Introduction

[1] Few contemporaries are unconvinced that health care and politics are interrelated. Health care services require significant resources, and, because of their humanitarian mission, also potentially elicit large bequests from benevolent donors. If these donations become munificent, what might start as a charitable service may, in the end, turn a profit. Once profitability is achieved, agents whose primary focus is other than charity might become interested in claiming “a piece of the pie.”

[2] We will observe the same basic dynamics between health care and politics with their interrelated complexities of charity and profit in the medieval world. In the middle ages, the
term “hospital/hospice” could refer to an institution that cared for the sick, a poorhouse, a rest home for the elderly, an orphanage, or a hostel for travelers. In any case, it was perceived, from the Christian perspective, as a religious house where God was served and thus was formally consecrated just like a chapel or church (Auge: 77-124). As early as the fourth century, Christian monasteries also provided healing services for their religious residents and, to a lesser degree, for their neighbors. Monastic rules mention these charitable services and remain our most significant source of information regarding the foundations of early western health care (Crislip: 103-18). Various monastic rules refer to the presence of female and male doctors, nurses, hospital administrators, pharmaceuticals, surgery, and psychological remedies (Crislip: 9-38).

[3] We know that in thirteenth-century Assisi, where the Franciscan movement was born, local hospitals existed at the time of Saints Francis and Clare. Francis, himself, distributed alms within a leper hospital that was located near the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in the valley below Assisi. The experience of meeting these lepers transformed Francis:

He moved to a hospice of lepers, taking with him a large sum of money. Calling the lepers together, he kissed the hand of each and gave them alms. When he left there, what before had been bitter, that is, to see and touch lepers, was turned into sweetness (Legend of the Three Companions IV: 11).

[4] In his Testament, Francis self-identifies the leper as the presence of Christ and the focal point of his conversion experience. Francis himself confirms that it was the lepers who were the immediate catalyst for his personal conversion and the Franciscan movement that followed.

The Lord taught me, Brother Francis, to begin doing penance in this way. When I was in sin, it was too bitter for me to see lepers. Then, the Lord himself led me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And 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 (The Testament of Saint Francis: 1-3).

[5] Clare, the first female follower of Francis, established a women’s monastery outside the walls of Assisi. We know from hagiographical sources and from testimony given at Clare’s process of canonization that the poor of the Assisi valley and of Monte Subasio came to Clare’s monastery seeking healing. One charming story is of a small boy named Mattiolo who had lodged a small pebble in his nose. Frenzied because no one could extricate the stone, Mattiolo’s father brought him to Clare. Clare made the sign of the cross over the child, and the pebble was immediately expelled. Others came needing a cure from blindness, tumors, deafness, fistulas, and laryngitis. Indeed, the witnesses who spoke of the life of Clare sometimes sound as though they are reading emergency room chartings (The Legend of Saint Clare 32-35).

[6] One particularly poignant story of persons coming to Clare’s Monastery of San Damiano for healing is an account of a mentally ill friar. Not knowing how to handle him, Francis sent Brother Stephen to Clare for healing. After Clare signed him with the cross, she permitted Stephen to sleep for a while in the place where she usually prayed. When he awoke, the
sisters fed him, and he left the monastery cured (Clare’s Process of Canonization 2: 15). In another case, while he was with the crusaders in the east, Francis developed a painful eye disease. Instead of leaving him with the brothers at Santa Maria degli Angeli, the friars transported him to San Damiano where he stayed for fifty days in a small lean-to made of mats attached to a wall of Clare’s monastery (The Assisi Compilation 83). There Clare’s sisters were able to nurse him with food prepared by the sisters and Clare’s knowledge of herbs—used to cure all sorts of medieval maladies—grown in the monastic garden. In short, the very beginnings of the Franciscan story are full of vignettes regarding the sick and their dependence upon Franciscans for their care.

