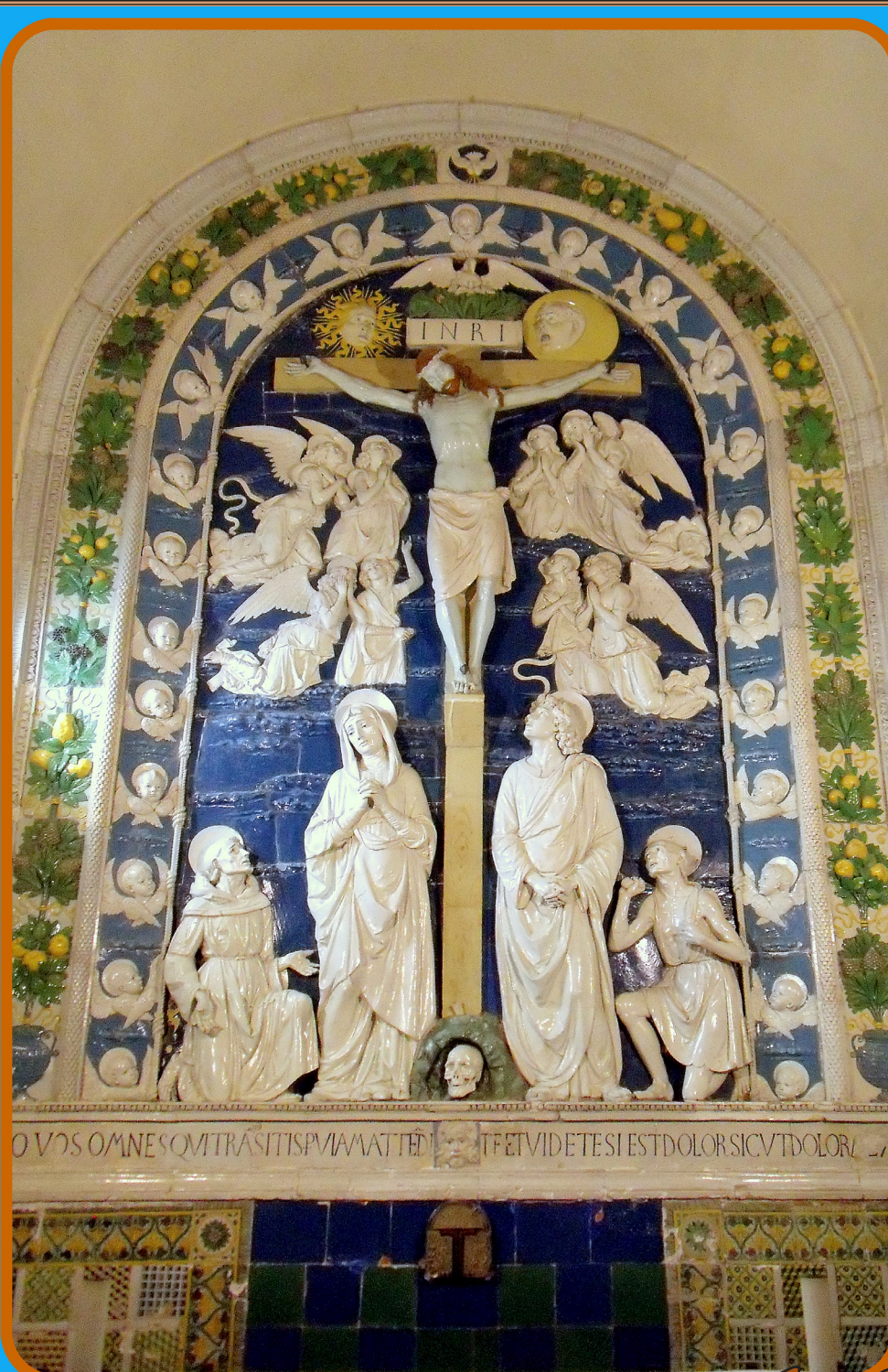


October - December 2012

Spirit + Life



Journal of Franciscan Culture
Issued by the Franciscan Friars (OFM Malta)

102



Quarterly journal of
Franciscan culture published
since April 1986.

Layout:
John Abela ofm
Computer Setting:
Raymond Camilleri ofm

Available at:
<http://www.i-tau.com>

All original material is
Copyright © TAU Franciscan
Communications 2012

Contents

- Editorial 2
- Francis, the Brothers and the
anguish of solitude 3
- Gorg Aquilina OFM..... 9
- The sacrament of the Holy
Words in Francis of Assisi .. 12
- The Franciscan Observants
and the Italian society in the
15th century 20
- Blessed Gabriele Maria Al-
legra OFM..... 22
- Quote 25

102

EDITORIAL

TRIBUTE TO A TRUE HISTORIAN

The death of Father George Aquilina ofm (or Patri Ġorġ) as he was known by all of us, on 29th September, came as a shock to all those who knew him closely. I was personally dumbfounded when I discovered the news on my mobile phone after the concluding Mass of the annual retreat of our Franciscan students of the Holy Land Custody on Mount Tabor.

Patri Ġorġ has left a great legacy and a sense of void that will be very difficult to fill. He was, first and foremost, a true Franciscan, who loved the Franciscan ideal and life, who cherished his vocation to the very end. His zeal for the Franciscan charism laid the basis of his untiring efforts as a researcher and historian, but above all it was the basis of his day to day life.

He was not a person who made a show of himself and his achievements. He was rather timid and shy of popularity. His success lay in the fact that he never wasted one minute of his time. Going through his papers, cards, chronicles, diaries, one cannot help wondering how he could cope with so much work. In his lifetime he produced volumes upon volumes of documentary material of all kinds. Every time he met with the tiniest detail regarding the Franciscans and the Maltese Franciscan Province he would note it down immediately in his clear and legible handwriting.

Patri Ġorġ was a great historian. He was a true historian, because he never pretended to say the last word in anything he discovered, but was always humbly open to further research, to the point where he had to be pushed to conclude his books before publication. Like every true scholar he left us with bundles of unfinished research that awaits further study and publication.

Tucked in every corner of the Provincial Library and Archives of Ta' Ġiezu friary in Valletta are memories of Patri Ġorġ. In the silent rooms and shelves one witnesses his great sacrifices, even physical exertion, to update and take loving care of whatever the Maltese Franciscans have produced in their long history, up till this very day. He took care to enclose all decorations and medals in showcases, and hang portraits of past provincials, librarians and archivists. I found his portrait hidden in his wardrobe awaiting someone to discover it after his death and place it among his predecessors.

Patri Ġorġ was a true friar, but he was also a sensible human person. He showed compassion and love to all, including fellow brothers, nuns and religious sisters, the sick and elderly who came to our Franciscan church. He respected fellow historians and scholars, and assisted students all his life. His room was open to all those who came to discover the nobility of Franciscan studies.

I want to continue remembering Patri Ġorġ for his enthusiasm, which never waned even when he became physically weak and psychologically depressed by events around him. I want to continue remembering him in our long country walks on the Korti of Mellieħa, or swimming at Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq, recounting his joy at having discovered new documents at the Vatican Archives. May God reward him for being a spiritual and academic father to me in my endeavour to study and work as a Franciscan. May God grant him eternal rest and peace!

Fr. Noel Muscat ofm

“LORD, I GIVE BACK TO YOU
THE FAMILY YOU GAVE ME” (CA 112):
**FRANCIS, THE BROTHERS,
AND THE ANGUISH
OF SOLITUDE**

Noel Muscat ofm

Chapter 1

Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi

Thomas of Celano, in the *Vita Sancti Francisci* (*Life of Saint Francis*), written barely two years after Francis' death, tells us how during the final weeks of his life, when “he was staying in the palace of the bishop of Assisi, he asked the brothers to carry him quickly to the place of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula. For he wanted to give back his soul to God in that place where [...] he first came to know perfectly the way of truth.”

It was in the intimacy of the surroundings of the Portiuncula, which were so familiar to Francis that he wished to end his days in the company of the brothers who were closest to him. The few weeks that Francis spent at the Portiuncula, lying sick in the infirmary close to the chapel of Saint Mary of the Angels, were characterised by some gestures and words that mark the final moments of the life of the saint. These actions and words are of fundamental importance to understand what the saint was feeling during that terminal illness.

According to Thomas of Celano's account, which is the oldest among the sources: “After he had rested a few days in that place he so longed for, knowing the time of his death was close at hand, he called to him two brothers, his special sons, and told them to sing *The Praises of the Lord* with a loud voice and joyful spirit, rejoicing at his approaching death, or rather at the life that was so near. He himself, as best he could, broke into that psalm of David: ‘With a loud voice I cried to the Lord; with a loud voice I beseeched the Lord.’”²

We shall now attempt to make an analysis of the contents of Psalm 141, which Francis recited

during this particular moment of his life. After seeing its contents we shall also see how Francis made use of this psalm in his prayers and what it evoked to him spiritually, particularly because it is a psalm that the liturgy often uses in order to recall Christ's sufferings during His passion and death.

The following is the Latin text of Psalm 141, according to the numbering of the Vulgate edition in the Roman breviary:

- ¹ Voce mea ad Dóminum clamavi: *
voce mea ad Dóminum deprecátus sum.
- ² Effúndo in conspectu eius orationem meam, *
et tribulatióem meam ante ipsum pronúntio.
- ³ In deficiéndo ex me spíritum meum: *
et tu cognovisti sémitas meas.
- ⁴ In via hac qua ambulábam, *
abscondérunt láqueum michi.
- ⁵ Considerábam ad dexteram, et vidébam: *
et non erat qui cognósceret me.
- ⁶ Périit fuga a me: *
et non est qui requírat animam meam.
- ⁷ Clamávi ad te, Domine, † dixi: Tu es spes mea, *
pórtio mea in terra vivéntium.
- ⁸ Inténde ad deprecatióem meam: *
quia humiliátus sum nimis.
- ⁹ Líbera me a persecuéntibus me: *
quia confortáti sunt super me.
- ¹⁰ Educ de custódia ánimam meam † ad confiténdum nómini tuo: *
me expéctant iusti, donec retríbuas michi.

Before embarking upon an analysis of the psalm recited by Saint Francis we have to refer to what he says in the *Later Rule* regarding the obligation of the friars to pray the divine office. Francis writes: "Let the clerical [brothers] recite the Divine Office according to the rite of the holy Roman Church excepting the Psalter, for which reason they may have breviaries."³ This practice refers to an explicit choice made by Francis regarding the life of prayer of the brothers. During the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 Pope Innocent III had introduced an abridged form of the divine office, in use in the papal curia in Rome. Hence, the name *breviarium*. Francis wanted his brothers to adopt this abridged form of liturgical prayer, which was more suited to an itinerant brotherhood than the longer monastic forms, which necessitated many liturgical books. He made an exception in the case of the Psalter, since he did not choose the Roman Psalter but the Gallican Psalter, which was more commonly used among clerics. Since many brothers who were clerics would know the psalms by heart according to this Psalter, Francis opts for this version of the psalms and makes the exception present in the Rule.

The fact that Francis and the brothers would know many psalms by heart according to the Gallican Psalter can be of help for us to understand why the saint chose this particular psalm during the final days of his life on earth. Psalm 141 in the Vulgate edition of Saint Jerome was included in the Roman breviary as the last psalm to be recited during Vespers on Fridays. In this way this particular psalm was closely linked to the theme of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. The paschal nature of the psalm is evident from the expressions it conveys, and also from its use during this important moment of the liturgical week.

Francis also included the first five verses of Psalm 141 in the *Office of the Passion of the Lord*, during the hour of Sext.⁴ This devotional office, composed by Francis from many verses of the psalms, other books of Scripture and some liturgical texts familiar to him, celebrates the paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. The first seven psalms are intimately linked with the mystery of Easter. The particular reference to Psalm 141 during the hour of Sext corresponds to the moment of Christ's crucifixion. Francis contemplates this solemn moment of Christ's supreme act of love by quoting a psalm with which he was familiar during the recitation of Vespers on Friday afternoons. We have to remember that in the Middle Ages and even after the Council of Trent, up till the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council, the entire Psalter was recited on a weekly basis. Hence Psalm 141 would be prayed every Friday afternoon.

