

THE LAST SUPPER OF SAINT FRANCIS AND THE IMAGE OF THE NEW ADAM

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The Franciscan Sources of the 13th century present Francis as “a new person of another age.”¹ The idea of novelty in the life of Saint Francis is present in various attitudes that mark a break with the past but also continuity with the plans of God regarding Francis. Under the influence of other famous biographies of saints of antiquity, like for example Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Martin of Tours, Francis’ biographers have, in a certain way, copied an hagiographical literary genre, in order to help us understand how Francis accomplished a process of radical conversion from a life of sin to the following of Christ in poverty and humility. This approach is seen very clearly in the trilogy of Thomas of Celano.

The novelty of Francis, however, consisted also in a new attitude towards God, towards human persons and towards creation. The Franciscan *novitas* has nothing to do with a personal or private conversion of a sinner who becomes a saint, but enters within the framework of the history of creation, of the tragedy of sin of humanity, and in the history of salvation of Christ and of his death on the cross.

Seen in this light Francis becomes a new man also in the Biblical sense. In him we can perceive the beauty of the innocence of the first man, Adam, created in the image and likeness of God, as well as the restoring of this image, which was deformed by original sin, in the person of Christ, the new Adam, who on the cross, in his paschal mystery, gives once more to every human person the dignity that had been lost because of sin.

If we see Francis in this light of the first human person, Adam, and in the light of the new Adam, Christ, prototype of creation, we can understand Francis’ attitude regarding God, regarding his fellow human beings and regarding creation. This vision can then be seen in a more clear way if we succeed in showing how Francis experimented in his own life the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ as a mystery of a new birth, of the restitution of the image of the new man created by God in his image and likeness, always in reference to Christ, the Incarnate Word, and the masterpiece of God’s work of creation and salvation.

The object of our paper will, therefore, be that of seeing, first and foremost, the figure of the first man, Adam, and that of the new Adam, Christ, applied to Saint Francis, and then to understand how Francis lived the paschal mystery of Christ in the perspective of the new Adam, particularly in the revelation of Christ who offers himself to his disciples during the paschal meal.

¹ THOMAS OF CELANO, *Life of Saint Francis* (1C 82), in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I [The Saint], edited by R.J. Armstrong, J.A. Hellmann, W.J. Short, New City Press, London – Manila - New York 1999, 251. (FAED I, 251). Latin text: *novus certe homo et alterius saeculi videbatur*. Parallel texts in *Legend of the Three Companions*, 54 (L3C 54) in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. II [The Founder] 2000, 99; SAINT BONAVENTURE, Major Life of Saint Francis 4,5 (LMj 4,5) in FAED II, 553; THOMAS OF CELANO, *Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis* (3C 2) in FAED II, 401.

The image of the first man, Adam, and of Christ, the new Adam, in the Writings of Saint Francis

The figure of Adam, the first man to be created, is presented by Francis in the *Admonitions*, in the light of the creation of the human race and of the fall of the first man.

The fifth *Admonition* speaks about the creation of man, of his dignity in the order of creation, of how man lost this dignity because of sin, and of how he can regain such a lost dignity by glorying in the cross of the Lord.²

“Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you *to the image* of His beloved Son according to the body and *to His likeness* according to the Spirit (Gen 1:26). And all creatures under heaven serve, know, and obey their Creator, each according to its own nature, better than you. And even the demons did not crucify Him, but you, together with them, have crucified Him and are still crucifying Him by delighting in vices and sins. In what, then, can you boast?”³

We shall stop at this first part of the fifth *Admonition*. Francis starts with a reference to the creation of the first man (Adam) according to the account of Genesis.⁴ The two key words are *imago* and *similitudo*. In the biblical text man is created to the image and likeness of God. The two terms have the aim of describing man in relationship to God the Creator. Man is created to the image and likeness of God, who in the Bible is sometimes presented in anthropomorphic terms.⁵ The physical and spiritual likeness of man with God is seen in a particular way in the power that God gives man to exercise over all the other creatures.

Francis interprets this image and similitudo in an original way, which does not exactly correspond to the original biblical significance, but which has a high theological value. In fact Francis says that the first man (Adam) has been created to the *image* of the Son according to the flesh and to the *similitudo* of the same Son according to the spirit. Francis understands very well the meaning of *imago* and *similitudo* in the biblical text, but he applies it not to God the Father, but rather to Christ. In this way Francis wants us to understand the intimate relationship that exists between the first man (Adam) and Christ, as the model and prototype of the entire creation.

In a testimony of a sermon delivered to the friars by Eudes of Châteauroux (†1273), chancellor of the University of Paris (1238-1244) and cardinal bishop of Tusculum (1246), we find an interesting reflection on Francis that summarizes in the

² F. URIBE, *La vera gloria dell'uomo. L'Ammonizione V di san Francesco*, in *Frate Francesco* 74/2 (Novembre 2008), 351-376.

³ *Adm* 5,1-4 (FAED I, 131).

⁴ The text of Gen 1:26-27 in the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* states: *faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram [...] et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam ad imaginem Dei creavit illum*. Latin edition: *Biblia Sacra iuxta latinam vulgatam versionem ad codicum fidem*, iussu Pii PP. XI, Pii PP. XII, Ioannis PP. XXIII, Pauli PP. VI, Ioannis Pauli II, cura et studio monachorum Abbatiae Pontificiae Sancti Hieronymi in Urbe Ordinis Sancti Benedicti edita. Textus et interpretatione Sancti Hieronymi. I. Liber Genesis, Libreria Vaticana 1926.

⁵ Ezekiel 1:26 describes God as “a form with the appearance of a human being” (Vulgate: *super similitudinem throni similitudo quasi aspectus hominis desuper*).

person of the Poverello the primeval state of innocence of Adam, created to the image and likeness of his Creator.

“As you very well know there are two kinds of creation, one which brings nature into being, the other whereby grace comes into being. The first creation gives existence to natural life, the second to the life of grace. About the first it is written: *The Lord created man out of earth* (Sir 17:1) and this that he might have being. Of the second we read: *When you send forth your Spirit, they are created* (Ps 104:30), that is, endowed with the life of grace, so that they may be virtuous. The first manner of being is to be understood of Adam, the second of Saint Francis and the other saints who were established in grace, and were called and glorified by God. There are two things to be said of Saint Francis: first, he was created in the image of the Godhead, and second, he was made in the likeness of Christ’s humanity.”⁶

This highly positive vision of the human person corresponds fully to the sensibility of Francis. As we have seen, he describes the harmony that reigned when the first man was still in paradise, when all creatures were under his power. This relation of harmony with the Creator was unfortunately broken by sin. Francis, however, insists that creatures, in as far as they can according to their own state, serve, know and obey their Creator even better than man himself. The reason of this lies in the fact that it is only man who, with his free will, has chosen to break the original harmony of creation. For Francis, man who is created to the image and likeness of God, is so free and responsible, that the Saint arrives at placing squarely upon man’s shoulder the responsibility of the crucifixion of Christ rather than placing it upon those of the devil, since it is man who abuses his freedom by delighting in vices and sins!

According to the positive Franciscan vision, however, Christ’s cross is that occasion so that man can regain the dignity lost because of sin, and therefore can again appear in all his primordial beauty. This is possible since Christ could restore the image and likeness of God in man, which had been darkened by sin. This occurred when Christ became Incarnate and redeemed all human persons with his death on the cross. Christ therefore becomes the new Adam, who gives once again to the human person the dignity lost because of sin. Therefore man can find sense for his own life only by glorying in the cross of the Lord. Francis here uses the Pauline terminology of the First Letter to the Corinthians, in order to make us understand how, on the cross, Christ, the new Adam, became the wisdom and power of God, in order to give to the old Adam his lost dignity.

“Even if you were so skilful and wise that you possessed *all knowledge* (1Cor 13:2), knew how to interpret every *kind of language* (1Cor 12:28), and to scrutinize heavenly matters with skill: you could not boast in these things. For, even though someone may have received from the Lord a special knowledge of the highest wisdom, one demon knew about heavenly matters and now knows more about those of earth than all human beings. In the same way, even if you were more handsome and richer than everyone else, and even if you worked miracles so that you put demons to flight: all these things are contrary to you; nothing belongs to you; you can boast in none of these things. But we can boast *in our weaknesses* (2Cor 12:5) and in carrying each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷

⁶ EUDES OF CHÂTEAURoux, *Sermon to the friars of Paris on the feast of Saint Francis* (4th October 1262), in FAED II, 813.

