. The tentative failed, however, as had the previous invitation to the General Chapter of 1244, for fear of imprisonment or of other severe ecclesial penalties. In reality, “more than once”, Elias had expressed the desire to go to Rome to the Pope; a desire made vain some number of times, for fear of the above-mentioned punishments (as is stated in the Apostolic Trial).

The amendment came about, however, in the last years, especially following the death of Fredrick II in 1250. Brother Elias, now over 70 years of age, became gravely ill; and, in tears, repeatedly confessing the sins of adherence to the Emperor “*Contra Mandatum Ecclesiae*” and of vainglory, was reconciled with the Church and the Order. Absolved and having received the Sacraments, he died a holy death on April 22, 1253. All of this was well certified in the regular Apostolic Trial carried out a few days later (May 2-6, 1253) by the Penitentiary Friar Velasco, sent to Cortona, probably at the request of St. Clare, by Pope Innocent IV, then present in Assisi.

One can observe at this point that the expressions of repentance repeated by Brother Elias, “*Quia Non Portavi Ordinem Meum Sicut Debui*” and “*Quam Vanagloriosus Fui*”, more than towards the non-observance of religious life and of the Rule, during the period of his Generalate (according to some accusations), refer to his irregular position in Cortona and to his adherence to the politics of the Emperor, sustained by the hope and ambition of achieving the Emperor’s reconciliation with the Pope.

Elias was buried with honour in the choir of the Church of St. Francis in Cortona, where his body lies still today, dressed in his ashen Franciscan habit.



*Elias designed and lead the construction of the resplendent Basilica that was to house the mortal remains of his sainted friend, Francis. Later he was to design yet another monumental Church to Francis' memory, this time in his hometown of Cortona. Therefore Elias himself was to rest all these many centuries among the resplendent poverty of the choir behind the main altar, his simple marker in the floor almost indecipherable these last years amid the rubble of a church (though monumental) that was falling into ruin. And so Elias, unlike Francis, materially speaking, seems to have come full circle from ruined church to ruined church, from poverty to poverty, with a wealth of Franciscan experience in between.*

Thus ends the glorious and troubled story of Brother Elias, who had dedicated a major part of his life to the expansion and apostolic efficiency of the Seraphic Order. He was an emblematic man, whose strong personality and brilliant capacity have left an indelible mark on history.

**Source:**

Letter from the Minister General (OFM. CONV)  
on the 750<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the death of  
Brother Elias of Cortona. (2003) abridged

# A Letter on the Passing of Saint Francis

4/5 October 1226

To Gregory, his beloved brother in Christ, the minister of the brothers who are in France, together with all his brothers and ours, Brother Elias, a sinner, sends greetings.

Before I begin to speak, I sigh, and rightly so. My groans gush forth like waters in a flood. For what I feared has overtaken me and has overtaken you. And what I dreaded has happened to me and to you. Our consoler has gone away from us and he who carried us in his arms like lambs has gone on a journey to a far off country. He who was beloved of God and of man, who taught Jacob the law of life and of discipline, and gave to Israel a covenant of peace has been received into the most resplendent dwellings. We would rejoice exceedingly on his account, yet for our own part we must mourn, since in his absence darkness surrounds us and the shadow of death covers us. It is a loss for all, yet it is a trial singularly my own, for he has left me in the midst of darkness, surrounded by many anxieties and pressed down by countless afflictions. For this reason I implore you. Mourn with me, brothers, for I am in great sorrow and, with you, in pain; for we are orphans without our father and bereaved of the light of our eyes.

In truth, in very truth, the presence of our brother and father Francis was a light, not only for us who were near, but even to those who were far from us in calling and in life. He was a light to shed by the true light to give light to those who were in darkness and sitting in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. He did this because the true Daystar from on high shone upon his heart and enkindled his will with the fire of His love. By preaching the kingdom of God and turning the hearts of fathers to their children and the rebellious to the wisdom of the just, he prepared for the Lord a new people in the world. His name reached distant coasts and all lands were in awe at his marvellous deeds.