The saint's devotion to Christ's passion and death is also documented in the Sources. Thomas of

Celano, in *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, describes Francis' intense devotion to Christ's passion after having described the encounter of the saint with the Crucifix of San Damiano:

"From then on, he could not hold back his tears, even weeping loudly over the Passion of Christ, as if it were constantly before his eyes. He filled the roads with his sobbing, and, as he remembered the wounds of Christ, he would take no comfort. Once, upon meeting a close friend, he explained the reason for this sorrow, moving him also to bitter tears."⁵

When Francis chose to pray Psalm 141 during the final days of his life he had accomplished a long spiritual journey from the encounter with the Crucifix of San Damiano in 1206, to the experience of the stigmatisation on La Verna in September 1224. Francis had, by then, become a living icon of Christ crucified, as Saint Bonaventure aptly states in the *Major Legend of Saint Francis*:

"O truly the most Christian of men, who strove by perfect imitation to be conformed while living to Christ living, dying to Christ dying, and dead to Christ dead, and deserved to be adorned with an expressed likeness!"⁶

Within this context we must now examine Psalm 141, which Francis explicitly chose to pray during his final moments. Having seen the Christological basis of the psalm, as expressed in its use during the liturgy of Friday in commemoration of the Lord's passion, we are more interested in discovering what it conveyed to the dying Francis. According to the account of Celano Francis was surrounded by the brothers. He first asked the brothers to sing for him the Praises of the Lord, possibly a reference to *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, to which Francis also added the reference to Sister Death. Then he himself personally recited Psalm 141, "as best he could." Why did he choose this psalm? Or rather, besides its obvious Christological connotations, why did Francis make use of this particular psalm?

A plausible explanation could be found again in the use that the liturgy made of Psalm 141 during the Friday Vespers. According to Thomas of Celano's *Legenda ad usum chori*, written for liturgical use during the divine office of the feast day of Saint Francis: "Freed from the fetters of this mortal life, he blessedly departed to Christ in the year of the Incarnation of Our Lord 1226, on the fourth day of the Nones of October, a Sunday."⁷ This would refer to Francis' death as occurring on Saturday 3rd October 1226, since we know from other sources that Francis died on the evening preceding Sunday 4th October.⁸ The saint could have recited Psalm 141 on the preceding day, which was a Friday, since he would easily remember it from his faithful custom to recite the divine office, and hence to pray it every Friday evening. In our analysis

of Psalm 141 we shall make use of the Latin text that Francis prayed, and which conveys more faithfully the sentiments and state of mind of the saint during the last moments of his life.

The psalm starts with a prayer of supplication to the Lord: *Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi, voce mea ad Dominum deprecatus sum* (I cry aloud to the Lord; I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy). The tone of the psalm is immediately one of intense prayer of supplication in the midst of affliction. It is the voice of a helpless human being who cries out to the Lord, since he is going through an intense experience of suffering. Christ also cried out to the Father on the cross, making use of Psalm 21:2: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and of Psalm 30:6: "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit." Francis unites himself with Christ during the passion, since he himself was experiencing his ultimate suffering in the face of Sister Death, which was approaching. Like Christ Francis felt afraid and in anguish, and he made recourse to prayer in order to find comfort and consolation. Indeed, like Christ, who was surrounded by his faithful followers (Mary, the beloved disciple, Mary Magdalen, Mary of Clopas) and by his enemies (the high priests, Pharisees, onlookers and executioners), yet feeling totally abandoned even by the heavenly Father, Francis must also have felt the anguish of loneliness and abandonment even though he was surrounded by the brothers, as we shall see.

Effundo in conspectu ejus orationem meam, et tribulationem meam ante ipsum pronuntio (I pour out before him my prayer; before him I recount my tribulation). Francis is aware that he is standing in the presence of God the Father, just like Jesus on the cross. Even during the moments of suffering Francis felt the need to express his sentiments in prayer. The object of his prayer is found in the expression: "before him I recount my tribulation." What was the tribulation that Francis was going through at that particular moment? Was it simply linked with his experience of physical suffering, or was some kind of psychological and spiritual tribulation also at work? Indeed, just like Christ on the cross, Francis was experiencing intense suffering in all aspects of his humanity, including bodily, spiritual and psychological suffering. For him it was a tribulation, an agony that can be explained only if we try to understand the circumstances that led up to his final illness.⁹ But maybe the greatest tribulation of all was not that linked with physical suffering, but rather that regarding psychological suffering of a broken-hearted man who was feeling that his life-long dream was not being shared by the majority of the brothers. We shall go deeper into this theme with the help of the Sources for the life of Saint Francis.

In deficiendo ex me spiritum meum, et tu

cognovisti semitas meas (When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who watch over my way). The verse aptly explains the state in which Francis was. He was at the point of dying and his prayer is the prayer of a dying man: "When my spirit grows faint within me." Again the link between Christ dying on the cross and Francis dying at the Portiuncula is very strong. It was during this solemn moment that Francis could express his sentiments in prayer and at the same time also place his trust in God, just like Christ did on the cross. "You watch over my way." Francis was full of trust in the power of God to save him and in the intimate relationship between him and Christ. It is as if Francis is aware of God's ability to justify him, since his ways were not hidden from God. The psalm is, in fact, a prayer of intense trust in God, even in the midst of suffering and tribulation.

In via hac, qua ambulabam, absconderunt laqueum mihi (In the path where I walk, people have hidden a snare for me). The image of the way or path is again present in this verse. Francis expresses the sentiments of the author of the psalm who sees himself being ambushed along the way by his enemies. Francis has just stated that his ways were clear and evident before God, in other words, that he had not acted in deceit or hypocrisy. Yet his enemies were there, ready to ensnare him by hiding traps along the way he was following. It is difficult to imagine to whom Francis is referring in this expression. It could very well be a reference to the devil, which ensnares man particularly during the moment of death in order to snatch him from God's hold. In fact, we do find examples of such an experience in hagiographical literature.¹⁰

Considerabam ad dexteram, et videbam, et non erat qui cognosceret me (Look and see, there is no one at my right hand; no one recognises me). This is maybe one of the most eloquent verses in the psalm. It expresses the inner anguish of a suffering man, who is physically surrounded by other persons who do not know him, or who are even his enemies. It is the typical experience of Jesus Christ on the cross. Francis would have been accustomed to contemplate the icon of the Crucifix of San Damiano, where Christ stands out from the cross in an aura of serenity and peace, his eyes wide open, and his slender members encompassing all those who are surrounding him, namely the angels above him and on the sides, Mary his mother, John, the beloved disciple, Mary Magdalen, Mary of Clopas, the Centurion, and the saints below his feet, receiving his saving blood falling on their heads. This image would have been impressed in the mind and heart of Francis. Yet, along the path of his life, he knew that the true story of Christ's passion was rather different. Besides these faithful disciples Christ was also surrounded by his enemies, namely the high priests, Pharisees,

Sadducees, scribes, Roman soldiers and executioners, besides the onlookers and passers-by who were jeering at him. Francis was in a rather similar situation when he was dying at the Portiuncula. The Sources speak about the faithful disciples who were close to Francis and who received a special blessing from their spiritual father. Yet the saint complains that he was looking at his right hand, and finding no one who really knew him. These words convey a profound meaning. What was going on in Francis at this moment? Why did he feel so abandoned as to be unrecognisable by those who were his faithful companions? It is difficult to answer such a question, and yet we find hints in the Sources that point towards this direction. The section dedicated to the final blessing of Francis to the companions will try to delve deeper into this issue and provide some insights as to what actually occurred in Francis' sensibility during this final moments of his life.

Periit fuga a me, et non est qui requirat animam meam (I have no refuge; no one cares for my life). The verse is a kind of repetition of the preceding. The psalms often speak about the need to flee from an incumbent danger and take refuge in God. The psalmist is here expressing his desire to escape from his present tribulation, but he feels helpless and cannot move. To complicate matters, he finds no one ready to help him to escape, no one who is ready to save his soul from danger. Again we are in the face of the experience of the cross, which is essentially an experience of abandonment. Francis is immersed into this experience of suffering and loneliness and he states that he cannot find anyone who is capable of helping him go through this ordeal, or better still, who can provide refuge for his soul. In a certain way it seems that Francis is expressing a natural attitude of a dying person, namely that of being left alone to face death with serenity and courage.¹¹

Clamavi ad te, Domine, dixi: Tu es spes mea, portio mea in terra viventium (I cry to you Lord; I say: You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living). After having expressed his feelings the psalmist turns directly to God in a prayer full of trust and faithfulness. The psalm re-echoes the verb *clamare* with which it had started. The supplication of the just man can penetrate heaven and move God to mercy in order to listen to his pleas. The psalm also refers to a frequent theme linked with God's faithfulness to the covenant, namely, the promise of inheriting the earth to those who are meek and humble (Psalm 15:5-6). The same theme, as we know, is present in the third Beatitude (Mt 5:5). Francis is therefore expressing the same feelings of the just man who is suffering tribulation and physical illness, and who knows that his only trust lies in the Lord who promises him the inheritance of the Promised Land. In this case it is "the land of the living" and hence the

reference to eternal life is quite clear.¹²

Intende ad deprecationem meam, quia humiliatus sum nimis (Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need). The Latin passive *humiliatus sum*, literally translated, would sound: "I am humiliated". Francis cries out to the Lord and asks him to listen to his prayer, because he is feeling "humiliated". Humiliated by whom? Surely Francis could not have felt humiliated in his spirit if he examined his conscience before dying. His union with Christ was reaching its highest levels of intensity. Yet he was feeling humiliated by those who were now considering him as a kind of outcast. This expression of humiliation seems very real when one considers that Francis truly felt helpless in the face of the turn of events in the Order during the last couple of years of his life. Maybe he felt humiliated by the brothers themselves, as we shall see when we examine the Sources which speak about the inner tension of Francis at seeing that he was being sidelined by the brothers.

Libera me a persequentibus me, quia confortati sunt super me (Rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me). This verse develops the same frame of mind of the preceding expression. The psalmist is feeling not only abandoned, but also persecuted by those who are too strong for him. His illness and the approaching death render him helpless in the face of those who want to take advantage of his weakness in order to have it their own way. Francis might have felt very much the same during this final hour of his life, when he places his trust in the Lord alone. The fact that the brothers had forsaken him meant that they had become the ones who were persecuting him, and he felt that they had by now become too strong for him and he could not oppose their ideas or projects any longer. Francis prayed that he be freed from the ones who opposed and persecuted him, but his prayer, as we shall see, is not the fruit of bitterness, but of a wholehearted trust in the Lord who could free him through death. In this way the extreme moment of Francis' passing over into Christ was not only a moment of truth, in which he fully understood the depth of his psychological suffering, but above all it was a moment of freedom, of joy, of being able to let go in order to gain victory over his weakness.

Educ de custodia animam meam ad confitendum nomini tuo (Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name). The comparison of the body to a prison in which the soul is locked could very well be reminiscent of classical philosophy, in which the soul was presented as being "imprisoned" in the body. We know that the Biblical notion of the human person as a composite of body and soul is not in agreement with the philosophical distinctions that have shaped Christian belief for centuries. The effect of Aristotelian and

Platonic philosophy was, however, strongly felt in such a way that this verse could have been interpreted as a prayer for the liberation of the soul from the limitations of the body. Francis himself speaks about the soul as living in a “cell” in the body.¹³ The desire of Francis during those last days of his life was that of being freed from the limitations of bodily existence in order to go beyond sensible experience and encounter God beyond the limitations of the flesh. In a sense, Francis’ wish expressed in the words of the psalm is not meant to be derogatory to human existence in the flesh, but rather expresses the transcendent experience of going beyond the flesh in order to enter into God’s own sphere of being. The soul is capable of such a journey. Saint Bonaventure would express the same experience in his famous *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, written in 1259 after a profound period of meditation on La Verna. In this mystical treatise the Seraphic Doctor explains how the soul passes through and in God’s vestiges in nature, in order to pass through and in God’s image in its faculties and in the theological virtues, and then to go beyond itself into God’s own essence as unity and Trinity, through the mystery of Christ crucified. It is the paschal journey of the disciple, as expressed by Francis’ own experience of mystical union with the crucified and risen Christ.