After the pontificate of Innocent III, there was increasing papal resistance to the Franciscan notion of living without guaranteed income, i.e., taking literally “go, sell everything you possess, and give it to the poor” (Matthew 19:21). Monasteries of women without adequate endowment were a particular concern in that the women might expect relief from ecclesial authorities or might engender scandal if their hunger drove them from their convents to beg publically on the streets. While the papal office progressively engaged in a regime of repression against religious dissidents who by and large favored a poor, humble church, powers north of the Alps, who gained nothing from papal taxes except debt, increasing oversight, and political interference, were sympathetic to this gospel return to the Poor Christ (Freed).

It is no surprise, therefore, to see that Franciscan friars in northern Europe found widespread acclaim of their mendicant lifestyle. Commoners, nobles, and royals alike supported their message to attend to the needs of the poor. Inspired by the vision of Francis, Elizabeth of Hungary, for instance, distributed royal resources to the masses suffering from pestilence and built a twenty-eight bed hospital below her Wartburg castle where she personally attended the sick. After being widowed at twenty when her husband, Ludwig IV, died en route to the Sixth Crusade, Elizabeth moved to Marburg, where she spent her hard-won widow’s inheritance to build the Hospital of Saint Francis. She founded this hospital for the care of lepers and served them herself until her untimely death at the age of twenty-four. In 1234, her hospital was assigned to the Teutonic Order who erected a huge church at her tomb, which became a place of popular, medieval pilgrimage. Many claimed to have been healed at this tomb (Atzbach: 93-105; Moritz: 112). Using these healings as evidence, Elizabeth was canonized just four years after her death with the full support of both Emperor Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX, and became the most popular female saint of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Klaniczay: 202-203; Elm: 189-202).

A Dowry Given

Elizabeth’s cousin, Agnes of Prague, was born in 1211, the daughter of King Přemysl Otakar I of Bohemia and Queen Constance of Hungary. After a series of unsuccessful betrothals, Emperor Frederick II asked her hand in marriage. Appealing to her brother, King Wenceslas I for support, Agnes rejected Frederick’s proposal in order to join the Franciscan movement. The attraction of the Franciscan ideal reached Bohemia probably during the 1220’s, and given her royal lineage, Agnes’s religious affection shaped both royal and papal politics (Felskau 2010: 21-42). She had heard the reports of Clare’s life in the Monastery of San Damiano from Franciscan friars who had come to Prague and she had the example of
her famous cousin, Elizabeth of Hungary. Rather than pursue the imperial engagement, she
decided upon a Franciscan vocation (Felskau 2008: 77-214).

[10] But joining the Franciscan movement was no easy task for a woman of Agnes’s caliber.
She possessed a royal dowry and would need to “sell everything, and give the money to the
poor.” To do this, she followed the example of her cousin, Elizabeth, and began the building
of the Hospital of Saint Francis in the vicinity of the Prague castle that subsequently became
the Old Town. She endowed this hospital with her own dowry, but she purposefully left her
monastery that she was also constructing, unendowed, designating it as Franciscan
monastery (Mueller 2001: 211-12). Her brother and mother also added substantial
contributions to the hospital endowment. With these donations legally documented, Agnes’s
brother, King Wenceslas I, proceeded to exempt both the monastery and hospital from royal
taxation on March 21, 1234:

Therefore, in order to remove any trace of ambiguity, let both the present
generation of people and generations to come in Christ know that we accept
into our royal protection the enclosure built at Prague in honor of Saint
Francis and the hospital connected with it (Actiones humanae 65-66).

[11] Writing to Agnes on August 30, 1234, Gregory noted that Agnes’s monastery and the
Hospital of Saint Francis had received tax exemption both from the royal family and the
bishop of Prague (Sincerum animi tui, 134-35). Affirming his papal approval of Agnes’s
project, Gregory sent another letter to the Christian faithful of Bohemia and Poland, urging
them under the auspices of indulgency, “to go to the Monastery of Saint Francis in Prague to
entreat from the Lord forgiveness of sins in humility of spirit” (Quia sensus hominis: 136).

