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EDITORIAL

On 17th and 18th April Pope Benedict XVI will come for a short pastoral visit to Malta on the occasion of the 1950th anniversary of the arrival of the Apostle Saint Paul to our shores in AD 60. Apart from the historical and religious significance of the event, that underlines the two millennia of Christianity of the Maltese people, who have been known as a bulwark of Catholicism, the papal visit should be for us all an occasion for reflection upon the role of the Catholic Church in a Maltese society that is radically changed.

We are proud to be a European nation, we are enjoying a fairly good standard of living, we have overcome the initial difficulties of a parliamentary democracy. At the same time we are aware that we are facing enormous problems that we never dreamt of some years back. The influx of illegal immigrants and their insertion in our society has been a great challenge. So will be the insertion of the small, but ever-growing Muslim community. For the first time in our long history, we have witnessed xenophobic manifestations. We have seen traditional family values crumble, with increasing numbers of separated and divorced couples, single parents, cohabitation, a pro-abortion mentality among young people, the de-facto acceptance of the normality of an openly gay and lesbian way of life. The Church has had to face the problem of long years of detachment from the younger generations, the lack of obedience of some of its priests to their superiors, and also some cases of open scandal on the part of members of the clergy and religious.

And yet some people still think that nothing serious is happening. They still consider Malta to be a staunchly Catholic country that will welcome the Pope with open arms and with no sense of criticism or even hostility towards the Church. They regard any open discussion of moral or social problems as taboo, and prefer to continue living in a land of dreams in past traditional religious customs which are, however, stained with petty piques and mutual distrust unbecoming of a country that prides itself with being Catholic and civilised.

In the midst of this social and religious upheaval prophetic voices are indeed rare. Normally they are relegated to silence, or have had to leave the island in search of a better audience. The Franciscan message of Gospel radicality is, unfortunately, very weak and barely audible in such a situation. And yet one would expect us Franciscans to be at the forefront in addressing these social and religious problems with the courage of facing up to our own internal problems of inertia and lack of Gospel witness. Unfortunately we still prefer to close up ourselves in our seemingly untouchable fortress-like structures that go beyond our friaries, and also involve our way of thinking.

It is high time we wake up from our sweet slumber and face reality with courage and humility. The Church in Malta is in for a hard time, and we are a part of it and cannot pretend to stand aloof as spectators. After all the pomp and festivities of the papal visit have passed we will have to embark on a new approach if we are to survive and if our message is to be credible. The signs given during the papal visit will be an indication of where we should be going, if only we have the courage to discover them and not pretend to just suffocate any dissenting voices.

Noel Muscat ofm

«INDUITUR SANCTUS DEI LEVITICIS ORNAMENTIS»

SAINT FRANCIS, DEACON?

Noel Muscat ofm

It is a well-known fact that Saint Francis was never ordained as a priest. However, many have regarded him as having been a deacon, because of some references to him in the mediaeval Sources of his life, which present him wearing a dalmatic and singing the Gospel, as is the case of the Christmas Mass at Greccio. The same sources state that, when the brothers went to present their primitive *Forma Vitae* to Pope Innocent III at the Lateran in 1209, they all received the ecclesiastical tonsure. Subsequent reflections upon this fact have convinced many that Francis himself was ordained deacon, and in fact the Franciscan calendar for a certain number of years awarded him the title of deacon.¹

Contemporary scholars have voiced doubts regarding the true nature of Francis' diaconate, and regarding whether we can truly call Francis a deacon in the full theological sense of the term. In order to try to clarify this rather complex question, we shall first present the texts in the Franciscan Sources that speak about Francis as a deacon, and then try to interpret them in the light of mediaeval ecclesiastical institutions.²

Saint Francis, deacon, in the Sources

The episode of the Christmas Mass at Greccio has been instrumental in the spreading of the notion that Saint Francis was a deacon. We shall first present the various texts that refer to this fact. The most important is the text of Thomas of Celano in his *Life of Saint Francis*, 85-86:

"Finally, the day of joy as drawn near, the time of exultation has come. From many different places the brethren have been called. As they could, the men and women of that land with exultant hearts prepare candles and torches to light up that night whose shining star has enlightened every day and year. Finally, the holy man of God comes and, finding all things prepared, he saw them and was glad. Indeed, the manger is prepared, the hay is carried in, and the ox and the ass are led to the spot. There simplicity is given a place of honour, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of

Greccio is made a new Bethlehem. The night is lit up like day, delighting both man and beast. The people arrive, ecstatic at this new mystery of new joy. The forest amplifies the cries and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd. The brothers sing, giving God due praise, and the whole night abounds with jubilation. The holy man of God stands before the manger, filled with heartfelt sighs, contrite in his piety, and overcome with wondrous joy. Over the manger the solemnities of the Mass are celebrated and the priest enjoys a new consolation. The holy man of God is dressed in the vestments of the Levites, since he was a Levite, and with full voice sings the holy gospel."³

Celano does not say that Francis was a deacon, but he uses the term Levite. Indeed, this was the term normally used by the liturgy to indicate the office of deacon. Saint Lawrence is celebrated in this way in the Roman liturgy.⁴ The signs of being a Levite, that is, of functioning as a deacon during Mass, are two, namely the vestments proper to deacons (the stole and dalmatic) and the proclamation or singing of the Gospel. For us, who are accustomed to the post-Vatican II liturgical rites, these functions of the deacon during Mass are quite normal. But for those who remember the Tridentine Mass before Vatican II, it was normal to have a sung or solemn Mass in which three priests would be vested, one functioning as the celebrant, vested in the chasuble, the other two who would function as deacon and subdeacon, vested in the dalmatic and tunic, and singing the Gospel and Epistle respectively. So it was normal in the Middle Ages to have the functions of deacon played by other ministers who were not really ordained deacons, or who were priests. We shall be seeing this at greater depth in order to ascertain whether Francis was truly ordained as deacon, or else was simply functioning as a deacon during Mass.

Julian of Speyer, in the episode of the Christmas Mass at Greccio in his *Vita Sancti Francisci*, 54, also notes that Francis was a Levite, and that he acted as a deacon:

"Finally the holy night arrived. Blessed Francis was there with many of his brothers gathered around him. The hay in the manger is prepared, the ox and the ass are arranged around the manger, and the vigil celebration begins with joy. A great multitude of peo-

ple stream together from various places, the night is filled with an unaccustomed joy and made luminous by candles and torches. And so, with a new ritual, the festival of new Bethlehem is celebrated. The brothers also paid their debt of praise to the Lord, and all present acclaimed him with new songs of praise. Blessed Francis, however, was standing before the manger full of sighs of joy and suffused by an indescribable sweetness. Finally, when Solemn Mass was celebrated above the manger, the holy Levite of God, dressed in festive vestments proclaimed the gospel with a sonorous voice and then with a voice flowing with honey he preached to the people about the poor King born in Bethlehem. Truly, he was so overcome by sweet devotion toward

preme Pontiff. He had a manger prepared, hay carried in and an ox and an ass led to the spot. The brethren are summoned, the people arrive, the forest amplifies with their cries, and that venerable night is rendered brilliant and solemn by a multitude of bright lights and by resonant and harmonious hymns of praise. The man of God stands before the manger, filled with piety, bathed in tears, and overcome with joy. A solemn Mass is celebrated over the manger, with Francis, a levite of Christ, chanting the holy Gospel. Then he preaches to the people standing around him about the birth of the poor King, whom, whenever he means to call him, he called in his tender love, the Babe from Bethlehem.”⁶

Bonaventure adds a new note to the episode,



Saint Francis, Assisi

the infancy of that King, that whenever he had to speak the name of Jesus Christ, he would, as if stuttering, call him ‘the babe of Bethlehem,’ out of an excess of loving tenderness.”⁵

The last reference to the Greccio episode, indicating that Francis functioned as a deacon during Mass, is given to us by Saint Bonaventure in the *Major Legend of Saint Francis* 10,7:

“It happened, three years prior to his death, that he decided to celebrate at the town of Greccio the memory of the birth of the Child Jesus with the greatest possible solemnity, in order to arouse devotion. So that this would not be considered a type of novelty, he petitioned for and obtained permission from the Su-

namely that Francis obtained permission from Pope Honorius III to hold that particular celebration in Greccio. It might have been necessary to ask for such a permit, given that the Mass was not celebrated in a sacred place, that is, in a church, but in a stable, and the altar was improvised over the manger. The representation of scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary was common in the Middle Ages, but seemingly not within the context of a liturgical celebration such as a Christmas Mass. One could state that Francis truly blended liturgy with popular devotion in this celebration, and he himself acted as the one who took the initiative and who proclaimed the joy of Christ’s birth by singing the Gospel and preaching. Now these are offices proper to

deacons. However, the text does not state that Francis, as a deacon, preached *during* Mass. It states, *praedicat deinde* (then he preaches), and thus indicates that Francis delivered his homily after Mass had been concluded. This was a normal procedure, and it could very well signify that Francis preached as he would normally do, that is, as a cleric deputed to do so by the Church, but not necessarily as an ordained deacon, and certainly not as a priest, since we know that he was not a priest.

The deacon's function of chanting the Gospel during high Mass has to be seen against the mediaeval liturgical usage. We shall return to this theme in the second subheading of our paper.

Another reference to Francis who sang the Gospel during Mass is that given by the *Anonymous of Perugia* and the *Legend of Three Companions*. Both speak about the function of singing Gospel during the Mass celebrated by Cardinal Hugolino at the Portiuncula, on the occasion of the general chapter, but they say nothing regarding the fact that Saint Francis sang the Gospel because he was a deacon. Let us take a look at these two Sources:

The *Anonymous of Perugia*, 43 states: "The Lord inspired one of the cardinals, Hugolino, the bishop of Ostia, who loved blessed Francis and his brothers very much, not merely as a friend, but even more as a father. When blessed Francis heard of his reputation, he approached him [...] Then he invited him to come to the chapter of the brothers at Pentecost. He agreed and came each year. Whenever he came, all the brothers gathered at the chapter would go in procession to meet him. As they were coming, he would dismount from his horse and go on foot with the brothers to the church because of the devotion he had for them. Afterward he would preach to them and celebrate Mass during which blessed Francis would chant the Gospel."⁷

The parallel text in the *Legend of Three Companions*, 61 states: "After the Lord Cardinal John of Saint Paul had died, the Lord inspired one of the cardinals, Hugolino, at that time the bishop of Ostia, to cherish, protect, and support Francis and his brothers. With burning intensity, he held them in awe as if he were the father of them all [...] Then blessed Francis, thanking God, told the lord cardinal: 'My lord, I gladly want to have you as the father and protector of our religion, and I want all my brothers to have you always remembered in their prayers.' Then blessed Francis asked him to be present at the chapter of the brothers at Pentecost. He immediately agreed graciously, and, from then on, was present every year at their chapter. When he came to the chapter, all the brothers who had gathered at the chapter would go in procession to meet him. As they were approaching, he would dismount from his horse and go on foot with them to the church of Saint Mary. Afterward he preached to them and celebrated Mass, during which the man of God, Francis, would chant the Gospel."⁸

There is another episode in which Francis is represented by the biographers as being vested in the vest-

ments of a deacon. This is the episode that has inspired the anonymous painter (Stefano Fiorentino?) known as the "Maestro delle Vele" (Master of the vaults) in the presentation of the *Gloriosus Franciscus* in one of the vaults above the altar of the lower basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi (1315-1320). The Saint is depicted wearing a splendid purple dalmatic and seated upon a throne. The account is given to us by Thomas of Celano in *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, 219:

"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."⁹

This episode shows that, in 1246-1247, when Thomas of Celano was writing the *Memoriale in desiderio animae*, the idea of the conformity (*conformitas*) between Francis and Christ was already developing within Franciscan circles. Francis is depicted in his *apotheosis* as wearing a deacon's dalmatic of royal purple, but at the same time as being so Christ-like that it seems that Christ himself in his glory wears the dalmatic.¹⁰

Bernard of Besse, in the *Liber de Laudibus sancti Francisci* (*The Book of Praises of Saint Francis*), chapter 8, presents the same episode:

"In the very hour of his passing away, he appeared to – among others who saw him ascending into heaven – a holy brother who was absorbed in prayer. He was dressed in a purple dalmatic, accompanied by an innumerable crowd of followers like the greatest of princes in the wonderful beauty of glory. Arriving at a very beautiful place, a palace of amazing size and of a singular abundance of special delights, he entered there with a glorious company of brothers."¹¹

The fact that Francis is depicted as entering heaven vested as a deacon indicates that for the mediaeval biographers, he was known to have been a deacon, or at least, to have functioned as a deacon during liturgical celebrations. What remains at stake now is to ascertain whether Francis was truly ordained as a deacon, or else whether he acted as a deacon during the liturgy because of a special concession by ecclesiastical discipline. In other words, we have to see whether we can truly call Francis a deacon in the contemporary sense of the term in canon law, namely, as a member of the clergy who has received the sacrament of ordination to the state of deacon, and to be more precise, to the state of a permanent deacon, given that Francis was never ordained a priest.