Me exspectant iusti, donec retribuas mihi (Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me). The psalm concludes with an invocation to the communion of saints in the glory of beatific vision. What Francis was missing was a company of persons who would welcome him and accept him at that very moment of his life, on threshold of eternity. He seemingly could not recognise any of those persons in those who were surrounding him, and therefore he recognises his new company in the multitude of saints. His reward was already awaiting him in heaven. God would repay him for his faithfulness to his life-long Gospel commitment. In this way the psalm ends in a positive note evoking the peace of the heavenly Jerusalem reserved for those who are truly just. Francis feels at home in this heavenly company.

Psalm 141 has now to be seen against the background of the events that were unfolding at the Portiuncula during the final days of the life of Saint Francis. We shall now attempt an analysis of the various Sources referring to these final days and to the actions and words of Francis, in order to understand what was going on in the mind and heart of the saint, particularly his inner anguish at seeing how the brothers were finding it increasingly difficult to be faithful to those values which he had cherished for so long during his life. If we compare these same sources with the words of Francis in the *Testament*, we have a fairly clear picture of the state of mind and of the inner sufferings of

the saint, which became more marked during the final couple of years after the episode of the stigmatisation on La Verna. Indeed, looking at his right, the saint could count on very few brothers whom he could recognise as being true and faithful friars minor. On his deathbed he tried his best to bless them and encourage them not to waver from their courageous commitment to follow Christ and observe the Gospel *sine glossa*.

NOTES

1. THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Life of Saint Francis* [1C] 108, in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Vol. 1: The Saint*, Edited by R.J. Armstrong, J.A.W. Hellmann, W.J. Short, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 1999, 277 [FAED I, 277].

2 1C 109 [FAED I, 277]. Latin text: THOMAS DE CELANO, *Vita Prima Sancti Francisci*, 108-110, in *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di Enrico Menestò e Stefano Brufani, Edizioni Porziuncola, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Assisi 1995, 387: “Cum igitur in loco sibi valde desiderato paucis quievisset diebus, et cognosceret *tempus* propinquare mortis *instare* (cfr. Hebr 9,9), vocavit ad se duos fratres et suos filios specialies, praecipiens eis de morte propinqua, immo de vita sic proxima, in *exultatione* (cfr. Ps 106,22) spiritus, alta voce Laudes Domino decantare. Ipse vero, prout potuit, in illum Davidicum psalmum eripuit: ‘*Voce mea*’, inquit ‘*ad Dominum clamavi, voce mea ad Dominum deprecatus sum*’ (Ps 141,2-8).”

3 ST. FRANCIS, *Later Rule* 3,1 [FAED I, 101]. Latin text in FRANCESCO D’ASSISI, *Scritti*. Edizione critica a cura di Carlo Paolazzi, Frati Editori di Quaracchi, Grottaferrata 2009, 326: “Clerici faciant divinum officium secundum ordinem sancte Romane Ecclesie excepto psalterio, ex quo habere poterunt breviora.”

4 ST. FRANCIS, *Office of the Passion of the Lord*, Psalm V,1-5 [FAED I, 144-145].

5 THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [2C] 11, in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Vol. 11: The Founder*, Edited by R.J. Armstrong, J.A.W. Hellmann, W.J. Short, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 2000, 250 [FAED II, 250]. A more vivid description of the event is found in the *Legend of Three Companions* [L3C] 14 [FAED II, 76]: “Once he was walking by himself near the church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, weeping and wailing loudly. A spiritual man, overhearing him, thought he was suffering some sickness or pain. Moved by piety for him, he asked why he was crying. ‘I am crying because of the Passion of my Lord,’ he said, ‘for whom I should not be ashamed to go throughout the world crying in a loud voice.’ That man, in fact, likewise began to cry with him in a loud voice.

Frequently, even when he got up from prayer, his eyes seemed full of blood because he was crying with such bitterness. But, in memory of the Lord's passion, not only did he afflict himself in tears, he also did so by abstaining from food and drink."

6 ST. BONAVENTURE, *Major Legend of St. Francis* [LMj] 14,4 [FAED II, 643].

7 THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Legend for Use in the Choir*, IX,17 [FAED I, 325].

8 *Assisi Compilation* [AC] 14 [FAED II, 129]: "Saturday evening, before nightfall, after vespers, when blessed Francis passed to the Lord, many birds called larks flew low above the roof of the house where blessed Francis lay, wheeling in a circle and singing."

9 JACQUES LE GOFF, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, English Translation by Christine Rhone, (Routledge) London 2004, 26, states: "An essential feature in the physical and spiritual personality of Francis is established: he was a sick man. He would suffer until his death from two kinds of illness: eye troubles, on the one hand, and disorders of the digestive system, stomach, spleen and liver, on the other. Travels, preaching fatigue and ascetic practices would aggravate this ill-health."

10 SULPICIOUS SEVERUS (*Sources Chrétiennes*, 133, 336-344) describes the death of Saint Martin of Tours as a struggle against the devil and a welcoming into the bosom of Abraham. "Haec locutus diabolum vidit prope

assistere. 'Quid hic, inquit, astas, cruenta bestia? Nihil in me, funeste, reperies; Abrahæ me sinus recipit.'"

11 ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS, *On Death and Dying*, 40th Anniversary edition, (Routledge) Oxford 2009, 92: "While the dying patient has found some peace and acceptance, his circle of interest diminishes. He wishes to be left alone or at least not stirred up by news and problems of the outside world." Francis' loneliness was, in a certain way, a sign of a serene acceptance of death. At the same time, however, it also meant a distancing of himself from the same brothers who were surrounding him. This might sound strange, but it seems to be a normal human experience at the moment of death. Seen in a spiritual perspective it becomes even more meaningful, in that Francis experiencing an intimate union with Christ in his human suffering.

12 This verse is also quoted in chapter 6,5 of the *Later Rule* in the context of the brothers not claiming to have any possessions: "Let his be your *portion* which leads into the *land of the living*" [FAED I, 103]. Latin text in FRANCESCO D'ASSISI, *Scritti*, 330: "Haec sit *portio* vestra, que perducit in *terram viventium*."

13 AC 108 [FAED II, 215]: "Brother Body is our cell, and the soul is the hermit who remains inside the cell to pray to God and meditate. So if the soul does not remain in quiet and solitude in its cell, a cell made by hands does little good to a religious."

ĠORĠ AQUILINA OFM (1939-2012)

In memoriam

Early in the morning of Saturday 29th September 2012, feast day of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, Fr. Ġorġ Aquilina ofm passed away at the Franciscan friary of Saint Mary of Jesus (Ta' Ġiezu) in Valletta. He was 73 years old.

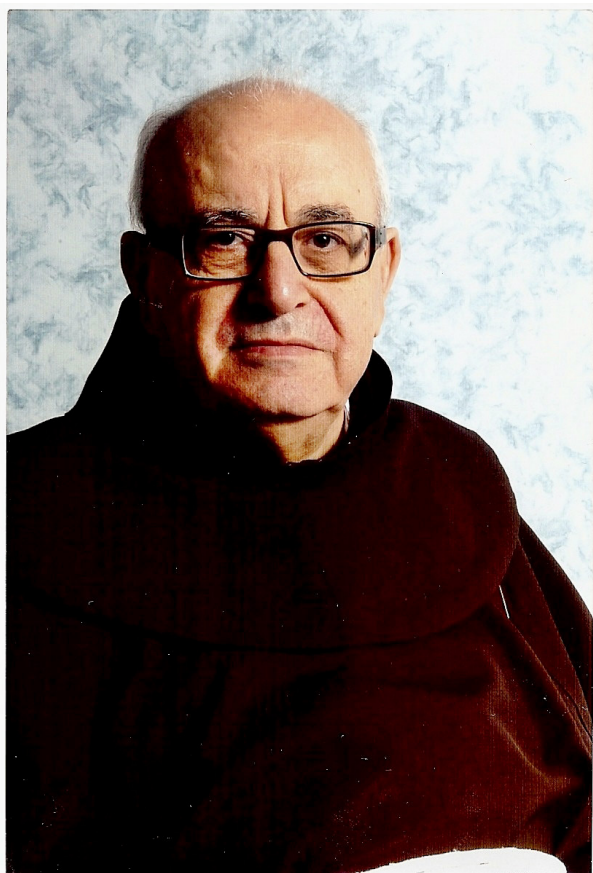
Marjanu Aquilina was born in Qormi on 18th July 1939, the son of Joseph and Rosaria Saliba. He received his education at the Government schools, at Saint Albert the Great College in Valletta and at the College run by the Franciscan Friars at "Ta' Gliex", close to Saint Anthony's friary in Ġhajnsielem, Gozo. As a teenager he was at home at the Franciscan Friary of Ta' Ġiezu in Valletta, where he received his Franciscan calling. He entered the Novitiate house at Saint Anthony's friary on 9th October 1955, changing

his name to Ġorġ, out of his devotion to the patron saint of his parish in Qormi. He made his first Temporary Profession on 14th October 1956 and his Solemn Profession on 31st July 1960. He studied philosophy and theology in the Franciscan friaries of Ta' Ġiezu in Rabat and Valletta. On 14th March 1964 he was ordained priest.

After his priestly ordination Fr. Ġorġ was sent for higher studies at the Pontificio Ateneo Antonianum in Rome (nowadays the Università Pontificia Antonianum), where he specialised in Ecclesiastical History acquiring a doctoral degree after defending his thesis on the Franciscan Minister General, Marco da Viterbo, entitled: *Marco da Viterbo [1304-1369]*. Volume 47 di *Studi e Testi Francescani*, Roma 1971. In Rome he also attended the Diploma course at the *Scuola Vaticana di Paleografia Diplomatica e Archivistica*.

Back in the Maltese Franciscan Province Fr. Ġorġ Aquilina took over the work of the late Maltese Franciscan historian Fr. Ġorġ Xerri (†1942). He lectured Church History to the Franciscan students of the Province and became Provincial Librarian and Archivist, a post he was to hold until his death. For many years Fr. Ġorġ was also the Chronicler of the Maltese Franciscan Province. During his long years as Librarian and Archivist he revamped the Provincial Library of the Maltese Province, housing it in a more spacious environment on the floor above the south aisle of Saint Mary of Jesus Church in Valletta, overlooking Grand Harbour. He also moved the Provincial Archives from the cramped space they occupied in the Provincial Curia to the premises of the old theological seminary. He took care of the microfilming and cataloguing of the entire archive.

In the Maltese Franciscan Province Fr. Ġorġ was also Provincial Secretary (1973-1978) and Provincial Vicar (1990-1996). He also promoted and supported the building of the Church and Friary of Saint Mary of the Angels in Baħar iċ-Ġagħaq. His love



for Franciscan life and studies, which he communicated with love and care to younger friars, was also mixed with a sense of enthusiasm for fresh initiatives in Franciscan life, which the Maltese Franciscan Province undertook particularly during the period 1982-1996. Fr. Ġorġ stood up to defend what he truly believed in, even though, like many other learned and enthusiastic Franciscans before him in the history of the Order, he was sometimes misunderstood and misjudged. For those who knew him well, his loud voice, in years gone by, was only the cry of a heart yearning for renewal and seriousness in concrete choices regarding Franciscan values in the field of study and care for the artistic and historical patrimony of the Province.