[12] Meanwhile, news of Agnes’s May 1234 entrance into the Franciscan monastery in
Prague had reached Assisi. Although she did not know Agnes personally, Clare wrote to
Agnes congratulating her on her Franciscan choice and encouraged her to remain fast in the
ideal of Franciscan poverty. For Clare, Agnes had not only made an admirable spiritual
choice, but also a smart business deal – with the rewards, of course, being promised in
heaven. Recalling the biblical story of the rich young man who desired a life of perfection,
Clare reminded Agnes that anyone who gives everything to the poor for the sake of Christ is
promised the hundredfold.

It is indeed a great and praiseworthy exchange:
to give up the temporal for the everlasting,
to merit the heavenly rather than the earthly
to receive a hundredfold instead of one,
to have a happy, eternal life (Mueller 2010: 263).

[13] With both papal and Franciscan acclaim, all seemed to be in accord with Agnes’s plans.
On October 2, 1234, Agnes’s brother, Prêmysl, margrave of Moravia, donated even more
property to the Hospital of Saint Francis. Agnes’s brother, King Wenceslas gave this gift his
legal approval (Cum debeat principalem: 157-58).

[14] Meanwhile, Gregory IX was very eager, perhaps overly eager, to move forward with the
canonization proceedings of Elizabeth of Hungary. On October 11, 1234, he sent the
following catalyst to those facilitating the process:
Lest we can be accused if we allow a light worthy of being set on a candlestick to be hid under a bushel, especially when, through clear heavenly signs, it is known to send forth rays of great clarity, by apostolic documents we order your discretion, by enjoining you in virtue of obedience that within five months of its undertaking you send the results of the inquiry about the miracles of Elizabeth, the Lady Landgrave of Thuringia of blessed memory, which we ordered to be made through our venerable brother the Archbishop of Mainz and Master Conrad of Marburg of good memory, to our presence by trusted and experienced messengers, as the outstanding nature of such a task ought to be entrusted to their merits (Nos possimus argui: 138-39).

[15] With excitement about Elizabeth’s canonization in the air, the Bohemian royal family was inspired to even greater generosity. On February 12, 1335, Agnes’s mother, Constance, gave a significant number of estates to the hospital endowment. She donated this bequest on the condition that she was to be permitted “to act as steward of produce until the end of our life, so that we may be able to do with its goods what seems best to us according to God” (Noverit tam praeens: 159). There is no doubt, in Agnes’s case, that the royal family was determined to play a considerable role in the success of Agnes’s hospital; a hospital which at that stage was following constitutions established by the Franciscan General Giovanni de Carpine (Vota devotorum ecclesie: 231).

A Dowry Returned

[16] Yet, even though he mouthed the virtues of Elizabeth’s poverty, Gregory IX was not happy with the situation Agnes was creating after Elizabeth’s example. Concurrent with Agnes’s foundation, Gregory was busy in Italy frantically endowing monasteries, some even from his own pocket, in an attempt to stabilize the finances of women religious (Alberzoni 2006: 145-178). Having a royal woman from the Kingdom of Bohemia in an unendowed monastery was a dangerous precedent and a canonical nightmare. Gregory wanted none of it (Mueller 2006: 63-66).

[17] It was just before the May 28, 1235 canonization of Elizabeth of Hungary in Perugia, that Gregory revealed his concern. On May 18, 1235, a letter arrived at the Prague monastery. After praising Agnes’s choice “to follow Christ the pauper as paupers in supreme poverty,” Gregory proceeded to challenge Agnes’s Franciscan vision (Cum relicta seculi: 156). His praise of Franciscan poverty, which undermined the radical nature of this poverty, served Gregory well as a propagandist tool that appealed to lay people who were enamored by the notion of apostolic poverty, and at the same time, softened the radical nature of this poverty with his own legislative practicality. Gregory could embrace an ideal of Franciscan poverty as a simple and virtuous monastic lifestyle, but he was not at all interested in promoting monasteries that were fiscally poor. Agnes had the resources of an endowment equal to her rank, and the primary purpose of this endowment – even if it did charitable work on the side – needed to be the solvency of the royal monastery.

