

# THE SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

## Lecture 4

### FRANCIS, THE FOUNDER [PART I]

The period following the publication of the Papal Bull *Quo elongati* (28<sup>th</sup> September 1230) is marked by a rapid progress in the Order on all fronts. The majority of the Order began to settle in large houses in the towns and cities. Conventual churches were being built and gradually would receive the same privileges of the churches of the secular clergy. The Order was present in all major centres of learning in Europe, and friars could be seen attending lectures at Bologna, Oxford and Paris. The missionary zeal of the Order helped it expand in all the regions of Europe, and in the eastern regions of the Mediterranean, including the Far East. Papal letters of recommendation were being sent to all bishops, to allow the friars to build houses, churches, preach and exercise their apostolic ministry under papal jurisdiction, with the exemption from the local bishop's jurisdiction. The mitigations on the strict observance of the Rule were helping the friars to make increasing use of their "spiritual friends" in acquiring the alms necessary not only for indispensable means of life, but also for the needs of the apostolate and of studies.

The generalate of brother Elias of Cortona (1232-39) marked a particular thrust in this direction. It also brought about, however, a sense of unease in a good number of friars, who were preoccupied that the Order was moving too far away from Francis's original intentions in the Rule. Within the community of the Order there were increasing numbers of brothers, known as "zelanti", who were longing for a more simple way of life according to the pattern of the primitive brotherhood. This need became more urgent after the deposition of Elias in 1239, and with the gradual process of clericalisation of the Order which started during the generalate of Haymo of Faversham in 1240.

In this period, we have seen that the Franciscan Sources give prominence to Francis as the Saint. Thomas of Celano, Julian of Speyer, Henri d'Avranches, portrayed Francis as the new Saint, at a time when his tomb became a famous shrine upon which Gregory IX had constructed a magnificent basilica. The development of the liturgical cult towards Francis was the dominant feature of the first twenty or so years of the Order following the death of the founder in 1226.

From 1240 onwards, a new need was being felt in the Order, namely that of having a solid basis to continue living the Gospel values of Francis of Assisi within the changing times and circumstances of the Order. The emphasis now began to shift upon Francis as the Founder of his Order. In this period, the direct witness of the companions who lived with Francis, and who were soon going to die, was important to all the new comers who had never known Francis personally. It was paramount to conserve the written memories of the companions as a direct link to St. Francis, since Thomas of Celano's *Life of St. Francis* was, after all, an incomplete work.

Within this period, which goes roughly from 1240 to 1276, we shall be considering some of the most important Franciscan Sources of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, including *The Anonymous of Perugia*, *The Legend of the Three Companions*, *The Assisi Compilation*, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano, *The Treatise of Miracles* by Thomas of Celano, and the *Major Life of St. Francis* by St. Bonaventure.

### *The Anonymous of Perugia*

The Legend commonly known by the name *Anonymous of Perugia* (AP) has the title: “The Beginning or Founding of the Order and the Deeds of Those Friars Minor Who Were the First Companions of Blessed Francis in Religion.”

Until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the AP was to be found in a unique manuscript in the friary of San Francesco al Prato in Perugia. This manuscript was subsequently lost when the newly born state of Italy annexed many friaries. In 1381 there was, at the library of the Sacro Convento in Assisi, a manuscript which contained the title *De Inceptione Ordinis*. This could well have been the AP, which in Latin has the title: *De inceptione vel fundamento Ordinis et actibus illorum Fratrum Minorum qui fuerunt primi in Religione et socii Beati Francisci*.

During the medieval period, and right up to the modern era, the AP was not known very well, and it remained a very “local” Legend, linked to the figure of brother Giles, who seems to have a certain prominence in the Legend. In fact, the codex of Perugia, in which the AP was found, contained other well-known texts referring to the life of brother Giles (*Vita II Beati Aegidii*, *Dicta Beati Aegidii*, *Anonymus Perusinus*, *Miracula Beati Aegidii*).

The efforts of modern scholars to arrive at the composition of the text of the AP all point to the environment of Assisi where this Legend was soon welcomed in the codex of the library of the Sacro Convento, together with the *Life of Blessed Giles of Assisi*, and which was copied during the 15<sup>th</sup> century by a friar, in order to be kept at the friary of San Francesco al Prato in Perugia, the same place where the body of brother Giles was buried and venerated.

In 1671 the Bollandist Daniel Van Papenbroch asked for a transcription of the codex of Perugia for the sake of presenting the sources relating to brother Giles. The reading of the manuscript proved difficult, since it was riddled with abbreviations. According to this scholar, the text could have been part of the Sources coming from brother Leo’s pen. The first scholar to give the title *Anonymous of Perugia* was Suyskens, another Bollandist.

One of the problems which presented itself immediately to Suyskens was the very close parallelism between the AP and the *Legend of the Three Companions*. According to this scholar the AP does not necessarily depend upon the L3C, but rather on its direct sources, that is, the protagonists of the events which it narrates. The AP was destined to

remain at the margins of the “Franciscan Question”, since it was not given great importance until fairly recently. The AP was often studied in direct relation with, and in dependence upon, the L3C.