The long years of research as a historian at the Archives of the Order of St. John in the National Library at Valletta, at the Cathedral Museum in Mdina, at the Notarial Archives, and at many other archives in Malta and abroad, particularly the Archivio Segreto Vaticano, and the Archivio di Stato in Palermo as well as in other towns in Sicily, were the basis of many publications of local and international renown regarding the history of the Order of the Knights of St. John, and the history of the Franciscan Order in Malta and Sicily.

Whoever knows Ġorġ Aquilina in our Franciscan friary of Saint Mary of Jesus (Ta' Ġiezu) in Valletta, remembers him as a laborious historian, always studying old documents in the Provincial Library and Archives, or in the National Library, the Notarial Archives, the Monastery of St. Ursola, where he has been chaplain of the nuns for about 35 years. Ġorġ Aquilina has made extensive research in the State Archives in Palermo, Rome and other Italian towns, as well as in the Secret Archives of the Vatican. It was in the Vatican that he discovered important documents shedding light on the arrival of the Friars Minor in our islands towards the end of the 15th century. With the collaboration of other eminent historians, like Professor Stanley Fiorini, Ġorġ Aquilina published the earliest documented history of Franciscan presence in Malta, particularly with reference to the friary of Saint Mary of Jesus in Rabat. This monumental work was published through the encouragement of Fr. Raymond Camilleri ofm, founder of the Maltese Franciscan publishing house, Edizzjoni TAU. The last work that he published, and which can be said to be the synthesis of his life's dedication to historical research, was the complete history of the Maltese OFM Friars, ever since the foundation of the first friary in Rabat in 1482 till more recent times during the Second Vatican Council. The voluminous work covers 483 years of history of Franciscan life in Malta. It was published in 2011. Another work regarding the history of the Franciscan church and friary of Ta' Ġiezu in Valletta was next in line on the author's desk. Unfortunately he did not

conclude it in time.

For many years, Fr. Ġorġ Aquilina ministered to many Franciscan sisters, particularly to the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart of Jesus and to the Franciscan Missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He was instrumental in the canonical process of the Servant of God Madre Margherita Debrincat, foundress of the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart of Jesus. As vice-postulator in the canonical process of Beatification of Nazju Falzon, Fr. Ġorġ worked tirelessly to see that this Tertiary cleric who was buried in the Franciscan church of Valletta be promoted to beatification, as indeed happened in Pope John Paul II's pastoral visit to Malta in 2001.

For 35 years, as we have said, Fr. Ġorġ has been chaplain to the Jerosolymitan Order Nuns of the Monastery of St. Ursola in Valletta. Every morning at 6 am he would celebrate Mass for the Jerosolymitan Cloistered Nuns. For them Patri Ġorġ, "il-Kappillan", as they affectionately called him, was more than a chaplain. He took care to plead with the highest authorities of the Order of the Knights of St. John in Rome to officially recognise once more the Nuns of St. Ursola as part of the Jerosolymitan Order. He worked hard to raise funds and sensibilise local associations for the restoration of the 17th century monastery. The publication on the history of the Jerosolymitan Nuns saw three editions in Maltese, Italian and English, with a presentation by the Grand Master of the Order of Malta Fra Andrew Bertie († 2008). Through his close collaboration and friendship with the Order of Malta and with the local authorities Fr. Ġorġ managed to bring to the monastery the relics of Blessed Gerard Sasso di Scala, founder of the Jerosolymitan Order at the Hospital in Jerusalem. These are now venerated on the presbytery of the church of Saint Ursola in Valletta. For his services to the Jerosolymitan Order Fr. Ġorġ was decorated with the title of Magistral Chaplain of the Order. His last contribution to the monastery church was the placing of an old artistic marble altar that used to belong to the Church of St. Alphonse of the Discalced Carmelites in Birkirkara. Fr. Ġorġ was earnestly preparing for the solemn celebration of the blessing of the new altar on the occasion of the feast of Saint Ursola on 21st October. He did not live to see this joyful event. Patri Ġorġ died just as he was preparing himself to go to say Mass at St. Ursola's Monastery, as he used to do every morning. To the very end he meticulously carried out his religious duties. May the merciful God reward him for his faithfulness to his Franciscan calling.



Publications by Fr. Ġorġ Aquilina

The following is the list of the most important among the publications of Fr. Ġorġ Aquilina during his long years as a leading Maltese historian:

- *Marco da Viterbo (1304-1369), Ministro Generale dei Frati Minori, Cardinale e Nunzio Apostolico*, Roma 1971.
- *L-Ispiritwalità Frangiskana*, Edizzjoni TAU, Malta 1982.
- *The Maltese Franciscans and Marian Devotions in the 17th. and 18th. Centuries, in Marian Devotion in the Islands of St Paul*, (V. Borg, ed.) Malta 1983.
- *Il-Moviment Frangiskan*, Edizzjoni TAU, Malta 1984.
- *Il-Ġimġha l-Kbira tal-Belt*, Edizzjoni TAU, Malta 1986.
- *Una Devozione Nazionale a Malta per il Crocefisso di Frate Umile*, in *Frato Umile da Petralia*, (Atti del Convegno, Mojo Alcantara 20/21- XI- 1985, S. Agati-S. Nibali, edd.), Catania 1987, 81-88.
- *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, Vol. II, Part 8, Malta 1991. *Les Hospitaliers à Malte (1530-1798)*, in *L'Ordre de Malte dans les Pays-Bas Méridionaux (XIIe-XVIIIe Siècles)*, (in French and in Flemish) 1993, 31-40.
- *The Carmelites, the Oratorians and the Nuns in Birgu*, in *Birgu the Maritime City*, (L. Bugeja, et al., edd.), Malta 1993.
- *The Origin of Franciscanism in Late Medieval Malta*, in conjunction with S. Fiorini, Malta 1994.
- *New Documents relating to the Origins of Religious Orders in Malta*, in *Proceedings of History Week 1994*, The Maltese Historical Society 1996, 1-23 (in conjunction with S. Fiorini).
- *Organs and Organ-Builders in 17th. to 19th. Century Malta*, in *Old Organs in Malta and Gozo. A collection of studies*, (H. Agius-L. Buono, edd.), Malta 1999, 133-168.
- *Il-Frangiskani f'Għajnsielem. Il-Knisja u l-Kunvent ta' S. Antnin, 100 sena ta' storja*, Malta 2000.
- *Il-Qaddejja ta' Alla Madre Margherita De Brincat: Evangelizzatriċi ta' l-Imħabba*, (in Maltese, English, Italian), Malta 2000.
- *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, Part IV, Documents at the Vatican, Visita Apostolica di Mons. P. Dusina*, (in conjunction with S. Fiorini), Malta 2001.
- *San Ġorġ Martri ta' Kristu. Tagħrif storiku*, Malta 2003.
- *San Giorgio, il Santo della Palestina*, in *San Giorgio e il Mediterraneo*, (Atti del II Colloquio internazionale per il XVII Centenario, Roma, 28-30 nov. 2003, G. de' Giovanni-Centelles ed.), Città del Vaticano 2004, 21-40.
- *Is-Sorijiet Ġerosolimitani: Il-Knisja u l-Monasteru ta' Sant'Ursola, Valletta*, Malta 2004 (translated in Italian 2005 and in English 2008).
- *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, Part IV, Documents at the Vatican, Cancelleria Apostolica and related sources at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, 417-1479, (in conjunction with S. Fiorini), Malta 2005.
- *The full clause explaining the "et coetera" abbreviation in two manuscripts of the National Library of Malta*, Malta 2005.
- *Fra Diego Bonanno OFM. Frangiskan li haseb fil-fqir*, Malta 2006.
- *Le Arti Figurative nelle relazioni conventuali tra Sicilia e Malta*, in *Sicilia e Malta Le Isole del Grand Tour*, (R. Bondin – F. Pantano, edd.), Malta 2007, 125-133.
- *Malta e il Conte Ruggero. La Liturgia dopo la Conquista Normanna per un nuovo Status Quaestionis*, in *Ruggero I Gran Conte di Sicilia 1101-2001*, (Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi per il IX Centenario, Troina 29 sett.- 2 Dic. 2001, G. de' Giovanni-Centelles, ed.), Roma 2007, 25-33.
- *Il-Frangiskani Maltin (Ta' Ġiežu) 1482c-1965c (sal-Koncilju Vatikan II)*, Midsea Books Ltd., Malta 2011.

THE SACRAMENT OF THE HOLY WORDS IN FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Cindy Charrière

[*Miscellanea Franciscana* 111 (2011) 456-472]

This paper, entitled “The Sacrament of the Holy Words in Francis of Assisi” intends to present the value and sacramental significance that the Saint attributed to the Word of God. Studies and research on the Word of God in the life and writings of the Saint have already been published.¹ We shall refer to them. However, we also intend to study the theme once more in order to throw light upon some aspects which, according to our way of seeing things, have not been underlined sufficiently in preceding studies. Anyhow, it is always instructive to study and meditate once again on a theme of such great importance, both for Francis of Assisi as well as for us. We shall base our considerations principally upon the writings of the Saint.

Already from the mid-12th century, and following upon the great masters of the 13th century, the study of the Bible progressed to a great extent, and so did the preaching of the Word of God. The study of Scripture, therefore, was not reserved nearly exclusively to monks, as it had been before.

We should underline the fact that Francis distinguished himself from monastic tradition for his particular way of reading and meditating Sacred Scripture. We can briefly state that the monks made recourse to the *lectio divina*. Through the assiduous meditation of the sacred texts, the monk discovered the profound truths of mystical union, he discovered the gradual unfolding of the mystery of Christ and the Church, he drew constant teaching for his spiritual progress. In the peace of the monastery the monk could enjoy the joys of eternal union of love with God.² Instead, in both Rules of the Franciscan Order, the expression *lectio divina* is not found. Francis of Assisi did not even pretend that the brothers who entered his fraternity should know how to read. This, however, did not mean, that in their fraternal life the friars were not bound to read or meditate Holy Scripture. The approach, however, was different from the monastic tradition. The experience of Francis diversified itself from that of

the monks because he was an “unlettered” layman and his conversion was the result of an immediate reading of the Gospel texts, which he successively desired to live *ad litteram*.³ He was not accustomed to comment upon Scripture texts, but preferred to leave Scripture speak for itself.

Our research will have as its principal point of reference one of the chapters of the book *The Teacher of His Heart* by Norbert Nguyễn-Van-Khanh.⁴ This author stated that, contrary to the first biographers and many other authors, he did not stop to consider the coherence between the Gospel and the life of Francis, but rather he concentrated his efforts on the value that Francis attributed to the Holy Words as a sacrament. The fact that, for the Saint, one cannot speak about the Eucharist without speaking about “the most holy words of the Lord” prompted this scholar to ask the following question: If the Eucharist is essentially for Francis the prolongation of the revealing and redeeming Incarnation, do not the “Holy Words” convey the same significance?

In order to answer this question, according to the suggestions of Nguyễn-Van-Khanh, we shall examine the different aspects of the Word of God according to Francis, and in a particular way we shall concentrate upon two points: the first one regards the Holy Words understood as a living Presence; the second regards the Holy Words as a living Presence for those who receive them worthily.

Various Aspects of the Word of God in Saint Francis:

1. The Word of God according to Saint Francis

Francis listened to the Word of God with a very open and attentive spirit, in such a way that the

biographers reveal his ability to remember most of the texts he heard by heart (2*Cel* 102: FAED II, 314-315). He drew abundant nourishment from the Word of God: both in his writings as well as in the biographies the quotations from the Gospels are very frequent;⁵ the writings contain some 674 explicit or implicit biblical quotations, among which one finds many texts, built exclusively or nearly so, by a collage of biblical texts.⁶ Besides the quantitative importance of the biblical quotations, one should underline their quality in such a way that one concludes that these contents lay very close to Francis' heart.

