



No. 148: APRIL – JUNE 2024



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



Quarterly journal of
Franciscan culture published
since April 1986.

Founders:
John Abela ofm
Raymond Camilleri ofm

Available at:
<http://www.franciscanstudies.com>

All original material is
Copyright © TAU Franciscan
Communications 2022

Contents

- Editorial
- La Verna, Calvary, and Us in the celebration of the 800 Years of the Stigmatisation of Saint Francis
- Documenting the Historical Truth of the Stigmata:
The Treatise on the Miracles
by Thomas of Celano

148

Editorial

CALVARY IN THE HOLY LAND

The Custos of the Holy Land, Fr. Francesco Patton OFM, visited Malta on 8 – 11 May 2024. During his short stay he delivered a very inspiring conference to the Franciscan Family of Malta on the meaning of the stigmata of St. Francis in the context of today's Church and world, and especially in the light of what is happening right now in the Holy Land. La Verna, the place of the stigmatisation of St. Francis, is sometimes called "The Franciscan Calvary". It reminds us of Calvary in Jerusalem, where Jesus suffered the Passion on the Cross by which we were saved and brought to the hope of a new life. It is precisely this hope that is now lacking in the Holy Land, ravaged as it is by war, but more so, by hatred. Fr. Patton insisted that, even if war ends, the real problem would be the hatred that would still linger in the hearts of so many persons. In this vortex of hate and mutual distrust, the Christian message of the Gospel which Francis proposed is ever more necessary. We are called to support the quest for peace by understanding the true significance of the marks of the Passion of Christ even on the body of our Risen Lord. It is this hope that we are called to proclaim, by our prayers and support to the Christian community in the Holy Land, where Francis himself went to visit some years before he was marked by the stigmata of Christ on La Verna. Celebrating the 800 years of the event of La Verna, may we also invoke the grace of God's peace on His Holy Land and on all the people of good will who live in it.

Noel Muscat OFM

LA VERNA, CALVARY, AND US IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE 800 YEARS OF THE STIGMATISATION OF SAINT FRANCIS

Francesco Patton OFM
Custos of the Holy Land

*Talk presented to the Franciscan Family of Malta
9 May 2024*

*On the naked crag between the Arno and
Tiber,
he received the final seal from Christ;
and this, his limbs bore for two years.¹*

1. What is the meaning of the memory of this eighth centenary?

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord
give you peace!

What is the meaning of the memory of this
eighty centenary of the stigmatisation of
Saint Francis? This is certainly not an
occasion for triumphal celebrations (this
would be the least Franciscan of
celebrations), but rather an occasion to
return to the essence of our Franciscan
vocation. As the Minister General Br.
Massimo Fusarelli has reminded us during
his visit to the Custody of the Holy Land:

“Francis received the wounds of the Lord
and like Jesus, remained wounded. Jesus

always carried in himself the marks of the
Passion, the Resurrection did not cancel the
wounds. Francis reminds us that the
stigmata, the wounds of our human
condition, remain. The Christian learns to
live in a reality full of stigmata, of wounds
and through the new eyes of the faith.”²

In the reflection that you have asked me to
develop and which I will propose to you, I
will try to draw a parallel between the
experience lived by Jesus Christ on
Calvary, namely the experience of his death
on the cross (which is unique and is unique
in its salvific value) and the experience of
Francis of Assisi on Mount La Verna
(which in many ways is also unique, but is
also an exemplary and paradigmatic
experience which enlightens the life of each
disciple of Christ crucified and risen). At
the end I will try to propose some kind of
actualisation for us, helped also by what
Pope Francis has said to the brothers of La
Verna when he received them for a special
audience.

¹ DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Paradiso*, Canto XI, 106-108
(FAED III, 885).

² <https://www.custodia.org/eng/news/living-as-franciscans-a-wounded-land>

2. On Calvary: the mystery of the greatest love

If we speak of the stigmata of Saint Francis it is because we refer to a mystical event which conformed Francis to Christ Crucified. Therefore, in order to understand what happened in Francis we need to go back to contemplate the event of Calvary on Good Friday, contemplating in a second moment the same event in the light of Easter and seeing how Christ Crucified and Risen left his marks on the lives of his disciples.

It is interesting to place ourselves in the perspective of Saint Francis. In one of the prayers that precede the gift of the stigmata, recited precisely during the night that came before the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (between 13 and 14 September 1224), the Poverello made a request which is very interesting also for us:

“O Lord Jesus Christ, two graces do I ask of you before I die; the first that in my lifetime I may feel, as far as possible, both in my soul and body, the pain which you, sweet Lord, endured in the hour of your most bitter Passion; the second, that I may feel in my heart as much as possible of that excess of love by which you, O Son of God, was inflamed to suffer so cruel a Passion for us sinners.”³

The mystery of Calvary is, first and foremost, a mystery of suffering transformed in love. Jesus himself, during the last supper, had spoken of the greatest love and had said that it is that kind of love by which one offers his life for his friends (Jn 15:13). Saint Paul describes the passion and death of Jesus as an act of love which is a paradox in itself: “We were still helpless when at his appointed moment Christ died for sinful men. It is not easy to die even for a good man – though of course

for someone really worthy, a man might be prepared to die – but what proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners” (Rom 5:6-8).