In what way was Saint Francis a deacon?

The Sources we have just quoted speak about Saint Francis as having functioned as a deacon during the celebration of the Christmas Mass in Greccio. It is now, however, necessary for us to understand what exactly the biographers meant in the 13th century, when they describe Francis as *leviticis ornamentis indutus*. A short, but good article by André Callebaut, written way back in 1927, provides some interesting insights.¹²

Luke Wadding states that Francis was made a deacon in 1210, on the occasion of the approval of the primitive *Forma Vitae* by Pope Innocent III.¹³ This thesis was not accepted by the Bollandist Suyskens, who agrees that Francis was, indeed a deacon, but that we have no inkling as to when he became one in the Sources. In a study published in *Acta Sanctorum*, Suyskens states that Francis received the diaconate in an intermediate date between the approval of the first Rule in 1209 and the death of Cardinal John of Saint Paul in 1215, or maybe around the death of Innocent III in 1216. He also states that it was not the Pope who conferred the subdiaconate and the diaconate to Francis, but rather bishop Guido of Assisi.

The fact that the 1924 edition of Roman Martyrology gives the title of *Levita* to Saint Francis, indicates that the Church did not officially always recognise Francis as a deacon, whereas the Sources are quite explicit in indicating that Francis was a deacon. The new edition of the Roman-Seraphic breviary has abolished the title of deacon that was normally given to Saint Francis. This is an indication that there exists no universal agreement as to the nature of Francis' diaconate, or to be more precise, as to whether Francis was actually ordained as a deacon or simply functioned as one for practical reasons.

The document entitled *The Identity of the Franciscan Order in the Moment of its Foundation*, published on 23rd December 1998 by the Conference of the Ministers General of the First Order and TOR,¹⁴ explains the fact that Saint Francis was deacon by analysing what being a deacon meant during the 13th century. The group of scholars who worked upon the document also addressed the issue of Francis' diaconate:

"The affirmation that Francis was a deacon (but when was he ordained?) does not contradict the facts we have underlined above. On the contrary, with all probability, we must explain the 'diaconate' of Francis according to this order of ideas. We cannot exclude that Francis' diaconate (which is more presumed than proved) has to be understood against the faculty that the Benedictine Rule conceded and concedes to the abbot to sing the Gospel (with some words of commentary), wearing liturgical vestments (chapter 11). This

could be the meaning of the expression *leviticis ornamentis indutus* used by Celano (1C 86), when Francis, making use of the faculty given by common law to a lay superior, sang the Gospel at Greccio during the Christmas night Mass. We should not forget that, at the time of Francis, the permanent diaconate had fallen in disuse. All this, obviously, has nothing to do with the affirmation that Benedict and Francis renounced to the priesthood on the grounds of humility (they did not even commence any formative journey towards priesthood)."

The *Rule of Saint Benedict*, in chapter 11, states that "the Abbot shall read the lesson from the book of the Gospels" at the end of the night office of Matins. However it does not mention anything regarding the fact that the Abbot wears any particular liturgical vestments, and certainly the reference is to the office of Matins and not to Mass. When I personally asked a Benedictine monk to explain to me this particular liturgical usage outlined in the document I have quoted, he answered that he had never heard of such a liturgical custom in his Order.

A study of the history of the diaconate¹⁵ shows that, during the Middle Ages, the office of deacon had become, in Karl Rahner's words, "close to being legal fiction."

The Church from the 4th century till the time of Charlemagne gradually lost the original significance of the diaconate, as a specific ministry of charity in the community. The deacons began to abandon their original functions, and priests began to assume the liturgical duties that had previously been reserved for deacons. Already during the 5th century the ecclesiastical hierarchy was made up of bishops, priests and ministers of various ranks, that exercised functions that comprised the states of *ostiarius*, exorcist, lector, acolyte, subdeacon and deacon. Thus, by the time of Saint Francis, these ministries had become stepping-stones on the road to priesthood. In Rome, any Church official, by the 9th century, had to be at least a subdeacon. In cathedral churches the functions of the canon archdeacon absorbed all the duties that had formerly been the competence of deacons. Thus the diaconate became closer to the subdiaconate than to the priesthood as a state in the Church.

The diffusion of monasticism dealt another blow to the diaconate. Whereas during the early centuries the work of charity towards the poor was the sole competence of deacons, with the advent of monasticism new institutions flourished in aid of the poor, particularly in institutes of education and in new agricultural techniques. Thus the works of charity passed on from the deacon to the monk. This state of affairs was even more evident with the birth of the mendicant Orders, particularly the Friars Minor, whose vocation compelled them to minister to the poor by sharing their lot and working with them, and to serve the lepers and the sick.



Cammino San Francesco, Santuario, Grotta, Greccio

Another interesting factor regarding the diaconate was that, during the First Lateran Council (1123) and the Second Lateran Council (1139), the obligation of celibacy on priests was enforced, and was also extended to include deacons and subdeacons. Hence, the exercise of the diaconate asked for a celibate life that was characteristic in the case of monks and, later on, of mendicant religious. In this way the diaconate as a permanent institution in the Church was abandoned. This, in fact, is one of the problems regarding Francis' diaconate, since during the 13th century there were no permanent deacons in the Church in the way we know them today.

In the liturgy the deacon could only exercise some functions reserved to the candidates for priesthood. He became simply a person who had a liturgical function, that was not only his, but that could also be exercised by priests and that had to be shared by other ministers of inferior rank, like subdeacons, lectors, acolytes and the like.

What, therefore, can we state by way of conclusion regarding the fact that Francis is presented as a deacon by the Sources we have analysed? First of all, we have no proof that Francis was, in fact, ordained as a deacon, for the simple reason that the Sources are silent about this and because ordination to the diaconate was reserved to candidates for priesthood, and there was no state of permanent diaconate in the 13th century. What we can say is that Francis probably had received

some kind of permission to function as a deacon during liturgical celebrations in solemn moments within the confines of the fraternity, and these functions could well have been part and parcel of ecclesiastical mediaeval usage in monastic circles, that was then applied also to the mendicant Orders. Thus, in our contemporary mindset, Francis would never have been regarded as a cleric, but as a layman. However, in the mediaeval mindset, Francis was a *clericus*, since the state of cleric included also minor orders. As to how he acquired the permission to function as a deacon during Mass remains a mystery that cannot be solved, except by the supposition that Francis enjoyed some special privilege to this effect.

In his contribution to the question Callebaut raises an important point that cannot be overlooked. He states that, in his writings, Francis often speaks about reverence to the body and blood of the Lord and about the care that his friars were to show towards churches, altars, and sacred furnishings. When he admonishes his friars about this duty, Francis always uses the first person plural, as if he is including himself within the group of clerics, to whom he writes.

In his *Letter to the Clergy* Francis includes himself among the clerics and states: "Let all of us, clergymen, consider the great sin and the ignorance some have toward the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and His most holy names and written words that consecrate His Body."¹⁶



Benozzo Gozzoli, Greccio

When he writes to the whole Order, Francis addresses particular words to the brother priests, and includes himself among those who are deputed to the responsibility of the care of liturgical objects. Now this duty pertains in a particular way to the ministry or function of the deacon during Mass. These are the words of Saint Francis in the *Letter to the Entire Order*:

“We who are more especially charged with divine responsibilities must not only listen to and do what the Lord says but also care for the vessels and other liturgical objects that contain His holy words in order to impress on ourselves the sublimity of our Creator and our subjection to Him.”¹⁷

What is of more importance to us, however, is the spirit of service and love towards the poor that characterised Francis, and made him act as a true deacon in the theological sense of the term. His service to the lepers, his love to the brothers, his profound humility, all point to his direction. In the *Earlier Rule*, Francis refers to the name of the brothers as friars minor, and indicates the specific gesture of Christ who washes the disciples’ feet as a true deacon: “Let no one be called prior, but let everyone in general be called a friar minor. Let one wash the feet of the other.”¹⁸

The image of the *Gloriosus Franciscus* on the vault above the main altar of the lower Basilica of Saint Francis is truly symbolic. The Christ-like features of Saint Francis are represented in art by the figure of the deacon seated on a throne, to signify the regal qualities of service in the spirit of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, and who is thus the one who truly appears in the vestments of the Levites, and who Francis imitates inwardly in his humble spirit of service and outwardly when he appears to be *leviticis ornamentis indutus*.

ENDNOTES:

- 1 Cfr. *Catholic Encyclopaedia* on line at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm>. The Franciscan calendar has indicated that Francis was a deacon until fairly recently. The *Martyrologium Romanum*, on 4th October, also states that Francis was a *Levita*, that is, a deacon: *Assisii, in Umbria, natalis sancti Francisci, Levitae et Confessoris; qui trium Ordinum, scilicet Fratrum Minorum, Pauperum Dominarum, ac Fratrum et Sororum de Paenitentia Fundator exstitit*.
- 2 Regarding Francis as deacon, cfr. A. CALLEBAUT, “Saint François Lévite,” *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 20 (1927) 193-196; MARIANO D’ALATRI, *San Francesco d’Assisi, Diacono nella Chiesa*, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Rome 1977.
- 3 1C 85-86 (FAED I, 255-256). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di E. MENESTÒ e S. BRUFALI, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 1995, 360-361: *Appropinquavit autem dies laetitiae, tempus exultationis advenit. E pluribus locis vocati sunt fratres: viri et mulieres terrae illius, secundum posse suum, exsultantibus animis cereos et faces praeparant ad illuminandam noctem, quae scintillantem sidere dies omnes illuminavit et annos. Venit denique sanctus Dei et inveniens omnia praeparata, vidit et gavisus est. Et quidem praeparatur praesepeum, apponitur foenum, bos et asinus adducuntur. Honoratur ibi simplicitas, exaltatur paupertas, humilitas commendatur et quasi nova Bethlehem de Graecio facta est. Illuminatur nox ut dies, et hominibus atque animalibus deliciosa existit. Adveniunt populi et ad novum mysterium novis gaudiis adlaetentur. Personat silva voces et iubilantibus rupes respondent. Cantant fratres, Domino laudes debitas persolventes, et tota nox iubilantibus resultat. Stat sanctus Dei coram praesaepio, suspiriis plenus, pietate contritus et mirabili gaudio superflusus. Celebrantur missarum solemnities supra praesaepio et nova fruitur consolatione sacerdos. Induitur sanctus Dei leviticis ornamentis, quia levita erat, et voce sonora sanctum Evangelium cantat*.
- 4 *Breviarium Romanum*, 10th August, Feast of St. Lawrence, antiphon at *Magnificat*: *Levita Laurentius bonum opus operatus est*.
- 5 LJS 54 (FAED I, 406). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, 1074-1075: *Advenit denique nox sollemnis, aderatque beatus Franciscus, pluribus illic secum fratribus adunatis. Praeparato itaque praesaepio foenum imponitur; adducti bos et asinus ad praesaepium collocantur; et sic cum gaudio vigiliae celebres incohantur. Confluente igitur e diversis locis multitudine populi, facta est nox illa iucunditatis insolitae plena, facta est cereis et facibus luminosa, novoque ritu celebrantur Bethlehem novae sollemnia. Fratres quoque laudes Domino debitas exsolvebant; sed et cuncti qui aderant novis laetitiae canticis applaudebant. Stabat autem coram praesaepio beatus Franciscus; stabat, inquam, suspiriis prae gaudio plenus; stabat indicibili suavitate perfusus. Tandem super ipsum praesaepio sacra missarum aguntur sollemnia, cum et ipse sanctus Dei levita, sollemnibus ornamentis indutus, Evangelium voce sonora pronuntiat, ac deinde*