In order to understand better Francis' vision of the Word of God we should ask ourselves from where this Word departed for him. We believe that one should keep in mind the words of Saint Luke's Gospel: "Only God is truly good" (Lk 18:19). In effect, in many phrases of Francis' writings we find the proof of such a truth: "Therefore, let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, the only true God, Who is the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good, *Who alone is good* (Lk 18:19), merciful, gentle, delightful, and sweet, Who alone is holy, just, true, holy and upright, Who alone is kind, innocent, clean."⁷ It is from God that all good proceeds, and therefore his Word has been uttered for all persons. Departing from this evangelical verse the Saint deduces that every word or good action that a human person can accomplish can only come from God, and that it can only be a word or action of God, in the sense that human persons are only capable of vices and sins. Thus Saint Francis concludes that every sin is an act of stealing. Man sins whenever he appropriates any one of the good things that the Lord says and accomplishes through him.

For Francis, God speaks to all men, Christians or pagans, although in a different manner. Once a friar asked Francis why he strove so hard to collect all writings he encountered, since the name of the Lord is not mentioned in them. Francis answered him: "Son, I do this because they have the letters which make the glorious name of the Lord God. And the good that is found there does not belong to the pagans nor to any human being, but to God alone, to whom belongs every good thing."⁸ In this paper, we shall rather stop to analyse the divine Word as it has been written and preached in the Church, namely the Word of Scripture and of the Liturgy, which Saint Francis calls "the most holy Words of the Lord" or "the fragrant Words of the Lord."

2. The biblical and liturgical "most holy Words of the Lord"

It is interesting to note that the texts of the Old

and New Testament constitute the basis for many of the writings of Saint Francis. The Saint did not use the term "Scripture" in order to indicate Holy Scripture or the Bible; he frequently used the expression "Word of God" (*verbum Dei*) in the singular, or "the most holy words of the Lord" (*verba sanctissima Domini*) in the plural. Sometimes he also speaks of "the written words" (*verba scripta*).⁹ These three expressions are profoundly linked to one another, since the only Word of God (*verbum Dei*) assumes various forms (*verba Domini*) and the Scriptures are the Word of God inspired and written down.¹⁰

According to M. Conti, in the writings of Francis, the concept of the Word of God is indicated with four notions: *verbum, evangelium, sermo, eloquium*.¹¹ R. Bartolini discovered another term, *divina littera*, which is in line with the pastoral tradition of the Latin Fathers, who considered Holy Scripture as the "letter of God."¹²

When Francis speaks about the *verba Domini*, he indicates three realities:

1. He refers to the sacramental formula with which clerics consecrate bread and wine on the altar. One can deduce this from some texts of his writings, for example: "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. We know it cannot be His Body without first being consecrated by the Word" (*I LtCl* 1-2: FAED I, 52).

2. From a wider point of view all the liturgical writings indicate this aspect, as we see from this fragment of the *Letter to the Entire Order*: "Because *whoever belongs to God hears the words of God* (Jn 8:47), 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. I, therefore, admonish all my brothers and encourage them in Christ to venerate, as best as they can, the divine written words wherever they find them" (*LtOrd* 34-35: FAED I, 119).

Nguyen-van-Khanh states that the correct translation of the mediaeval Latin term *officialia* indicates "the liturgical writings", as D. Vorreux¹³ and O. Schmucki have proposed. The latter writes that "the words of the Lord are for him [Francis] the liturgical books, with the formulae for all the sacraments, the prayers and the blessings of the Church, in particular the words of Scripture."¹⁴

3. The "words of the Lord" indicate the words of preaching of the theologians and preachers of the Church, as one can deduce from the following text:

“And we must honour all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us *spirit and life* (Jn 6:63)” (Test 13: FAED I, 125).

We shall now pass to analyse the faith of Francis in the Holy Words. Through his writings and the testimonies of the biographers we can understand that, for him, the Word of God is spirit and life, because in it one perceives a living and life-giving presence, through the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit.

2. The living presence of God in His Holy Words

The sacramental dimension of the Holy Words

Francis was not content to consider the Holy Words, namely Sacred Scripture and the liturgical texts, as just historical texts. In them he saw the presence of Christ and it is with this same spirit that he approaches the Holy Words. We can see this in his writings. “For we have and see nothing bodily of the Most High in this world except His Body and Blood, His names and words through which we have been made and redeemed from death to life” (1 LtCl 3: FAED I, 52).

In theological terminology, the term *corporaliter* refers to the Eucharistic presence. Henry de Lubac notes: “For the Latins of the 12th century, Christ is said to be corporally present only under the sacramental species: both on the altar, as well as in those who receive Communion until the moment when the species cease to exist in their original state.”¹⁵ Francis extends the significance. Besides “the body and blood of the Most High” he also speaks of “His names and words.” From this we can affirm that, for Francis, the Word of God is a sacrament through which one does the experience of the real presence of Jesus Christ.

The announcing of the Holy Words as a sacramental administration

The fact that one conceives the Holy Words as a sacrament is evidenced in a particular way in preaching.

In the Middle Ages many authors compared preaching to the administration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, and therefore ministers of the sacraments were requested to show genuine dispositions. J. Leclercq writes: “Since preaching calls for purity of life, some authors have compared it to *the administration of the sacrament of the Eucharist*. Preaching called for charity, virtue and science.”¹⁶

Francis assimilated preaching to the distribution of the Eucharist on the part of clerics. “We

must also frequently visit churches and venerate and revere the clergy not so much for themselves, if they are sinners, but because of their office and administration of the most holy Body and Blood of Christ which they sacrifice upon the altar, receive and minister to others” (2LtF 33: FAED I, 47). “Because I am the servant of all, I am obliged to serve all and to administer the fragrant words of my Lord to them” (2LtF 2: FAED I, 45).

For Francis, therefore, the preaching of the Holy Words and the distribution of the Eucharist are similar, in the sense that, in both cases, it is Christ who “administers” himself to the faithful. In preaching, as Nguyen-van-Khanh states that Christ encounters his faithful, and he comes to them in the same way he comes in the Eucharist in the species of bread and wine.

The welcoming of the Holy Words as a sacrament

From what we have just stated regarding the announcing of the Holy Words, we can deduce the importance that Francis gives to the welcoming of these same Words, in the sense that they are a sacrament.

First of all, *the Holy Words are nourishment for the soul*. This theme of welcoming of the Word of God is treated in a detailed way in the *Earlier Rule* in chapter 22. The chapter begins with the words: “All my brothers: let us pay attention to what the Lord says” (ER 22,1: FAED I, 79). With a similar accentuation Francis begins the *Letter to the Entire Order*: “Listen, sons of the Lord and my brothers, pay attention to my words. Incline the ear of your heart and obey the voice of the Son of God” (LtOrd 5-6: FAED I, 116-117).

According to Nguyen-van-Khanh the central section of chapter 22 is the following exhortation: “Now that we have left the world, however, we have nothing else to do but to follow the will of the Lord and to please Him. Let us be careful that we are not earth along the wayside, or that which is rocky or full of thorns, in keeping with what the Lord says in the Gospel: *The word of God is a seed* (Lk 8,11)” (ER 22,91-11: FAED I, 79).

This quotation is a clear indication that Francis attaches great importance to the accomplishment of the will of the Lord; this is the only thing which is necessary. Therefore the Word of God, since it is something which is dynamic and not static, should be welcomed as the seed in fertile ground. This is the reason why the Saint continues his admonition. Quoting the parable of the seed which falls on different terrain, Francis writes: “And let us beware of the malice and craftiness of Satan, who does not want anyone to turn his mind and heart to God. And prowling around he wants to ensnare a person’s heart under the guise of some reward or assistance, to choke out the word and

precepts of the Lord from our memory, and, desiring a person's heart, [he wants] to blind it through worldly affairs and concerns and to live there" (ER 22,19-20: FAED I, 80).

With these words Francis underlines that, if the presence of the Words of God assures us of His presence, the absence of the Words of God, on the contrary, is a sign of the presence of Satan. Therefore Francis exhorts the brothers: "Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him Who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (ER 22,27: FAED I, 80).

For Francis God dwells in whoever welcomes his Word. To accept God's Word creates a relationship of love between the faithful and the Holy Trinity, a relationship of union which is made possible through the coming of the Holy Spirit. "And *the Spirit of the Lord will rest* (Is 11:2; Lk 4:18) upon all those men and women who have done and persevered in these things and It will make a home and *dwelling place in them* (Jn 14:23). And they will be the children of the heavenly Father, Whose works they do. And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2LtF 48-50: FAED I, 48-49).

The Poverello compares the welcoming of the Word of God to nourishment of the soul, where the food is God who gives Himself to his faithful. Thomas of Celano states: "When he was travelling the world on foot, he always would stop walking in order to say the Hours, and when he was on horseback he would dismount to be on the ground. So, one day when he was returning from Rome and it was raining constantly, he got off his horse to say the Office, and, standing for quite a while, he became completely soaked. He would sometimes say: 'If the body calmly eats its food, which along with itself will be food for worms, the soul should receive its food, which is its God, in great peace and tranquillity'" (2C 96: FAED II, 311).

The sin against the Holy Words. After having shown the importance of welcoming the Words of God, we can now comprehend what Francis meant by sin against the Holy Words, namely the non-acceptance of the same Words with due respect. A vision of Saint Francis, regarding the Rule, which is narrated by Thomas of Celano, will help us to understand the gravity of this kind of sin:

"The most holy Father once saw by heavenly revelation a vision concerning the Rule. It was t the time when there was discussion among the brothers about confirming the Rule, and the saint was extremely anxious about this matter. This is what was shown to him in a dream. It seemed to him that he was gathering tiny bread crumbs from the ground, which he had to distribute to a crowd of hungry brothers who stood all around him. He was afraid to give out such little crumbs,

fearing that such minute particles might slip between his fingers, when a voice cried out to him from above: 'Francis, make one host out of all the crumbs, and give it to those who want to eat.' He did this, and whoever did not receive it devoutly, or showed contempt for the gift received, soon appeared obviously infected with leprosy" (2C 209: FAED II, 381).

When he woke up, sad because he could not understand the dream, he recounted it to his companions. A short time later, he was praying when he heard a voice which said to him: "Francis, the crumbs you saw last night are the words of the Gospel; the host is the Rule, and the leprosy is wickedness" (2C 209: FAED II, 381). The episode narrated by Thomas of Celano exalts the sacramental significance that Francis attributed to the words of the Gospel, which are compared to the Eucharistic hosts. He underlines that one should accept the Word of God in the same way he receives the Eucharist, namely with great veneration and respect. The desecration of the divine Words, indeed the contempt of the writings in which the Holy Words are contained, constitutes a very serious sin, as Francis states: "Even His written names and words are at times left to be trampled under foot; *for the carnal person does not perceive the things of God* (1Cor 2:14)" (1LtCl 6-7: FAED I, 53). This sin is compared to leprosy, a horrible disease that had to be avoided at all costs, just as the young Francis used to do before his conversion.

In the *Letter to the Entire Order*, the Saint of Assisi admonishes the brothers regarding their duty towards the divine Words: "I, therefore, admonish all my brothers and encourage them in Christ to venerate, as best as they can, the divine written words wherever they find them. If they are not well kept or are carelessly thrown around in some place, let them gather them up and preserve them, inasmuch as it concerns them, honouring in the words the Lord Who spoke them. For many things are made holy by the words of God and the sacrament of the altar is celebrated in the power of the words of Christ" (LtOrd 35-37: FAED II, 119).

After this brief analysis, we can affirm that Francis attributes a sacramental significance to the announcing of the Holy Words and to their acceptance. One can apply to the Eucharistic faith of Francis what the Fathers affirm regarding their own faith, namely that the Gospel is Jesus Christ who came, who is present and who is communicated.

3. The Holy Words are the Words of the Holy Trinity

Francis applies to the three Persons of the Holy Trinity both the Eucharist as well as the Holy Words.

