

THE SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

Lecture 6

FRANCIS, THE PROPHET

The General Chapter of Padova, in 1276, just ten years after the decree of the Chapter of Paris, requested once more the brothers to forward their written memories of St. Francis to the Minister General Jerome of Ascoli Piceno:

“All [Provincial Ministers] are hereby charged to carry out diligently the provisions of the letter sent to the ministers assembled in chapter at Padova by the Reverend Father General Minister, entitled ‘To the venerable brothers, beloved in Christ, etc.’ The intent of this letter is to have them conduct an investigation into any additional information worthy of remembrance concerning the deeds of the blessed Francis and of other holy brothers, which may have occurred in their provinces. Such instances are to be reported to the General Minister in exact language and under the oath of witnesses.”

The period starting from 1276 onwards presents St. Francis as the Prophet in an age when prophecy was very much in fashion. Let us remember that, already in the prologue to the LMj, Bonaventure had spoken of Francis in prophetic and apocalyptic terms. The Order, at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, was very much influenced by the spiritualistic doctrines of Joachim of Fiore. Bonaventure himself, in his *Collations on the Six Days of Creation*, advocated six ages of salvation history before Christ and six after Christ, with the last age, the seventh age of peace, being ushered in by the sixth age, symbolised by the angel rising from the east in the person of Francis of Assisi. This view of St. Francis was being shared more and more by the brothers, particularly the “zelanti” who, at this stage of history, became to be known as the Spirituals, some of whom entered into direct conflict with the institution of the Church and Order. Among the most famous Spiritual writers we find Peter of John Olivi (1248-1298), Ubertino da Casale (+1325) and Angelo Clareno (+1337). This was also the age of the first Franciscan Pope, Jerome of Ascoli Piceno, Minister General of the Order, who chose the name of Nicholas IV (1288-92). He was followed by the famous Pope Celestine V (1294), who for six months occupied the Holy See, and was benevolent towards the Spirituals, even allowing some of them to become a faction living outside communion with the Order. These “Fratricelli” were later persecuted by Boniface VIII (1294-1303), and after a short respite during the time of Clement V (1305-14), they were finally condemned by the notorious John XXII in 1317. The turn of the century saw the Order at one of its greatest crises in history, at loggerheads with a Pope who did not want to accept the doctrine that Christ and the apostles possessed nothing of their own, and who therefore so no justification for Franciscan poverty. The 14th century was the time of the Avignon Papacy (1308-1373), the Black Death (1347-50) and the Hundred Years War (1338-1453). This is the historical background against which we shall consider the last group of Sources, which take us from 1276 on to 1318 and beyond, practically to the

very last years of the 14th century. For reasons of space we can only consider some of them in some detail, and indicate the others for personal research and study.

During this period the Order had also continued to develop along institutional lines, even regarding the observance of the Rule and poverty. On 14th November 1245 Pope Innocent IV had given the Church's second interpretation of the Rule, after *Quo elongati*, with his Bull *Ordinem vestrum*. The miraculous event of the stigmata of St. Francis was also being questioned in some quarters. That is why Gregory IX had already written three Papal documents in 1237 to prove the truth of Francis's stigmata. On 29th October 1255 Alexander IV addressed to bishops another declaration to this effect, namely, the *Benigna operatio*. The most important papal document concerning the Franciscan Rule and the observance of poverty was the Bull *Exiit qui seminat* of Pope Nicholas III (14th August 1279), followed by the *Exivi de paradiso* of Clement V (6th May 1312). These papal interpretations are also important in the analysis of the Franciscan Sources of the late 13th and early 14th century, because they shed light on the state of the Order regarding the interpretation of the Rule, and hence, the intentions of St. Francis.