In his first Letter John says that Christ’s love always preceded us: “God’s love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him; this is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away” (1Jn 4:9-10). And the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, after having reflected deeply on the sacrifice of Christ as the only sacrifice that is capable of expiating our sins, precisely towards the end of the letter, unites together the event of the passion, its significance for us and what it asks of us: “Jesus too suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people with his own blood. Let us go to him, then, outside the camp, and share his degradation” (Heb 13:12-13).

Before reflecting on the stigmata of Saint Francis it is therefore necessary to reflect upon the significance of the death on the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. The cross: scandal and foolishness

In the episodes of the passion we are invited to face the reality of the cross and its profound meaning. Saint Paul reminds us that the cross “is a scandal to the Jews and to the pagans foolishness” (1Cor 1:23). But what does the cross really signify?

The oldest representation of the Crucifix is a graffito which can be dated between the end of the first and the second century, which was found in Rome on the Palatino hill. It represents a pupil who is kneeling down in front of a crucified person who has the body of a human being but the head of a donkey. The graffito is accompanied by

³ Third Consideration on the Sacred Stigmata.

the ironic writing: “Alexamenos adores his God” and is the work of a pagan pupil who wanted to ridicule his Christian classmate.

We can therefore ask: what exactly was the cross during the time in which Jesus was crucified?

For the Jews the cross meant the instrument of death for those who were cursed, that is, for those who were considered to be irreparably far from God and excluded from salvation. In the Letter to the Galatians Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:23 and states: “cursed be everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Gal 3:13).

For the Greeks and Romans, the cross meant the instrument of death for those criminals who were socially dangerous, and therefore had to be eliminated in an exemplary manner, in order to discourage others (this is the case of the two men who were crucified with Jesus and who Luke calls “criminals”). Lastly, especially in the Roman world, the cross meant the instrument of death reserved for slaves, a category who was compared to material things more than to human persons.

Therefore, death on a cross was at the same time a terrible and painful death from the physical point of view, and it was an ignominious death from the social point of view, as well as being a scandalous death from the moral and religious point of view. Death on the cross was revolting and scandalous for all that it manifested and signified. For a contemporary of Jesus who became Christian, to accept the Crucified meant to accept that the one who was recognised and believed to be the incarnate Son of God had to face the death of a cursed person, of a criminal and of a slave. The Christian believer had to place himself in the place of whoever was irreparably far from God, socially irrecoverable, deprived of any personal dignity; he had to become one with the cursed, the criminal, the slave in the sense that he would have to shoulder

their lot in life, their person and their destiny.

Every year, on Ash Wednesday, we listen to Saint Paul who proclaims to the Corinthians: “For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God” (2Cor 5:21). The death of Jesus on the cross is therefore inclusive of any kind of distance from God, of any crime, of any deprivation of dignity! In other words, through the death on the cross of his Son, God himself says: “No one can be more irrecoverable! No one else can be so far from me that I cannot approach him, identify myself with him, even place myself in his place!” If we understand this we can understand what Francis was praying: to experiment in his flesh the sufferings of the passion, was not an end in itself but it meant that he experimented the “excessive”, or exaggerated and infinite love with which we are loved by God in his Son, who gave over his life for us when he died on the cross.

Now the cross is placed in a precise physical place: Calvary. This is a that we Franciscans are its custodians together with our brethren of the Greek Orthodox Church. This is the place which speaks about the historical truth of the death on the cross of the Son of God, and therefore of the historical, concrete and absolute reality of his love for us.

Calvary and all the other holy places are an antidote for the transformation of the historical event of Jesus in a myth and are an arraignment of the theological custom of placing Serapis Christos of faith against Jesus of history. Calvary, in particular, is the best antidote for any temptation of a Gnostic-Docestit nature: “and they said: «We have killed the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah!» Instead they have not killed him, neither crucified him, but that what it seemed to them. Those who do not agree with this proposition, remain in doubt: they do not have any other

knowledge and they do not follow any other conjecture. It is certain that they did not kill him, but Allah elevated him to Himself. Allah is the highest and the wisest.”⁴

4. Christian life is carrying the stigmata of the Lord

In the Letter to the Galatians Paul announces with firmness the paradox of the cross and uses very strong expressions to say that the cross of Christ is part and parcel of our Christian life. I invite you to read personally this short letter, because it is certainly the most provocative writing of the New Testament.

In the greeting Paul already proclaims: “We wish you the grace and peace of God our Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ, who in order to rescue us from this present wicked world sacrificed himself for our sins, in accordance with the will of God our Father” (Gal 1:3-4).

Paul then passes on to narrate the event of his conversion. He describes it as an election and a special calling in favour of the gentiles. He narrates his first experiences and also his clash with Barnabas and Cephas (Peter) as a result of the will of the converted Jews who wanted to impose the circumcision and the observance of the Jewish laws upon the Christians who converted from paganism. At a certain point his speech becomes passionate and even polemical. Paul states this regarding the theme of which we are speaking: “Through the law, I am dead to the Law, so that now I can live for God. I have been crucified with Christ (Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι), and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live

in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake. I cannot bring myself to give up God’s gift: if the Law can justify us, there is no point in the death of Christ” (Gal 2:19-21).⁵

The experience of the disciple of Christ does not consist in having assumed a new morality through the (impossible) observance of the Law, but in a mystical experience, that of having been crucified with Christ, in having made the experience of “Christ who lives in me” (ζῆν δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός). At the beginning of the third chapter, Paul introduces the theme of justification through the faith with an enigmatic phrase on whose exact significance the exegetes are not in agreement, but which in any case is an interesting phrase for us: “Are you people in Galatia mad? Has someone put a spell on you, in spite of the plain explanation (προεγράφη) you have had of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ?” (Gal 3:1).