Jesus, Word of the Father, has spoken the Words of the Father

In the Gospel of Saint John the Poverello learned that Jesus is the Word of the Father (cfr. 2LtF 3.4: FAED I, 45.46) and that his Words, which are collected in the Holy Scriptures, are the Words of the Father. We shall here quote two texts from the writings of Saint Francis, taken from the priestly prayer of Jesus (Jn 17).

In the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* we read: “[Jesus] prayed to His Father, saying: *Holy Father, save in your name those whom you have given me. Father, all those whom you have given me in the world were yours and you have given them to me. The words that you gave me, I have given to them; they have accepted them and known in truth that I have come from you and they have believed that you have sent me. I pray for them and not for the world; bless and sanctify them. I sanctify myself for them that they may be sanctified in being one as we are one. And I wish, Father, that where I am, they may be with me that they may see my glory in your kingdom*” (2LtF 56-60: FAED I, 49).

In the *Earlier Rule* Francis writes: “[Jesus] humbled Himself to beg His Father for us and to make His name known saying: *Father, I have made Your name known to those whom You have given me. The words You gave to me I have given to them, and they have accepted them and truly have known that I came from You and they have believed that You sent me. I pray for them, not for the world, but for those You have given me, because they are Yours and everything of mine is Yours. Holy Father, keep in Your name those You have given me that they may be one as We are. I say this while in the world that they may have joy completely. I gave them Your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world as I do not belong to the world. I do not ask you to take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. Glorify them in truth. Your word is truth. As You sent me in the world, so I sent them into the world. And I sanctify myself for them that they also may be sanctified in truth. I ask not only for them but also for those who will believe in me through them, that they may be brought to perfection as one, and the world may know that You have sent me and loved them as You loved me. I shall make known to them Your name, that the love with which You loved me may be in them and I in them. Father, I wish that those whom You have given me may be where I am that they may see Your glory in Your kingdom*” (ER 22,42-55: FAED I, 81).

Francis chose these verses from chapter 17 of Saint John’s Gospel in order to underline the mission of the eternal Word of the Father, namely Christ, who

reveals the Father with his words. The following text documents this: “Let us, therefore, hold onto the words, the life, the teaching and the Holy Gospel of Him Who humbled Himself to beg His Father for us and to make His name known” (ER 22,41: FAED I, 81).

The Words of the Holy Spirit

Francis never separates the Holy Words from the Holy Spirit. In the 7th *Admonition* he explains the difference between the spirit of the divine Word which gives life, and the letter that kills, as well as that between the flesh and the spirit of the Lord:

“The apostle says: *The letter kills, but the spirit gives life* (2Cor 3:6). Those people are put to death by the letter who only wish to know the words alone, that they might be esteemed wiser than others and be able to acquire great riches to give to their relatives and friends. And those religious are put to death by the letter who are not willing to follow the spirit of the divine letter but, instead, wish only to know the words and to interpret them for others. And those people are brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter who do not attribute every letter they know, or wish to know, to the body but, by word and example, return them to the most high Lord God to Whom every good belongs” (*Adm 7*: FAED I, 132).

When he comments on these words, Bartolini evidences that the “spirit of the divine letter” – namely Holy Scripture – is the Holy Spirit. In fact, in *Admonition 7*, Francis attributes Scripture to the Holy Spirit and explains the role of the Spirit: “to give life” to Scripture. Most probably, “to give life” refers both to the inspiration of Scripture, as well as to the continual presence of the Spirit in the Word of Scripture, which therefore becomes “life” for whoever listens to it with faith and devotion. Therefore one can say that for the Saint of Assisi the Holy Words come out from the Father, who is the source of divine life and of the project of salvation of humanity. They are then brought to men by the Son, eternal Word of the Father, when He becomes man and utters human words. They are then vivified by the Spirit, in the fact that they were inspired when they were written down, and therefore are a source of life for men. When we accept them and make them our own, we live for them and in them; in fact, through the Spirit, the Holy Words become for us “spirit and life.” This is the idea we get reading *Admonition 1*,1-16. In this *Admonition* Francis quotes Jn 14,6-9, and says that Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life, makes the Father known to us; he also adds, however, that we can recognise the truth which is in the Father only if we live in an inaccessible light, and we can see and believe also in the divinity of the Son, present in his humanity, if we believe “according to the Spirit” who gives life. The

Eucharistic species are seen and believed in as being the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ only “according to the Spirit” (v. 9). Francis affirms that, “it is the Spirit of the Lord that lives in Its faithful, that receives the Body and Blood of the Lord” (v. 12). If we keep in mind the parallelism that Francis establishes between the Eucharist and the Holy Words of the Lord, we can conclude that, for the Saint, it is always the Spirit who guides man in the listening and living assimilation of the Holy Words and in living according to a true knowledge and vital union with God who is Trinity.

Carlo Paolazzi, like Francis, exemplifies the expression “the letter kills” and explains that this judgment is not reserved solely to religious who listen to and explain the Word of God and then do not put it in practice, but “to all those who look for a ‘science of words’ for aims which are different from the fundamental aim of learning how to live, which cannot be substituted. For Francis, sacred and profane science either transforms itself into a ‘wisdom of life’, or else it becomes a dead letter, even ‘a letter which kills.’”¹⁷

Francis “considered a true philosopher the person who never set anything ahead of the desire for eternal life. He affirmed that it was easy to move from self-knowledge to knowledge of God for someone who searches Scripture intently with humility and not with presumption. He often untangled the ambiguities of questions. Unskilled in words, he spoke splendidly with understanding and power” (2C 102: FAED II, 315).

In the *Assisi Compilation* we find the same concept. Francis used to say: “‘A person is only as learned as his actions show; and a religious is only as good a preacher as his actions show,’ as if to say, ‘A good tree is known only by its fruit’” (CA 105: FAED II, 210).

Francis profoundly believed that the divine Words are the whole Trinity. This is evident at the beginning and end of the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*: “I decided to offer you in this letter and message the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Word of the Father, and the words of the Holy Spirit, which *are spirit and life* (Jn 6:63) [...] And may the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit bless all those men and women who receive (these words of our Lord Jesus Christ) with kindness” (2LtF 3.88: FAED I, 45.51).

4. The living presence of almighty God in the Holy Words

For Saint Francis the Holy Words are efficacious for three reasons: they “sanctify” the bread and wine, they give life to men and men should live by

them. Francis attributes an almighty effect to the divine Words, when he affirms that Christ is present among men through the sacrament of the Holy Words, until the end of time.

The Holy Words and the Sacraments

According to the Poverello, it is through the almighty Word of Christ that sacraments are celebrated. Thus, the species of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ through the words that the minister of the Eucharist pronounces during the consecration.¹⁸ “For many things are made holy by the words of God and the sacrament of the altar is celebrated in the power of the words of Christ” (LtOrd 37: FAED I, 119).

In order to understand better the significance of this profound vision we should keep in mind that, during the time of Saint Francis, on the part of the Cathars, Waldensians and Amalricians, as well as many other sects, many errors regarding the omnipotence of the Word of God that sanctifies were spread, and these sects were especially denying the transubstantiation of the Eucharist.

The Cathars, then, held that whoever led a morally praiseworthy life could celebrate the Eucharist. This error was condemned by the Council of Lombez in 1165,¹⁹ which decreed that the consecration of the bread and wine is reserved, in virtue of the same almighty words of the Lord, uniquely to clerics, in spite of any eventual lack of moral worthiness on the part of the celebrant.²⁰

The provincial council of Sens in 1219 intervened in order to correct various heretical errors, particularly those that did not attribute any efficacious power to the words of consecration. Francis was firm in his faith in the truth and efficacious nature of the words of the Lord that are pronounced by the minister, and especially regarding their sacramental value, and points out that the moral unworthiness of the celebrating priest who consecrates the Eucharist does not nullify in any way the almighty power of the divine Word regarding the sacraments. This is witnessed by various texts in his writings.²¹

The Holy Words communicate life

“And let all of us know for certain that no one can be saved except through the holy words and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which the clergy pronounce, proclaim and minister” (2LtF 34: FAED I, 47-48). These words of Francis indicate the certainty that the creative and redemptive power does not come only from the Body and Blood of Christ, but also from his Holy Words. These are the Words that generate life. For Francis of Assisi it is not enough to receive the Body

and Blood of Christ in order to obtain eternal life. In fact, he often makes recourse to these words: “*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life* (Jn 6,63)” (ER 22,39: FAED I, 81). “Word – Spirit – Life” are always united in the same order and constitute for Francis a triple indication that is often found in his writings.

After an ulterior analysis of these three names in the various texts of Francis’ writings,²² Bartolini affirms that the spirit and the life have a strict origin from the Word.

“The Spirit and the life pass through the means of the Word of God (in its diverse senses), and through the same intrinsic presence of the Spirit in the Word. This is the foundation of the apostolic solicitude of Francis: all preaching, as well as the great respect that Francis shows towards theologians and preachers in general, results from the fact that the Lord makes use of preachers in order to communicate the Spirit and the life. In this we also find the foundation of the care with which Francis received and invites his friars to receive the Word of the Lord; he is aware that through the same Word the soul receives Spirit and Life.”²³

That is why the Saints tells the brothers that they should receive God’s Word “with humility and love” (2LtF 87: FAED I, 51).

As a consequence, theologians and preachers are nominated by the Poverello as “those who minister to us *spirit and life*” (Test 13: FAED I, 125). “He said that this office [of preachers] was worthy of reverence and that those who exercised it should be revered by all. ‘They are the life of the body, the opponents of demons, the *lamp of the world* (Mt 5:14)’” (2C 163: FAED II, 352).

It is the competence of preachers “to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that [unbelievers] may believe in Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, the Son, the Redeemer and Saviour, and be baptized and become Christians because *no one can enter the kingdom of God without being reborn of water and the Holy Spirit*” (ER 16,7: FAED I, 74).

Nevertheless, preachers are to be aware that all the good they accomplish comes from God and not from themselves.

The Holy Words request that man should live by them and place them in practice in order to give a witness of joy to all men

If the divine Words give life, they also ask for an answer that is manifested through faith and action, namely an operative faith. It is not enough to know the Word of God. One needs to put it into practice, to apply it to his daily life. It is only thus that the Word becomes

a fountain of life: “And those people are brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter who do not attribute every letter they know, or which to know, to the body but, by word and example, return them to the most high Lord God to Whom every good belongs” (Adm 7,4: FAED I, 132).

Saint Francis explains how, after having listened to and studied the Holy Words, the religious should come to know God as the source of all good, and with the help of the divine Word, he should bring men to the love of God. In this way, the Words of God return to Him, after they will have bore fruit.

“Blessed is that religious who has no pleasure and delight except in the most holy words and deeds of the Lord and, with these, leads people to the love of God with gladness and joy” (Adm 20,1-2: FAED I, 135).

Conclusion

We can affirm that, although Francis had no knowledge of the hermeneutical mediaeval principles regarding the interpretation of Holy Scripture, he nevertheless had a great capacity to interpret and remember Scripture texts. He did not approach the Bible with the attitude of a scholar, but with that of a man of faith, who searched in it solely the will of God, in order to adhere to it with the obedience of faith. We can classify the exegesis of Francis as “literal-existential”, since after he would read or listen to the Word of God, his care would be that of practicing it *sine glossa*, in order to accomplish perfectly whatever the Lord would show to him, from time to time. We should point out that such an attitude was constant during all his life.

According to Francis, the Son dwells in the midst of human persons until the end of time and offers himself to us “corporally” through the sacrament of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of the Holy Words. In the Word of God, besides human words, we meet a living Presence and a Presence which gives life. The first one consists in the fact that it is Christ who transmits to human persons the Words that he received from the Father for the life of all men. The second Presence is Christ, who communicates himself in the Words, who gives spirit and life to all those who welcome him with humility and love.

Francis attributes the Word of God to the Trinity. However, within the context of the Trinity, this Word is seen to be proper to the Holy Spirit with regards to its power to give life.