- populo de nato in Bethlehem Rege paupere melliflua praedicat. Tanta vero pietatis dulcedine circa iam dicti Regis afficiebatur infantiam, ut, si quando Iesum Christum nominare deberet, ipsum veluti balbutiens «puerum de Bethlehem» prae nimia amoris teneritudine nuncuparet.
- 6 LMj 10,7 (FAED II, 610). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, 868: *Contigit autem anno tertio ante obitum suum, ut memoriam nativitatis pueri Iesu ad devotionem excitandam apud castrum Graecii disponderet agere, cum quanto maiore solemnitate valeret. Ne vero hoc novitati posset adscribi, a Summo Pontifice petita et obtenta licentia, fecit praeparari praeseptum, apportari foenum, bovem et asinum ad locum adduci. Advocantur fratres, adveniunt populi, personat silva voces, et venerabilis illa nox luminibus copiosis et claris laudibusque sonoris et consonis et splendens efficitur et sollemnis. Stabat vir Dei coram praeseptio pietate repletus, respersus lacrimis et gaudio superfus. Celebrantur missarum solemnia super praesepe, levita Christi Francisco sacrum Evangelium decantante. Praedicat deinde populo circumstanti de nativitate pauperis Regis, quem, cum nominare vellet, puerum de Bethlehem prae amoris teneritudine nuncupabat.*
- 7 AP 43 (FAED II, 55-56). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, 1346-1347: *Post hoc inspiravit Dominus quendam de Cardinalibus nomine Hugolinum Episcopum Ostiensem, qui beatum Franciscum et fratres eius dilexit intime, non sicut amicus tantum, sed potius tamquam pater. Audita autem fama illius, accessit ad eum beatus Franciscus [...] Deinde rogavit eum ut venire ad Capitulum fratrum in Pentecosten dignaretur. At ille annuit, et annis singulis veniebat. Quando autem veniebat, exibant ei obviam processionaliter fratres omnes in Capitulo congregati. Ille vero, venientibus fratribus, descendebat de equo et ibat pedes cum fratribus usque ad Ecclesiam propter devotionem quam erga ipsos habebat. Et eis sermonem postmodum faciebat, et celebrabat Missam, et beatus Franciscus Evangelium decantabat.*
- 8 L3C 61 (FAED II, 104). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, 1433-1434: *Defuncto vero domino Iohanne de Sancto Paulo, inspiravit Dominus uni ex cardinalibus, nomine Hugolino, tunc Ostiensi episcopo, ut beatum Franciscum et fratres eius intime diligeret, protegeret et foveret. Qui revera ferventissime se habuit circa eos ac si esset omnium pater, immo plus quam patris carnalis dilectio ad carnales filios naturaliter se extendat, amor huiusmodi spiritualiter efferbuit ad virum Dei cum suis fratribus diligendum in Domino et fovendum [...] Tunc beatus Franciscus, gratias Deo agens, dixit eidem domino cardinali: «Libenter volo, domine, vos habere in patrem et protectorem nostrae religionis, et volo quod omnes fratres habeant vos semper in suis orationibus commendatum». Postea rogavit eum beatus Franciscus ut in Pentecoste dignaretur fratrum capitulo interesse. Qui statim benigne assensit, atque ex tunc interfuit eorum capitulo omni anno. Quando vero ad capitulum veniebat, exibant processionaliter obviam ei omnes fratres in capitulo congregati. Ille autem, venientibus fratribus, descendebat de equo et ibat pedes cum eis usque ad ecclesiam Sanctae Mariae. Eisque postea faciebat sermonem et celebrabat missam in qua vir Dei Franciscus evangelium decantabat.*
- 9 2C 219 (FAED II, 389). 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.*
- 10 For the historical origin of the dalmatic as a deacon's liturgical vestment, cfr. J. BRAUN, "Dalmatic," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Robert Appellon Company, New York 1908, Vol. 4. The article can be retrieved in <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04608a.htm>
- 11 BPr c.8 (FAED III, 66). Latin text in *Fontes Franciscani*, 1285-1286: *In ipsa transitus sui hora inter alios, quibus visus est ascendens in coelum, fratri cuidam, viro sancto in oratione suspenso, purpream indutus dalmaticam cum innumera sequentium turba tamquam princeps maximus in admirabili gloriae decore apparuit; qui tandem ad amoenissima loca perveniens, palatium mirae magnitudinis et singularis deliciarum plenitudinis intravit multorum ibi fratrum praeditus gloriosa comitiva.*
- 12 A. CALLEBAUT, "Saint François Lévite," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 20 (1927) 193-196.
- 13 LUKE WADDING, *Annales Minorum*, Vol. I, ad an. 1210, 16 (Collegium S. Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas, Quaracchi 1931): *Affirmat autem Marianus ex Legenda trium sociorum, a quo non dissentit Bonaventura, concessas has coronas Laicis, tam ob ministerium Sacerdotum, quam ut cum eisdem Dei verbo praedicando incumbere; idque post haec obtentum a Pontifice per supra nominatum Cardinalem Sabinensem Episcopum, ut ipse Sanctissimus Dominus Laicos omnes minoribus ordinibus, et Franciscum usque ad Diaconatum donaret, solemnemque ipse in suis manibus omnium reciperet professionem, et vota probaret de huiusmodi observando Instituto.*
- 14 CONFERENZE DEI MINISTRI GENERALI DEL PRIMO ORDINE E TOR, "L'Identità dell'Ordine Franciscano nel suo momento fondativo," *Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, Vol. 119, Fasc. 2 (May-August 1999).
- 15 GOTTFRIED HAMMANN, *Storia del Diaconato. Dal cristianesimo delle origini ai riformatori Protestanti del XVI secolo*, Edizioni Qiqajon 2004.
- 16 1LtCl 1 (FAED I, 52).
- 17 LtOrd 34 (FAED I, 119).
- 18 ER 6,3 (FAED I, 68).

POPE BENEDICT XVI ON SAINT BONAVENTURE

During the weekly audience speech on 3rd and 10th March 2010, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, within the context of his catecheses on the Mendicant Orders. We present the Pope's speech in the English version that can be downloaded at the official website of the Order of Friars Minor <http://www.ofm.org/ofm>

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today I would like to speak about St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. I confide to you that on proposing this theme I feel a certain nostalgia because I remember the research that, as a young scholar, I carried out precisely on this author, whom I particularly esteem [I, too, have a fondness of Saint Bonaventure and I find his writings particularly fascinating]. His knowledge has been of no small influence in my formation. With great joy I went on pilgrimage a few months ago to his birthplace, Bagnoregio, a small Italian city, in Latium, which venerates his memory.

Born probably in 1217, he died in 1274; he lived in the 13th century, an age in which the Christian faith, profoundly permeating the culture and society of Europe, inspired immortal works in the field of literature, visual arts, philosophy and theology. Striking among the great Christian figures who contributed to the composition of this harmony between faith and culture is, precisely, Bonaventure, man of action and of contemplation, of profound piety and of prudence in governing.

He was called John of Fidanza. An incident that occurred when he was still a boy profoundly marked his life, as he himself relates. He had been affected by a serious illness and not even his father, who was a doctor, hoped to save him from death. His mother appealed then to the intercession of St. Francis of Assisi, canonized a short time earlier. And John was cured. The figure of the Poverello of Assisi became even more familiar a year later, when he was in Paris, where he had gone for his studies. He had obtained the diploma of Master of Arts, which we could compare to that of a prestigious secondary school of our time. At that point, as so many young people of the past and also of today, John asked himself a crucial question: "What must I do with my life?" Fascinated by the witness of fervour and evangelical radicalism of the Friars Minor, who had arrived in Paris in 1219, John knocked on the doors of the Franciscan monastery of that city, and asked to be re-

ceived in the great family of the disciples of St. Francis.

Many years later, he explained the reasons for his choice: He recognized the action of Christ in St. Francis and in the movement he initiated. He wrote thus in a letter addressed to another friar: "I confess before God that the reason that made me love more the life of Blessed Francis is that it is similar to the origin and growth of the Church. The Church began with simple fishermen, and was enriched immediately with very illustrious and wise doctors; the religion of Blessed Francis was not established by the prudence of men, but by Christ" (*Epistula de tribus quaestionibus ad magistrum innominatum*, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Introduzione generale*, Rome, 1990, p. 29).

Therefore, around the year 1243 John put on the Franciscan coarse woollen cloth and took the name Bonaventure. He was immediately directed to studies and frequented the faculty of theology of the University of Paris, following a programme of very difficult courses. He obtained the different titles required by the academic career, those of "biblical bachelor" and "bachelor in sentences." Thus Bonaventure studied in depth sacred Scripture, the Sentences of Peter Lombard, the manual of theology of that time, and the most important authors of theology and, in contact with the teachers and students that arrived in Paris from the whole of Europe, he matured his own personal reflection and a spiritual sensitivity of great value that, in the course of the following years, showed in his works and sermons, thus making him one of the most important theologians of the history of the Church. It is significant to recall the title of the thesis he defended to be able to qualify in the teaching of theology, the *licentia ubique docendi*, as it was then called. His dissertation was titled "Questions on Knowledge of Christ." This argument shows the central role that Christ always had in the life and teaching of Bonaventure. We can say, in fact, that all his thought was profoundly Christocentric.

In those years in Paris, Bonaventure's adopted city, a violent dispute broke out against the Friars Minor of St. Francis of Assisi and the Friars Preachers of St. Dominic Guzmán. Debated was their right to teach in the university and doubts were even cast on the authenticity of their consecrated life. Certainly the changes introduced by the Mendicant Orders in the way of understanding religious life, of which I spoke in preceding catecheses, were so innovative that not everyone understood them. Also added, as happens sometimes among sincerely religious persons, were motives

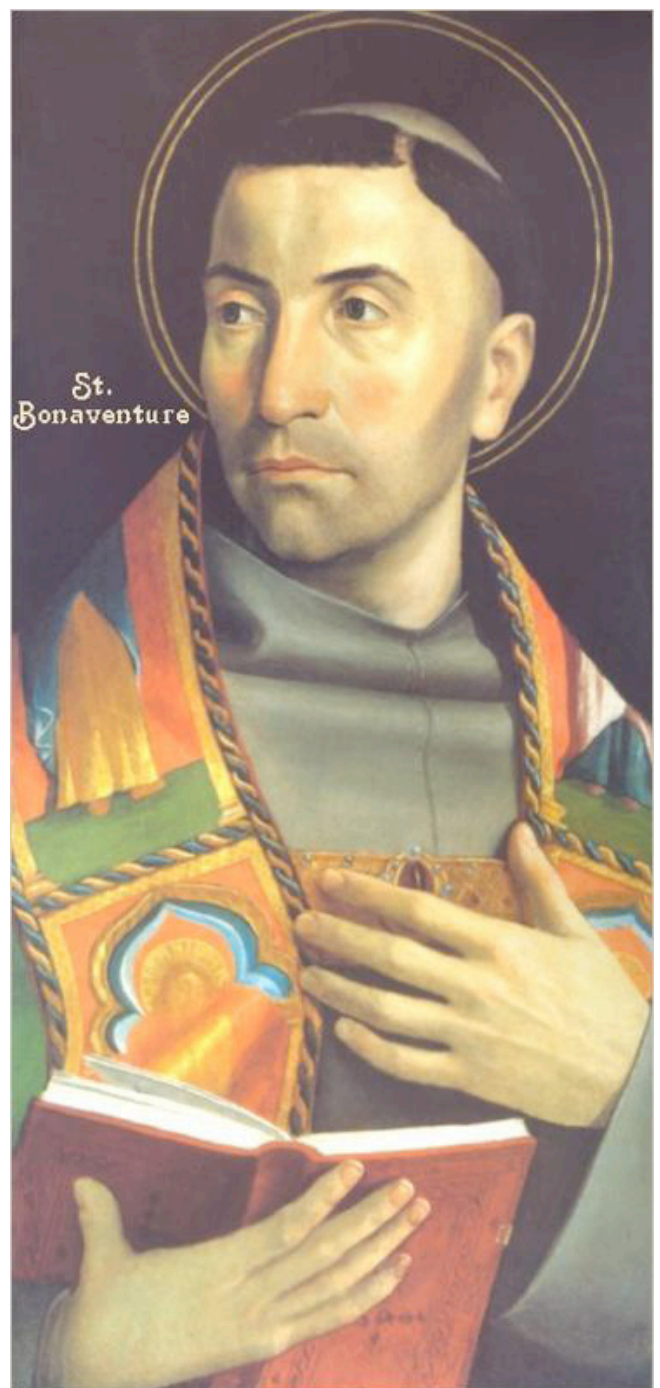
of human weakness, such as envy and jealousy. Bonaventure, although surrounded by the opposition of the rest of the university teachers, had already started to teach in the chair of theology of the Franciscans and, to respond to those who were criticising the Mendicant Orders, he composed a writing titled "Evangelical Perfection." In this writing he showed how the Mendicant Orders, especially the Friars Minor, practicing the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, were following the counsels of the Gospel itself. Beyond these historical circumstances, the teaching offered by Bonaventure in this work of his and in his life is always timely: The Church becomes luminous and beautiful by fidelity to the vocation of those sons and daughters of hers who not only put into practice the evangelical precepts, but who, by the grace of God, are called to observe their advice and thus give witness, with their poor, chaste and obedient lifestyle, that the Gospel is source of joy and perfection.