⁷ *Adm* 5,5-8 (FAED I, 131).

This second part of the fifth *Admonition* contains again a reference to the first sin of humankind. Drawn by the devil, who is capable of knowing the celestial and terrestrial realities more than all human beings, man desired to possess science and wisdom, and forgot that the true wisdom and glory is found in being submissive to the mystery of the cross, as Christ himself did, he who was the wisdom and power of God. The sin of the first man, therefore, consisted essentially in his wanting to appropriate that wisdom and knowledge that belong to God alone, and in not wanting to recognize the majesty of God upon the entire creation. Francis insists strongly: “nothing belongs to you.”⁸ It is only in the expropriation of his own self-will in a total act of obedience to the Father that Christ could redeem man from his primeval fall into sin. Man is saved by his total union with Christ, the new Adam, who humbles himself unto death on the cross, as we sing in the Christological hymn of Phil 2:5-11.

The discourse regarding the first man Adam who sins by appropriating his own will, and thus disobeys to the voice of God, is developed in the second *Admonition*, entitled «The Evil of Self-Will». This text is the only one in which Adam is explicitly mentioned in the writings of Saint Francis:

“The Lord said to Adam: *Eat of every tree; you may not eat, however, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (Gn 2:16.17). He was able to eat of every tree of paradise, because he did not sin as long as he did not go against obedience. For that person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good who makes his will his own and, in this way, exalts himself over the good things the Lord says and does in him. And so, through the suggestion of the devil and the transgression of the command, it became the apple of the knowledge of evil. Therefore it is fitting that he suffer the punishment.”⁹

The first man, created to the image and likeness of God, according to the eternal prototype of creation who is Christ, who glorifies the Father, is endowed with free will in order to use it for his own good and that of the entire creation. God makes just one prohibition to the first man, that of not appropriating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The first Adam, according to Francis, sinned when he went against this order of God, and thus wanted to appropriate his own free will. Therefore the sin of the first man was, always according to Francis, a sin of disobedience, which expressed itself also in an act which went against poverty, that is against the loving gratitude for all the good things that God had entrusted to man’s care. Man wanted thus to acquire the same knowledge of God. The appropriation of the will implies an abuse of the same free will, and this renders man a slave of the devil. The ancient serpent succeeded in making the first man eat the venom of the forbidden fruit, thus making Adam an enemy of God and a punishable creature. A remedy had to be found to this state of things, through the redeeming action of Christ, the new Adam, who did not go against obedience and who did not appropriate his own will, as Francis explains in the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*:

“Then he prayed to His Father, saying: *Father, if it can be done, let this cup pass from me. And his sweat became as drops of blood falling to the ground* (Lk 22:42.44).

⁸ C. PAOLAZZI, *Lettura degli “Scritti” di Francesco d’Assisi*, Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, Milano 2002, 121: “Comprendiamo la pregnanza teologica, concettuale e sentimentale di una definizione di Francesco: il peccato è l’“appropriarsi” di un bene che appartiene al Signore, come ha fatto Adamo mangiando dell’«albero della scienza del bene e del male», e come continuano a fare coloro che disubbidiscono a Dio, attribuendo a se stessi o usando a scopi egoistici ciò che deve servire all’amore di lui e dei fratelli.”

⁹ *Adm 2* (FAED I, 129).

Nevertheless, He placed His will in the will of His Father, saying: *Father, let Your will be done; not as I will, but as You will* (Mt 26:42). His Father's will was such that His blessed and glorious Son, Whom He gave to us and Who was born for us, should offer Himself through His own blood as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross: not for Himself through Whom all things were made, but for our sins, leaving us an example that we might follow His footsteps."¹⁰

We see the change between the appropriation of the will on the part of the first Adam and the total handing over into the Father's will on the part of Christ, the new Adam. Francis insists that Christ did not accomplish this for his own sake, since he is the model and prototype of creation, including man created in the image and likeness of God. Christ realised the mystery of redemption on the altar of the cross, in order to shed his own blood in expiation of the sin of Adam and of the entire human race. Living the grace of salvation implies walking on the footsteps of Christ, obedient servant of the Father.

Another text that speaks in a clear way about the fall of man in sin and about the redemption realised by Christ on the cross is found in chapter 22 of the *Earlier Rule*, which contains words of admonition to the brothers. Francis begins reminding his brothers the commandment of fraternal charity, on the example of Christ who offered himself spontaneously unto death on the cross.

"All my brothers: let us pay attention to what the Lord says: *Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you* (Mt 5:44) for our Lord Jesus Christ, Whose footprints we must follow, called His betrayer a friend and willingly offered Himself to His executioners."¹¹

This text recalls once more the theme of the following of Christ along the way of the cross, according to the text of 1Peter 2:21, and insists upon the spontaneous self-offering of the Lord on the cross. Those who crucified the Lord, according to what we have seen in *Admonition* 4,3 are men with their sins and vices, which are the fruit of the sin of the first man Adam. For this reason Francis continues to admonish his brothers against vices and sins, with references to the Gospel, particularly with reference to the state of man after his image is darkened by sin. The text which follows can be considered as a picture of Adam whose sin becomes contagious to the entire human race, which with him enters into a solidarity of sin that can be redeemed only by Christ, the new Adam.

"And let us hate our body with its vices and sins, because by living according to the flesh, the devil wishes to take away from us the love of Jesus Christ and eternal life and to lose himself in hell with everyone else. Because, by our own fault, we are disgusting, miserable and opposed to good, yet prompt and inclined to evil, for, as the Lord says in the Gospel: *From the heart proceed and come evil thoughts, adultery, fornication, murder, theft, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, false witness, blasphemy, foolishness. All these evils come from within, from a person's heart, and these are what defile a person* (Mt 15:19; Mk 7:21-23)."¹²

The image of man which Francis presents seems rather dull and pessimist. However, it corresponds to the reality of man when he becomes slave to sin, to the misery of the old Adam, evicted from the earthly paradise. The image of the carnal man, who is putrid and fetid, is expressed very well in the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*,

¹⁰ *EpFid* II,8-13 (FAED I, 46).

¹¹ *RegNB* 22,1-2 (FAED I, 79).

¹² *RegNB* 22,5-9 (FAED I, 79).

where Francis speaks of the fact that “through our own fault, we are all wretched and corrupt, disgusting and worms.”¹³ At the same time, the image of the worm, which indicates scorn, assumes a new meaning when Francis applies it to Christ, always in the same text, quoting Psalm 21:7. On the cross Christ becomes like a worm which is despised, but assuming the miserable condition of the sons of Adam, he, the new Adam, gives once more to humanity its lost dignity, in his sacrificial death on the cross.

The original sin of Adam consisted in letting himself be seduced by Satan to take away his gaze from the Lord God. Francis describes this state in which carnal man becomes, like Adam, the dwelling of Satan, and then he describes the state of the spiritual man in which God-Trinity dwells.

“And let us beware of the malice and craftiness of Satan, who does not want anyone to turn his mind and heart to God. And prowling around he wants to ensnare a person’s heart, [he wants] to blind it through worldly affairs and concerns and to live there [...] Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him, Who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

The anthropological theology of Francis faithfully follows the biblical truth of man who distances himself from God and lets himself be drawn into sin by the action of Satan. In this way the new Adam loses his friendship with the Creator and becomes a miserable being, in need of redemption. In the person of the Incarnate Son, the new Adam, who on the cross turns the projects of Satan upside down and assumes upon himself the misery of man with a total obedience to the will of the Father, man regains the dignity which he had lost in the earthly paradise, and thus becomes a dwelling place for the divinity in his human nature redeemed by the blood of Christ.

There is a close relationship between the *mysterium iniquitatis* of the fall of the first Adam and the paschal mystery of our redemption that Christ, the new Adam, has accomplished by offering his will completely into the hands of the Father. It is in the paschal mystery that Christ gains complete victory on the devil, which had seduced the first Adam, created to the image and likeness of God.