Book of Praises of St. Francis by Bernard of Besse

The first among the Sources of this period is the *Liber de Laudibus Sancti Francisci* (*Book of Praises of St. Francis* = BPr) by Bernard of Besse, secretary to St. Bonaventure, dated 1277-1283, that is, from the decree of the Chapter to Padova to the death of Bernard. Regarding the author, we know that he was born in the town of Besse, in south-west France, and that as a Franciscan he belonged to the Province of Aquitaine and to the Custody of Cahors (Arnald of Sarrant, *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals*). Arnald of Sarrant also says that Bernard was the author of a life of Saint Francis, with many miracles, as well as of the *Chronicle of Fourteen or Fifteen Ministers General*.

The BPr provides little new material to what Thomas of Celano, Julian of Speyer, the Three Companions, or Bonaventure had already said in their biographies. It echoes Bonaventure's opinion that Francis was "more to be praised and wondered at than imitated" (*Sermon on St. Francis* in 1255). The first and seventh chapters of BPr do, however, present some new insights. The first concerns Francis's companions, while the seventh deals with the growth of the three Orders. In the first chapter we encounter the names of brothers who we never meet in the other Sources: Soldanerio, John de Laudibus, Leo, archbishop of Milan, Simon, William of England, and Christopher.

For further reading, cfr. D. Amico, "Bernard of Bessa: Praises of Blessed Francis," *Franciscan Studies* 48 (1988) 213-288.

The Mirror of Perfection

Paul Sabatier published the first edition of the *Mirror of Perfection* in 1898, with the title *Speculum Perfectionis seu S. Francisci Assisiensis legenda antiquissima auctore fratre Leone*. He had studied the Mazzarino Codex 1743 in Paris. As the title of the work shows, Sabatier was convinced that this was the oldest Legend of St. Francis and that, moreover, it came from the pen of brother Leo. In fact, the manuscript he edited, bore the date 11th May 1228 (MCCXXVIII). But other manuscripts which were discovered later, among which the one in Ognissanti friary in Florence, also discovered by Sabatier, had the date 11th May 1318 (MCCCXVIII). The Mazzarino text was a mistake on the part of the copyist. This naturally led Sabatier to redimension his original thesis regarding the *Mirror of Perfection* as being even older than 1C. It was this detail regarding the *Mirror of Perfection* that started the “Franciscan Question.” In 1904 Boehmer noted that the various groups of manuscripts differed widely, and tried to group them into two families, which he named the “group of the Portiuncula” and the “Avignon Compilation”, one coming from central Italy, the other from northern Europe. Sabatier also noted another group of manuscripts coming from northern Europe (the Köln Province) which were distinct from the “Avignon Compilation.” We shall refer to Sabatier’s edition of the *Mirror of Perfection* as 2MP.

In order to solve the riddles regarding the *Mirror of Perfection*, it is important to clarify the problem of interdependence of the biographical Sources of Francis of Assisi. This regards especially the relation between the *Mirror of Perfection* and *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*. The scholar Salvatore Minocchi concluded that 2C depends upon the *Mirror of Perfection*, since in the edition of 1246 it contains 80 chapters which he identified with the original texts in the *Speculum*. The other 44 chapters were added by the compiler of the 1318 manuscript, coming either from 2C or from the writings of brother Leo.

The work of trying to isolate the sources coming from Thomas of Celano and those coming from brother Leo was done by Leonard Lemmens. In 1901 he discovered a shorter edition of the *Mirror of Perfection* (which we shall refer to as 1MP), based on the manuscript 1/73 of the friary library of St. Isidore’s Irish College in Rome. The scholar distinguished at least 30 chapters of the *Mirror of Perfection* which depend upon 2C. The problem regarded the channels through which the documentary material passed from 2C into the *Mirror of Perfection*. Among the various opinions brought forward we find the theory of an oral tradition of the texts of Thomas of Celano, or that of a bundle of notes which were written down by brother Leo before 1227, which formed the basis of both 2C and the *Speculum*.