The conflict died down, at least for a certain period, and, by the personal intervention of Pope Alexander IV, in 1257 Bonaventure was officially recognised as doctor and teacher of the Parisian University. Despite all this, he had to resign from this prestigious post, because that same year the General Chapter of the order elected him minister general.

He carried out this task for 17 years with wisdom and dedication, visiting the provinces, writing to brothers, intervening at times with a certain severity to eliminate abuses. When Bonaventure began this service, the Order of Friars Minor had developed in a prodigious way: There were more than 30,000 friars spread over the whole of the West, with a missionary presence in North Africa, the Middle East and also Peking. It was necessary to consolidate this expansion and above all to confer on it, in full fidelity to Francis' charism, unity of action and spirit. In fact, among the followers of the Saint of Assisi there were different forms of interpreting his message and the risk really existed of an internal split. To avoid this danger, in 1260 the General Chapter of the order in Narbonne accepted and ratified a text proposed by Bonaventure, which unified the norms that regulated the daily life of the Friars Minor. Bonaventure intuited, however, that the legislative dispositions, though inspired in wisdom and moderation, were not sufficient to ensure communion of spirit and hearts. It was necessary to share the same ideals and the same motivations. For this reason, Bonaventure wished to present the authentic charism of Francis, his life and his teaching. Hence he gathered with great zeal documents related to the Poverello and listened attentively to the memories of those who had known Francis directly. From this was born a biography, historically well founded, of the Saint of Assisi, entitled *Legenda Maior*, written also in a very succinct manner and called because of this the Legend. The Latin word, as opposed to the Italian [and English, legend], does not indicate a fruit of imagination but, on

the contrary, *Legenda* means an authoritative text, "to be read" officially. In fact, the General Chapter of the Friars Minor of 1263, which met in Pisa, recognised in St. Bonaventure's biography the most faithful portrait of the founder and it thus became the official biography of the saint.

What is the image of St. Francis that arises from the heart and pen of his devoted son and successor, St. Bonaventure? The essential point: Francis is an *alter Christus*, a man who passionately sought Christ. In the love that drives to imitation, he was entirely conformed to Him. Bonaventure pointed out this living ideal to all of Francis' followers. This ideal, valid for every Christian, yesterday, today and always, was indicated as a program also for the Church of the Third Millennium by my predecessor, the Venerable John Paul II. This program, he wrote in the letter *Tertio Millennio*



Ineunte, is centered “on Christ himself, who must be known, loved and imitated to live in Him the Trinitarian life, and, with Him, to transform history to its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem” (No. 29).

In 1273 St. Bonaventure’s life met with another

divine immensity through reasoning and admiration; in the heavenly homeland, instead, through vision, when we will be made like to God, and through ecstasy — we will enter into the joy of God” (*La conoscenza di Cristo*, q. 6, conclusione, in *Opere di San Bonaventura*).



Civita di Bagnoregio

er change. Pope Gregory X wished to consecrate him bishop and name him cardinal. He also asked him to prepare a very important ecclesial event: the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyon, whose objective was the re-establishment of communion between the Latin and the Greek Churches. He dedicated himself to this task with diligence, but was unable to see the conclusion of that ecumenical summit, as he died while it was being held. An anonymous papal notary composed a eulogy of Bonaventure, which offers us a conclusive portrait of this great saint and excellent theologian: “Good, affable, pious and merciful man, full of virtues, loved by God and by men ... God, in fact, had given him such grace, that all those who saw him were invaded by a love that the heart could not conceal” (cf. J.G. Bougerol, *Bonaventura*, in A. Vauchez (vv.aa), *Storia dei Santi e della santità cristiana*. Vol. VI. L’epoca del rinnovamento evangelico, Milan, 1991, p. 91).

Let us take up the legacy of this saint, doctor of the Church, who reminds us of the meaning of our life with these words: “On earth ... we can contemplate the

Opuscoli Teologici /1, Rome, 1993, p. 187).

As I already said, among various merits, St. Bonaventure had that of interpreting authentically and faithfully the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, whom he venerated and studied with great love. In a particular way, in the times of St. Bonaventure a current of Friars Minor called “spiritual” held that there was a totally new phase of history inaugurated with St. Francis; the “eternal Gospel” had appeared, of which Revelation speaks, which replaced the New Testament. This group affirmed that the Church had now exhausted her historical role, and in her place came a charismatic community of free men guided interiorly by the Spirit, namely, the “spiritual Franciscans.” At the base of the ideas of this group were the writings of a Cistercian abbot, Joachim of Fiore, who died in 1202. In his works, he affirmed a Trinitarian rhythm of history. He considered the Old Testament as the age of the Father, followed by the time of the Son, the time of the Church. To be awaited yet was the third age, that of the Holy Spirit. The whole of history was thus interpreted as a history of progress:

from the severity of the Old Testament to the relative liberty of the time of the Son, in the Church, up to the full liberty of the children of God, in the period of the Holy Spirit, which would have been also the period of peace among men, of the reconciliation of peoples and religions. Joachim of Fiore aroused the hope that the beginning of the new time would come from a new monasticism. It is thus understandable that a group of Franciscans thought it recognised in St. Francis of Assisi the initiator of the new time and in his order the community of the new period — the community of the time of the Holy Spirit, which left behind it the hierarchical Church, to begin a new Church of the Spirit, no longer connected to the old structures. There was, hence, the risk of a very serious misunderstanding of the message of St. Francis, of his humble fidelity to the Gospel and to the Church, and such a mistake implied an erroneous vision of Christianity as a whole. St. Bonaventure, who in 1257 became minister general of the Franciscans, found himself before serious tension within his own order due, precisely, to those who espoused this current of “spiritual Franciscans,” which aligned itself to Joachim of Fiore. Precisely to respond to this group and to give unity again to the order, St. Bonaventure carefully studied the authentic writings of Joachim of Fiore and those attributed to him and, taking into account the need to present correctly the figure and message of his beloved St. Francis, he wished to show a correct view of the theology of history.

St. Bonaventure addressed the problem in fact in his last work, a collection of conferences to monks of the Paris studio, which remained unfinished and which was completed with the transcriptions of the hearers. It was titled *Hexaemeron*, that is, an allegorical explanation of the six days of creation. The Fathers of the Church considered the six or seven days of the account of creation as a prophecy of the history of the world, of humanity. The seven days represented for them seven periods of history, later interpreted also as seven millennia. With Christ we would have entered the last, namely, the sixth period of history, which would then be followed by the great sabbath of God. St. Bonaventure accounts for this histori-

cal interpretation of the relation of the days of creation, but in a very free and innovative way. For him, two phenomena of his time render necessary a new interpretation of the course of history. The first: the figure of St. Francis, the man totally united to Christ up to communion of the stigmata, almost an *alter Christus*, and with St. Francis the new community created by him, different from the monasticism known up to then. This phenomenon called for a new interpretation, as a novelty of God which appeared in that moment. The second: the position of Joachim of Fiore, who announced a new monasticism and a totally new period of history, going beyond the revelation of the New Testament, called for an answer. As minister general of the Order of Franciscans, St. Bonaventure had seen immediately that with the spiritualistic conception, inspired by Joachim of Fiore, the order was not governable, but was going logically toward anarchy. For him there were two consequences. The first: the practical need of structures and of insertion in the reality of the hierarchical Church, of the real Church, needed a theological foundation, also because the others, those who followed the spiritualist conception, showed an apparent theological foundation. The second: although taking into account the necessary realism, it was not necessary to lose the novelty of the figure of St. Francis. How did



Francisco de Zubaran (1598-1664): St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Bonaventure respond to the practical and theoretical need? Of his answer I can only give here a very schematic and incomplete summary in some points: 1. St.

Bonaventure rejected the idea of the Trinitarian rhythm of history. God is one for the whole of history and he is not divided into three divinities. As a consequence, history is one, even if it is a journey and — according to St. Bonaventure — a journey of progress. 2. Jesus Christ is the last word of God — in him God has said all, giving and expressing himself. More than himself, God cannot express, cannot give. The Holy Spirit is Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Christ himself says of the Holy Spirit: He “...will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26), “he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:15). Hence, there is not another higher Gospel, there is not another Church to await. Because of this, the Order of St. Francis had also to insert itself in this Church, in her faith, in her hierarchical order. 3. This does not mean that the Church is immobile, fixed in the past and that novelties cannot be exercised in her. *Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*, the works of Christ do not go backward, do not fail, but progress, says the saint in the letter *De tribus quaestionibus*. Thus St. Bonaventure formulates explicitly the idea of progress, and this is a novelty in comparison with the Fathers of the Church and a great part of his contemporaries. For St. Bonaventure, Christ is no longer, as he was for the Fathers of the Church, the end, but the centre of history; history does not end with Christ, but a new period begins. Another consequence is the following: prevailing up to that moment was the idea that the Fathers of the Church were at the absolute summit of theology, all the following generations could only be their disciples. Even St. Bonaventure recognises the Fathers as teachers for ever, but the phenomenon of St. Francis gave him the certainty that the richness of the word of Christ is inexhaustible and that also new lights can appear in the new generations. The uniqueness of Christ also guarantees novelties and renewal in all the periods of history.

Certainly, the Franciscan Order — so he stresses — belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ, to the Apostolic Church, and cannot build itself on a utopian spiritualism. But, at the same time, the novelty of such an order is valid in comparison with classic monasticism, and St. Bonaventure — as I said in the preceding catechesis — defended this novelty against the attacks of the secular clergy of Paris. The Franciscans do not have a fixed monastery, they can be present everywhere to proclaim the Gospel. Precisely the break with stability, characteristic of monasticism, in favour of a new flexibility, restored to the Church her missionary dynamism. At this point perhaps it is useful to say that also today there are views according to which the whole history of the Church in the second millennium is a permanent decline; some see the decline already immediately after the New Testament. In reality, *opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*, the works of Christ do not go backward, but progress. What would the Church be without the new spirituality of the Cistercians, of the Franciscans and Dominicans, of the spirituality of St.