In a text from the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, Saint Bonaventure shows in a concrete way how Christ won over the devil on the cross, in his act of supreme obedience to the will of the Father. The Seraphic Doctor says that Christ has confounded the devil at the exact moment of his death on the cross. Christ, the new Adam, has turned upside down the way of reasoning of the devil with a perfect syllogism, of which the major proposition was regarded his eternal divinity, the minor proposition regarded his death on the cross, arriving at the conclusion of the resurrection. Bonaventure states that while the leaders of the Jews were saying to Christ on the cross, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross,” they were echoing the rebel cry of the devil who seduced the first man in order to make him appropriate his will and thus dominate upon creation against the will of God. On the other hand Christ remained obedient to the Father also on the cross, since he let himself be nailed to the cross and did not turn away from death. In this

¹³ *EpFid II*, 45-47 (FAED II, 48): “We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh (cfr. 1Cor 1:26), but, instead, we must be simple, humble and pure. And let us hold our bodies in scorn and contempt because, through our own fault, we are all wretched and corrupt, disgusting and worms, as the Lord says through the prophet: *I am a worm and not a man, the scorn of men and the outcast of the people* (Ps 22:7). We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we must be servants and subjects to every human creature for God’s sake (1Pt 2:13).”

¹⁴ *RegNB* 22,19-20.27 (FAED I, 80).

way, on the cross Christ has rejoined the two extremes of death and victory, as Paul says in 1Cor 15:54: *Death is swallowed up in victory*. Thus Christ confounded the devil, who could not understand how the author of life could die. On the cross Christ won over the devil and gave back to man the dignity that the first Adam had lost because of his sin of disobedience.¹⁵

We can thus say that, even though the figure of Adam is not mentioned if not just once in the entire *corpus* of the writings of Saint Francis, we find various references to a theological tradition which was very popular in Christianity,¹⁶ namely that of the relationship between the first Adam, the first man who went against God's command and sinned, and the new Adam, Christ, who obeyed His Father's will and restored to humanity its image and likeness to God that had been obscured because of sin.

The image of the first man, Adam, and of Christ, the new Adam, in the Franciscan Sources

We shall now pass on to see the figure of Adam applied to Christ and Saint Francis in some sources of the 13th century. The first text we consider is taken from the *Versified Legend of Saint Francis*, written by Henri d'Avranches in 1239-1239 in the form of an epic poem. In the third book of the poem the author speaks about Francis who takes his clothes off in front of bishop Guido of Assisi. He compares Francis, who stands naked and despising the world, to Adam who loses his state of innocence in the earthly paradise and has to expose his nudity in a shameful way.

"His clothes, he lays them down, including his trousers. / Without a stitch, stark naked he stands, for all the world like Adam. / But he differs from Adam in this: he suffers freely what Adam / Was forced to endure; he suffers by merit what Adam endured for sin; / And yet he is penalized as Adam was – though in a different way. / Exposed was the shamefulness of Adam, while no shame / Is discovered in him. Where is the shame in a naked body / When the vesture of its soul is honour? Wherein did this / Manliness lie?

¹⁵ ST. BONAVENTURE, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, I, 28, in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, Ad Claras Aquas, (Quaracchi) 1882-1902, Vol. V, 334: "Maior propositione fuit ab aeterno; sed assumptione in cruce; conclusione vero in resurrectione. Iudaei credebant Christum confudisse et improperebant ei: *Si Filius Dei es, descende de cruce*. Nam Christus non dicebat: sinite me vivere, sed dicebat: sinite me mortem assumere at alteri extremitati copulari, pati, mori; et tunc sequitur conclusio. Unde ipse illudit diabolo."

¹⁶ B. BAGATTI, *Note sull'iconografia di «Adamo sotto il Calvario»*. *Studii Biblici Franciscani*, in *Liber Annuus*, Jerusalem XXVII (1977) 5-32, with illustrations 1-12. This study speaks about the so-called "Chapel of Adam", which is found underneath Calvary in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. In this place, according to a very ancient Judaeo-Christian tradition, the skull of Adam who was buried under the rock of Calvary, was washed by the blood of Christ, which trickled down the open crack in the rock opened by the earthquake at the moment of Christ's death. Thus Adam was redeemed by Christ's blood and with him the entire human race was also redeemed. The famous Franciscan archaeologist notes the importance of some Apocryphal writings, such as *The Cave of Treasures*. This tradition was handed down by the Jerusalem Church, and from there it spread to Christendom, including in the Franciscan tradition of the *Tau cum capite* in the parchment of the blessing that Saint Francis gave to brother Leo on La Verna in 1224, and which is nowadays conserved as a relic in the inferior basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi.

In scorning the world, in making himself disdained / By the world; in caring not a whit for his property or person.”¹⁷

The theme of nudity applied to Francis is presented by Henri d’Avranches not only in contrast to the shameful nakedness of Adam, but also in relationship to the nakedness of Christ on the cross. In this way, Christ who is naked and crucified becomes the new Adam who Francis follows by denuding himself from all possessions. The following text from the *Versified Life* is a posterior addition:

“His clothes, he lays them down, including his trousers. / To be entirely stripped bare he declined not, out of love / Of Him who upon the cross was willing to hang naked. / And so, departing naked from the world, he left all things, / And being naked, followed the naked Christ crucified.”¹⁸

The image of Adam in the story of creation is also illustrated in one of the most interesting Sources for our theme, namely the *Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty*, an allegory written probably within the context of the poverty controversy between the secular clergy and the mendicant orders in the University of Paris in 1254.¹⁹ The anonymous author of this allegory speaks about Francis who goes in search of Lady Poverty, who had been abandoned by the sons of Adam, who “hated it with a vengeance.”²⁰

Lady Poverty welcomes Francis and his brothers who had easily climbed the lofty mountain where she dwelt, since they were lacking of material possessions. After the words of praise that the brothers address to Lady Poverty, she starts to speak about herself, beginning with the story of her betrothal with Adam in the earthly paradise:

“I was once *in the paradise of God* where *man* was *naked* (Rv 2:7). In fact I was in man and was *walking with naked man* (Gn 2:25; 3:8) through that entire splendid paradise, fearing nothing, doubting nothing, and suspecting nothing amiss. I thought I would be with him forever, because the Most High created him just, good and wise and

¹⁷ HENRI D’AVRANCHES, *Versified Life of St. Francis*, Book 3, 145-154 (FAED I, 449-450). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di E. MENESTÒ e S. BRUFANI, Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli, Assisi 1995, 1150: “Exutus vestes etiam femoralia ponit. / Stat sine veste palam nudoque simillimus Adae; / In causa tantum distat status huius et eius: / Suffert iste libens, quod sustulit ille coactus; / Suffert hic propter meritum, quod sustulit ille / Propter delictum; tamen hic punitur ut ille. / Sed secus: eius enim patuere pudenda, sed huius / Nulla pudenda patent. Quid enim caro nuda pudendum / Offerret, cuius animam vestivit honestas?”

¹⁸ HENRI D’AVRANCHES, *Versified Life of St. Francis. Additions*, Book 3, 165, in Vol. III [The Prophet], edited by R.J. Armstrong, J.A. Hellmann, W.J. Short, New City Press, London – Manila - New York 2001, 84. (FAED III, 84). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, 1217: “Nudari totus non abnuit eius amore, / In cruce qui nudus pro nobis ultro pependit, / Sic mundum nudus egressus cuncta relinquit, / Et nudum nudus Christum sequitur crucifixum.”

¹⁹ Cfr. F. ACCROCCA, *Introduzione al Sacrum commercium sancti Francisci cum domina Papertate*, in *Fonti Francescane. Nuova Edizione*, a cura di E. Caroli, Editrice Francescane, Padova 2004, 1275-1282.