In chapter five, Paul preaches Christian freedom and reminds that if this is not linked to faith in Christ, but to other aspects, “*would there be any scandal of the cross?*” (Gal 5:11). A freedom which is fruit of the action of the Spirit of Christ in us signifies, as Paul says that: “You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires. Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit” (Gal 5:24-25).

Paul then exhorts to carry one another’s burdens, that is, to live fraternal love by making ourselves – we might say – as Simon of Cyrene for one another. Finally, he concludes the letter with a heartfelt appeal, which forms the text which we read

⁴ Quran IV, 157-158.

⁵ For the Greek I refer to: P. BERETTA cur., *Nuovo Testamento Interlineare*, ed. San Paolo, 1999²; per commenti alla Lettera ai Galati, cfr. S. ROMANELLO, *Lettera ai Galati. Introduzione, traduzione e commento*, ed. San Paolo 2004; A. VANHOYE cur.,

Lettera ai Galati. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento, ed. Paoline, 2015; R. MEYNET, *La Lettera ai Galati*, EDB, 2012; A. PITTA, *Lettera ai Galati. Introduzione, versione, commento*, EDB, 2009).

in the liturgy of the feast of the stigmata: “As for me, the only thing I can boast about is the cross our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world. It does not matter if a person is circumcised or not; what matters is for him to become an altogether new creature. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, who form the Israel of God. I want no more trouble from anybody after this; the marks on my body are those of Jesus (ἐγὼ γὰρ τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω). The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, my brothers. Amen” (Gal 6:14-18).

What does Paul intend to say when he affirms: “the marks on my body are those of Jesus?” It is difficult to establish this in an exact way. However, from the whole context of the letter, we understand that Paul in his personal experience felt that he had lived and was living a particular experience of Christ Crucified, and that his entire person was now transformed and marked, even physically, by the experience of his encounter with Christ Crucified. For the Apostle the experience of having been loved in a personal way by the Son of God who “has given his life for me”, is also an experience of having been in some way transformed by this love in the image of the love which is Christ crucified.

What Paul proclaims is the essence of every Christian experience. The Apostle claims this with passion, even in a polemic way, against the will to attribute to something else (the Law, circumcision, other practices) the possibility of our redemption, of our communion with God, of our freedom finalised to a new life as children of God.

5. The fact of the stigmata

Let us now pass from the experience of Paul to that of Francis. We shall concentrate on what the historian Giovanni Miccoli calls “The Fact of the Stigmata,”⁶ in response to the hypothesis of Chiara Frugoni who retains the stigmata to be a later invention and a kind of operation of religious marketing in which Francis would have been subject *post mortem* with the initiative of brother Elias and even more with that of the work of Bonaventure in the “Major Legend.”⁷

Cesare Vaiani summarises all this question in a few but significant words: “Let us make it clear from the beginning that we are speaking of an event or fact of the stigmata of Francis as a fact that has historically occurred; this precision, which borders on what is obvious, is however imperative, especially after the doubts raised regarding the historical truth of the stigmata of Francis on the part of Chiara Frugoni. In this regard we will not analyse the arguments brought forward by the scholar (even though they are interesting), but we shall limit ourselves to quote the words of Giovanni Miccoli, a famous historian, who is certainly not to be suspected of apologetic partiality regarding this matter. After a series of analyses of the primary sources which speak about the stigmata of Francis, he affirms: «It seems to me to be inevitable not to admit the conclusion that one should draw from the complex of analyses that we have made up till now: the primary sources which speak about the stigmata do not permit to establish in their inner structure an effective diversity of perception, and therefore of witness, of the phenomenon. All of them look at it and interpret it in a unitary manner: the body of Francis presented in itself the stigmata of

⁶ AA.VV. *Il fatto delle stimmate di San Francesco*, Ed. Porziuncola, Assisi 1996, 25-33; G. MICCOLI, *Francesco d'Assisi: memoria, storia e storiografia*, EBF, 2010, 281-298

⁷ CH. FRUGONI, *Francesco e l'invenzione delle stimmate. Una storia per parole e immagini fino a Bonaventura e Giotto*, Einaudi, 1993.

Christ. The scholar of history cannot ignore such a fact, and cannot prescind from its substantial concordance. Every argument on the episode of La Verna, on the last years of the life of Francis, as well as on those episodes which followed his death, cannot ignore to take this observation into account».⁸

We now come to see the various episodes and to note how interesting it is to read the witness of brother Leo, that of brother Elias, and that of the *Vita beati Francisci* by Thomas of Celano (the so-called 1 Celano).