Therefore, extolling with worthy praises to the Lord your pious and holy proposal, which was divinely inspired in you, and following it up with favorable actions by agreeing to your requests, we have decided that the Hospital of Saint Francis situated next to your monastery, which you,
daughter and abbess built on land of the Roman church, is to be conceded to that monastery with its appurtenances forever. Also, we order that the same hospital with all its goods cannot be separated from the monastery by any means or plan. Moreover, let the income of its possessions fall to the use of yourselves and those who succeed you, always recognizing the authority of the apostolic see (Cum relicta seculi: 156).

[18] With the endowment once again under the monastery, Gregory was more than willing to affirm any further increase in the monastic endowment. Even though both Agnes’s brother and mother specifically earmarked their properties for the hospital endowment, Gregory blatantly ignored their intent. On May 18, 1235, the very date that Agnes had received Cum relicta seculi, a letter was also addressed to the rector of the Hospital of Saint Francis in Prague. Because the brothers who worked in the hospital would benefit from the hospital endowment, Agnes had established a hospitaller brotherhood, rather than a Franciscan brotherhood, to minister to the needs of the hospital patients (Mueller 2010, 78). In his papal letter, Gregory IX affirmed that the donation of Agnes’s brother, Prĕmysl, had received papal confirmation (Filius summi Regis: 156-58). A second May 18, 1235 letter addressed to these same hospitaller brothers recognized the donation of Queen Constance (Filius Summi Regis: 158-59). Although these properties had been given to the hospital, with a papal slight of hand Gregory confirmed them as part of the monastery endowment.

[19] The direct connection between Elizabeth of Hungary and her hospital project, and Agnes of Prague and her hospital is, nevertheless, corroborated by Pope Gregory IX himself. In a June 7, 1235 letter to Queen Beatrice of Castile and Leon, a cousin of Frederick II, Gregory speaks of Agnes of Bohemia:

[He] also intoxicated with the cup of this vessel the virgin Agnes, handmaid of Christ, your sister born of the king of Bohemia, in whose young age and harsh circumstances we experience the signs of heavenly conversion. In a similar fashion to you, fleeing the offered summit of imperial heights, she [St. Elizabeth], advanced without delay to meet her spouse, joining the chorus of holy virgins with their lighted lamps (Jesus Filius Sirach: 164-67).

[20] Although affirming Agnes’s spiritual connection with Elizabeth, Gregory IX had no intention of approving the absolute poverty that defined her Franciscan vocation. It was good to build a hospital for the poor with royal funding, but, in Gregory’s mind, the monastery was to be the primary beneficiary and administrator of the royal endowment. Gregory outlines the liberality of the endowment in question in a July 25, 1235 letter to Agnes’s monastery.

We have decided that the items under discussion ought to be clearly and specifically described as being that place, in which the above monastery is located, with that hospital with all its appurtenances: the estate of Hloubětín, with all the small estates pertaining thereto, namely Humene and Hnidošice, the estate of Borotice and Dražetice: the estate of Rybník, with all its appurtenances; the estate of Rakšice, with all its appurtenances, and your other possessions, with fields, vineyards, lands, woods, properties held in usufruct, and pastures, with all other freedoms and their immunities
regarding forest and field, waters and mills, and streets and paths (*Prudentibus Virginibus*: 144-47).

[21] If Gregory had his way, Agnes would own more as a poor, Franciscan nun – in communion with the other sisters of her monastery, of course – than she had possessed as a royal princess living in the world. Even more poignantly, Gregory was undermining the very nature of Agnes’s religious vocation. Agnes truly understood the gospel mandate: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven” (Matthew 19:21), to be a sort of divine insurance policy. Her way of perfection, her religious life, was to sell what she had and to give it to the poor in return for heavenly treasure. Gregory’s system was less focused on the eschatological and more concerned with the temporal. For him, the poor could be cared for as a secondary receiver of the monastic endowment, but Agnes would keep and administrate the money. This way, if the Prague monastery fell upon hard times, or if the begging friars proved fickle, the sisters could provide for themselves.