²⁰ SC 5 (FAED I, 530): “(Francis) eagerly began to go about *the streets and piazzas of the city*, as a curious explorer diligently *looking for her whom his soul loved*. He asked those standing about, inquired of those who came near him: ‘*Have you seen her whom my soul loves?*’ (Sg 3:2-3) *But that saying was hidden from them* (Lk 18:24) as though it was barbaric. Not understanding him, they told him: ‘We do not know what you’re saying. *Speak to us in our own language* (2Kings 4:31) and we will answer you.’ At that time there was no voice and no sense among Adam’s children of being willing to converse with or to speak to anyone about poverty. They hated it with a vengeance, as they do even today, and could not speak peacefully to anyone asking about it. Therefore, they answered him as they would a stranger and declared that they did not know anything of what he was seeking.”

placed in the most delightful and beautiful place. I was so happy *playing before him all the while* (Prv 8:30) because, possessing nothing, he belonged entirely to God.”²¹

The figure of Adam which comes forth from this text is that of the first man who was totally naked and poor in front of his Creator. In nakedness and poverty, which Francis himself had embraced, Lady Poverty saw the exemplar of the first man Adam before he sinned, and also of Christ, who in the poverty and nakedness of the cross redeems man and leads him back to the original innocence of the earthly paradise. Unfortunately Adam sinned and deprived himself of the innocence of primeval nakedness, and in this way he had to hide himself from his Creator. Thus Lady Poverty remained deprived of her beloved, and she had to wait for the mercy of God who sent Christ, the new Adam, so that man could return to his Creator.²²

The link between the creation of Adam and the re-creation by the new Adam is found in the consideration of how Francis presents the paschal mystery of Christ, particularly in his writings when he speaks of the paschal meal as the prelude of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. We shall now try to look at the theme of the Holy Thursday celebration of Saint Francis, within the context of the Eucharistic meal, of the priesthood and of the commandment of love, in which Christ reveals himself as the new Adam who offers himself to his Father in order to restore the image spoiled by the first Adam.

Christ, the new Adam, in the paschal meal of Holy Thursday and in the “last supper” of Saint Francis

When Saint Francis was dying at the Portiuncula, during the first days of October 1226, he wanted to re-live with his brothers the episode of the last supper of the Lord on the day of Holy Thursday. For Francis, the celebration of the supper of the Lord was linked in an inseparable way with the Eucharist, the ministerial priesthood and the commandment of fraternal charity. Before going into the analysis of the episode of the so-called “last supper of Saint Francis” as it is handed down to us in the Sources, we have to take a look at the references to the supper of the Lord in the writings of the Saint.

The most important reference to the Lord’s supper is found in the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, within the context of the reflection that Francis makes regarding the Word of the Father:

“And as His Passion was near, He celebrated the Passover with His disciples and, taking bread, gave thanks, blessed and broke it, saying: *Take and eat: This is My Body*. And taking the cup He said: *This is My Blood of the New Covenant which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.*”²³

²¹ SC 25 (FAED I, 537).

²² SC 28 (FAED I, 538): “Immediately (God) called my companion. ‘Adam, where are you?’ But Adam said, ‘Lord, I heard your voice and was afraid because I was naked and hid.’ (Gn 3:9-10). He was truly naked because, as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, he fell among thieves who robbed him (Lk 10:30) first and foremost of his good nature, causing him to lose his likeness to the Creator. The most high King was, nonetheless, very kind, longed for his repentance, after giving him an opportunity to return to him.”

²³ *EpFid II*, 6-7 (FAED I, 46).

The text forms part of the first section of the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, which speaks about “The Word of the Father”, and immediately follows upon the words that regard the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ, true man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and of his choice of radical poverty. We know that Francis often returns upon this theme, particularly in his defence of the true humanity of Christ, in opposition to the doctrine of the Cathars who denied the truth of the Incarnation. The reference to the supper of the Lord is inserted within the paschal context according to the narrative of Matthew. There is nothing that is original of Francis in these words, which in substance are the repetition of the evangelical text. However, after a reference to the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane, where Francis underlines the obedience of the Lord to the will of the Father, we find a more original comment that links the last supper of Jesus with his sacrificial death on the cross:

“His Father’s will was such that His blessed and glorious Son, Whom He gave to us and Who was born for us, should offer Himself through His own blood as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross: not for Himself *through Whom all things were made* (cfr. Jn 1:3), but for our sins, leaving us an example that we might follow His footsteps. And He wishes all of us to be saved through Him and receive Him with our heart pure and our body chaste. But, even though His *yoke is easy* and His *burden light* (Mt 11:30), there are few who wish to receive Him and be saved through Him.”²⁴

The object of the will of the Father, according to Francis, was the sacrificial death of His Son on the cross, which is described as an altar. In these words we already note the link between the paschal meal and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The reason for this death is found in the sins of humankind, since Christ could not die for himself, since according to John 1:3, *all things were made through Him*. In these words the evangelist links the entire creative activity of the Father with his *Logos*, or eternal Word, which becomes the prototype of the entire creation. The reference to man’s sin as the reason why Christ offers himself as a victim of expiation is also related to the sin of the first man, Adam, who was the origin of human nature corrupted by sin after having been created to the image and likeness of the Son (always according to the interpretation of Francis).

With his death on the cross Christ leaves us an example in order that we might follow in his footsteps. 1Peter 2:21 is a verse dear to Francis’ sensibility, and he quotes it at other times in his writings.²⁵ This verse reminds us of the obedient following of Christ, who submitted his will to the will of the Father, not like Adam, the first man, who was a rebel and was disobedient through an act of pride. The obedience of Christ, Son of God and new Adam, is expressed in a unique way during the moment of agony in Gethsemane and during the death on the cross. The imitation of this attitude is necessary in order to regain the original image of Adam in the earthly paradise, but it is also necessary to carry Christ’s sweet yoke and light burden (cfr. Mt 11:30), that is, to accept the reality of the cross. We cannot live this reality in fullness if we do not unite ourselves with Christ who is sacrificed for us in the mystery of the Eucharist. In this way we can be saved through his death and resurrection, which we live once again in the paschal meal. Therefore, the institution of the Eucharist during the last supper, the prayer of obedience during the

²⁴ *EpFid II*, 11-15 (FAED I, 46).

²⁵ *RegNB* 22,2; *EpFid II*, 13; *OffPass* 7,8; 15,13.

agony in Gethsemane, the sacrificial offering on the altar of the cross, and the following of Christ crucified, constitute a precise theological discourse and are mutually related.

The constitutive elements of the liturgy of Holy Thursday are found united together in various texts in which Francis speaks about the Eucharist, ministerial priesthood and the gesture of Jesus who washes the feet of his disciples as a concrete sign of his love unto death on the cross. The three elements that we have mentioned, however, can also be found in the episode of the dying Francis who wanted to re-lived the supper of the Lord that the Church celebrates in a solemn way on Holy Thursday.²⁶

The texts from the Sources which we shall analyse have in common various elements that make them draw their inspiration from one source, that can be linked to the documentary material of the companions of Saint Francis, sent with an accompanying letter by the “Three Companions” of Greccio on 11th August 1246 to the minister general Crescenzo da Iesi. Here we cannot enter into the merits of the synoptic study of the three texts, since such a study has already been accomplished with expertise by renowned scholars of the mediaeval sources for the life of Saint Francis.²⁷ What is of interest to us is to study, in the text we analyse, those elements that correspond to the paschal celebration of Holy Thursday, which Francis wanted to re-live in that extreme moment before departing from this world. The *transitus* of Saint Francis at the Portiuncula is presented by the biographers as a paschal celebration, which enters into the living texture of the mystery of Christ who offers himself to us during the last supper, during his passion on the altar of the cross, as a victim for our sins. We shall not only try to make emerge these themes, but also to see them in the light of Christ who, as a new Adam, restores the image and likeness of God, spoiled by sin in the old Adam and his descendants. In this way Francis re-lives in his own suffering flesh, during a time of sickness when he was near death, the drama of the first Adam who was redeemed by Christ crucified, the new Adam.

The first text that we shall take into examination is that of *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano, written in 1246-1247, with the help of the documentary material of the companions of Greccio. Already in the *Life of Saint Francis* Celano had spoken about the *transitus* of Saint Francis,²⁸ and had mentioned in a particular way the blessing of the dying Francis, the prayer of Psalm 142(141), “With a loud voice I cried out to the Lord,” the reading of the Gospel of John from chapter 13 onwards, and the fact that Francis wanted the friars to sprinkle his body with ashes at the point of death. In the *Memoriale*, however, Celano adds some other details, and in a special manner the episode of the so-called “last supper of Saint Francis.”