If in the Eucharist the Lord God gives himself to men, in the Holy Words it is the Lord himself who speaks. Therefore it is always the same Son who is the way, the truth and the life..

The Holy Words, together with the Eucharist, are two essential aspects which prolong the salvific Incarnation of the Son of the Most High God. They are the expression and sign of his life that never fails us, that never leaves us alone, and that continues to enter into our life in order to save us. The Holy Words are humble expressions, they are “poor” expressions of the greatness of God’s love without reservation. They are sings of the kenotic presence of the Most High God who with unwavering “condescendence” continues to speak to man in such a weak manner, in a manner which is so far away from his almighty nature.

When he considers the Eucharist and the Divine Words as fundamental elements of the Christian life, Francis invites all men to nourish themselves with them avidly and humbly and to make a sensible, sacramental experience of the salvific presence of the Son of Man among men. They are invited to correspond to his marvellous humility which deigns to remain among them and to live a life which becomes a sign of the humble and grateful love that renders everything back to Him who offers Himself in the Eucharist, but also in his Words, without which the sacrament of the altar cannot be realised.

“Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour our your hearts before Him! Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!” (*LtOrd* 28-29: FAED I, 118).

NOTES

1. M. CONTI, *La Sacra Scrittura nell'esperienza e negli Scritti di san Francesco. Criteri ermeneutici*, in G. CARDAROPOLI – M. CONTI (a cura) *Lettura biblico-teologica delle fonti francescane*, Roma 1979, 19-59; R. BARTOLINI, *Lo Spirito del Signore. Francesco d'Assisi guida all'esperienza dello Spirito Santo*, Assisi 1982, 23-64; R. BARTOLINI, *Le parole del Signore e le parole dello Spirito Santo (per una teologia della parola del Signore secondo gli scritti di S. Francesco d'Assisi)*, in G. BETTORI et alii, *Parola di Dio e Francesco d'Assisi*, Assisi 1982, 248-291; U. OCCHIALINI, *Lectio divina monastica e spiritualità biblica di S. Francesco*, in G. BETTORI et alii, *Parola di Dio e Francesco d'Assisi*, Assisi 1982, 49-63; P. DRAGO, *Parola di Dio*, in *Dizionario Francescano. Spiritualità*, Padova 1983, 1199-1216; N. NGUYEN-VAN-KHANH, *Gesù Cristo nel pensiero di san Francesco secondo i suoi scritti*, Milano 1984, 255-290; G. IAMMARRONE, *La Spiritualità francescana. Anima e contenuti fondamentali*, Padova 1993, 84-87; M. CONTI, *Temi di vita e di spiritualità del francescanesimo delle origini*, Bologna 1996, 33-79.

2. LR 10,8-10 (FAED I, 105): “Let (the brothers) who are illiterate not be anxious to learn, but let them pay attention to what they must desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity, to pray always to Him with a pure heart, to have humility and patience in persecution and infirmity, and to love those who persecute, rebuke and find fault with us.”

3. 1C 22 (FAED I: 201-202): “One day the gospel was being read in that church about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach. The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the

priest after celebrating the solemnities of the Mass to explain the gospel to him. When he heard that Christ’s disciples should not possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics (Mt 10:9-10), but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance (Lk 9:2; Mk 6:12), the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God (Lk 1:47). ‘This is what I want,’ he said, ‘this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart.’ [...] For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel; rather he committed everything he heard to his excellent memory and was careful to carry it out to the letter.”

4. NORBERT NGUYEN-VAN-KHANH, *The Teacher of His Heart. Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St. Francis*, Translated by E. Hagman, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1994.

5. Cfr. T. MATURA, *Il progetto evangelico di Francesco d'Assisi oggi*, Assisi 1979, 44.

6. Cfr. D. DOZZI, *Come Francesco cita e interpreta il Vangelo. Note metodologiche ed esemplificazioni*, in E. COVI – F. RAURELL, *Metodi di lettura delle fonti francescane*, Roma 1988, 177.

7. ER 23,9 (FAED I, 85).

8. 1C 82 (FAED I, 252).

9. The term *scriptum* recurs 8 times in the writings of Saint Francis, while the term *verbum* is found 60 times, of which 40 times with reference to the Word of God: *Adm* 1,10; *ER* 16,8; *ER* 22,11; *ER* 22,12; *ER* 22,13; *ER* 22,14; *ER* 22,15; *ER* 22,16; *ER* 22,17; *ER* 22,18; *ER* 22,21; *ER* 22,38; *ER* 22,41; *ER* 22,43; *ER* 22,45; *LR* 2,7; *LR* 9,6; *Test* 14; *Test* 15; *2LtF* 2; *LtOrd* 4,43; *LtOrd* 4,44; *LtOrd* 4,45; *LtOrd* 4,47; *LtCl* 1; *LtCl* 2; *LtCl* 3; *LtCl* 6; *LtCl* 12; *LtCus* 5; *LtCus* 8. Cfr. BOCCALI, *Concordantiae*, 715, 812-824.

10. Cfr. BARTOLINI, *Lo Spirito del Signore*, 36.

11. Cfr. CONTI, *Temi di vita*, 36.

12. Cfr. BARTOLINI, *Lo Spirito del Signore*, 35.

13. Cfr. D. VORREUX – P. BAYART, *Les Opuscules de saint François d'Assise*, Paris 1955, 199.

14. O. SCHMUCKI, *Die Stellung Christi im Beten des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi*, in *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 25 (1962) 204.

15. H. DE LUBAC, *Corpus Mysticum. L'Eucharistie et l'église au moyen âge*, Paris 1944, 364.

16. J. LECLERCQ, *Le magistère du prédicateur au XIII^e siècle*, *AHDL* 21 (1946) 144.

17. C. PAOLAZZI, *Lettura degli “Scritti” di Francesco d'Assisi*, Milano 1987, 20.

18. Francis normally used the verb *sanctificare* – to sanctify, a term that was changed by the theologians of the 12th century in the verb *consecrare* – to consecrate, and even to the technical term *transubstantiatio* – transubstantiation, in order to avoid all possible doubts regarding the true nature of the Eucharist.

19. Cfr. H. WOLTER – H.G. BECK, *Storia della Chiesa*, Milano 1999², 143.

20. Cfr. G.D. MANSI (a cura di), *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, XXII, Parisiis 1903, col. 159; K.J. HEFELE, *Histoire des conciles d'après les documents originaux* (tr. Fr. I. Gschler – O.J.M. Delarc), Paris 1913, V/B, 1006-1010.

21. *Test* 9-10; *Adm* 1,9; *2LtF* 33-34; *LtCl* 2; *LtOrd* 37; *LtCust* 2.6-7; *2C* 152.

22. *2LtF* 3; *2LtF* 86-87; *Test* 15; *ER* 22,39-42. BARTOLINI, *Le parole del Signore*, 275.

23. Cfr. BARTOLINI, *Lo Spirito del Signore*, 47-50.



THE FRANCISCAN OBSERVANTS AND ITALIAN SOCIETY IN THE 15TH CENTURY

The 40th annual Congress of the International Society of Franciscan Studies, celebrated in Assisi and Perugia on 11th – 13th October 2012, had as its theme “I Frati Osservanti e la Società in Italia nel secolo XV” (The Observant Friars and Society in Italy in the 15th century). The Congress was celebrated on the occasion of the 550th anniversary of the foundation of the “Monte di Pietà” of Perugia, in 1462.

The “Monte di Pietà” was a non-profit financial institution born towards the last half of the 15th century in Italy on the initiative of some Franciscan Observant friars. It aimed to help the poor by lending them small amounts of money on more favourable conditions than they could get on the market, and thus protect them from the exorbitant interests of usury. The clients had to offer a pledge amounting to at least one third of the amount of money they borrowed, and they had one year to pay back their debts to the bank.

The “Monte di Pietà” of Perugia was founded by the Franciscan Observant Michele Carcano. Born in Milan in 1427 in a noble family, he entered the Franciscan Order in the friary of Santa Croce in Boscaglia in Como, drawn by the famous Franciscan Observant preacher, Saint Bernardine of Siena, who preached in the cathedral of Milan in 1442-1443. Michele was present in Rome in 1450 for the canonization of Saint Bernardine, and immediately began to preach so eloquently that his fame spread. He preached in many Italian towns, including Mantua, Florence, Milan, Perugia (1462), Bologna, Rieti, L’Aquila, Venice, Crema, Lodi. In 1461 he went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land

where he stayed from 30th June to 29th November.

His major field of activity was that in favour of the establishment of the “Monti di Pietà” in various Italian towns, beginning with Perugia in 1462. His close collaborator in the establishment of these financial institutions was Blessed Bernardine of Feltre (1439-1494). In 1473 Michele established the “Monte di Pietà” of Bologna.

Michele’s preaching was typical of the current trend in the Observant movement. He was a fiery preacher against usury and is sometimes regarded as an anti-Semite because of his preaching against the Jews who were normally accused of usury. In 1476 he was invited by the bishop of Trent, Prince John Hinderbach, to preach the cult of “blessed” Simon of Trent in the territories of the Republic of Venice. It was believed that Simon had been murdered during Holy Week and in 1475 a group of fifteen Jews were led to death as punishment for having been accused of murdering him. The riots of the Jewish community of the region induced the authorities of the Serenissima to banish Michele from the Republic in 1477.

In July 1468 Michele Carcano was nominated visitator commissary for the Observant Province of Bohemia, Poland and Austria. In 1473 he was guardian of the friary of Sant’Angelo in Milan and in 1475 he became vicar provincial of the Observants. Many a time he was banished from the Duchy of Milan because of his fiery sermons, and was accused of disrupting public order.

Michele Carcano died at Lodi on 20th March 1484 while preaching during Lent, after

having fainted on the pulpit.

The programme of the International Congress of Franciscan Studies included the following lectures: Carlo Delcorno (University of Bologna), *The Franciscan Observance and the renewal of preaching*; Grado Giovanni Merlo (University of Milan), *The Observance in central and northern Italy and the political institutions*; Rosalba di Meglio (University Federico II, Naples), *Religious questions, the Observant movement and the political projects of Southern Italy during the time of the Angevins and Aragonese*; Letizia Pellegrini (University of Macerata), *Between the piazza and the palace: preaching and government practices in Italy during the 15th century*; Daniele Solvi (University of Naples), *The cult of saints in the socio-religious proposal of the Observance*; Rosa Maria Dessì (University of Nice Sophia Antipolis), *The “social” sins*; Giuliana Albini (University of Milan), *The Observance, charity and hospitals during the fifteenth century*; Giacomo Todeschini (University of Trieste), *The rights of citizenship of the Italian Jews in the doctrinal speeches of the Observants*; Alberto Grohmann (University of Perugia), *The socio-economic life in Perugia in the mid-15th century*; Maria Grazia Nico (University of Perugia) – Paola Monacchia (State Archives, Perugia), *The Observant friars and the communal legislation in Umbria*; Manuel Vaquero Píneiro (University of Perugia), *The Monti di Pietà in Umbria: experiences and confrontation*; Giuseppina Muzzarelli (University of Bologna), *A new idea: the credit awarded to the less poor and the creation of the Monti di Pietà*.

A good description of the “Monti di Pietà”, or *Mons Pietatis*, is given by Giovanni Grado Merlo, *In the Name of Saint Francis*, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 2009, 404: “Bypassing further interpretation of the facts, we note that the creation and promotion of a *Mons Pietatis*, the first of which was established in Perugia in 1462, was undoubtedly one of the actions in the fight against the Jews. The new credit union had to take the place of the Jewish lending institutions, legitimately distributed by means of a public concession (the so-called *condotta*). To create a *Mons Pietatis* was theoretically the way to undermine the well-being of the Jewish community, which tried to obtain wealth through the exercise of ‘usury’ (*usura*) and experienced

well-being only at a cost to Christians. In the statutes of the *Mons Pietatis* in Rieti, written by brother Bernardine of Feltre in 1489, there is the statement that the *Mons Pietatis* came into existence to ‘avoid the angry pit of the usuries and the wrathful unfaithfulness and hard-headedness of the Jews, the usurpers of the goods of Christians and the suckers of their blood.’”