**A Dowry Given Again**

[22] Given this new state of affairs, Agnes wrote to Clare begging for advice. Although Clare’s second letter to Agnes is undated, we know that it had to be written after May 18, 1235, the date that Gregory endowed Agnes’s monastery. Unfortunately, Agnes’s letter to Clare has not been found, but Clare’s response gives ample evidence of its content.

[23] Clare states the purpose of her letter at the end of the salutation, wishing that “Agnes may always live in the utmost poverty” (Mueller 2010: 265). According to Clare, Agnes was to remember her vocation call and not deviate from the Lord’s call even if the pope himself tempted her. Rather, she was to proceed as she had always done, ignoring the papal advice but doing this without causing scandal.

> What you hold, continue to hold.
> What you do, keep doing and do not stop.
> But with swift pace, nimble step, and feet that
do not stumble so that even your walking
does not raise any dust,
go forward tranquilly, joyfully, briskly, and cautiously
along the path of happiness.
Trust in no one and agreeing with no one
insofar as he [Pope Gregory IX] might want to dissuade you
from pursuing your founding purpose
or might place a stumbling block in your way,
preventing you, in that perfection with which
the Spirit of the Lord has called you,
from fulfilling your vows to the Most High (cited in Mueller 2010: 265-66).

[24] Even with a papal decree, enacting the demands of a papal document depended upon the will of the royal family. While the pope might insist on his rights by placing Agnes’s monastery and hospital under interdict, he would, in doing so, run afoot of the Bohemian royal family. Clare’s advice was to ignore the pope’s orders and to continue as before, with as
little “dust” as possible. To fortify her position, Clare advised Agnes to garner the support of the Franciscan minister general, Brother Elias:

   Now concerning this, so that you may walk more tranquilly along the way of the Lord’s commands, follow the advice of our venerable father, our Brother Elias, minister general. Prefer his advice to the advice of others and consider it more precious to you than any gift.
   Indeed, if someone tells you something else or suggests anything to you that may hinder your perfection or seems contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, still, do not follow his advice.
   Instead, poor virgin, embrace the Poor Christ (cited in Mueller 2010: 266).

[25] According to Clare, Agnes is following a life of perfection because she has fulfilled the gospel mandate: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give the money to the poor” (Matthew 19:21). If anyone, even the pope, suggests that she should do something that undermines this vocation, especially if its primary requirement to “sell everything and give the money to the poor” is compromised, Clare takes the unusual step of advising Agnes to respect him but not to follow his advice. When Christ speaks in the gospels, according to Clare, even the pope must respect his authority.

A Dowry Given Again

[26] It seems that Agnes did speak with Brother Elias as Clare suggested, but she also garnered, not surprisingly, the support of her brother, King Wenceslas I. The royal family who had so carefully helped Agnes organize the hospital and monastery according to the Franciscan ideal were a bit miffed. On February 5, 1237, Wenceslas sent a letter to Gregory IX concerning the matter. Although camouflaged with well-mannered, courtly flourishes, Wenceslas’s message is clear. The pope, if he wished to enjoy the loyalty of the European royal families associated with the Bohemian crown, was to respect and comply with the wishes of Agnes, his blood sister. After bearing witness that the pope had never before had reason to snub the integrity of Agnes’s praiseworthy requests or to question the worthiness of her divine vocation, Wenceslas wrote:

   After lengthy deliberation, I solemnly vow and promise to God that from this action I will sincerely wish to be always more ready and available for you and the Holy Roman Church in every necessity or opportunity, both public and private. This will be particularly true if you will have decided with your customary kindness that the petitions of your above-mentioned special daughter and my most-beloved blood sister, which she herself has decided to offer to you now, ought to be admitted into the chapel of your kind hearing, knowing this to be sure and in every way established that, since you give satisfaction to her prayers, which without doubt are pleasing to God because they also come from him, you receive me, as I have said, with all my power
[27] This political pressure could not be ignored, even though the pope was not pleased with Agnes’s politicking. Nevertheless, he modified the prescriptions for the monastery of Prague, giving it the so-called, “privilege of poverty” – a privilege that permitted a Franciscan monastery to exist without mandatory endowments. In the reissue of the monastery’s papal confirmation, Gregory linked the monastery at Prague with the “Institute of Enclosed Nuns of San Damiano in Assisi” (Prudentibus Virginibus 1237: 215-16). This document firmly aligned Agnes’s monastery with Clare and the sisters of San Damiano who had also, after painful negotiations, obtained the rare, papal privilege to live without monastic endowments.