“As the brothers shed bitter tears and wept inconsolably, the holy father had *bread brought* to him. He *blessed* and *broke* it (Mt 14:17.18; Mt 26:26), and gave each of them a piece to eat. He also ordered a Book of the Gospels to be brought and asked that the Gospel according to Saint John be read to him starting from that place which begins: *Before the feast of Passover* (Jn 13:1). He was remembering that most sacred Supper, the

²⁶ C. CIAMMARUCONI, *L'ultima cena di Francesco d'Assisi. Una pericope dei «Nos, qui cum eo fuimus»?* , in *Miscellanea Franciscana* 98/3-4 (1998) 791-811.

²⁷ R. MANSELLI, *«Nos, qui cum eo fuimus». Contributo alla questione francescana*, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Roma 1980.

²⁸ IC 109-110 (FAED I, 277-278).

last one the Lord celebrated *with his disciples* (Mt 26:20). In reverent memory of this, to show his brothers how much he loved them, he did all of this.

The few days that remained to him before his passing he spent in praise of God, teaching his beloved companions how to praise Christ with him. As best he could, he broke out in this psalm, *With my voice I cried to the Lord, With my voice I beseeched the Lord* (Ps 142:2-8). He also invited all creatures to the praise of God, and exhorted them to love by some words which he had composed earlier. Even death itself, terrible and hateful to everyone, he exhorted to praise, and going to meet her joyfully, invited her to be his guest, saying: 'Welcome, my Sister Death!' And to the doctor he said: 'Be bold, Brother Doctor, foretell death is near; for to me she will be the gate of Life!' But to the brothers he said: 'When you see I have come to my end put me out naked on the ground as you saw me naked the day before yesterday, and once I am dead, allow me to lie there for as long as it takes to walk a leisurely mile.' The *hour came* (Jn 4:21). All the *mysteries of Christ* (Col 4:3) were fulfilled in him, and he happily flew off to God."²⁹

Thomas of Celano recalls the gestures of the Lord Jesus, who receives the five loaves and multiplies them in the miracle recorded in Mt 14:19 and parallel synoptic texts, who blesses and breaks bread during the last supper in Mt 26:26, and lastly who loves his own to the very end by bowing down to wash the feet of the disciples during the last supper in Jn 13:1ff. The link between the gestures of Francis and those of Jesus during the supper on Holy Thursday is underlined by Celano in the expression: "He was remembering that most sacred Supper, the last one the Lord celebrated with his disciples." The text, however, contains various elements that are linked with the profound meaning of the paschal meal of the Lord. We shall try to individuate some of them.

The gestures of Francis, who imitates the actions of Christ during the last supper, remind us of the constitutive elements of the liturgy of Holy Thursday. Francis asks the brothers to bring him some bread, then he blesses it and breaks it. This was the Eucharistic gesture of the Lord, who instituted the Eucharist during the last supper. At the same time it is also the gesture of the priest who presides in the person of Christ during the Eucharistic sacrifice. This paraliturgical representation of the supper has its importance, because it comes from Francis, who was not a priest, but who demonstrated

²⁹ 2C 217 (FAED II, 387-388). Latin text: THOMAS DE CELANO, *Memoriale in Desiderio Animae*, 217, in *Fontes Franciscani*, 631-632: "Cum itaque amarissime lacrimarentur fratres et inconsolabiliter deplorarent, iussit pater sanctus *panem* sibi *afferi* (cfr. Mt 14,17.18). Quem *benedixit et fregit* (cfr. Mt 26,26; Lc 24,30), et particulam unicuique ad manducandum porrexit. Codicem etiam Evangeliorum apportari praecipiens, Evangelium secundum Ioannem ab eo loco qui incipit: *Ante diem festum Paschae* (Ioa 13,1) etc, sibi legi poposcit. Recordabatur illius sacratissimae coenae, quam Dominus *cum suis discipulis* (cfr. Mt 26,20) ultimam celebravit. In illius enim veneranda memoria, ostendens quem ad fratres habebat amoris affectum, fecit hoc totum. Proinde paucos dies, qui usque ad transitum eius restabant, expendit in laudem, socios suos valde dilectos secum Christum laudare instituens. Ipse vero, prout potuit, in hunc psalmum erupit: *Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi, voce mea ad Dominum deprecatus sum* (Ps 141,2-8) etc. Invitabat etiam omnes creaturas ad *laudem Dei* (Lc 18,43), et per verba quaedam quae olim composuerat, ipse eas ad divinum hortabatur amorem. Nam et mortem ipsam, cunctis terribilem et exosam, hortabatur ad laudem, *eique laetus occurrens* (cfr. Iudc 19,3), ad suum invitabat hospitium: «Bene veniat», inquit, «soror mea mors!». Ad medicum autem: «Audacter, frater medice, proximam prognostica mortem, quae mihi erit ianua vitae!». Ad fratres vero: «Cum me videritis ad extrema perducere, sicut me nudiustertius nudum vidistis, sic me super humum exponite, et per tam longum spatium iam defunctum sic iacere sinatis, quod unius milliarii tractum suaviter quis perficere posset». – *Venit igitur hora* (cfr. Ioa 4,21), et cunctis in eum *Christi* completis *mysteriis* (cfr. Col 4,3), feliciter volavit ad Deum."

respect and reverence to the ordained ministers of the Church. Francis distributed the bread to all the brothers gathered around his deathbed, just as Christ distributed the bread to the apostles during the last supper. With this action Francis expressed the communion of love that should reign among the brothers, which is truly signified in the Eucharistic celebration. After this gesture Francis commanded the brothers to bring to him the book of the Gospels, and wanted to listen to the text of the Gospel of John 13:1ff, in which the evangelist recounts the gesture of Jesus who loves his disciples to the end by washing their feet. This is the third element of the paschal meal of Holy Thursday, and we know how fundamental this action is not only in the reading of the Gospel text during the liturgy of this particular day, but also in the tradition to re-enact the gestures of Jesus in a concrete way in the rite of the *Mandatum*, or foot washing. In the Middle Ages the custom to wash the feet of poor persons was widespread in the monasteries and cathedrals, and was called *Mandatum*, from the first word of the antiphon that is sung during the celebration: *Mandatum novum dabo vobis* (I will give you a new commandment), echoing in this way the words of Jesus in Jn 13:34. Francis accomplished this paraliturgical action with his brothers, and in the reading of the text from John's Gospel he certainly wanted to re-live in a spiritual way this experience of fraternal charity towards those who he loved to the very end, on the example of the Master.

Even though the most important elements of the paschal meal are found in these gestures on the part of Francis, we can add others that refer to the experience of Jesus before the passion. On the point of dying Francis recites Psalm 142(141), which begins with the Latin words *Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi*. It is a psalm of anguish but also of hope, of sadness but also of liberation. It is a psalm that, placed on the lips of Francis at the extreme moment of his departure from this life, expresses in a unique way the sentiments of Christ in the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. In a particular way it reminds us of the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane, which immediately follows the paschal meal. In his agony Christ abandons himself in an attitude of obedience in the hands of the Father, in order to win over the ancient adversary. As we have already seen, already in Gethsemane Jesus expiates the sin of disobedience of the first Adam with his action of free and voluntary obedience in the hands of the Father, and thus becomes the new Adam who gives back to man his lost freedom.

The welcoming of "sister death" reminds us of the serenity by which Christ went out to encounter his death on the cross, and of his words of total trust in the Father to the extreme moment of his death, according to Luke 23:46. Celano then insists upon the fact that, in the person of the dying Francis, all the mysteries of the life of Christ were accomplished. This is a reference to the theme of the *conformitas* with Christ, which is already evident in the writings of Celano, but which is then developed in the later Sources of the 14th century. Francis gathers in his person the same life of Christ, and in the moment of his *transitus* he appears truly as the one who, with Christ, accomplishes the passage from this world to the Father.

The second text that we shall take into consideration is that of the *Assisi Compilation*. Since it comes from the same source, it is very similar to the text of Celano. The references to Holy Scripture are less marked, the style is simpler and the content is shorter. All these are indications that probably this text of the *Compilatio* served as a source for Thomas of Celano, and that in its original nucleus it was closer to the witness

of the companions of Greccio. The text insists upon the day of the week, namely a Thursday, when Francis had the intention to celebrate his “last supper” with the brothers:

“One night blessed Francis was so afflicted with the pains of his illness that he could barely rest or sleep that night. In the morning, when his pain eased a bit, he had all the brothers staying in that place called to him, and when they were seated around him, he considered them and regarded them as representatives of all the brothers.