In 1902 the Bollandist Van Ortroy presented a critical edition of the AP. A more recent critical edition is that of Lorenzo Di Fonzo, “L’Anonimo Perugino tra le fonti francescane del secolo XIII. Rapporti letterari e testo critico,” *Miscellanea Franciscana* 72 (1972) 117-483.

The author of the AP could have been a certain brother John of Perugia, who was a confessor and disciple of brother Giles. Some scholars had proposed brother Leo, because of what the prologue says: “I, who saw their deeds, listened to their words, and also became their disciple”, with reference to Francis and the first brothers. Scholars like Pierre Beguin and Giovanni Miccoli place the composition of the AP between 4<sup>th</sup> March 1240 (date of the death of brother Sylvester, whom AP 13 mentions), and 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1241 (date of the death of Gregory IX, of whom the AP speaks as if he were still alive).

The text of the AP is certainly a faithful reconstruction of the life of the primitive Franciscan fraternity. It stands out distinctly for the originality of its narrative details. The figure of Francis does not predominate. The Legend is rather concerned with the group of the first friars in the typical Assisi surroundings. The conversion of Francis has the aim of pointing at the real motives of the author of the AP, namely, the development of the *Religio fratrum* (the group of the first brothers) into an established *Ordo fratrum* (religious Order of brothers). Whereas the L3C gives a certain importance to the figure of Francis as the founder of the Order, the AP is more concerned with the role of the first brothers. The Legend concludes with the final approval of the Rule by Honorius III and the institution of the Cardinal Protector of the Order. There is a final chapter regarding the death, miracles and canonisation of St. Francis.

### *The Legend of the Three Companions*

During the General Chapter of Genova, on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1244, the Minister General Crescentius of Iesi “directed to all the brothers to send him in writing whatever they could truly recall about the life, miracles, and prodigies of blessed Francis” (Arnald of Sarrant, *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals*, *Analecta Franciscana* III,262).

Among the companions of St. Francis who answered the Minister General’s requests we find brothers Leo, Rufino and Angelo, who sent him a letter from the hermitage of Greccio, dated 11<sup>th</sup> August 1246, in which they stated that they were sending their written memories, as well as those of other companions of St. Francis, namely, brothers Filippo, Illuminato, Masseo, Giles, Bernard, and a certain brother John, companion of brother Giles. This Letter of Greccio, which has been transmitted in many manuscripts together with the L3C, is considered an authentic document which throws light upon the formation of many Franciscan Sources of the period. At the same time, its relation to the documentary material which the companions sent, and which is lost at least

in its original form, has been the source of many problems and discussions linked to the “Franciscan Question.”

Although Crescentius had asked for the writing of “the life, miracles, and prodigies of blessed Francis,” brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo make the following statement: “We do not intend merely to relate miracles, which demonstrate, but do not cause sanctity. Our intention is to point out some striking aspects of his holy manner of life and the intention of his pious desires, for the praise and glory of almighty God and of the holy father Francis, and for the edification of those who desire to follow in his footsteps.”

The companions also state that they did not intend to write a “Legend”, since other Legends had already been written about St. Francis. They were rather sending a *florilegium* (field of flowers), in which they sent their memories not in a chronological sequence, and in which they omitted those facts which the official legends had already described in an accurate way. Their aim is clear in the words they address to Crescentius: “If you deem it expedient, you may insert these few things we have written into the other legends. For we believe that if these things had been known to the venerable men who wrote those legends, they would in no way have passed them by.”

These expressions show that the companions knew about the official Legends of 1C, LJS, and VL. The Three Companions, therefore, had the intention of producing new material for the life of St. Francis. At the same time they did not intend to write a Legend. So, how come the Letter of Greccio is often found in conjunction with the L3C? Can we say that the L3C is the famous *florilegium* of Greccio, which is supposed to have been lost? The companions also state that they did not intend to follow a chronological sequence of events. But the L3C does follow a chronological sequence.

The L3C was studied for the first by Luke Wadding and then by Suyskens in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, upon a manuscript belonging to the Friars Minor Recollects of Louvain. Another manuscript was discovered in the Codex Vatican 7339. This manuscript does not contain the Letter of Greccio. Other manuscripts continued to come to light, among which the Codex of Sarnano, discovered by Giuseppe Abate in 1939. Two families of manuscripts emerged, the “traditional” and the “Sarnano.”

In more recent times, Théophile Desbonnets studied the L3C and its variants with 1C in order to arrive at a critical edition of the Legend. The study of Desbonnets is the most recent critical edition of the L3C.<sup>1</sup> The plurality of the versions, their interdependence, the witness of the Sarnano Codex, all point to the year 1246 as the year in which the L3C began to be formed, in direct correspondence with the Letter of Greccio.

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<sup>1</sup> Théophile Desbonnets, “La Légende des trois compagnons. Nouvelles recherches sur la généalogie de biographies primitives de saint François,” *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 65 (1972) 66-106; “*Legenda trium sociorum*. Édition critique,” *AFH* 67 (1974) 37-144.