[28] In accordance with this privilege, the brotherhood that Agnes had established to administer and work in the Hospital of Saint Francis also received a papal letter that reassigned the royal endowment to the hospital. Since they were to benefit from the endowment, the master and the brothers of this hospital were given, not the Rule of Saint Francis as this would have required a lack of endowment according to the original Franciscan standards, but the Rule of Saint Augustine (Omnipotens Deus: 216-17). A first step towards the establishment of the hospital as an independent institution within the existing laws pertaining to clerical, religious life was accomplished. It was the brotherhood, not the sisters of Agnes’s monastery who were to manage this endowment, although no doubt the brothers and their master, Albert of Sternberg, were well aware of the watchful eyes of the Přemyslid royal family whose sprawling castle was perched on the hill above them. One can imagine how the system of checks and balances that Agnes had worked out to benefit the poor would, even if stressed by disaster, come to the assistance of the truly poor. In times of stress, the system was still designed to care for the needs of the hospital patients. If the wealthy families of the monastic nuns fled town, the sisters would suffer more dire consequences than the needy in the hospital – although it was no doubt presumed that the sisters would always have someone who would provide them with the essentials.

[29] Gregory, however, continued to envision the hospital’s future according to his own ambitions and detached from the foundress’ vision. Although on April 15, 1238 he permitted the sisters of Prague to leave their monastery unendowed, Gregory wrote only that they could not “be forced to receive unwillingly any possessions in the future” (Pia credulitate tenentes: 236-37). This way, if the sisters came to their senses, according to Gregory’s mind, they could reverse course without the embarrassment of having to admit their folly to the Holy See. Gregory also affirmed that Agnes had, for the second time, renounced her dowry: “We do so having received your free resignation of the Hospital of Saint Francis of the Diocese of Prague that was conceded with all its legal rights and appurtenances to you, and through you to your monastery, by the apostolic see” (Pia credulitate tenentes: 236-37).

[30] This re-gifting of the royal endowment is confirmed further in Gregory’s April 27, 1238 letter to the master and brothers of the Hospital of Saint Francis in Prague. Here Gregory succinctly summarized the business dealings to this point. Notice that he now ties Agnes’s monastery to Clare’s Monastery of San Damiano in Assisi – something that he had been determined not to do.
Our dearest daughter in Christ, Agnes, the blood sister of the illustrious King of Bohemia, and the convent of enclosed handmaids of Christ of the Monastery of Saint Francis in Prague of the Order of San Damiano, have humbly requested from us that we take care to receive the free resignation of the Hospital of Saint Francis of that same place, which the apostolic see once gave to them, and through them to the above monastery with all its legal rights and appurtenances (Carissima in Christo: 240).

[31] A couple of days before, the pope advised the administration of the hospital for a second time on April 22nd, when he assigned the Prague provincial and prior of the local Dominican province as official visitators of the hospital. As visitators these Dominican superiors were commissioned to revise and adjust the existing Franciscan regulations (Vota devotorum ecclesie: 231). This ordered affinity of the Dominicans and hospitals of lay origin can be observed also in other cases, especially when hospitalers were targeted to become autonomous orders as in the case of the brothers of the Holy Cross in the Belgian-Netherland region (Kempkens: 41-43).

[32] One would think that the issue was settled with these proceedings, but Gregory was still bothered by the atypical status of Agnes’s monastery. He would impose consequences and attempt still other strategies to bring Agnes in line. A series of letters followed in May 1238 that informed Agnes in no uncertain terms that although she had won a victory, Gregory was not at all convinced or happy about her fiscal policy. Gregory was working hard to endow feminine monasteries to ensure their solvency. Although noble, directly assisting the poor, was not, in Gregory’s opinion, to undercut prudent fiscal management.