5.1. The witness of brother Leo

The document which contains the blessing given to brother Leo and the Praises of the Most High is for us very precious for two reasons. The first reason is that it is one of the two autographs of Francis of Assisi which have been saved and which have arrived to us. As we read in the introductory note to the Franciscan Sources by Carlo Paolazzi: “The story of the so-called Praises of the Most High and of the Blessing to brother Leo attached to them is first of all the chronicle of a «chartula» or small parchment (actually, 10x13 cm) which contains the two texts on both sides, which is conserved in the Sacro Convento of Assisi and which Thomas of Celano gives witness that it was written «with his own hand» by Francis, on Mount La Verna and under divine inspiration, in favour of a «companion» who was afflicted with a serious interior temptation, which then immediately disappeared (cf. 2Cel 49).”⁹

The second reason for which this “chartula” is precious is found in the three rubrics that were written by brother Leo himself. The first rubric in particular is found at the top of the side of the parchment that contains the blessing given to brother Leo, and has

the aim of contextualising the text of the Praises of the Most High. It reads as follows: “Two years before his death, the blessed Francis spent forty days on Mount La Verna from the Feast of the Assumption of the holy Virgin Mary until the September Feast of Saint Michael, in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and the blessed Michael the Archangel. And the Lord’s hand was upon him. After the vision and message of the Seraph and the impression of Christ’s stigmata upon his body, he composed these praises written on the other side of this page and wrote them in his own hand, thanking God for the kindness bestowed upon him.”¹⁰

The witness of brother Leo is for us of primary importance because he tells us when Francis received the stigmata (during September 1224); where he received them (on Mount La Verna); in which context (the context of contemplative prayer during which the hand of the Lord fell upon Francis: Francis thus made a mystical experience in which he saw and heard a particular message of the Seraph and received the imprinting of the stigmata).

The “Praises of God the Most High” are an ecstatic prayer (there is only the mentioning of God as “You” in this prayer) with which Francis gave thanks for the gift that he had received. This gift was the experience of his encounter with the Paschal Christ (this is what the most beautiful and crucified Seraph indicates, precisely as in the case of the Paschal apparitions in Jn 20:27, where Jesus manifests himself as the risen and crucified Lord since he conserves the wounds of the passion). The imprinting of the stigmata in the body of Francis make him experience, even on a physical level, the fact that he was crucified-with-Christ.

⁸ C. VAIANI, *San Francesco, la Verna e le stimmate*, EBF, 2024, 1-12.

⁹ Cfr. C. PAOLAZZI cur, *Fonti Francescane*, EFR, 2004, 174.

¹⁰ *Chartula*, (FAED I, 108).

We do not know with certainty when brother Leo wrote these notes: “without doubt, he wrote his witness after the letter of Elias. I do not think that, at the present state of the sources, it is possible to determine the exact moment.”¹¹

5.2. The witness of brother Elias

The second interesting witness, which in reality is the first one in order of chronology, is that of brother Elias, who writes immediately after the death of Francis a circular letter to the entire Order. The document constitutes the first witness on the stigmata of Francis and, in spite of the impossibility to identify it «tout court» with the actual document that came out of the pen of Elias, it is still very precious. The description which it gives on the form of the stigmata is somewhat different from that of Thomas of Celano: according to Elias the hands and feet of Francis conserved the holes of the wounds.

According to Celano, instead, who corrected Elias explicitly on this point, the wounds presented themselves as flesh protruding in the form of nails.¹² However, this is not enough to deny the credibility of one or the other. Indeed, precisely because of this discrepancy we can speak of the objective difficulty of the witnesses to refer with appropriate terms the fact that had struck them by surprise: the same Elias affirms that it was an event that was unheard of before.

In the fifth paragraph of his letter to the brothers, Elias, with words composed of biblical quotations and references, announced the gift of the stigmata. For him it was a gift that appeared “not long before

his [Francis’] death” and which brother Elias seems to know, since he manifests the secret of the bleeding from the wound on the side: “And now, after telling you these things, I announce to you a great joy (Cfr. Lk 2:10) and the news of a miracle. Such a sign that has never been heard of from the dawn of time (Cfr. Jn 9:32) except in the Son of God, who is Christ the Lord (Cfr. Lk 2:11). Not long before his death, our brother and father appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds which are truly the marks of Christ (Cfr. Gal 6:17). His hands and feet had, as it were, the openings of the nails and were pierced front and back revealing the scars and showing the nails’ blackness. His side, moreover, seemed opened by a lance and often emitted blood.”¹³

5.3. The certified testimony of the notary

Together with the text of Elias, of which we do not have an original but a copy published for the first time in 1620 by Wilhelm Spoelberch,¹⁴ one should probably add a document which was written upon the initiative of the same Elias and deposited in view of the process of canonisation of Francis. This document has been found in 1914 by Francesco Pennacchi in the Archives of the Commune of Assisi.¹⁵

I will quote what Rino Bartolini has written regarding this document: “The Vicar General of the Order, brother Elias, took care to create immediately that which today we would call a Commission of ‘external’ Jurats, that is, from outside the Order, formed by persons who were not friars. Its members were noble persons in authority who were experts and who could directly see and touch the stigmata and take an oath

¹¹ MICCOLI, *Francesco d’Assisi: memoria, storia e storiografia*, 286.

¹² IC 113 (FAED I, 280-281).