For this reason, sons and brothers, do not mourn beyond measure, God, the father of orphans, will give us comfort by his holy consolation. And if you weep, brothers, weep for yourselves and not for him. For “in the midst of life, we are caught in death,” while he has passed from death to life. Rejoice, for, like another Jacob, he blessed all his sons before he was taken from us and forgave them all the faults which any one of us might have committed, or even thought of committing, against him.

And now, after telling you these things, I announce to you a great joy and the news of a miracle. Such a sign that has never been heard of from the dawn of time except in the Son of God, who is Christ the Lord.

Not long before his death, our brother and father appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds which are truly the marks of Christ. His hands and feet had, as it were, the openings of the nails and were pierced front and back revealing the scars and showing the nails' blackness. His side, moreover, seemed opened by a lance and often emitted blood.

As long as his spirit lived in the body, there was no beauty in him for his appearance was that of a man despised. No part of his body was without great suffering. By reason of the contraction of his sinews, his limbs were stiff, much like those of a dead man. But after his death, his appearance was one of great beauty gleaming with a dazzling whiteness and giving joy to all who looked upon him. His limbs, which had been rigid, became marvellously soft and pliable, so that they would be turned this way and that, like those of a young child.

Therefore, brothers, bless the God of heaven and praise Him before all, for He has shown His mercy to us. Hold fast the memory of our father and brother, Francis, to the praise and glory of Him who made him so great among people and gave him glory in the sight of angels. Pray for him, as he begged us, and pray to him that God may make us share with him in his holy grace. Amen.

On the fourth day before the nones of October, the Lord's Day, at the first hour of the preceding night, our father and brother went to Christ. I am sure, dearest brothers, that when this letter reaches you, you will follow the footprints of the people of Israel as they mourned the loss of their great leaders, Moses and Aaron. Let us, by all means, give way to tears for we are deprived of so great a father.

Indeed, it is in keeping with our love for him that we rejoice with Francis. Still, it is right to mourn him! It belongs to us to rejoice with Francis, for he has not died but gone to the fair in heaven, taking with him a bag of money and will not return until the full moon.

At the same time it is right for us to weep for Francis. He who came and went among us, as did Aaron, who brought forth from his storehouse both the new and the old and comforted us in all our afflictions, has been taken from our midst. Now we are like orphans without a father. Yet, because it is written, "the poor depend on you and you are the helper of orphans" all of you, dearest brothers, must earnestly pray that, though this earthen jar has broken in the valley of Adam's children, the Most High Potter will deign to repair and restore another of similar honour, who will rule over the multitude of our race and go before us into battle like a true Maccabee.

And, because it is not useless to pray for the dead, pray to the Lord for his soul. Let each priest say three Masses, each cleric the Psalter, and the lay brothers five Our Fathers. Let the clerics also recite in common the vigil office. Amen.

Brother Elias, Sinner.

**Source:**

Francis of Assisi, The Founder. Early Documents Volume 2  
Edited by: Armstrong, Short & Hellmann  
Published: 2001

## A PEOPLES GOVERNMENT

By now the city was ready for its independence. The new situation in the city was not affected by the bull that on May 26, 1198, Innocent III directed to the Bishop of Assisi, Guido, confirming his ancient privileges and proposing a unification of the diverse ecclesiastical jurisdictions. The project, which would have put an end of age-old quarrels, did not succeed, primarily because of the solid opposition of the canons of San Rufino and the monks of Mount Subasio.

Beside, the distrust of the pope that had been demonstrated with the destruction of the imperial fortress was greatly accentuated when Innocent III showed a predilection for Perugia, going there in September of that same year of 1198 and staying for fifteen days. He left Perugia October 2, and in Todi issued a brief declaring that he was taking the city (Perugia) under his protection. Even though Assisi's desire to establish an independent government had thrown it against the emperor's man, Conrad, its political sympathy certainly remained imperial, if only because of its hatred of Perugia. In vain the imperious Bishop Guido fired off an interdict against all those who were opposing his plans to reclaim the old privileges. Those affected by it were little troubled; more than one person succeeded in removing himself from the penalties by swearing falsely that after having been excommunicated by the bishop, he had been blessed again by the Pope.