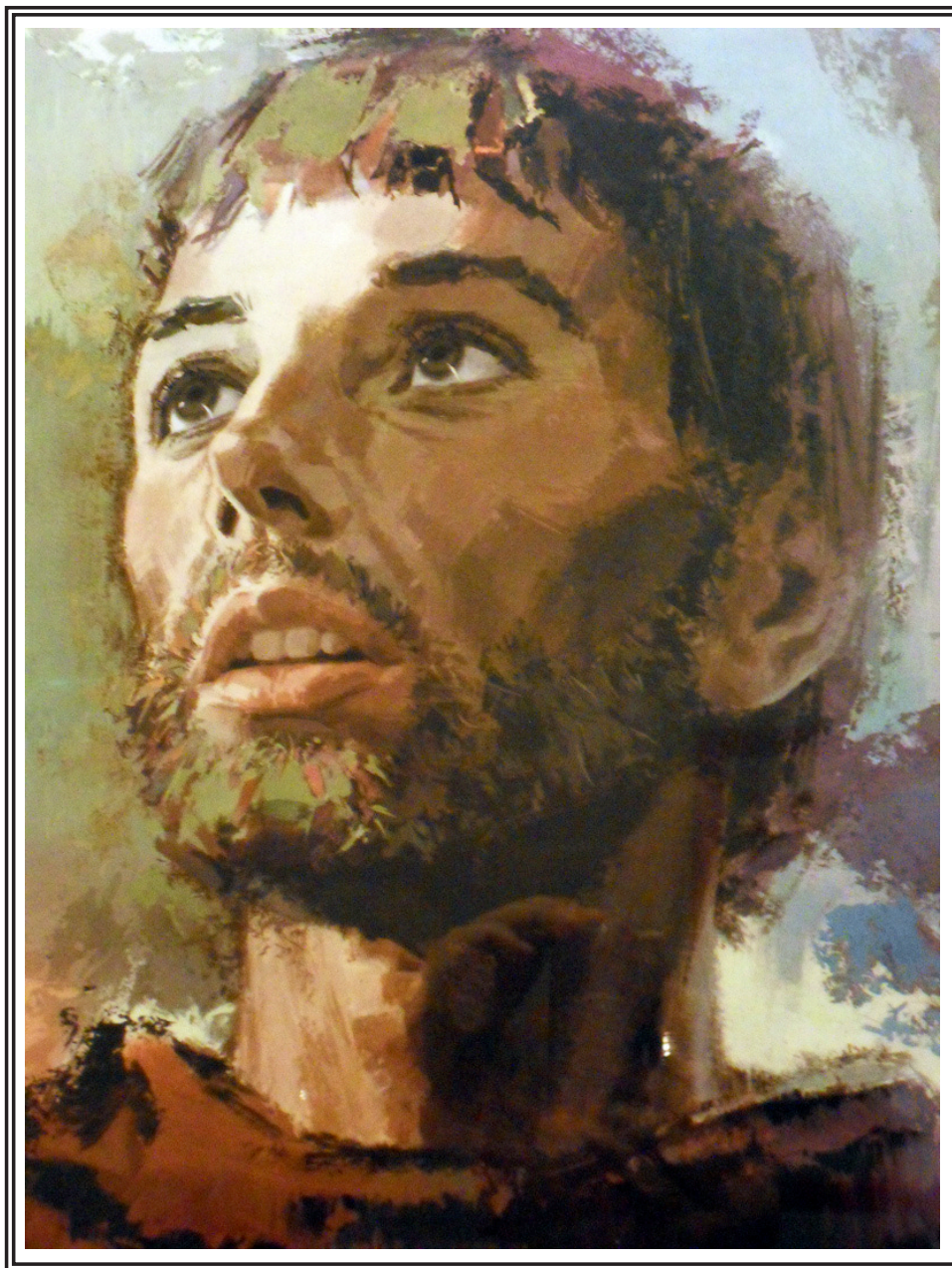
Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, and so on? This affirmation is also valid today: *Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*, they go forward.

St. Bonaventure teaches us the whole of the necessary discernment, even severe, of the sober realism and of openness to new charisms given by Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to his Church. And while this idea of decline is repeated, there is also the other idea, this “spiritualistic utopianism,” which is repeated. We know, in fact, how after the Second Vatican Council, some were convinced that everything should be new, that there should be another Church, that the pre-conciliar Church was finished and that we would have another, totally “other” Church. An anarchic utopianism! And thanks be to God, the wise helmsmen of Peter’s Barque, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, on one hand defended the novelty of the council and on the other, at the same time, defended the uniqueness and continuity of the Church, which is always a Church of sinners and always a place of grace. 4. In this connection, St. Bonaventure, as minister general of the Franciscans, took a line of government in which it was very clear that the new order could not, as a community, live at the same “eschatological height” of St. Francis, in which he saw the future world anticipated, but — guided, at the same time, by healthy realism and spiritual courage — had to come as close as possible to the maximum realisation of the Sermon on the Mount, which for St. Francis was the rule, though taking into account the limits of man, marked by original sin. Thus we see that for St. Bonaventure, to govern was not simply a task but was above all to think and to pray. At the base of his government we always find prayer and thought; all his decisions resulted from reflection, from thought illumined by prayer. His profound contact with Christ always accompanied his work of minister general and that is why he composed a series of theological-mystical writings, which express the spirit of his government and manifest the intention of guiding the order interiorly, of governing, that is, not only through commands and structures, but through guiding and enlightening souls, orienting them to Christ. Of these his writings, which are the soul of his government and show the way to follow either as an individual or a community, I would like to mention only one, his masterwork, the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, which is a “manual” of mystical contemplation. This book was conceived in a place of profound spirituality: the hill of La Verna, where St. Francis had received the stigmata. In the introduction, the author illustrates the circumstances that gave origin to his writing: “While I meditated on the possibility of the soul ascending to God, presented to me, among others, was that wondrous event that occurred in that place to Blessed Francis, namely, the vision of the winged seraphim in the form of a crucifix. And meditating on this, immediately I realized that such a vision offered me the contemplative ecstasy of Father Francis himself and at the same time the way that leads to it”

(*Journey of the Mind in God, Prologue, 2*, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Opuscoli Teologici* / 1, Rome, 1993, p. 499). The six wings of the seraphim thus became the symbol of six stages that lead man progressively to the knowledge of God through observation of the world and of creatures and through the exploration of the soul itself with its faculties, up to the satisfying union with the Trinity through Christ, in imitation of St. Francis of Assisi. The last words of St. Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, which respond to the question of how one can reach this mystical communion with God, would make one descend to the depth of the heart: "If you now yearn to know how that happens (mystical communion with God), ask grace, not doctrine; desire, not the intellect; the groaning of prayer, not the study

of the letter; the spouse, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness not clarity; not light but the fire that inflames everything and transport to God with strong unctions and ardent affections. ... We enter therefore into darkness, we silence worries, the passions and illusions; we pass with Christ Crucified from this world to the Father, so that, after having seen him, we say with Philip: that is enough for me" (Ibid., VII, 6).

Dear friends, let us take up the invitation addressed to us by St. Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor, and let us enter the school of the divine Teacher: We listen to his Word of life and truth, which resounds in the depth of our soul. Let us purify our thoughts and actions, so that he can dwell in us, and we can hear his divine voice, which draws us toward true happiness.



St. Francis of Assisi by A. Cesselon, 1982

PAUL SABATIER

«LIFE OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI»

*Translated into English by Louise Seymour Houghton,
(Hodder and Stoughton), London 1908.*

Chapter X

FIRST ATTEMPTS TO REACH THE INFIDELS

(Autumn 1212 – Summer 1215)

[168] The early Brothers Minor had too much need of the encouragement and example of Francis not to have very early agreed with him upon certain fixed periods when they would be sure to find him at Portiuncula. Still it appears probable that these meetings did not become true Chapters-General until toward 1216. There were at first two a year, one at Whitsunday, the other at Michaelmas (September 29th). Those of Whitsunday were the most important; all the Brothers came together to gain new strength in the society of Francis, to draw generous ardor and grand hopes from him with his counsels and directions.

The members of the young association had everything in common, their joys as well as their sorrows; their uncertainties as well as the results of their experiences. At these meetings they were particularly occupied with the Rule, the changes that needed to be made in it, and above all, how they might better and better observe it; then, in perfect harmony, they settled the allotment of the friars to the various provinces.

One of Francis's most frequent counsels bore upon the respect due to the clergy; he begged his disciples to [169] show a very particular deference to the priests, and never to meet them without kissing their hands. He saw only too well that the Brothers, having renounced everything, were in danger of being unjust or severe toward the rich and powerful of the earth; he, therefore, sought to arm them against this tendency, often concluding his counsels with these noble words: "There are men who to-day appear to us to be members of the devil who one day shall be members of Christ."

"Our life in the midst of the world," said he again, "ought to be such that, on hearing or seeing us, every one shall feel constrained to praise our heavenly Father. You proclaim peace; have it in your hearts. Be not an occasion of wrath or scandal to anyone, but by your gentleness may all be led to peace, concord, and good works."

It was especially when he undertook to cheer his disciples, to fortify them against temptations and deliver them from their power, that Francis was most successful. However anxious a soul might be, his words brought it back to serenity. The earnestness which he showed in calming sadness became fiery and terrible in reproving those who fell away, but in these days of early fervor he seldom had occasion to show severity; more often he needed gently to reprove the Brothers whose piety led them to exaggerate penances and macerations.

When all was finished and each one had had his part in this banquet of love, Francis would bless them, and they would disperse in all directions like strangers and travellers. They had nothing, but already they thought they saw the signs of the grand and final regeneration. Like the exile on Patmos they saw "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband ... and the throne upon which is seated the Desired of all nations, [170] the Messiah of the new times, he who is to make all things new."

Yet all eyes were turned toward Syria, where a French knight, Jean de Brienne, had just been declared King of Jerusalem (1210), and toward which were hastening the bands of the children's crusade.

The conversion of Francis, radical as it was, giving a new direction to his thoughts and will, had not had power to change the foundation of his character. "In a great heart everything is great." In vain is one changed at conversion – he remains the same. That which changes is not he who is converted, but his surroundings; he is suddenly introduced into a new path, but runs in it with the same ardor. Francis still

remained a knight, and it is perhaps this which won for him in so high a degree the worship of the finest souls of the Middle Ages. There was in him that longing for the unknown, that thirst for adventures and sacrifices, which makes the history of his century so grand and so attractive, in spite of many dark features.

Those who have a genius for religion have generally the privilege of illusion. They never quite see how large the world is. When their faith has moved a mountain they thrill with rapture, like the old Hebrew prophets, and it seems to them that they see the dawning of the day "when the glory of the Lord will appear, when the wolf and the lamb will feed together." Blessed illusion, that fires the blood like a generous wine, so that the soldiers of righteousness hurl themselves against the most horrific fortresses, believing that these once taken the war will be ended.

Francis had found such joys in his union with poverty that he held it for proven that one needed only to be a man to aspire after the same happiness, and that the [171] Saracens would be converted in crowds to the gospel of Jesus, if only it were announced to them in all its simplicity. He therefore quitted Portiuncula for this new kind of crusade. It is not known from what port he embarked. It was probably in the autumn of 1212. A tempest having cast the ship upon the coast of Slavonia, he was obliged to resign himself either to remain several months in those parts or to return to Italy; he decided to return, but found much difficulty in securing a passage on a ship which was about to sail for Ancona. He had no ill-will against the sailors, however, and the stock of food falling short he shared with them the provisions with which his friends had overloaded him.

No sooner had he landed than he set out on a preaching tour, in which souls responded to his appeals with even more eagerness than in times past. We may suppose that he returned from Slavonia in the winter of 1212-1213, and that he employed the following spring in evangelizing Central Italy. It was perhaps during this Lent that he retired to an island in Lake Trasimeno, making a sojourn there which afterward became famous in his legend. However that may be, a perfectly reliable document shows him to have been in the Romagna in the month of May, 1213. One day Francis and his companion, perhaps Brother Leo, arrived at the chateau of Montefeltro, between Macerata and San Marino. A grand fête was being given for the reception of a new knight, but the noise and singing did not affright them, and without hesitation they entered the court, where all [172] the nobility of the country was assembled. Francis then taking for his text the two lines,

"Tanto è il bene ch'aspetto
Ch'ogni pena m'è diletto,"

preached so touching a sermon that several of those present forgot for a moment the tourney for which they had come. One of them, Orlando dei Cattani, Count of Chiusi in Casentino, was so much moved that, drawing Francis aside, "Father," he said to him, "I

desire much to converse with you about the salvation of my soul." "Very willingly," replied Francis; "but go for this morning, do honor to those friends who have invited you, eat with them, and after that we will converse as much as you please."

So it was done. The count came back and concluded the interview by saying, "I have in Tuscany a mountain especially favorable to contemplation; it is entirely isolated and would well suit anyone who desired to do penance far from the noise of the world; if it pleased you I would willingly give it to you and your brethren for the salvation of my soul."

Francis accepted it joyfully, but as he was obliged to be at Portiuncula for the Whitsunday chapter he postponed his visit to the Verna to a more favorable time.