¹³ *Letter of brother Elias on the Transitus of St. Francis*, 5 (FAED II, 490)

¹⁴ Cfr. C. PAOLAZZI, in *Fonti Francescane*, ed. 2004, p. 235. English text in FAED II, 770-771.

¹⁵ Cfr. F. PENNACCHI, *Saggio del Processo per la canonizzazione di S. Francesco: Le Stimmate*, in *Miscellanea francescana*, 15 (1914), 131-132; M. BIHL, *De quodam elencho Assisiano testium oculatorum S. Francisci Stigmatum*, in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 19 (1926) 931-936; Cfr. J. DALARUN, SF, II, 3059-3060.

on the Gospels. This External Commission wrote a report in which they describe the object of their oath and the names of at least some of the witnesses who signed the document.

«In the Name of the Lord. Amen.

These are the ones who have seen the stigmata in the flesh of blessed Francis when he was still living and after his death: Giovanni Simone; Bonaccursio di Ugo di Leto; Giovanni di Diotaiuti; the lord Giacomo, canon of the bishop's house who saw the stigmata of this saint only when he was still living. The notary Alberico.

These are the ones who saw them after his death: the lord Tommaso di Ranerio who at the time was chamberlain of the Commune; the lord Gerolamo; the lord Giovanni di Garnieri, Offreduccio, Scalla, the notary Alberico, the lord Masseo, Andrea de Preite, Bartolo della signora Fantina, Giovanni di Guidottolo, Baliero, Giovanni di Greccio. These signs (of the Stigmata) were round on the inside of the hands, oblong on the external side and they looked like outgrowth of flesh that seemed to be like the point of nails which were riveted and folded and which grew out of the flesh. The signs of the nails were impressed also in the feet and they were clearly visible on the rest of the flesh. The right side looked like a scarred wound, which had been pierced with a lance; blood often came out of his side, in such a way that his tunic was often wet with sacred blood, as well as his undergarments. Giovanni di Magnolo, master Giacomo di Pellipario di Margherita di Norcia».

Some of the members of this Commission were persons who were reluctant to admit immediately that it was «a miracle».¹⁶

5.4. The testimony of Thomas of Celano

The testimony of the first official biographer, Thomas of Celano, in his *Vita beati Francisci*, is of great interest, both for its chronological closeness to the death of Francis (it was written in 1228, that is, just two years after the death of Francis), as well as because Celano could certainly have made recourse to the testimonies given under oath which were gathered for the process of canonisation (as an analogy it is sufficient to make a comparison between the witnesses of the process of canonisation of Saint Clare and the *Legend of Saint Clare*, and one discovers in this way that not all that is documented in the process necessarily ends in the official biography, but that everything which ends up in the official biography is present also in the testimonies taken under oath during the process).

The narration of Thomas of Celano is very close to that given by the witnesses under oath. We can read the entire chapter III of the II part of the *Vita beati Francisci*,¹⁷ which constitutes the way in which Thomas of Celano describes the event, very probably and principally based upon the witness of brother Leo.

Let us now read the entire chapter which Celano dedicates to the stigmata:

“While he was staying in that hermitage called La Verna, after the place where it is located, two years prior to the time that he returned his soul to heaven, he saw in the vision of God a man, having six wings like a Seraph, standing over him, arms extended and feet joined, affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up, two were stretched out over his head as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe, but could not decide what this vision meant

¹⁶ R. BARTOLINI, *Stimate di S. Francesco d'Assisi, il 'Processo', Ottavo Centenario 1224-2024*, ed. pro manuscript, p. 6.

¹⁷ IC 94-96 (FAED I, 263-265).

for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph's beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart. Concerned over the matter, he kept thinking about what this vision could mean and his spirit was anxious to discern a sensible meaning from the vision.

While he was unable to perceive anything clearly understandable from the vision, its newness very much pressed upon his heart. Signs of the nails began to appear on his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little while earlier on the crucified man hovering over him.

His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the middle by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner part of his hands and on the upper part of his feet, and their points protruding on opposite sides. Those marks on the inside of his hands were round, but rather oblong on the outside; and small pieces of flesh were visible like the points of nails, bent over and flattened, extending beyond the flesh around them. On his feet, the marks of nails were stamped in the same way and raised above the surrounding flesh. His right side was marked with an oblong scar, as if pierced with a lance, and this often dripped blood, so that his tunic and undergarments were frequently stained with his holy blood. Sadly, only a few merited seeing the sacred wound in his side during the life of the crucified servant of the crucified Lord. Elias was fortunate and did merit somehow to see the wound in his side. Rufino was just as lucky: he touched it with his own hands. For one time, when the same brother Rufino put his hand onto the holy man's chest to rub him, his hand slipped, as often happens, and it chanced that he touched the precious

scar in his right side. As soon as he had touched it, the holy one of God felt great pain and pushed Rufino's hand away, crying out for the Lord to spare him.

He hid those marks carefully from strangers, and concealed them cautiously from people closer to him, so that even the brothers at his side and his most devoted followers for a long time did not know about them.

Although the servant and friend of the Most High saw himself adorned with such magnificent pearls, like precious stones, and marvellously decorated beyond the glory and honour of all others, still his heart did not grow vain. He did not seek to use this to make himself appealing to anyone in a desire for vainglory. Rather in every way possible he tried to hide these marks, so that human favour would not rob him of the grace given him.