By now the development of the commune had been perfected in all necessary ways.

On December 9 of that same year we find the name of the first consul of the city, Bonbarone. He appears in the Church of San Rufino to act as an arbiter in a controversy involving claims of lands.

The opening phrases of the opinions of the imperial magistrates had all referred to the authority of the emperor. Now, between the people and the magistrates, there is no one but God. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. I, Bonbarone, its being my duty to become familiar with the controversy that has arisen between Giuliana on one side and Bernardo di Grasso on the other...."

The consul, forceful and self-confident, makes a judgement: *Ego autem hoc modo laudo* ("I recommend this as a remedy"). Let us look well at the face of this new man who speaks with such firmness, who has leapt from the revolution in the piazza to military and political command of the city. We shall at once recognise him as the future organiser of the Franciscan mission to the East, the future minister general of the Franciscan Order, the builder of the marvellous Basilica di San Francesco, the most intimate counsellor of the emperor, the man who was described by the chronicler Mariano as 'armed with so much wisdom and so much prudence that he was first among the men of his time, first among the Roman Curia, and much esteemed by the Curia of the Empire – Brother Elias.

His name, Bonbarone, reveals its noble origin. Perhaps he was among the nobles who moved into the city from the country and afterwards devoted themselves to trade (it is known for certain that he was born in a *castello* of the *comitato* of Assisi, probably Brittignano). He attended the University of Bologna. We cannot exclude the probability that before entering the Franciscan Order he was married and that the Guiduccio di Bonbarone who in 1246 was a witness in legal proceedings concerned with the sale of a house in the *contrada* of Saint' Ansuino (the legal paper is preserved in the Sacro Convento) may have been his son. In this case, given the custom of calling neighbours and residents of the same *contrada* as witnesses, we can suppose that

Elias's house stood in the Episcopal citadel, beside the gate of Sant' Antimo, in the precise place on which the houses of the Fiumi family were later built.

The notary Giovanni who drew up the principal papers of this important historical period declares that he writes *pro communi mandato domini Boni Baronis* ("under the authorization of *domini Bonbarone*").

**Source:**

Francis of Assisi

Author: Arnaldo Fortini

Translated by Helen Moak

## **THE CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO IN CORTONA**



Like the basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, even this church was constructed by Brother Elias in 1247 on an area called Bagno della Regina, which had been donated to him by the Commune. Notable remains of some Roman constructions, probably hot springs, existed on that piece of land. The church is Gothic in style but has been heavily remodelled especially in the 17th century. The impact of its masses and the grace of its original lines, however, are still intact. The

entry door and the large windows, which have recently been restored, are to be admired. Some manipulations concerned the painting on the walls, once embellished with famous frescoes, where Baroque altars have been placed. The large Gothic windows have been closed and the stone high altar has been replaced with a marble Baroque one created by Bernardino Radi (17th century), which contains a relic of the Holy Cross. Besides the Holy Cross, which was brought by Brother Elias from Constantinople, the church also preserves the tunic, an evangelistic manuscript, and a pillow. All these relics belonged to Saint Francis and have been preserved by Brother Elias, who called the saint "my mother", as we are told by Celano in the first biography of Saint Francis. On the wall on the right of the entrance there are the remains of a fresco attributed to Buffalmacco (16th century).



On the third altar there is the Immaculate Conception by Comodi (1609), while on the fourth the Miracle of the Mule by Cingoli (1597). In the chapel on the right of the apse there is a funerary monument dedicated to the first bishop of the diocese of Cortona, Ranieri Ubertini, who died in 1348. In the chorus we find the tomb of Brother Elias, the successor of Saint Francis as the leader of the order. In the third altar on the left wall there is a masterpiece by Pietro da Cortona (1597-1669): The Annunciation, one of the most beautiful paintings of the 17th century. Luca Signorelli was buried after his death in 1523 in the crypt below, which is no longer accessible as it was closed in the 17th century. The church and the monastery are still undergoing an extensive restoration work. Brother Dominic Basili, who is presently in charge of the complex, has written several publications about the history of the church and the life of Saint Francis and of his companion Elias, which can be read in this church.