In the same manuscript, Lemmens also found what came to be known as *rotuli*, or scrolls of brother Leo, containing the *Verba Sancti Francisci* (*The Words of St. Francis*), and the *Intentio Regulae* (*The Intention of the Rule*). These texts are also present in the *Mirror of Perfection*, as well as in AC, and it is possible that they could have existed within these Sources rather than as distinct documents. What is relevant, however, is that there are distinct sections coming definitely from the pen of brother Leo

himself, who was one of the last companions of St. Francis to die, in 1278. In the *Expositio super Regulam* of Peter of John Olivi, dated 1288, we find the following witness: “We read in the parchments of brother Leo, who as his unique companion, wrote whatever he saw and heard in the life of our father Francis.” Ubertino da Casale and Angelo Clareno, in their writings, also speak about *cedulae, dicta et scripta, verba, liber, rotuli* (parchments, sayings and writings, words, book) attributed to brother Leo.

When Ferdinand Delorme published the *Legend of Perugia* in 1922, the problem was further complicated by the attention to this new Source, which contained many parallel texts with the *Speculum*. Some even proposed the LP, or AC, as the direct source of the *Speculum*. Moorman, for example, thought that the *Mirror of Perfection* is a reorganisation of the material of the LP. According to him 23 chapters are identical to the LP and to 2C, thus indicating that the *Mirror of Perfection* took these texts from 2C through the mediation of the LP. Cambell and Brooke also opt for the superiority of the LP upon the *Speculum*. The problem regarding the interdependence of these Sources, is quite interesting, will probably never be solved.

The Lemmens edition, or 1MP, contains 45 paragraphs. It is presented under the title “A Mirror of Perfection, Rule, Profession, Life and True Calling of a Lesser Brother.” Except for paragraph 45, which gives Admonitions 11 and 21 of St. Francis, the whole text is present in the Sabatier edition, although the paragraphs are ordered in a different manner. The opening phrase, demonstrates the aim of the author: “In the name of the Lord begins the mirror of the perfection, Rule, profession, life and calling of a true Lesser Brother according to the will of Christ and the intention of blessed Francis.”

The Sabatier edition, or 2MP, contains 124 paragraphs. Paul Sabatier studied no fewer than 45 manuscripts before the final critical edition which was published after his death on 4th March 1928. Sabatier was of the opinion that all the paragraphs came from the pen of brother Leo himself. Later studies, especially after the edition of the Manuscript 1046 of Perugia, have led scholars to indicate various sources for 2MP. These would include the AC, *The Words of St. Francis*, 2C, *The Words of Conrad of Offida*, and even an instance of Francis’s own writings. Paragraph 84 is original, and contains a poem in praise of the Portiuncula.

Although Sabatier concluded that it was Leo who wrote 2MP, a close look at the opening phrase in all the manuscripts gives no direct indication as to its specific author: “This work has been compiled in the form of a legend based on what the companions of blessed Francis had formerly written or caused to be written.”

The title of 2MP is: “The Beginning of A Mirror of Perfection of the Status of a Lesser Brother.” 2MP opens with a controversial episode about the loss and rewriting of the Later Rule at Fonte Colombo, and about the resistance posed by the ministers against the rigidity of the Rule. The episode clearly refers to *The Words of St. Francis*, whose author is brother Leo. It is followed by the twelve chapters of 2MP, which regard fundamental values of the Franciscan life. In 2MP 120 we find the complete *Canticle of Brother Sun*, written by St. Francis.

The Actus Beati Francisci and the Fioretti

The Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Ministers General of the Order of Friars Minor states that brother Conrad of Offida, together with brother John, went to the Portiuncula some time before the death of brother Leo, to interview him regarding his memories regarding the words and life of St. Francis. “They heard many interesting and important things regarding Saint Francis from the mouth of brother Leo” (*Analecta Franciscana* III,428). Other chroniclers of the 14th century, such as Salimbene of Parma, Angelo Clareno, Peter of John Olivi and Ubertino da Casale, all base the authenticity of their historical affirmations upon the oral tradition of the companions of St. Francis, whom they had the occasion of consulting directly, or through the witness of the friars who were disciples of these companions.