One has to take such descriptions within the social and political framework of 15th century Europe, and it would be incorrect to label the entire Franciscan Order as having been anti-Semitic in its dealings with the Jews. It is true that the language used by the Observant preachers was very harsh against the Jews, but the same thing can be said regarding their denouncing of social ills and abuses, including civil strife between Christian communes in Italy, prostitution and homosexuality. The establishment of the “Monti di Pietà” was, if anything, the first attempt to provide a more fair banking system in a society that did not care to protect its poorer members. In this respect, at least, the Observants were living up to their Franciscan vocation.

BLESSED GABRIELE MARIA ALLEGRA OFM

On Saturday 29th September, in the Cathedral Basilica of Acireale, in Sicily, the Franciscan friar Gabriele Maria Allegra was declared a Blessed by His Eminence Cardinal Angelo Amato, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, representing Pope Benedict XVI. This beatification had long been overdue for causes that went beyond the control of the Vatican, and which had nothing to do with the eminent holiness of this humble Franciscan friar, apostle of the Word of God in the Far East.

Gabriele Maria Allegra was born at San Giovanni La Punta (province of Catania, Sicily) on 26th December 1907. His parents were Rosario Allegra and Giovanna Guglielmino. The child was baptised on 5th January 1908, with the names Giovanni Stefano.

In December 1918 he entered the Seraphic Seminary of the friary of San Biagio in Acireale. He made his novitiate in the friary of Bronte. On 13th October 1923 he received the Franciscan habit, and took the religious name of Gabriele Maria. On 19th October 1924 he made his first Temporary Profession.

Gabriele Maria was ordained priest in Rome, in the chapel of the Collegio Leoniano, by the Polish bishop Mgr. Dubowski, on 20th July 1930.

In 1924, on the occasion of the *peregrinatio* of the relic of the arm of Saint Francis Xavier in Sicily, Gabriele Maria requested and obtained the grace of the vocation for the missions.

In 1926 he was sent to Rome, in the International College of Saint Anthony of the Friars Minor (nowadays the Pontifical University Antonianum) to study theology. In 1928 he listened to a conference on Giovanni da Montecorvino, a Franciscan pioneer for the missions in China from 1294 to 1328, and the first Archbishop of Beijing, on the occasion of the 7th centenary of the death of

this eminent missionary. In his diary, Fr. Gabriele wrote: “that conference was like a fuse with a flame thrown against a gun powder keg.” From that moment he was convinced that his vocation was that of going as a missionary to China. He also came to know that there was no Catholic translation of the Bible in Chinese, and therefore he decided to translate the entire Holy Scripture in this language. He consecrated his resolved to the Immaculate Virgin Mary, to whom he always showed a particular devotion. His decision was confirmed during his first solemn Mass, which he celebrated in his hometown, in the shrine of Ravanusa, on 15th August 1930, solemnity of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.

Gabriele Maria arrived in China at Heng Yang on 20th July 1931. For seven years he was director of the seminary. He immediately set about on an intense missionary and charitable activity, dedicating his energies especially to the realisation of his courageous project of translating the Bible. This arduous work was completed only in 1968. As a translation of the entire Bible in Chinese, according to the words of the Chinese Cardinal Paul Yupin, this endeavour “remains the greatest literary achievement of the Catholic Church in China.”

In 1945 Gabriele Maria established a *Studium Biblicum* in Beijing, akin to the one that the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land had already established in Jerusalem in 1927, and where Gabriele himself had been a professor for a short period of time during the academic years 1954-1955 and 1973-1974.

Gabriele Maria Allegra was known for his holiness, and admired for his Franciscan simplicity and captivating smile. He was particularly loved by the poor and lepers of Coloane. He died in the Hospital “Canossa” of Hong Kong on 26th January 1976.



The name of Gabriele Allegra is synonymous with the translation of the entire Bible in the Chinese language, which he had started on 11th April 1935, on the feast day of the Sorrowful Virgin. Thus he realised the most courageous project of his life, in the spirit of his great faith

in the Word of God and of his love towards the Chinese people.

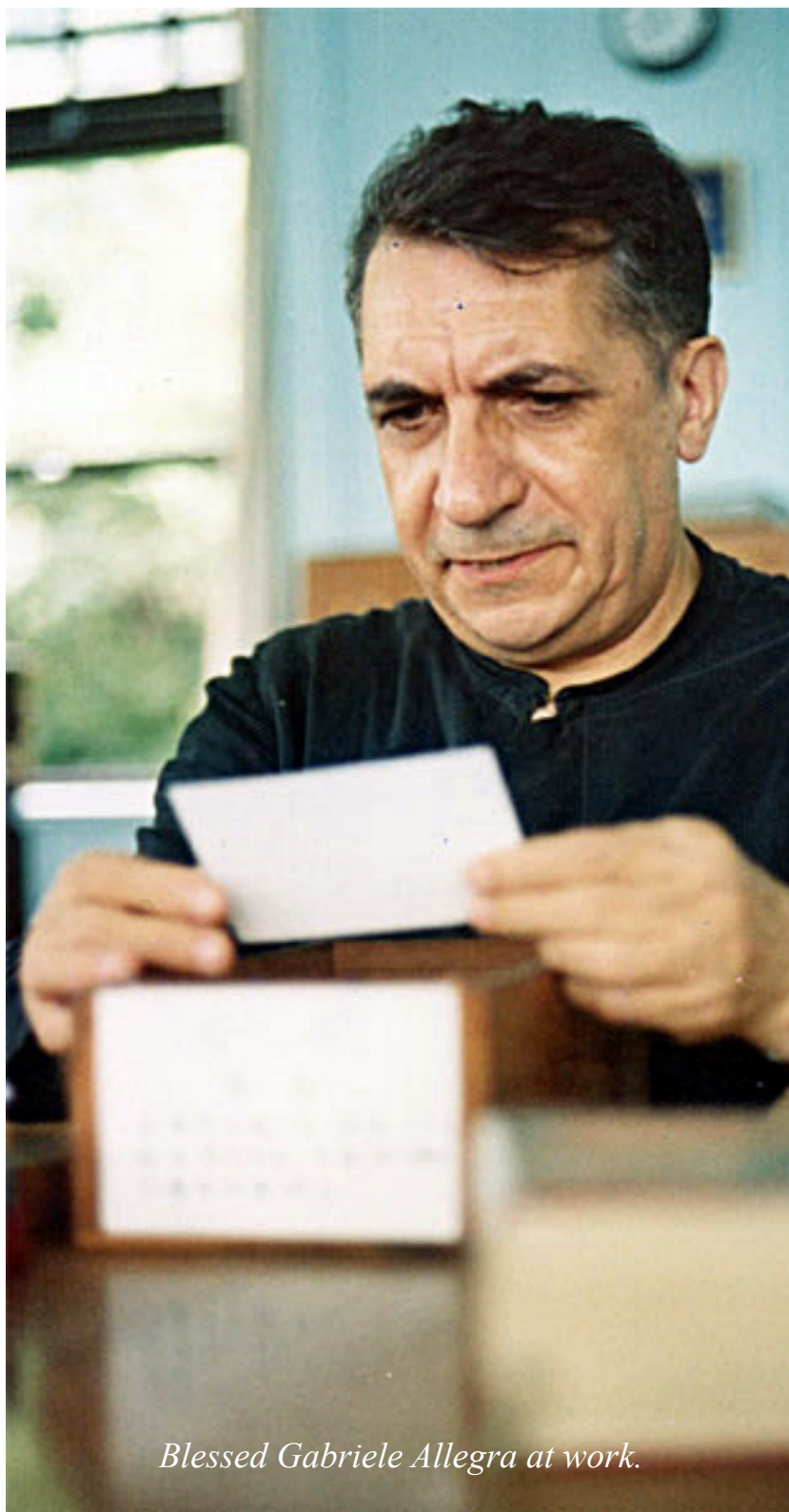
Besides the translation of the Bible in Chinese, Gabriele Allegra also published a Biblical Dictionary in Chinese (1975). In 1963 he founded a *Studium* of Sociology in Singapore.

For his untiring apostolate in favour of the spreading of the message of Holy Scripture Gabriele Allegra has been known as the “Saint Jerome of China.”

Gabriele Allegra was also ardent in his striving towards ecumenical dialogue, particularly with the Protestant Churches present in China and with the Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong.

The fame of holiness of Gabriele Maria Allegra was such that in 1983 the Bishop of Hong Kong authorised the opening of a regular canonical process to ascertain the holiness of life and the heroic virtues of the Servant of God. The process was formally concluded on 15th December 1994 with the Decree on the heroic virtues. On 23rd April 2002 another Decree established the miraculous healing obtained through the intercession of the Venerable Gabriele Allegra. The road was now open for his beatification, fixed for 20th October 2002, on Mission Sunday. Unfortunately, an article that was published on “Osservatore Romano” stated that in 1955 Father Allegra had a meeting with the Sicilian Luigi Sturzo, founder of the Popular Party, in which he had matured the idea of establishing a *Studium* of Christian sociology in Singapore, to promote Christian ideals of socialism. Some had interpreted this move as a direct opposition to the principles of Communism in China. This misinterpretation of facts brought with it a fierce criticism on the part of the Chinese Communist authorities against the Vatican. The result was that, at that stage, the beatification of Father Allegra was put on hold.

Pope Benedict XVI, ten years after these events, decided to go ahead with the beatification of Gabriele Maria Allegra, delegating the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, as he often does in the case of beatifications, and decreeing the date of beatification on 29th September 2012, with the faculty of celebrating the feast of



Blessed Gabriele Allegra at work.

Blessed Gabriele Maria Allegra on 26th January according to the canonical laws which establish the modalities and places where the feast day is to be celebrated.



Franciscans and the economic crisis

“

Looking first at the internal life of our fraternities, should not the current socio-economic emergency awaken in each Friar a willingness to live gratuitousness and reciprocity? How do we justify personal bank accounts or keeping for ourselves income (wages, pensions, offerings, etc.) that belongs to the fraternity and should also be shared with those most in need? Are we being honest with society by paying taxes? Do we adhere to labour legislation in regard to our workers?

At the provincial level, do we believe that establishment of a “Common Fund”, maintained by all the fraternities for mutual support, is a concrete form of solidarity between us and of reciprocity between the fraternities, and which might also be a way to share with the poor?

The current crisis, which forces many families to tighten their belts and others to deprive themselves of the necessary, should lead the Friars to a strict examination of conscience regarding a lifestyle that may have become too comfortable, or an overly liberal use of more sophisticated technology, or of habits of life that are clearly “bourgeois” and consumerist (cf. GGCC 67). How can we instil courage and hope in the new poor if we ourselves cannot manage to do without many “unnecessary needs”?

The austerity brought about by the crisis should also cause us to reconsider the use of liquid assets (e.g., accumulation of money, cf. GGCC 82 § 3, and our trust in Divine Providence?) and of property (many of our buildings are empty). How many evicted families, homeless migrants and charitable institutions could make use of our many unused places! And where do we deposit our money, in what banks? Do we know how they are using our savings? Do they promote economic, social, and cultural projects that respect human rights and safeguard creation, or do they promote activities contrary to our ethical principles? Our solidarity and sharing should not only be generous, but also intelligent and creative.

If we look at our past, we notice that the time of Observance was a particularly fruitful time, because the friars knew how to manage the tension of internal renewal with that of the renewal of society, thus giving rise to the marvellous Monti di Pieta, the first instance of microcredit in history.

Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo ofm
Minister General

Letter for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi 2012

“Solidarity and Responsibility. The Friars Minor in the current crisis”

”

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.

Editor: Noel Muscat OFM

All correspondence should be
addressed to
muscatnoel@yahoo.co.uk



Cover picture:

Main altarpiece at La Verna