[33] One interesting strategy that Gregory attempted was to change the diet of the sisters in the Prague monastery. In Prague, as in Assisi, the sisters depended on the Franciscan begging brothers whose mendicancy provided food for their table. Although in a pinch, the sisters were undoubtedly assured that the royal family would come to their aid, Agnes was legislating for the future when the security of her monastery might become more precarious. Medieval politics, especially in eastern lands caught in the crosshairs between the Germans, Mongols, and Italians, were always uncertain even during good times. On May 5, 1238, Gregory wrote to the sisters of Agnes’s monastery permitting them to eat dairy products twice a week (Freeman). They could also enjoy dairy foods on certain feast days (Pia meditatione pensantes: 240-41). The significance of this action might be lost on readers of the developed world. During a class on this topic, I recently had a Chinese student who instinctively responded to Agnes’s problem regarding the question of milk-fat. In her words, “You couldn’t have the brothers beg milk from a poor farmer who needed the fat to feed his wife and children. His cow was his life!” In an age obsessed with “no fat,” it is hard for us to appreciate the need for fat to preserve human life. One Sudanese woman once told me that her family was so poor they used their last drops of oil (another form of fat) and prepared to die. If the sisters were given milk products as a result of the brothers’ labors, this certainly would have been a wonderful gift. But, as Gregory legislated, if the sisters expected to have milk products twice a week, this would have required landed endowments to raise the animals to provide such an extravagant, medieval luxury. Milk twice a week was beyond the brothers’ ability to beg. Such a diet would have required animals that needed land/estates for
grazing – exactly what Agnes was foregoing in offering her dowry to the poor who were served in the hospital she had founded.

[34] Agnes was extremely upset with Gregory’s incursion, no doubt because she understood it as another attempt to force her to accept endowments, but also because he clearly intended to disrupt the peace of Agnes’s community. Agnes again wrote to Clare asking for advice and requesting the directions that Francis had given to Clare in regard to the Franciscan table. Clare, noting that Agnes had obtained her privilege of poverty, encouraged her to be peaceful. The pope could knock himself out legislating delicacies for the sisters’ table, but if the sisters cherished their vocational poverty, they would be satisfied with the table of the poor (Mueller 2010: 267-69). Just because something is permitted, doesn’t mean that one has to do it.

[35] In a second letter, dated May 9, 1238, Gregory IX criticized Agnes for her desire to follow the poverty of Francis so literally. In Gregory’s opinion, Francis’s obsession with poverty was noble, but also naive and even immature. Rather than be so fundamentally concerned with the following of Francis, Agnes was to refocus her energies on obeying the will of God (De conditoris omnium: 241-42). Pursing this line of reasoning further, a third papal letter, dated May 11, 1238, admonished Agnes to be “ever eager and ready for the cultivation of obedience for the glory of him who was obedient to the Father even to the time of his death on the cross” (Philippians 2:8). Agnes was to forget the admonitions of Francis, and follow the dictates of the papal office:

Therefore, since we, though unworthy, have been instituted by God as the father of the community of the faithful, and taking this inheritance to heart, that with God’s help through the office of our service the salvation of souls is able to flourish, you ought to respect our admonitions with a devoted mind and perform them with the efficient zeal of diligence (Angelis gaudium: 156).

[36] As though he sensed that Agnes would undoubtedly oppose him yet again, Gregory attempted to transcribe his mandate into a religious sentiment that he felt Agnes might be able to hear. Agnes was concerned about being a Franciscan. She desired to follow Saint Francis, and therefore the Poor Christ, in poverty. Gregory, on the other hand, wanted her to live a virtuous monastic life, focused on excellence in prayer. To encourage her in this more traditional direction, he needed Agnes to realize that he indeed understood the origins of her Franciscan vocation:

As you know, daughter of blessing and grace, when we were performing the duties of a lesser office, our beloved daughter in Christ, Clare, the abbess of the Monastery of San Damiano in Assisi, and certain other women, who were devoted to the Lord, put away the vanity of the world and chose to serve him under an observance of a religious life. Blessed Francis gave them a sip of milk as a way of life, as this fit them, newborns as they were, better than solid food (Angelis gaudium: 156).