As can happen in any oral transmission of historical facts, many words and actions could have created confusion, transpositions of historical truth, and it is not the first time that they could degenerate into legendary accounts. We cannot, however, dismiss them as being untruthful or historically incorrect. What needs to be done is to arrive at the basis of the truth of these affirmations, thereby discovering the historical truth underlying them. This is what is done in the case of two important Sources coming from the oral tradition, namely, the *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius* (*The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions* = DBF), written by Hugolino Boniscambi da Montegiorgio in 1328-1337, and the translation into the Italian Tuscan dialect of whole sections of them by an anonymous translator, known as *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, or *Fioretti* (LFI), written after 1337, and probably towards the second half of the 14th century.

The *Actus Beati Francisci* are a collection of *excerpta, flores*, that is, anecdotes, regarding the virtuous life of St. Francis and his first companions. It has four sections: the first speaks about Francis and some of the first companions; the second speaks about some of the companions (Bernard, Rufino, Leo, Masseo, Clare, Anthony, Conrad); the third regards the friars from the Marche region, all of them coming from the family of the Spirituals (Conrad of Offida, John of La Verna); while the fourth section is a mixture of various anecdotes.

According to DBF, chapter IX,71, the author is a certain brother *Hugolinus de Monte Sancte Mariae*: “Brother James of Massa received this account from the mouth of Brother Leo, and Brother Ugolino of Monte Santa Maria had it from the mouth of this Brother James, and I, the writer, had it from the mouth of Brother Ugolino.” This brother Hugolino was Ugolino Boniscambi di Monte Santa Maria (or Montegiorgio), a town in the Marches, within the province of Ascoli Piceno, who probably died in 1350. He is the compiler of DBF. It seems, however, that Hugolino was helped by collaborators who continued his work, among whom there could have been a friar from his same Province of the Marches, coming from the group of friars who were disciples of Angelo Clareno. According to Cambell, the date of composition of the DBF is between 1331 and 1337. It seems that there is some link between the DBF and the *Chronicle on the Seven Tribulations* by Angelo Clareno, written in 1323-25. The same friars of whom Angelo

Clareno speaks are also present in the DBF (James of Massa, Conrad of Offida, Pietro of Monticello). The DBF could have been written in a friary in which the Spirituals and “Fratricelli” had some influence, particularly that of Sarnano, where the disciples of Pietro of Macerata and Angelo Clareno lived.

The DBF betray a preoccupation to conserve the observance of the Franciscan Rule “without gloss” (comment), as well as that of a way of life identical to the one which Francis portrays in his Testament. At the same time the DBF defend that evangelical freedom to which the Spirituals appealed in order not to succumb to the normative rules of the Community which, according to them, was not observing the evangelical life in its purity and simplicity.

The themes which are dear to the DBF are those which were at the forefront of the differences between Community and Spirituals, namely, ascetical life, evangelical perfection, the relationship between active and contemplative life, the discussions between Franciscans and Dominicans regarding poverty, the apostasy of brother Elias and his downfall, which Francis is supposed to have foretold (chapter 62).

The DBF lay great importance upon the theme of the conformity of Francis to the life of Jesus Christ. In chapter VI,1, the author writes: “Because Francis, that very real servant of Christ, was in some things another Christ given to the world, God the Father made this fortunate man conformed in many things to Christ, his Son, as was apparent in his venerable band of holy companions, in the wonderful mystery of the stigmata of the Cross, and the holy fast of forty continuous days.” This same theme of conformity was already present in 2C 26,135,217,219, and LMj, Prologue, XIII,4, XIV,4. With the DBF and the *Fioretti*, the theme of conformity to Christ (*Franciscus fuit quasi alter Christus*) comes to the forefront and develops later on in Arnald of Sarrant’s *The Kinship of St. Francis* (1365) and Bartholomew of Pisa’s *Book of Conformities of the life of St. Francis with the life of Jesus Christ* (1399).