Beginning with one brother, he blessed them, placing his right hand on the head of each one, and he blessed all who were in the religion and all who were to come until the end of the world. He seemed to feel sorry for himself because he was not able to see his sons and brothers before his death.

Afterwards he ordered loaves of bread to be brought to him and he blessed them. Unable to break them because of his illness, he had them broken into many little pieces by one of the brothers. Taking them, he offered each of the brothers a little piece, telling them to eat all of it. Just as the Lord desired to eat with the apostles on the Thursday before his death, it seemed to those brothers that, in a similar way, blessed Francis, before his death, wanted to bless them and, in them, all the other brothers, and that they should eat that blessed bread as if in some way they were eating with the rest of their brothers.

And we can consider this obvious because, while it was a day other than Thursday, he told the brothers that he believed it was Thursday.

One of the brothers kept a piece of that bread, and after the death of blessed Francis some people who tasted it were immediately freed from their illnesses.”³⁰

The text is very similar to that of Celano, but insists upon the fact that Francis wanted, at least intentionally, to celebrate his “last supper” with the brothers on a Thursday, in order to imitate the Lord who celebrated his last supper on Holy Thursday before his passion. The supper is placed in relation with the last blessing of Francis, who appears like the patriarch Jacob who blesses his sons in the Genesis account. The testament of love of Francis is sealed by the gesture of sharing the blessed bread. According to the authors of the *Compilatio*, this bread also assumed miraculous powers in order to heal sick persons who tasted it after the death of Francis.

The same episode is also recounted nearly *verbatim* in the *Mirror of Perfection* (Sabatier edition). Here we also present this text in order to show the similarities with the text of the *Assisi Compilation*. Although the *Speculum* is of late composition, being dated

³⁰ CA 22 (FAED II, 135). Latin Text: *Compilatio Assisiensis*, 22, in *Fontes Franciscani*, 1500-1502: “Quadam nocte beatus Franciscus tantum fuit doloribus infirmitatum pregravatus quod fere in illa nocte nec quiescere potuit nec dormire. Mane, cessante aliquantulum dolore, fecit vocari omnes fratres existentes in loco, et, illis sedentibus coram ipso, consideravit et prospexit eos in personis omnium fratrum. Et incipiens ab uno fratre benedixit eos, *ponens dexteram manum in capitibus* (cfr. Gen 48,17) singulorum; benedixitque omnes, qui erant in Religione et *qui venturi erant usque in finem saeculi* (cfr. Ioa 1,15; Dan 7,18); et videbatur compati sibi ipsi eo quod non poterat videre filios et fratres suos ante mortem suam. Postea iussit apportari coram se *panes et benedixit* (cfr. Mt 26,26) eos; et quia propter infirmitatem eos frangere non poterat, fecit a quodam fratre ipsos in plurimas particulas *frangi*; et *accipiens*, unicuique fratrum porrexit particulam, precipiens ut totam *manducaret* (cfr. Mc 14,22; 1Cor 11,24). Nam sicut Dominus feria V cum apostolis voluit manducare ante mortem suam, sic quodammodo visum fuit fratribus illis, quod beatus Franciscus antem mortem suam voluit benedicere illis et in eis omnibus aliis fratribus, et quod manducarent illum panem benedictum, quasi quodammodo cum ceteris fratribus suis manducarent. Et hoc manifeste considerare possumus, quia, cum esset alia dies quam feria V, ipse dixit fratribus quod credebatur feriam V esse. Unus ex illis fratribus reservavit particulam unam de illo pane. Et post mortem beati Francisci aliqui, qui gustaverunt de eo in suis infirmitatibus, liberati sunt statim.”

1318, it makes abundant use of the documentary material of the companions of Saint Francis, particularly of the scrolls of brother Leo, and therefore is a privileged witness among the biographical sources for the life of Saint Francis:

“One night blessed Francis was so afflicted with the pains of his illness that he could barely rest or sleep that night. In the morning, when his pain eased a bit, he had all the brothers staying in that place called to him, and when they were seated around him, he considered them and regarded them as representatives of all the brothers.

Placing his right hand of the head (Gn 48:17) of each one, he blessed all who were present and absent in the religion and all who were to come to the Order until the end of the world. He seemed to feel sorry for himself because he was not able to see all his sons and brothers before his death.

Desiring to imitate his Lord and Master in death as he had so perfectly done in his life, he ordered *loaves of bread* to be brought to him. *And he blessed* (Mt 26:26) them and had them broken into many little pieces because he was unable to do so because he was extremely weak. Taking them, he offered each of the brothers a little piece, telling them to eat all of it. Just as the Lord *desired to eat* (Lk 22:15) with the apostles as a sign of His love on the Thursday before His death, in the same way His perfect imitator, blessed Francis, wanted to show the same sign of love to his brothers.

And it is clear he wished to do this in imitation of Christ, because he later asked if the day were a Thursday. And since it was another day, he said he thought it was Thursday.

One of the brothers kept a piece of that bread, and after the death of blessed Francis many sick people who tasted it were immediately freed from their illnesses.”³¹

The text of the *Speculum* insists upon the verb *imitari* (to imitate). Francis, “desiring to *imitate* his Lord and Master in death as he had so perfectly done in his life, he ordered loaves of bread to be brought to him.” Again, “before His death, in the same way His perfect *imitator*, blessed Francis, wanted to show the same sign of love to his brothers.” These references to the imitation of Christ’s gestures and attitudes are underlined in the *Speculum* in such a way as to make us understand the importance of this source that comes from the first quarter of the 14th century, when the theme of conformity to Christ and imitation of his actions were part and parcel of Franciscan spirituality, particularly in the family of the Spirituals, from which the *Speculum* draws its inspiration.

The characteristic elements of the supper of the Lord are all evident in these three texts, which are related to one another since they come from the same source and witness of the companions of the Saint. We have noted how Francis re-lives the experience of the last supper of the Lord in the re-enactment of the same paschal meal some time before he died. In this representation, that has all the characteristics of a paraliturgical celebration,

³¹ SP 88 (FAED III, 336-337). Latin Text: *Speculum Perfectionis*, 88, ed. Sabatier, in *Fontes Franciscani*, 1995-1996: “Volens autem in morte imitari suum Dominum et magistrum quem in vita sua perfecte fuerat imitatus, jussit apportari sibi *panes et benedixit* (cfr. Mt 26,26) eos, atque in plurimas particulas fecit frangi, quia prae nimia debilitate frangere non valebat. Et accipiens unicuique fratrum porrexit particulam, praecipiens ut totam quilibet manducaret. Unde sicut Dominus ante mortem suam voluit in signum dilectionis cum apostolis quinta feria manducare, ita perfectus imitator ipsius beatus Franciscus voluit idem signum dilectionis ostendere fratribus suis. Et quod ad similitudinem Christi voluerit hoc facere patet manifeste, quia postea quaesivit si erat tunc feria quinta. Et cum esset tunc alia dies dixit quod putabat esse feriam quintam. Unus autem ex illis fratribus reservavit unam particulam de ipso pane, et post mortem beati Francisci multi infirmi qui de ipso gustaverunt statim fuerunt a suis infirmitatibus liberati.”

Francis renders present to the brothers the dramatic moment of the passing over (*transitus*) of Christ, in order to insert his personal *transitus* from this life within the Christological context of the paschal mystery.

One can ask where we can find the link between these texts of the Sources and what we have already seen in the writings of the Saint, regarding the figure of Adam, the first sinner, and of the new Adam, Christ, redeemer of humankind. We shall now try to make this element more evident, since it does not seem to have been neglected neither by Francis nor by his biographers.