He would never or rarely reveal his great secret to anyone. He feared that his special friends would reveal it to show their intimacy with him, as friends often do, and then would then lose some of the grace given to him. He always carried in his heart and often had on his lips the saying of the prophet: 'I have hidden your words in my heart to avoid any sin against You.'

Whenever some people of the world approached him and he did not wish to speak with them, he would give this sign to the brothers and sons staying with him: if he recited the verse mentioned above, immediately they would dismiss politely those who had gathered to see him. He had learned through experience that one cannot be a spiritual person unless one's secrets are deeper and more numerous than what can be seen on the face and by their appearance can be judged in different ways by different people. For he had met some people who agreed with him outwardly but inwardly disagreed, applauding him to his face but laughing behind his back. These brought judgment upon themselves and made

honest people seem somewhat suspect to him.

So it is that malice often attempts to smear sincerity and because of the lies of many, the truth of the few is not believed.”¹⁸

Among other things we note that Thomas confirms the fact that both brother Elias and brother Rufino had seen the stigmata of Francis when he was still alive, that Rufino had even touched the wound on the side, and that Francis cherished the stigmata as a secret, a thing which was perfectly in line with the spirituality of the Saint as we come to know from his Admonitions: “Blessed is the servant who stores up in heaven the good things which the Lord shows to him and does not wish to reveal them to people under the guise of a reward, because the Most High Himself will reveal His deeds to whomever He pleases. Blessed is the servant who safeguards the secrets of the Lord in his heart.”¹⁹

To this hiding of the stigmata, Thomas of Celano dedicates an entire section of the *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*,²⁰ narrating also some curious episodes and even some rough answers on the part of Francis to whoever would ask him: “One time a companion saw the marks on his feet, and said to him: «What is this, good brother?» But he replied: «Mind your own business».”²¹

In the *Treatise on the Miracles* Thomas of Celano narrates how, after the death of Francis, many faithful flocked to see the stigmata of Francis: “A crowd of people came together praising and glorifying the name of the Lord. The whole city of Assisi rushed down as a group and the entire region hurried, eager to see that new wonder that God newly displayed in this world. The novelty of the miracle changed their weeping to jubilation, and swept up

their bodily sight toward amazement and ecstasy. They observed the blessed body adorned with the stigmata of Christ, not the holes of the nails, but the nails themselves, in the middle of his hands and feet, marvellously fashioned by divine power from his own flesh, in fact, grown in the flesh itself. From whatever point they were pressed, simultaneously, as if a single tendon, they pulsed at the opposite end. They also saw his side stained red with blood.”²²

In the following paragraph Celano passes from the third to the first person plural, including himself among the witnesses of the miracle: “We who say these things have seen these things; we have touched with our hands what we are writing by hand. With tears in our eyes, we have sketched what we profess with our lips, and what we once swore, while touching sacred things, we declare for all time. Many brothers besides us saw it while the saint was alive; at his death, more than fifty of them with countless lay people venerated it.”²³

Here seems to be the echo of the narration on the resurrection of the Lord (cfr. 1Cor 15:5-7), with the mentioning of the innumerable witnesses of the fact. It also seems to be the echo of the document that Elias ordered to be written with the testimony of those who had seen the fact and then gave witness to it. Lastly a considerable weight is given also to the witness of the fifty brothers who, with a great number of lay persons, could venerate the stigmata and therefore became the eyewitnesses of the event.

¹⁸ 1C 94-96 (FAED I, 263-265).

¹⁹ *Adm* 28 (FAED I, 137).

²⁰ Cfr. 2C Chapters XCVIII-C (FAED II, 334-336),

²¹ 2C 135 (FAED II, 335).

²² 3C 5 (FAED II, 403).

²³ 3C 5 (FAED II, 403).

6. Bonaventure: the transformation of the lover into the one loved

Bonaventure²⁴ inserts the episode of the stigmatisation of Francis in a frame which summarises and orders elements which are already present in preceding biographical narrations and also offers exact details regarding the temporal sequence of the events:

Francis, as was his custom, spends time in retreat (the Lent of Saint Michael the Archangel from 15 August to 29 September) and he goes to Mount La Verna two years before he dies.²⁵

Francis feels an interior voice telling him to open the Gospel three times (NB it is the same thing that happened twenty years before when Francis was looking for an indication for his life) and for three times he encounters the episode of the passion of the Lord.²⁶

One morning close to the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14 September), while he was in prayer, Francis had the vision of the Crucified Seraph.²⁷ Here Bonaventure follows the account by Thomas of Celano.

After receiving the stigmata Francis faces the brothers who were accompanying him and asks them for counsel regarding whether he had to speak out or keep silent on what he had seen. He narrated his vision but kept the secret on the words that he had heard from the Crucified Seraph.²⁸

The comment that follows has a theological character and is profoundly suggesting the scope of a providential and spiritual reading of the event of the stigmata: “After true love of Christ transformed the lover into His

image, when the forty days were over that he spent in solitude as he had desired, and the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel had also arrived, the angelic man Francis came down from the mountain, bearing with him the likeness of the Crucified, depicted not on tablets of stone or on panels of wood carved by hand, but engraved on parts of his flesh by the finger of the living God.”²⁹

The following paragraphs continue to develop the theme of the miracles linked in various ways to the “miracle” of the stigmata of Francis.