The *Fioretti* are also a group of anecdotes regarding the relationship of Francis with some of his most intimate companions, such as Bernard, Elias, Giles, Leo, Masseo, Clare, Rufino, Sylvester. The LFI are based on themes which are very dear to the Franciscan charism, namely, perfect joy, poverty, love for creatures. In the LFI we come to know Francis who preaches to the birds and who tames the wolf of Gubbio. The final chapters of the LFI contain stories coming from the environment of the Spirituals, especially those living in the Marches, particularly Conrad of Offida, John of Penna, John of La Verna, James of Massa. In the manuscript tradition, the 53 chapters of the LFI are often followed by the five *Considerations on the Stigmata of Saint Francis*, which are a rich source of information regarding the events which happened on La Verna in September 1224, and which reveal a strong link with the LMj of St. Bonaventure.

Sources coming from the Spirituals

The Spirituals in the Order of Friars Minor were groups of friars scattered in three different regions, namely, Provence, Tuscany and the Marches of Ancona. They were

initially known as “zelanti”, but gained the name Spirituals especially after 1274, when they began to defend a strict faithfulness to the Rule against the Community of the Order, which was advocating a more moderate observance. These friars also adhered to the apocalyptic vision of Church history common among the followers of Joachim of Fiore, who taught the emergence of an *ecclesia spiritualis* (a spiritual Church). They produced a group of writings, which claim to be the result of the testimony of the first companions, notably of brother Leo. Among these Sources we find the *Legenda Vetus*, or *Old Legend*, also known by the name of *Avignon Compilation*, discovered by Paul Sabatier, and the *Words of brother Conrad of Offida*, the leader of the Spirituals of the Marches.

In Provence, the Spirituals were under the leadership of Hugh of Digne, who wrote an *Expositio Regulae*. Hugh died in 1257 and was succeeded by Peter of John Olivi, who joined the Order at Béziers in 1260. The group of Spirituals in Tuscany was led by Ubertino da Casale. He came from Genova and joined the Order in 1273. After studying in Paris he returned to Italy in 1287, where he became a close friend of John of Parma, the ex-Minister General, who was confined to the hermitage of Greccio because of his Spiritual views. Ubertino was then invited to lecture at the study of Santa Croce friary in Florence in the period 1287-1305. In 1305 he retired to Mount La Verna, where from 9th March to 28th September he composed his *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu* (*The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*).

Among the friars who were all out for a strict observance of the Rule in the Marches we find Angelo Clareno. Known first as Peter of Fossombrone, he was born in 1255 and entered the Order in 1270. Together with other brothers Angelo was imprisoned in 1279, because of his sympathies with the doctrines of the followers of Joachim of Fiore. When Raymond Godefroy was Minister General in 1289, he decided to free Angelo Clareno and his Spiritual companions, and sent them as missionaries to Armenia. In 1294 they returned to Italy. Angelo and Peter of Macerata were made welcome in the Franciscan houses of the Marches, and they sought the protection of Pope Celestine V, who was Pope for only five months, before resigning to go back to eremitical life. He gave them permission to found a new Order, called “Poor Hermits of Pope Celestine.” They were permitted to observe the Rule and Testament of St. Francis, without the papal interpretations. When cardinal Benedict Gaetani became Pope Boniface VIII he immediately persecuted the Celestines, who had to flee to Greece. The new Pope asked the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Archbishop of Patras and Athens to imprison them, but they fled to Thessalonica. After the death of Boniface VIII in 1305, they returned to Italy, and sought the refuge of Cardinal Napoleon Orsini, their Protector. Pope Clement V removed the excommunication that Boniface VIII had given to these friars. The “Fratricelli” continued to exist in various groups, but they had to suffer much, and Pope John XXII finally condemned them in 1317. After the storm was over, Angelo Clareno composed his *Chronicon seu Historia Septem Tribulationum Ordinis Fratrum Minorum* (*The Chronicle or History of the Seven Tribulations of the Order of Friars Minor*), in 1325-1330, at the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco. He spent his last days at Santa Maria dell’Aspromonte, in Basilicata, southern Italy, where he died on 15th June 1337.