The “last supper” of Saint Francis in the light of the new Adam

A synthetic analysis of the life of Francis of Assisi as it is narrated by the biographical sources of the 13th century, shows that the Saint often accomplished symbolic gestures modelled upon those of the biblical narratives of the Old Testament and upon those of Christ in the New Testament. The moment of the *transitus* of the Saint is full of these symbolic actions, which we have already underlined. Francis blessed his brothers like Jacob who, on his deathbed, blessed the twelve tribes of Israel. Francis wanted that the brothers make him lay down naked on the naked earth, and in this way re-enacted the death of Christ, poor and naked on the cross, but also the episode of the creation of the first man, Adam, who was naked in front of God until the moment when he distanced himself from his Creator by sinning, and who was destined to return to the earth from which he had been made. Francis asked his brothers to bring him bread, just as Christ had requested the apostles in the episode of the miraculous multiplication of loaves. Francis blessed and broke the bread just as Christ did during the last supper on Holy Thursday, and in this way he instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood. Francis commanded his brothers to share the pieces of bread as a sign of love and communion between themselves, in the same spirit of Christ during the last supper and also during the miracle of the multiplication of loaves. Francis asked the brothers to read out aloud to him the texts of John 13:1ff, which speak of the great commandment of love, the *mandatum*, that Christ leaves to his apostles before his passion and death, and which he expresses particularly in the humble gesture of the washing of the feet of the disciples, always within the context of the paschal meal on Holy Thursday.

In all these symbolic actions Francis succeeds in making emerge in his own person the figure of Christ, new Adam, who restores the image of the first Adam that had been tarnished by sin. Man, created to the image and likeness of the Creator, but also of Christ, Word of the Father, prototype of the entire creation, becomes the centre of creation and of history of salvation. God blesses Adam in his offspring, and also when man distances himself from his Creator, God does not abandon him forever, but promises a new blessing in the same human offspring, which would bruise the head of the infernal serpent. The personal responsibility of man regarding his sin is underlined by Francis, as we have seen, in the fifth *Admonition*, where he affirms that not even the devil has crucified the Lord, but that man did so with his vices and sins.

The remedy to all these evils was the human nature of the Incarnate Word in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who restored the image of the old Adam in his paschal

mystery. Francis wanted his friars to understand how, during his supper, agony, passion, death on the cross and resurrection, Jesus restored to man the dignity that he had lost because of original sin. In this way Christ becomes the new Adam, and in him every man can find once again the dignity and harmony with creation, that he had lost in the earthly paradise. In his person, Francis regained this dignity and harmony with creation, since he united himself to Christ in a sublime way, in such a way that he became conformed to Him in everything.³²

During the last supper Christ anticipated his paschal mystery of his death on the cross. By accomplishing the same actions of Christ during the supper, Francis wanted to re-live the extreme moment of his love towards the brothers. We can say that the supper of Holy Thursday signified the opposite of the situation of the sin of the first Adam. In the earthly paradise the first Adam was tempted by the devil to eat of the forbidden fruit, and thus he generated the entire human race in the spiritual death of original sin and in the corporal death that was its consequence. In the Cenacle Christ invited his disciples to eat His body and drink His blood, and loved them to the very end by washing their feet as a slave would do. In these actions Christ anticipated his sacrificial death on the cross, in such a way as to offer himself as the true paschal lamb in order to confound the devil with the true death of his body of flesh on the cross, in which he was hiding his divinity. In this way Christ donated to men eternal life that wins over sin and death. In this way the eating of the forbidden fruit that led Adam to sin and death was changed in the eating of the bread of life during the paschal meal of Christ, the new Adam. Francis, who was going to accomplish his passage from death to life, wanted to re-live this dimension in his person and in that of his brothers that stood around him, and in this way he himself became, in some way, the figure of Christ, the new Adam, who took away the sin of the old Adam. In the Bible the act of eating is a sign of communion, in the case of Adam of communion in sin and in death, and in the case of Christ, of communion in grace and in life.

The paschal passage from death to life is presented by Francis as a participation in the paschal mystery the dead and risen Christ. The biographers describe Francis who, during his life represented the figure of Christ crucified, particularly in the sign of the stigmata that he carried in his body,³³ and during his death he already represented the

³² The conformity of Francis with Christ is expressed in a special way in 2C 219 (FAED II, 389): “At the very same hour that evening the glorious father appeared to another brother of praiseworthy life, who was at that moment absorbed in prayer. He appeared to him clothed in a purple dalmatic and followed by an innumerable crowd of people. Several separated themselves from the crowd and said to that brother: ‘Is this not Christ, brother?’ And he replied: ‘It is he.’ Others asked him again, saying: ‘Isn’t this Saint Francis?’ And the brother likewise replied that it was he. For it really seemed to that brother, and to the whole crowd, as if Christ and Saint Francis were one person.” Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, 634-635: “Alteri fratri vitae laudabilis, tunc temporis orationi suspenso, nocte illa et hora, gloriosus pater purpurea dalmatica vestitus apparuit, quem turba hominum innumera sequebatur. A qua se plurimi sequestrantes, dixerunt ad fratrem: «Nonne hic est Christus, o frater?» Et ille dicebat: «Ipse est.» Alii vero iterum perquirebant dicentes: «Nonne hic est sanctus Franciscus?» Frater ipsum esse similiter respondebat. Videbatur revera fratri et omnium comitantium turbae, quod Christi et beati Francisci una persona foret.”

³³ LMj 14,1 (FAED II, 640): “*Now fixed with Christ to the cross* (Gal 2:19), in both body and spirit, Francis not only burned with a seraphic love into God but also *thirsted* (Jn 19:28) with Christ crucified for the multitude of those to be saved. Since he could not walk because of the nails protruding from his feet, he had his half-dead body carried *through the towns and villages* (Lk 8:1) to arouse others to *carry the cross* (Lk 9,23) of Christ.”

candour of resurrection.³⁴ Bonaventure speaks about this passage in an important text of his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, which could be applied to the *transitus* of Francis:

“Whoever turns his face fully to the Mercy Seat and with faith, hope and love, devotion, admiration, exultation, appreciation, praise and joy beholds him hanging upon the cross, such a one makes the Pasch, that is, the passover, with Christ. By the staff of the cross he passes over the Red Sea, going from Egypt into the desert, where he will taste the hidden manna; and with Christ he rests in the tomb, as if dead to the outer world, but experiencing, as far as is possible in this wayfarer’s state, what is said on the cross to the thief who adhered to Christ: *Today you shall be with me in paradise* (Lk 23:43).”³⁵

For Bonaventure this state is the final stage of the journey into God, which departs from the reality of the creatures, to go into that of the soul with its faculties of intellect and will, and then elevates itself to God, One and Three, and to God who is Love. At the centre of the journey stands the key to understand the whole mystery of the itinerary. The key opens the door to lead into the mystery of God who is Christ crucified in his paschal mystery. Participation in this mystery leads one to the sabbatical repose and to the state of ecstasy that Francis tasted in the episode of the stigmatisation on La Verna.

In this light Francis truly becomes the new man, recreated to the image and likeness of Christ. The invitation of Christ to the good thief, namely to enter with him into paradise, echoes the turning upside down of the tragic situation of Adam who was expelled from the earthly paradise when he went against God’s commandment. Christ, the new Adam, restores peace and serenity of paradise for man, who with him passes from tribulations and sufferings in order to enter into the peace of mystical union through the mystery of the cross. The passage of Francis from this world to the Father was expressed in such an itinerary towards the peace of paradise, promised to Adam who is regenerated in Christ. In this way, the body of the Poverello, who rested naked on the naked earth, with the signs of the nails in his hands, feet and the wound in his side, becomes a faithful icon of the dead and glorified body of Christ, and is vested with the candour of the resurrection that does not cancel the signs of the wounds that have healed the wounds of the first Adam.

The experience of Holy Thursday of Saint Clare

³⁴ IC 112 (FAED I, 280): “In fact, there appeared in him the form of the cross and passion of the spotless lamb (1Pt 1:19) who washed away the sins of the world (Rv 1:5). It seemed he had just been taken down from the cross, his hands and feet pierced by nails and his right side wounded by a lance (Jn 19:34). They looked at his skin which was black before but now shining white in its beauty, promising the rewards of the blessed resurrection.”

³⁵ ST. BONAVENTURE, *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis*, Translation and introduction by Ewert Cousins, Preface by Ignatius Brady, Paulist Press, New Jersey 1978, 111-112. Latin text: *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, Vol. V, 312: “Ad quod propitiatorium qui aspiciat plena conversione vultus, aspiciendo eum in cruce suspensum per fidem, spem et caritatem, devotionem, admirationem, exultationem, appretiationem, laudem et iubilationem; pascha, hoc est transitum, cum eo facit, ut per virgam crucis transeat mare rubrum, ab Aegypto intrans desertum, ubi gustet manna absconditum, et cum Christo requiescat in tumultu quasi exterius mortuus, sentiens tamen, quantum possibile est secundum statum viae, quod in cruce dictum est latroni cohaerenti Christo: *Hodie mecum eris in paradiso* (Lc 23:43).”