It was perhaps in this circuit that he went to Imola; at least nothing forbids the supposition. Always courteous, he had gone immediately on his arrival to present himself to the bishop, and ask of him authority to preach. "I am not in need of anyone to aid me in my task," [173] replied the bishop dryly. Francis bowed and retired, more polite and even more gentle than usual. But in less than hour he had returned. "What is it, brother, what do you want of me again?" "Monsignor," replied Francis, "when a father drives his son out at the door he returns by the window."

The bishop, disarmed by such pious persistence, gave the desired authorization.

The aim of Francis at that time, however, was not to evangelize Italy; his friars were already scattered over it in great numbers; and he desired rather to gain them access to new countries.

Not having been able to reach the infidels in Syria, he resolved to seek them in Morocco. Some little time before (July, 1212), the troops of the Almohades had met an irreparable defeat in the plains of Tolosa; beaten by the coalition of the Kings of Aragon, Navarre, and Castile, Mohammed-el-Naser had returned to Morocco to die. Francis felt that this victory of arms would be nothing if it were not followed by a peaceful victory of the gospel spirit.

He was so full of his project, so much in haste to arrive at the end of his journey, that very often he would forget his companion, and hastening forward would leave him far behind. The biographers are unfortunately most laconic with regard to this expedition; they merely say that on arriving in Spain he was so seriously ill that a return home was imperative. Beyond a few local legends, not very well attested, we possess no other information upon the labors of the Saint in this country, nor upon the route which he followed either in going or returning.

This silence is not at all surprising, and ought not to make us undervalue the importance of this mission. The [174] one to Egypt, which took place six years later, with a whole train of friars, and at a time when the Order was much more developed, is men-

tioned only in a few lines by Thomas of Celano; but for the recent discovery of the Chronicle of Brother Gior-dano di Giano and the copious details given by Jacques de Vitry, we should be reduced to conjectures upon that journey also. The Spanish legends, to which allusion has just been made, cannot be altogether without foundation, any more than those which concern the journey of St. Francis through Languedoc and Piedmont; but in the actual condition of the sources it is impossible to make a choice, with any sort of authority, between the historic basis and additions to it wholly without value.

The mission in Spain doubtless took place between the Whitsunday of 1214 and that of 1215. Francis, I think, had passed the previous year in Italy. Perhaps he was then going to see the Verna. The March of Ancona and the Valley of Rieti would naturally have attracted him equally about this epoch, and finally the growth of the two branches of the Order must have made necessary his presence at Portiuncula and St. Damian. The rapidity and importance of these missions ought in no sense to give surprise, nor awaken exaggerated critical doubts. It took only a few hours to become a member of the fraternity, and we may no doubt the sincerity of these vocations, since their condition was the imme-[175]diate giving up of all property of whatever kind, for the benefit of the poor. The new friars were barely received when they in their turn began to receive others, often becoming the heads of the movement in whatever place they happened to be. The way in which we see things going on in Germany in 1221, and in England in 1224, gives a very living picture of this spiritual germination.

To found a monastery it was enough that two or three Brothers should have at their disposition some sort of a shelter, whence they radiated out into the city and the neighboring country. It would, therefore, be as much an exaggeration to describe St. Francis as a man who passed his life in founding convents, as to deny altogether the local traditions which attribute to him the erection of a hundred monasteries. In many cases a glance is enough to show whether these claims of antiquity are justified; before 1220 the Order had only hermitages after the pattern of the Verna or the Carceri, solely intended for the Brothers who desired to pass some time in retreat.

Returned to Assisi, Francis admitted to the Order a certain number of learned men, among whom was perhaps Thomas of Celano. The latter, in fact, says that God at that time mercifully remembered him, and he adds further on: "The blessed Francis was of an exquisite nobility of heart and full of discernment; with the greatest care he rendered to each one what was due him, with wisdom considering in each case the degree of their dignities."

This does not harmonize very well with the character of Francis as we have sketched it; one can hardly imagine him persevering in his Order such profound distinctions as were at that time made between

the different social ranks, but he had that true and eternal politeness [176] which has its roots in the heart, and which is only an expression of tact and love. It could not be otherwise with a man who saw in courtesy one of the qualities of God.

We are approaching one of the most obscure periods of his life. After the chapter of 1215 he seems to have passed through one of those crises of discouragement so frequent with those who long to realize the ideal in this world. Had he discovered the warning signs of the misfortunes which were to come upon his family? Had he come to see that the necessities of life were to sully and blight his dream? Had he seen in the check of his missions in Syria and Morocco a providential indication that he had to change his method? We do not know. But about this time he felt the need of turning to St. Clara and Brother Silvestro for counsel on the subject of the doubts and hesitations which assailed him; their reply restored to him peace and joy. God by their mouth commanded him to continue his apostolate.

Immediately he rose and set forth in the direction of Bevagna, with an ardor which he had never yet shown. In encouraging him to persevere Clara had in some sort inoculated him with a new enthusiasm. One word from her had sufficed to give him back all his courage, and from this point in his life we find in him more poetry, more love, than ever before.

Full of joy, he was going on his way when, perceiving some flocks of birds, he turned aside a little from the road to go to them. Far from taking flight, they flocked around him as if to bid him welcome. "Brother birds," he said to them then, "you ought to praise and love your Creator very much. He has given you feathers for [177] clothing, wings for flying, and all that is needful for you. He has made you the noblest of his creatures; he permits you to live in the pure air; you have neither to sow nor to reap, and yet he takes care of you, watches over you and guides you." Then the birds began to arch their necks, to spread out their wings, to open their beaks, to look at him, as if to thank him, while he went up and down in their midst stroking them with the border of his tunic, sending them away at last with his blessing.

In this same evangelizing tour, passing through Alviano, he spoke a few exhortations to the people, but the swallows so filled the air with their chirping that he could not make himself heard. "It is my turn to speak," he said to them; "little sister swallows, hearken to the word of God; keep silent and be very quiet until I have finished."

We see how Francis's love extended to all creation, how the diffused life shed abroad upon all things inspired and moved him. From the sun to the earthworm which we trample under foot, everything breathed in his ear the ineffable sigh of beings that live and suffer and die, and in their life as in their death have a part in the divine work.

“Praised be thou, Lord, with all thy creatures, especially for my brother Sun which gives us the day and by him thou showest thy light. He is beautiful and radiant with great splendor; of thee, Most High, he is the symbol.”

Here again, Francis revives the Hebrew inspiration, the simple and grandiose view of the prophets of Israel. “Praise the Lord!” the royal Psalmist had sung, [178] “praise the Lord, fire and frost, snow and mists, stormy winds that do his will, mountains and all hills, fruit-trees and all cedars, beasts and all cattle, creeping things and fowls with wings, kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all judges of the earth, young men and maidens, old men and children, praise the Lord, praise ye the Lord!”

The day of the birds of Bevagna remained in his memory as one of the most beautiful of his whole life, and though usually so reserved he always loved to tell of it; it was because he owed to Clara these pure ardors which brought him into a secret and delicious communion with all beings; in his heart he bore an immense gratitude to her who, just when he needed it, had known how to return to him love for love, inspiration for inspiration.

Francis’s sympathy for animals, as we see it shining forth here, has none of that sentimentalism, so often artificial and exclusive of all other love, which certain associations of his time noisily displayed; in him it is only a manifestation of his feeling for nature, a deeply mystical, one might say pantheistic, sentiment, if the word had not a too definitely philosophical sense, quite opposite to the Franciscan thought.

This sentiment, which in the poets of the thirteenth century, is so often false and affected, was in him not only true, but had in it something alive, healthy, robust. [179] It is this vein of poetry which awoke Italy to self-consciousness, made her in a few years forget the nightmare of Catharist ideas, and rescued her from pessimism. By it Francis became the forerunner of the artistic movement which preceded the Renaissance, the inspirer of that group of Pre-Raphaelites, awkward, grotesque in drawing though at times they were, to whom we turn to-day with a sort of piety, finding in their ungraceful saints an inner life, a moral feeling which we seek for elsewhere in vain.

If the voice of the Poverello of Assisi was so well understood it was because in this matter, as in all others, it was entirely unconventional. How far we are, with him, from the fierce of Pharisaic piety of those monks which forbids even the females of animals to enter their convent! His notion of chastity in no sense resembles this excessive prudery. One day at Sienna he asked for some turtle-doves, and holding them in the skirt of his tunic, he said: “Little sisters turtle-doves, you are simple, innocent, and chaste; why did you let yourselves be caught? I shall save you from death, and have nests made for you, so that you may bring forth young and multiply according to the commandment of

our Creator.”

And he went and made nests for them all, and the turtle-doves began to lay eggs and bring up their broods under the eyes of the Brothers.

At Rieti a family of red-breasts were the guests of the monastery, and the young birds made marauding expeditions on the very table where the Brothers were eating. Not far from there, at Greccio, they brought to Francis a leveret that had been taken alive in a trap. “Come to me, brother leveret,” he said to it. And as the poor creatures, being set free, ran to him for refuge, he took it up, caressed it, and finally put it on the ground that it might run away; but it returned to him again and again, so that he was obliged to send it to the neighboring forest before it would consent to return to freedom.

One day he was crossing the Lake of Rieti. The boatman in whose bark he was making the passage offered him a tench of uncommon size. Francis accepted it with joy, but to the great amazement of the fisherman put it back into the water, bidding it to bless God.

We should never have done if we were to relate all the incidents of this kind, for the sentiment of nature was innate with him; it was a perpetual communion which made him love the whole creation. He is ravished with the witchery of great forests; he has the terrors of a child when he is alone at prayer in a deserted chapel, but he tastes ineffable joy merely in inhaling the perfume of a flower, or gazing into the limpid water of a brook.

This perfect lover of poverty permitted one luxury – he even commanded it at Portiuncula – that of flowers; the Brother was bidden not to sow vegetables and useful plants only; he must reserve one corner of good ground [181] for our sisters, the flowers of the fields. Francis talked with them also, or rather he replied to them, for their mysterious and gentle language crept into the very depth of his heart.

The thirteenth century was prepared to understand the voice of the Umbrian poet; the sermon to the birds closed in the reign of Byzantine art and of the thought of which it was the image. It is the end of dogmatism and authority; it is the coming in of individualism and inspiration; very uncertain, no doubt, and to be followed by obstinate reactions, but none the less marking a date in the history of the human conscience. Many among the companions of Francis were too much the children of their century, too thoroughly imbued with its theological [182] and metaphysical methods, to quite understand a sentiment so simple and profound. But each in his degree felt its charm. Here Thomas of Celano’s language rises to an elevation which we find in no other part of his works, closing with a picture of Francis which makes one think of the Song of Songs.

Of more than middle height, Francis had a delicate and kindly face, black eyes, a soft and sonorous voice. There was in his whole person a delicacy and

grace which made him infinitely lovely. All these characteristics are found in the most ancient portraits.

Chapter XI

THE INNER MAN AND WONDER-WORKING

[183] The missionary journey, undertaken under the encouragement of St. Clara and so poetically inaugurated by the sermon to the birds of Bevagna, appears to have been a continual triumph for Francis. Legend definitively takes possession of him; whether he will or no, miracles burst forth under his footsteps; quite unawares to himself the objects of which he has made use produce marvellous effects; folk come out from the villages in procession to meet him, and the biographer gives us to hear the echo of those religious festivals of Italy – merry, popular, noisy, bathed in sunshine – which so little resemble the fastidiously arranged festivals of northern peoples.

From Alviano Francis doubtless went to Narni, one of the most charming little towns in Umbria, busy with building a cathedral after the conquest of their communal liberties. He seems to have had a sort of predilection for this city as well as for its surrounding villages. From thence he seems to have plunged into the valley of Rieti, where Greccio, Fonte-Colombo, San Fabiano, Sant'Eleuthero, Poggio-Bustone retain even stronger traces of him than the environs of Assisi.

[184] Thomas of Celano gives us no particulars of the route followed, but, on the other hand, he goes at length into the success of the apostle in the March of Ancona, and especially at Ascoli. Did the people of these districts still remember the appeals which Francis and Egidio had made to them six years before (1209), or must we believe that they were peculiarly prepared to understand the new gospel? However this may be, nowhere else was a like enthusiasm shown; the effect of the sermons was so great that some thirty neophytes at once received the habit of the Order.