[37] One can almost imagine the gasp of sisters of Agnes’s monastery as Gregory’s letter insulting Francis and his instructions was read aloud in the refectory. Yet, even more
devastating news followed. Agnes would receive her privilege of poverty, but Gregory roundly rejected a Franciscan constitution that she had proposed, which would have legally identified her monastery as Franciscan. Not only were the sisters to suffer the belittlement of Francis’s wisdom, but Gregory officially absolved Agnes and her sisters from what they perceived as their Franciscan obligation:

Since a vow does not seem to weaken someone who has exchanged it for a better one, we absolve you and your sisters from the observance of the aforesaid formula through the fullness of the power granted to us by the Lord, and both wish and command that you accept with filial reverence that Rule sent to you under our own seal, which must be observed in your monastery for all future times (Angelis gaudium: 156).

[38] Agnes and her sisters were to accept the Rule of Saint Benedict and Gregory’s constitutions. Gregory’s concession, for the time being, was the privilege of poverty. In other matters, Agnes was simply to be obedient and entertain no further worries about the integrity of her vocation. In the official letter imposing the Rule of Saint Benedict and his own constitutions upon the sisters of Prague, Gregory wrote:

It is our hope that through the example and imitation of those who have served the Lord without complaint and have completed the beginning of their holy way of life by the most happy means of blessed perseverance, your form of religious life, which has been both constructed in Christ and founded on his Holy Temple, may be able to grow in the Lord and happily reach the reward of a heavenly invitation by following the footsteps of the saints and traveling on the right course (Cum omnis vera religio: 115).

[39] Although Agnes was unsuccessful in her negotiation of a Rule for Franciscan women—a later attempt after the rise of Pope Innocence IV to the papal throne in 1243 was likewise of no success (Polc: 48-55) – she helped paved the way for Clare of Assisi to eventually obtain the papal seal on such a rule. The Rule of Saint Clare, as this Rule eventually came to be called, was eagerly adopted after Clare’s death by Agnes and the sisters of the Prague monastery (Mueller 2010: 275-85; Felskau 2008: 302-22). At the very heart of this rule, Clare placed the instructions that Saint Francis had given to Clare: the “sip of infant’s milk,” which sustained both Clare and Agnes in their insistence that the dowries of wealthy women who wished to follow the vision of Francis be given directly to the poor.

Bibliography

Alberzoni, Maria P.


**Religion, Health, and Healing**

**Actiones humanae** (March 21, 1234)


**Angelis gaudium**


**The Assisi Compilation** [Compilatio Assisiensis]


**Auge, Oliver**


**Atzbach, Rainer**


**Brunacci, Aldo**


**Carissima in Christo**


**Clare’s Letters to Agnes**


**Clare’s Process of Canonization** [Il Processo di Canonizzazione di Santa Chiara d’Assisi]


**Crislip, Andrew T.**


**Cum deceat principalem**

Religion, Health, and Healing

*Cum omnis vera religio*

*Cum relicta seculi*

*De conditoris omnium*

Elm, Kasper

Felskau, Christian-Frederik


*Filius summi Regis*

*Filius Summi Regis*

Freed, John B.

Freeman, Gerard

*Jesus Filius Sirach*
Kempkens, Holger

Klaniczay, Gábor

The Legend of Saint Clare [Legenda Sanctae Clarae]

The Legend of the Three Companions [Legenda trium sociorum]

Lorenz, Willy

Moritz, Werner

Mueller, Joan

Nos possimus argui

Noverit tam præsens

Omnipotens Deus

Pia credulitate tenentes
Pia meditazione pensantes

Pole, Jaroslav

Primum quidem excellentissime

Prudentibus Virginitibus 1235

Prudentibus Virginitibus 1237

Quia sensus hominis

Sincerum animi tui

Testament of Saint Francis [Testamentum]

Vota devotorum ecclesie 1238