God placed Adam in a profound torpor and from his side He took a rib and created Eve, mother of all living human beings. The Fathers of the Church often speak about Adam and Christ, Eve and Mary. In the Franciscan Sources we can also see the link Francis-Clare within the context of the celebration of the supper of Holy Thursday and the meditation of the death of Christ on the cross.

The *Legend of Saint Clare*, written in 1255, two years after the death of the Saint, which occurred on 11th August 1253, presents an interesting episode which, in some way, is linked with our theme:

“Once, the day of the most sacred Supper arrived, in which *the Lord loved His own until the end* (Jn 13:1). Near evening, as the agony of the Lord was approaching, Clare, sad and afflicted, shut herself up in the privacy of her cell. While in her own prayer she was accompanying the praying Saviour and when *saddened even to death* (Mt 26:38) she experienced the effect of His sadness, she was filled at once with the memory of His capture and of the whole mockery and she sank down on her bed. All that night and the following day, she was so absorbed that she remained out of her senses. She seemed to be joined to Christ and to be otherwise totally insensible always focusing the light of her eyes on one thing.

A certain sister close to her often went to see if she might want something and always found her the same way. But with Friday night coming on, the devoted daughter lit a candle and, with a sign not a word, reminded her mother of the command of Saint Francis. For the saint had commanded her that no day should pass without some food.

With that [sister] standing by, Clare, as if returning from another world, offered this word: ‘What need is there for a candle? Isn’t it daytime?’ ‘Mother,’ she replied, ‘the night has gone and a day has passed, and another night has returned!’ To which Clare said: ‘May that vision be blessed, most dear daughter! Because after having desired it for so long, it has been given to me. But, be careful not to tell anyone about that vision while I am still in the flesh.’”³⁶

We shall note here only some parallel elements between the texts of the Sources of the life of Saint Francis we have already seen and this text. The anonymous author of the *Legenda Sanctae Clarae virginis* notes that Clare had this mystical experience during the night of Holy Thursday, and makes reference to the text of Jn 13:1, as well as to that of Mk 14:34, where Jesus retires in Gethsemane for his agony and passion. Clare appears “joined (literally nailed) to Christ and to be otherwise totally insensible” to all that was

³⁶ *LegCl* 31, in *Clare of Assisi. The Lady. Early Documents* (CAED), revised edition and translation by R.J. Armstrong, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 2006, 307-308. Latin Text: *Legenda sanctae Clarae, virginis*, in *Fontes Franciscani*, 2433-2434: “Advenerat quodam tempore dies sacratissimae Coenae, qua Dominus *in fine dilexerat suos* (cfr. Ioa 13,1). Circa sero, appropinquante Domini agonia, Clara contristata et maesta, in cellae secretarium se reclusit. Cumque orantem Dominum orans prosequeretur, et *tristis usque ad mortem anima* (cfr. Mt 26,38) tristitiae illius hausisset affectum, iam iamque captionis et totius illusionis memoria debriata, lecto resedit. Tota igitur nocte illa et die sequenti sic absorpta, sic a seipsa permanet aliena, ut irreverberatis circa unum semper intenta luminibus, confixa Christo, ac prorsus insensibilis videretur. Redit familiaris quaedam filia saepe ad ipsam, si forte aliquid vellet, et semper eodem modo se habere reperit. Nocte vero diei sabbati veniente, filia devota candelam accendit, et praeceptum S. Francisci, ad matris memoriam signo, non verbo reducit. Praeceperat enim sanctus, ne ullum sine commestione transiret diem. Illa igitur assistente, Clara quasi aliunde rediens, hoc protulit verbum: «Quae candelae necessitas? Numquid non dies est?». «Mater, ait illa, nox abiit, et dies transivit, noxque altera rediit». Cui Clara: «Benedictus sit somnus iste, carissima filia; quoniam diu optatus, donatus est mihi. Sed cave ne somnum istum cuiquam referas, dum vixero ipsa in carne»”.

happening around her. Her prolonged ecstasy made her lose the sense of time, just like the mystical experience of the “last supper” of Francis had made him lose sense of time (he thought that it was a Thursday the day on which he had shared bread with the brothers). If we enter into the dimension of the ecstasy and mystical union with Christ nailed to the cross, which we have already seen described by Bonaventure in the *Itinerarium mentis*, the vision of Clare was an image of the death that she wanted to taste with Christ, but which for her became a paschal experience. Clare also appears as a redeemed Eve, as the one who stands close to Francis, and who ennobles human nature in a wholesome way in the light of the paschal mystery of Christ.

The same episode is narrated in a poetic form in the *Versified Legend of Saint Clare*, which depends upon this episode of the *Legenda*, and which we quote in the notes for ulterior analysis.³⁷

³⁷ English text in CAED 232-234. Latin text in *Legenda versificata sanctae Clarae*, 27, 888-925, in *Fontes Franciscani*, 2374-2375:

“Accidit, et recitare iuvat, quod tempore quodam
 Advenit Cene Domini revolutio sacra;
 Noxque propinquabat, qua proditor ille Magistrum
 Vendere non timuit, praesumpsit pacis alumpnum
 Corruptor pacis sub pacis prodere signo,
 Et tenebris dampnare diem, caligine lucem
 Perdere, mortali contractu vendere vitam.
 Iamque pavor mortis instabat et ille cruentus
Sudor agonie, qua *Patrem* Filius orat
 Humanum sapiens *calicis* (cfr. Lc 22,42-44) quod transeat [h]austus.
 Secretum celle petiit, se virgo reclusit.
 Orans prosequitur orantem, mestaque mestum;
 Captio crudelis, illusio turpis, amara
 Que tulit ille pius et mansuetissimus agnus,
 Virignis in mentem subeunt, vehementius herent.
 Singula dum recolit, dum mens se cogit ad ista,
 Per totam noctem pia virgo diemque sequentem
 Extra se rapitur, sua lumina cogit in unum.
 Affectus vigilant anime, faciuntque silere
 Corporis offitia; peragit mens otia sancta,
 Dum sic fixa manet, dum sic immobilis extat.
 Sepe redit famula matrem visura, videtque
 Immotam stare; non in diversa feru[n]tur
 Vultus. Cumque dies Veneris transacta fuisset,
 Noxque sequeretur que prevenit illa beata
 Sabbata, devot repetit tunc filia matrem.
 Accendit lumen, memorat per signa statutum
 Id, quod vir sanctus dudum preceperat illi,
 Quod nulla sibi virgo die postponeret esum.
 Evigilat mater, quasi tunc aliunde rediret:
 «Non opus est», inquit, «candela; nonne dies est?»
 Respondet famula domine: «Nox transiit illa,
 Succedensque dies abiit; nox altera venit».
 Tunc sibi mater ait: «Benedictus sit sopor iste,
 Quem nimis optavi; tandem votiva recepi!».
 Ne tamen hinc fa[u]stus surgat, vel laude tumescat
 Humana, venit mater dixitque puella:
 «Hoc dum corpus ago, caveas exponere cuiquam»”.

Conclusion

In the cycle of frescoes by Giotto in the upper Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, where the life of Saint Francis according to the *Legenda Maior* of Saint Bonaventure is depicted, we are struck by the image of Francis who lays off his clothes in front of bishop Guido of Assisi, and hands them over to his father Pietro di Bernardone, remaining naked in the hands of the Father in heaven. This is probably the most beautiful image of Francis who becomes a new man in his conformity to Christ, the new Adam, who restores the beauty and innocence to the first Adam, with whom the entire humankind was in a state of solidarity in sin. In the naked Francis at the beginning of his conversion, and in the naked dead Francis lying on the naked earth after having celebrated his “last supper” with the brothers, we have one of the clearest examples of the restoration of the image and likeness of God in sinful man, in Adam expelled from Paradise, who becomes a new man when he finds the true tree of life in the cross of Christ, the new Adam, and regains his lost dignity, and who lives the paschal experience of death and resurrection, celebrated in the mystery of the supper that the Lord shared with his disciples on Holy Thursday.