The March of Ancona ought to be held to be the Franciscan province *par excellence*. There are Ofida, San-Severino, Macerata, Fornaro, Cingoli, Fermo, Massa, and twenty other hermitages where, during more than a century, poverty was to find its heralds and its martyrs; from thence came Giovanni della Verna, Jacopo di Massa, Conrad di Offida, Angelo Clareno, and those legions of nameless revolutionists, dreamers, and prophets, who since the *extirpés* in 1244 by the general of the Order, Crescentius of Jesi, never ceased to make new recruits, and by their proud resistance to

all powers filled one of the finest pages of religious history in the Middle Ages.

This success, which bathed the soul of Francis with joy, did not arouse in him the smallest movement of pride. Never has man had a greater power over hearts, because never preacher preached himself less. One day Brother Masseo desired to put his modesty to the test.

“Why thee? Why thee? Why thee? he repeated again and again, as if to make a mock of Francis. “What are you saying?” cried Francis at last. “I am saying that everybody follows thee, everyone desires to see thee, and obey thee, and yet for all that thou art neither beautiful, nor learned, nor of noble family. Whence comes it, then, that it should be thee whom the world desires to follow?”

On hearing these words the blessed Francis, full of joy, raised his eyes [185] to heaven, and after remaining a long time absorbed in contemplation he knelt, praising and blessing God with extraordinary fervor. Then turning toward Masseo, “Thou wishest to know why it is I whom men follow? Thou wishest to know? It is because the eyes of the Most High have willed it thus; he continually watches the good and the wicked, and as his most holy eyes have not found among sinners any smaller man, nor any more insufficient and more sinful, therefore he has chosen me to accomplish the marvellous work which God has undertaken; he chose me because he could find no one more worthless, and he wished here to confound the nobility and grandeur, the strength, the beauty, and the learning of this world.”

This reply throws a ray of light upon St. Francis's heart; the message which he brought to the world is once again the glad tidings announced to the poor; its purpose is the taking up again of that Messianic work which the Virgin of Nazareth caught a glimpse of in her *Magnificat*, that song of love and liberty, the sighs of which breathe the vision of a new social state. He comes to remind the world that the welfare of man, the peace of his heart, the joy of his life, are neither in money, nor in learning, nor in strength, but in an upright and sincere will. Peace to men of good will.

The part which he had taken at Assisi in the controversies of his fellow-citizens he would willingly have taken in all the rest of Italy, for no man has ever dreamed of a more complete renovation; but if the end he sought was the same as that of many revolutionaries who came after him, their methods were completely different; his only weapon was love.

The event has decided against him. Apart from the *illuminati* of the March of Ancona and the *Fraticelli* of our own Provence his disciples have vied with one another to misunderstand his thought.

[186] Who knows if some one will not arise to take up his work? Has not the passion for worm-eaten speculations yet made victims enough? Are there not many among us who perceive that luxury is

a delusion, that if life is a battle, it is not a slaughter-house where ferocious beasts wrangle over their prey, but a wrestling with the divine, under whatever form it may present itself – truth, beauty, or love? Who knows whether this expiring nineteenth century will not arise from its winding-sheet to make *amende honorable* and bequeath to its successor one manly world of faith?

Yes, the Messiah will come. He who was announced by Gioacchino di Fiore and who is to inaugurate a new epoch in the history of humanity will appear. *Hope maketh not ashamed*. In our modern Babylons and in the huts on our mountains are too many souls who mysteriously sigh the hymn of the great vigil, *Rorate coeli desuper et nubes pluant Justum*, for us not to be on the eve of a divine birth.

All origins are mysterious. This is true of matter, but yet more true of that life, superior to all others, which we call holiness; it was in prayer that Francis found the [187] spiritual strength which he needed; he therefore sought for silence and solitude. If he knew how to do battle in the midst of men in order to win them to the faith, he loved, as Celano says, to fly away like a bird going to make its nest upon the mountain.

With men truly pious the prayer of the lips, the formulated prayer, is hardly other than an inferior form of true prayer. Even when it is sincere and attentive, and not a mechanical repetition, it is only a prelude for souls not dead of religious materialism.

Nothing resembles piety so much as love. Formularies of prayer are as incapable of speaking the emotions of the soul as model love-letters of speaking the transports of an impassioned heart. To true piety as well as to profound love, the formula is a sort of profanation.

To pray is to talk with God, to lift ourselves up to him, to converse with him that he may come down to us. It is an act of meditation, of reflection, which presupposes the effort of all that is the most personal in us.

Looked at in this sense, prayer is the mother of all liberty and all freedom.

Whether or no it be a soliloquy of the soul with itself, the soliloquy would be none the less the very foundation of a strong individuality.

With St. Francis as with Jesus, prayer has this character of effort which makes of it the greatest moral act. In order to truly know such men one must have been able to go with them, to follow Jesus up to the mountain where he passed his nights. Three favored ones, Peter, James, John, followed him thither one day; but to describe what they saw, all that a manly *sursum corda* added to the radiance and the mysterious grandeur of him [188] whom they adored, they were obliged to resort to the language of symbols.

It was so with St. Francis. For him as for his Master the end of prayer is communion with the heavenly Father, the accord of the divine with the human; or rather it is man who puts forth his strength to do

the work of God, not saying to him a mere passive, resigned, powerless *Fiat*, but courageously raising his head: "Behold me, Lord, I delight to do thy will."

"There are unfathomable depths in the human soul, because at the bottom is God himself." Whether this God be transcendent or immanent, whether he be One, the Creator, the eternal and immutable Principle, or whether he be, as say the doctors beyond the Rhine, the ideal objectivation of our Me, is not the question for the heroes of humanity. The soldier in the thick of battle does not philosophize as to how much truth or falsehood there is in the patriotic sentiment; he takes his arms and fights at the peril of his life. So the soldiers of spiritual conflicts seek for strength in prayer, in reflection, contemplation, inspiration; all, poets, artists, teachers, saints, legislators, prophets, leaders of the people, learned men, philosophers, all draw from this same source.

But it is not without difficulty that the soul unites itself to God, or if one prefers, that it finds itself. A prayer ends at last in divine communion only when it began with a struggle. The patriarch of Israel, asleep near Bethel, had already divined this: the God who passes by tells his name only to those who stop him and do him violence to learn it. He blesses only after long hours of conflict.

The gospel has found an untranslatable word to characterize the prayers of Jesus, it compares the conflict which preceded the voluntary immolation of Christ to the death-struggle: *Factus in agonia*. We might say of [189] his life that it had been a long temptation, a struggle, a prayer, since these words only express different moments of spiritual activity.

Like their Master, the disciples and successors of Christ can conquer their own souls only through perseverance. But these words, empty of meaning for devout conventicles, have had a tragic sense for men of religious genius.

Nothing is more false, historically, than the saints that adorn our churches, with their mincing attitude, their piteous expression, that indescribably anaemic and emaciated – one may almost say emasculated – air which shows in their whole nature; they are pious seminarists brought up under the direction of St. Alphonso di Liguori or of St. Louis di Gonzagua; they are not saints, not the violent who take the kingdom of heaven by force.

We have come to one of the most delicate features of the life of Francis – his relations with diabolical powers. Customs and ideas have so profoundly changed in all that concerns the existence of the devil and his relations with men, that it is almost impossible to picture to oneself the enormous place which the thought of demons occupied at that time in the minds of men.

The best minds of the Middle Ages believed without a doubt in the existence of the perverse spirit, in his perpetual transformations in the endeavour to

tempt men and cause them to fall into his snares. Even in the sixteenth century, Luther, who undermined so many beliefs, had no more doubt of the personal existence of Satan than of sorcery, conjurations, or possessions.

[190] Finding in their souls a wide background of grandeur and wretchedness, whence they sometimes heard a burst of distant harmonies calling them to a higher life, soon to be overpowered by the clamors of the brute, our ancestors could not refrain from seeking the explanation of this duel. They found it in the conflict of the demons with God.

The devil is the prince of the demons, as God is the prince of the angels; capable of all transformations, they carry on to the end of time terrible battles which will end in the victory of God, but meantime each man his whole life long is contended for by these two adversaries, and the noblest souls are naturally the most disputed.

This is how St. Francis, with all men of his time, explained the disquietudes, terrors, anguish, with which his heart was at times assailed, as well as the hopes, consolations, joys in which in general his soul was bathed. Wherever we follow his steps local tradition has preserved the memory of rude assaults of the tempter which he had to undergo.

It is no doubt useless to recall here the elementary fact that if manners change with the times, man himself is quite as strangely modified. If, according to education, and the manner of life, such or such a sense may develop an acuteness which confounds common experience – hearing in the musician, touch with the blind, etc. – we may estimate by this how much sharper certain senses may have been then than now. Several centuries ago visual delusion was with adults what it is now with children in remotest country parts. A quivering leaf, a nothing, a breath, an unexplained sound creates an image which they see and in the reality of which they believe absolutely. Man is all of a piece; the hyperaesthesia of the will presupposes that of the sensibility, one is conditioned on the other, and it is this which makes men of [191] revolutionary epochs so much greater than nature. It would be absurd under pretext of truth to try to bring them back to the common measures of our contemporary society, for they were veritably demigods for good as for evil.

Legends are not always absurd. The men of '93 are still near to us, but it is nevertheless with good right that legend has taken possession of them, and it is pitiable to see these men who, ten times a day, had to take resolutions where everything was at stake – their destiny, that of their ideas, and sometimes that of their country – judged as if they had been mere worthy citizens, with leisure to discuss at length every morning the garments they were to wear or the *menu* of a dinner. Most of the time historians have perceived only a part of the truth about them; for not only were there two men in them, almost all of them are at the same time poets, demagogues, prophets, heroes, martyrs. To write history, then, is to translate and transpose almost

continually. The men of the thirteenth century could not bring themselves to not refer to an exterior cause the inner motions of their souls. In what appears to us as the result of our own reflections they saw inspiration; where we say desires, instincts, passions, they said temptation, but we must not permit these differences of language to make us overlook or tax with trickery a part of their spiritual life, bringing us thus to the conclusions of a narrow and ignorant rationalism.

St. Francis believed himself to have many a time fought with the devil; the horrible demons of the Etruscan Inferno still haunted the forests of Umbria and Tuscany; but while for his contemporaries and some of his disciples apparitions, prodigies, possessions, are daily phenomena, for him they are exceptional, and remain entirely in the background. In the iconography of St. Benedict, [192] as in that of most of the popular saints, the devil occupies a preponderant place; in that of St. Francis he disappears so completely that in the long series of Giotto's frescoes at Assisi he is not seen a single time.

In the same way all that is magic and miracle-working occupies in his life an entirely secondary rank. Jesus in the Gospels gave his apostles power to cast out evil spirits, and to heal all sickness and all infirmity. Francis surely took literally these words, which made a part of his Rule. He believed that he could work miracles, and he willed to do so; but his religious thought was too pure to permit him to consider miracles otherwise than as an entirely exceptional means of relieving the sufferings of men. Not once do we see him resorting to miracle to prove his apostolate or to bolster up his ideas. His tact taught him that souls are worthy of being won by better means. This almost complete absence of the marvellous is by so much the more remarkable that it is in absolute contradiction with the tendencies of his time.

[193] Open the life of his disciple, St. Anthony of Padua (†1231); it is a tiresome catalogue of prodigies, healings, resurrections. One would say it was rather the prospectus of some druggist who had invented a new drug than a call to men to conversion and a higher life. It may interest invalids or devotees, but neither the heart nor the conscience is touched by it. It must be said in justice to Anthony of Padua that his relations with Francis appear to have been very slight. Among the earliest disciples who had time to fathom their master's thought to the very depths we find traces of this noble disdain of the marvellous; they knew too well that the perfect joy is not to astound the world with prodigies, to give sight to the blind, nor even to revive those who have been four days dead, but that it lives in the love that goes even to self-immolation. *Mihi absit gloriari nisi in cruce Domini.*

Thus Brother Egidio asked of God grace not to perform miracles; he saw in them, as in the passion for learning, a snare in which the proud would be taken, and which would distract the Order from its true mission.

St. Francis's miracles are all acts of love; the greater number of them are found in the healing of nervous maladies, those apparently inexplicable disquietudes which are the cruel afflictions of critical times. His gentle glance, at once so compassionate and so strong, which seemed like a messenger from his heart, often sufficed to make those who met it forget all their suffering.