In his *Vie de Saint François d'Assise*, Paul Sabatier states this opinion: “The *Legend of the Three Companions* is the finest piece of Franciscan literature, and one of the most delightful productions of the Middle Ages...As it has come down to us, this document is the only one worthy from the point of view of history to be placed beside *The Life of Saint Francis* by Celano.”

The L3C is a text with a great sense of religiosity. Besides the chronological and biographical nature of the text, its value lies in the fact that it represents the primitive Franciscan fraternity, led by the charismatic figure of Francis, within the typical environment of Assisi. The Legend is so interwoven with local traditions from the Assisi neighbourhood that Raoul Manselli has called it a “*leggenda assisana*.” It deals with the conformity of the Poverello with Christ, a theme already underlined by Thomas of Celano. The simplicity of the evangelical form of life of the first brothers, the gift of the stigmata, give this short Legend a distinctive uniqueness.

### *The Assisi Compilation*

The *Assisi Compilation from the Writings of Brother Leo and Companions* (AC), known also as *The Legend of Perugia* (LP), has been transmitted by the Manuscript 1046 of the Biblioteca Augusta of Perugia.

The manuscript was originally in the library of the Sacro Convento of Assisi, because it features in an inventory of 1381. It then passed on to the friary of Monteripido in Perugia, and after 1860, it was taken to the Commune library of the same town. The manuscript was produced in Assisi between 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1310 and 31<sup>st</sup> May 1312 and contains, besides the AC, other important documents of Franciscan history, such as a collection of decrees given to the Franciscan Order, the Papal Bull *Supra montem* of Nicholas IV with the *Rule for the Order of Penitents* (1289), a group of privileges given to the Order, the *Major Life* and the *Epistola ad magistrum innominatum* of St. Bonaventure.

It was Ferdinand Delorme who first studied the AC in 1922. He gave it the title *Legenda Antiqua Sancti Francisci*. Delorme discovered that the AC had whole sections which were parallel to Thomas of Celano's *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* (2C), to brother Leo's *Verba Sancti Francisci* (*Words of St. Francis*) and *Intentio Regulae* (*Intention of the Rule*) and to Lemmens' edition of *The Mirror of Perfection* (we shall refer to these Sources later on).

In 1967 Jacques Cambell published a volume with the title *I Fiori dei tre compagni*. The author tried to decipher in the AC the text of the *florilegium* of 1246. In his study, *The Sources for the Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (Manchester, 1940), J.R.H. Moorman came out with the idea that it is possible to reconstruct the *florilegium* of Greccio on the basis of those texts which show that they depend upon it, namely 2C, the two *Mirrors of Perfection*, the *Words of St. Francis*, the *Intention of the Rule*, and the same AC. In 1970 Rosalind Brooke published *The Writings of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, Companions of St. Francis*. Brooke was of the idea that the Letter of Greccio was more

linked to the contents of the AC than to those of the L3C, and so she inserted the Letter before this Source. The most recent critical edition of AC was done in 1975 by Marino Bigaroni, who coined the name AC: "*Compilatio Assisiensis*" *dagli Scritti di frate Leone e Compagni su San Francesco d'Assisi*, Prima edizione integrale dal Ms. 1046 di Perugia con versione Italiana a fronte, introduzione e note, S. Maria degli Angeli, Assisi, 1975; second edition, Assisi, 1992.

Regarding the place where the AC was composed, Bigaroni is of the opinion that the documentary material of 1246 was conserved in the archives of the Sacro Convento of Assisi. Therefore it seems that the compiler who wrote AC could well have been a friar living in Assisi. The Sources is a "compilation", that is a grouping together of various anecdotes from the life of St. Francis and the first brothers, without any regard for chronological or logical order, but rather with the aim of gathering documentary material coming from various sources into distinct units with the aim of presenting a unified vision of Francis and the brothers. The AC is not concerned with the official picture of Francis as a Saint, but rather with the simple life of the first brothers in Assisi and in the remote hermitages. The fact that the compilation omits some of the sources relating to the youthful years of Francis of Assisi shows, according to Raoul Manselli, that the author was not interested in sources relating to the town he knew so well. Since a good portion of the material is also linked with the eye-witness accounts of the friars who say: *Nos, qui cum eo fuimus* ("We, who lived with him"), it is evident that these texts provide the key to understand the importance of the AC as a Source coming directly from the companions of St. Francis.

When reading the AC one always has to bear in mind the strong resemblances resulting from the parallel texts which it has with 2C. A thorough study of these parallel texts, referring to the expression "we, who lived with him", has already been done by Raoul Manselli (see biographical indication in Lecture 1). It is also interesting to note the units reserved for the *Words of Saint Francis* (AC 15-20) and the *Intention of the Rule* (AC 101-106), sources which come from the pen of brother Leo.

Regarding the date of composition, various theories have been proposed. We know that the Codex 1046 of Perugia is dated 1311, but the documentary material it contains must come from the period immediately following Crescentius' invitation to the brother companions of Francis to send him their written memories in 1244. Modern scholars opt for the period 1246-1260 as the probable lapse of time in which many of the units of the AC were composed.