After having taken into consideration some of these essential texts, it is evident that the stigmata occurred within a progressive itinerary of Christian life which led Francis to live ever more the ideal underlined by Paul in his Letter to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I know life in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake” (Gal 2:19-20).

In Francis this transformation has the unique character of a mystical experience, as one can glean from the witnesses given by brother Leo, Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure. With the theological language of Bonaventure, we can say that it is the Holy Spirit (*digitus paternae dexteræ*) who operates this transformation. It is a documented experience, namely that which normally is called a historical fact.

It is an experience that has part of the content reserved for Francis alone (as we know from brother Illuminato) and a part of the content that can be shared with the fraternity and with the faithful.

²⁴ BONAVENTURE, *Major Legend*, XIII, *The Sacred Stigmata* (FAED II, 630-639).

²⁵ LMj XIII, 1 (FAED II, 630-631).

²⁶ LMj XIII, 2 (FAED II, 631).

²⁷ LMj XIII, 3 (FAED II, 632-633).

²⁸ LMj XIII, 4 (FAED II, 633).

²⁹ BONAVENTURE, *Major Life of St. Francis*, XIII, 5 (FAED II, 634).

It is an experience that has an exemplary value. In the fifth *Admonition* Francis begins by reminding us of the dignity of the human person created to the image and likeness of the Son of God: “Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His likeness according to the Spirit” (v.1), Francis then passes on to describe our personal responsibility regarding the death on the cross of the Lord and the uselessness of taking glory in our human achievements (vv.2-7), to arrive at the conclusion: “But we can boast in our weaknesses and in carrying each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.8).³⁰ The stigmata have an exemplary value to make us remember in what we can truly glory, and have also the value of making us remember that, if we have been created to the image and likeness of the Son of God, we have been re-created (that is, redeemed) thanks to Christ Crucified, by whom we are also called to carry his image in us if we want to give glory to God and make an experience of salvation as a participation in the divine life through our immersion in the paschal mystery.

From this mystical experience flows an ecstatic praise: *The Praises of God the Most High*, which are a prayer of praise in which Francis – as it were – loses himself and dives into the “You” of God, completely forgetting his own self. Two years before he died, Francis lived another mystical experience in a context of terrible physical suffering, which is narrated both in the *Mirror of Perfection*³¹ and in the *Assisi Compilation*.³² In his nocturnal suffering Francis invoked the help of the Lord, since his resistance was at its limits, and the Lord assured him: “Brother, be glad and rejoice in your illnesses and troubles, and, as of

now, you are as secure as if you were already in my kingdom.” As a fruit of this mystical experience, on the following morning Francis intoned the cosmic praises, the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, in which he reminds us that no man is worthy of naming God except those “who bear infirmity and tribulation and endure in peace” and later on he would also add the category of “those who give pardon for your love.”

These texts already make us realise that the parallelism between the experience of Calvary and that of La Verna for us Friars Minor, as well as for every Christian, has simply the value of living to the ultimate consequences not so much in the exceptional mystical experience, but rather in the mystical experience of daily life, the contents of the full conformity of Christ in his Easter mystery, of Christ crucified and risen in whom we have been baptised, of Christ who makes us pass through the painful experience of being crucified-with-Him in order also to make a glorious experience of being risen-with-Him and projected in a dimension in which we forget ourselves in our contemplation of the “You” of God, placing ourselves in the centre of creation, and giving voice to the cosmic praise of all creatures, after having obtained once more as a gift the full image of children of God through our immersion in the paschal mystery.

7. Points of actualisation in the speech that Pope Francis gave to the brothers of La Verna

Speaking to the brothers of La Verna (and of the Tuscan Province of the Stigmatised St. Francis) last 5 April, Pope Francis first of all recalled the value that the stigmata have in the life of every Christian:

³⁰ *Adm* 5 (FAED I, 131).

³¹ MP 100 (FAED III, 346-348).

³² AC 83 (FAED II, 185-186).

“Jesus’ disciple finds in the stigmatized Saint Francis a mirror of his identity. Indeed, the believer does not belong to a group based on thought or action, held together solely by human forces, but to a living Body, the Body of Christ that is the Church. And this belonging is not nominal, but real: it was impressed in the Christian by Baptism, which has marked us with the Pasch of the Lord. In this way, in the communion of love of the Church, each one of us rediscovers who he or she is: a beloved, blessed, reconciled child, sent to witness the wonders of the grace of being an artisan of fraternity.”

The consequence of this tuning of every Christian with Saint Francis who bears the stigmata contains a calling: “Therefore, Christians are called to address themselves in a special way to the ‘stigmatized’ they encounter: to those who are “marked” in life, who bear the scars of the sufferings and injustices they have endured or the mistakes they have made. And in this mission, the Saint of La Verna is a companion on the journey, who supports us and helps us not to be crushed by difficulties, fears and contradictions, ours and those of others.”

A second aspect that is underlined, namely for actualisation and application, are the words of the Holy Father for us friars (and extending the meaning we can apply it to all male and female religious who are inspired by Francis): “And so, we come to the second point: the stigmata in the life of the Franciscan. Your founder Saint offers you a powerful call to unity among yourselves and in your history. Indeed, the image of Christ in the crucifix that appears to him in La Verna, marking his body, is the same as the one that had impressed itself upon his heart at the beginning of his ‘conversion’, and which had indicated to him the mission of repairing his house”.