The evil eye is perhaps a less stupid superstition than [194] is generally fancied. Jesus was right in saying that a look sufficed to make one an adulterer; but there is also a look – that of the contemplative Mary, for example – which is worth all sacrifices, because it includes them all, because it gives, consecrates, immolates him who looks.

Civilization dulls this power of the glance. A part of the education the world gives us consists in teaching our eyes to deceive, in making them expressionless, in extinguishing their flames; but simple and straightforward natures never give up using this language of the heart, "which brings life and health in its beams."

"A Brother was suffering unspeakable tortures; sometimes he would roll upon the ground, striking against whatever lay in his way, frothing at the mouth, horrible to see; at times he would become rigid, and again, after remaining stark outstretched for a moment, would roll about in horrible contortions; sometimes lying in a heap on the ground, his feet touching his head, he would bound upward as high as a man's head." Francis came to see him and healed him.

But these are exceptions, and the greater part of the time the Saint withdrew himself from the entreaties of his companions when they asked miracles at his hands.

To sum up, if we take a survey of the whole field of Francis's piety, we see that it proceeds from the secret union of his soul with the divine by prayer; this intuitive power of seeing the ideal classes him with the mystics. He knew, indeed, both the ecstasy and the liberty of mysticism, but we must not forget those features of character which separate him from it, particularly his apostolic fervor. Besides this his piety had certain peculiar qualities which it is necessary to point out.

And first, liberty with respect of observances: Francis felt all the emptiness and pride of most religious observance. He saw the snare that lies hidden there, for the man who carefully observes all the minutiae of religious code risks forgetting the supreme law of love. More than this, the friar who lays upon himself a certain number of supererogatory facts gains the admiration of the ignorant, but the pleasure which he finds in this admiration actually transforms his pious act into sin. Thus, strangely enough, contrary to other founders of orders, he was continually easing the strictness of the various rules which he laid down. We may not take this to be a mere accident, for it was only after a struggle with his disciples that he made his will prevail; and it was precisely those who were most disposed to relax their vow of poverty who were the most

anxious to display certain bigoted observances before the public eye.

"The sinner can fast," Francis would say at such times; "he can pray, weep, macerate himself, but one thing he cannot do, he cannot be faithful to God." Noble words, not unworthy to fall from the lips of him who came to preach a worship in spirit and in truth, without temple or priest; or rather that every fireside shall be a temple and every believer a priest.

Religious formalism, in whatever form of worship, always takes on a forced and morose manner. Pharisees of every age disfigure their faces that no one may be unaware of their godliness. Francis not merely could not endure these grimaces of false piety, he actually counted mirth and joy in the number of religious duties.

How shall one be melancholy who has in the heart an inexhaustible treasure of life and truth which only increases as one draws upon it? How be sad when in [196] spite of falls one never ceases to make progress? The pious soul which grows and develops has a joy like that of the child, happy in feeling its weak little limbs growing strong and permitting it every day a further exertion.

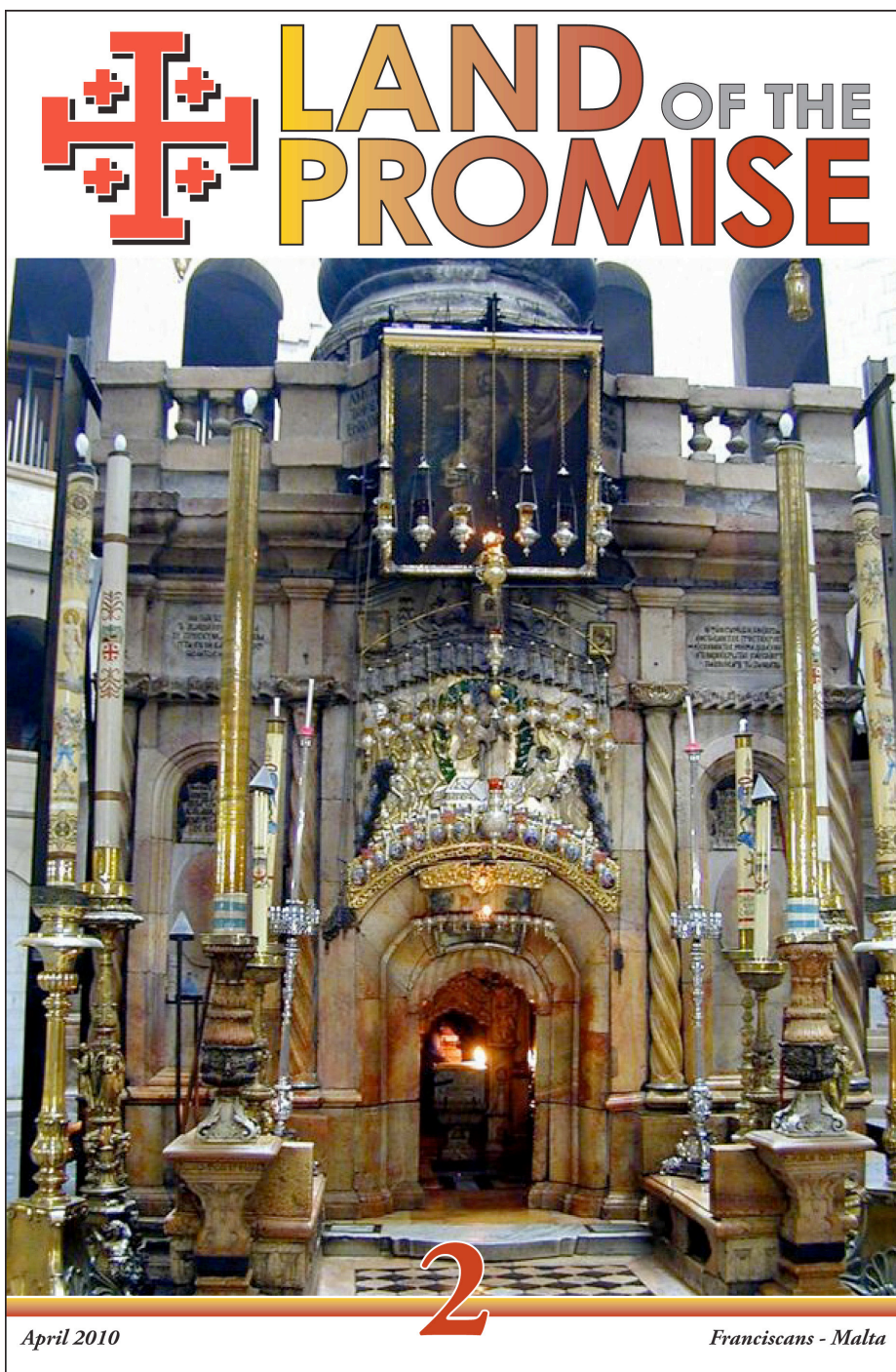
The word joy is perhaps that which comes most often to the pen of the Franciscan authors; the master went so far as to make it one of the precepts of the Rule. He was too good a general not to know that a joyous army is always a victorious army. In the history of the early Franciscan missions there are bursts of laughter which ring out high and clear.

For that matter, we are apt to imagine the Middle Ages as much more melancholy than they really were. Men suffered much more in those days, but the idea of grief being never separated from that of penalty, suffering was either an expiation or a test, and sorrow thus regarded loses its sting; light and hope shine through it.

Francis drew a part of his joy from the communion. He gave to the sacrament of the eucharist that worship imbued with unutterable emotion, with joyful tears, which has aided some of the noblest of human souls to endure the burden and heat of the day. The letter of the dogma was not fixed in the thirteenth century as it is to-day, but all that is beautiful, true, potent, eternal in the mystical feast instituted by Jesus was then alive in every heart.

The eucharist was truly the viaticum of the soul. Like the pilgrims of Emmaus long ago, in the hour when the shades of evening fall and a vague sadness invades the soul, when the phantoms of the night awake and seem to [197] loom up behind all our thoughts, our fathers saw the divine and mysterious Companion coming toward them; they drank in his words, they felt his strength descending upon their hearts, all their inward being warmed again, and again they whispered, "Abide with us, Lord, for the day is far spent and the night approacheth."

And often their prayer was heard.



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In the centre of the Church in ruins...

“A sun was born into the world.” With these words, in the *Divine Comedy* (*Paradiso*, Canto XI), the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri alludes to Francis’ birth, which took place in Assisi either at the end of 1181 or the beginning of 1182. As part of a rich family his father was a cloth merchant Francis lived a carefree adolescence and youth, cultivating the chivalrous ideals of the time. At age 20, he took part in a military campaign and was taken prisoner. He became ill and was freed. After his return to Assisi, a slow process of spiritual conversion began within him, which brought him to gradually abandon the worldly lifestyle that he had adopted thus far. The famous episodes of Francis’ meeting with the leper to whom, dismounting from his horse, he gave the kiss of peace and of the message from the Crucifix in the small Church of St Damian, date back to this period. Three times Christ on the Cross came to life, and told him: “Go, Francis, and repair my Church in ruins.” This simple occurrence of the word of God heard in the Church of St Damian contains a profound symbolism. At that moment St Francis was called to repair the small church, but the ruinous state of the building was a symbol of the dramatic and disquieting situation of the Church herself. At that time the Church had a superficial faith which did not shape or transform life, a scarcely zealous clergy, and a chilling of love. It was an interior destruction of the Church which also brought a decomposition of unity, with the birth of heretical movements. Yet, there at the centre of the Church in ruins was the Crucified Lord, and he spoke: he called for renewal, he called Francis to the manual labour of repairing the small Church of St. Damian, the symbol of a much deeper call to renew Christ’s own Church, with her radicality of faith and her loving enthusiasm for Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI
Catechesis on Saint Francis
27th January 2010

Abbreviations

Writings of St. Francis

Adm	Admonitiones.
CantAudPov	Cantico Audite Poverelle.
CantSol	Canticum fratris Solis.
LaudDei	Laudes Dei Altissimi.
BenLeo	Benedictio fratri Leoni data.
EpAnt	Epistola ad sanctum Antonium.
EpCler I	Epistola ad Clericos (Redactio prior).
EpCler II	Epistola ad Clericos (Red. posterior).
EpCust I	Epistola ad Custodes I.
EpCust II	Epistola ad Custodes II.
EpFid I	Epistola ad Fideles I.
EpFid II	Epistola ad Fideles II.
EpLeo	Epistola ad fratrem Leonem.
EpMin	Epistola ad Ministrum.
EpOrd	Epistola toti Ordini missa.
EpRect	Epistola ad populorum rectores.
ExhLD	Exhortatio ad Laudem Dei.
ExpPat	Expositio in Pater noster.
FormViv	Forma vivendi sanctae Clarae data.
Fragm	Fragmenta alterius RegulaeNB.
LaudHor	Laudes ad omnes horas dicendae.
OffPass	Officium Passionis Domini.
OrCruc	Oratio ante crucifixum.
RegB	Regula bullata.
RegNB	Regula non bullata.
RegEr	Regula pro eremitoriis data.
SalBMV	Salutatio beatae Mariae Virginis.
SalVirt	Salutatio virtutum.
Test	Testamentum.
UltVol	Ultima voluntas S. Clarae scripta.

Sources for the Life of St. Francis

1C	Tommaso da Celano, Vita Sancti Francisci.
LCh	Celano, Legenda ad usum chori.
2C	Celano, Memoriale in Desiderio Animae.
3C	Celano, Tractatus de Miraculis S. Francisci.
LJS	Julian of Speyer, Vita Sancti Francisci.
OR	Officium Rhythmicum S. Francisci.
AP	Anonimo Perugino.
L3C	Leggenda dei Tre Compagni.
CA	Compilatio Assisiensis.
LMj	S. Bonaventura, Legenda Maior S. Francisci.
LMn	S. Bonaventura, Legenda minor S. Francisci.
SP	Speculum Perfectionis.
SC	Sacrum commercium S. Francisci.
ABF	Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius.
Fior	Fioretti di San Francesco.

Sources for the Life of St. Clare

BICl	Blessing of St. Clare.
1-4LAg	Letters to St. Agnes of Prague..
LCl	Legend of St. Clare.
PC	Acts of the Process of Canonization.
PrPov	Privilege of Poverty.
RegCl	Rule of St. Clare.
TestCl	Testament of St. Clare.

Spiritu u Hajja

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