Also in this case Pope Francis draws some conclusions, and after having invited all to be confessors “with wide sleeves” (forgiving always), he gives some other indications:

“Your founder Saint offers you a powerful call to unity among yourselves and in your history. Indeed, the image of Christ in the crucifix that appears to him in La Verna, marking his body, is the same as the one that had impressed itself upon his heart at the beginning of his ‘conversion’, and which had indicated to him the mission of ‘repairing his house’. In Francis, a man pacified in the sign of the cross, with which he blessed his brethren, the stigmata represent the seal of the essential. This calls you too to return to the essential in the various aspects of your life: in formative paths, in apostolic activities and in your presence in the midst of the people; to be forgiven bears of forgiveness, healed bearers of healing, joyful and simple in fraternity; with the strength of the love that flows from the side of Christ and that is nourished in your personal encounter with Him, to be renewed every day with a seraphic ardour that burns the heart.”³³

8. Conclusion and prayer

As I conclude this conference permit me to quote a very beautiful text of a great Father of the Church and preacher, Saint Peter Chrysologus, who lived in the second half of the V century, bishop of Ravenna between 433 and 450.

In the *Discourse 108* he places himself in the shoes of Christ Crucified in order to invite the faithful to identify themselves with him: “Listen to the Lord who asks you: see, see in me your own body, your own members, your own heart, your own bones, your own blood ... Do not be afraid. This cross is not a thorn for me, but for death.

³³ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en>

These nails are not giving me so much pain, but rather are imprinting more profoundly in me the love I have toward you. These wounds do not make me weep and groan, but rather they introduce you into my own self. My body spread out on the cross does not increase the suffering, but widens the spaces of my heart to welcome you. My blood is not lost for me, but is given as ransom for you. Come, therefore, return. Make an experience at least of my fatherly tenderness, which pays evil with good, injury with love, wounds so great with a charity so immense.”³⁴

I believe that it is necessary also for us to make some questions: What kind of provocation do I feel when I confront myself with the experience of Saint Francis bearing the stigmata?

The experience of the stigmata is not only an experience of participation in the cross of Christ, but is also the contemplation of his beauty as the Risen One and is a participation in his mystery: What kind of experience do I have regarding the fact that I have to be crucified-with-Christ in order to become risen-with-Christ? What experience do I have of the participation to the mystery of his Easter?

After the vision of the Seraph and the impression of the stigmata, as well as after the terrible night lived in San Damiano and the assurance that the Lord offers him, Saint Francis praised God and did so in an ecstatic manner and in a kind of cosmic chorus. What kind of experience do I have of this existential oxymoron that leads me to praise God, even though I find myself going through “infirmity and tribulation”?

The stigmata are also a powerful symbol of the empathy of Christ in our regard, an empathy which leads us then to carry upon ourselves one another’s burden. Who are

the stigmatised persons with whom we find it most difficult to enter in tune and towards whom the Lord is pushing us so that we may show mercy to them?

Let us conclude our reflections with the prayer composed by Pope Francis for the eighth centenary of the impression of the stigmata of Our Lord Jesus Christ on the flesh of our Seraphic Father:

*Saint Francis,
man wounded by love,
Crucified in body and in spirit,
we look to you, decorated with the holy
stigmata,
to learn how to love the Lord Jesus,
brothers and sisters with your love,
with your passion.
With you it is easier to contemplate
and follow Christ, poor and Crucified.*

*Give us, Francis,
the freshness of your faith,
the certainty of your hope,
the gentleness of your charity.
Intercede for us,
so that it may be sweet for us
to bear the burdens of life,
and in trials we may experience
the tenderness of the Father
and the balm of the Spirit.
May our wounds be healed by the Heart of
Christ,
to become, like you, witnesses of His mercy,
which continues to heal and renew the life
of those who seek Him with a sincere heart.*

*O Francis,
made to resemble the Crucified One,
let your stigmata be for us and for the world
resplendent signs of life and resurrection,
to show new ways
of peace and reconciliation. Amen.*

³⁴ Disc. 108; PL 52, 499-500.

DOCUMENTING THE HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE STIGMATA: *TREATISE ON THE MIRACLES* BY TOMMASO DA CELANO

Noel Muscat OFM

The historical account of the stigmatisation of Francis of Assisi is well documented in the Franciscan Sources.¹ This, however, does not mean that it was universally accepted as a historical fact that could be proved scientifically, except through recourse to the witnesses who had seen or even touched the sacred stigmata of the *Poverello*. This could, of course, have been simply an expression of genuine but rather naive devotion, and not all were ready to accept it at face value.

In his study on the mediaeval detractors of the stigmata of St. Francis, André Vauchez² analyses a whole list of writings that tried to undermine the historical truth of the stigmata. Many of them came either from some members of the Dominican Order, who did not want to enhance the prestige of the Franciscans who were advocating the Christ-like person of Francis indicating him in his conformity to Christ Crucified. Other opponents included the secular masters during the poverty

controversy, who regarded the Medicant way of life, based upon voluntary poverty, as intrinsically heretical in nature, since it presented Christ and the apostles in a radical light regarding mendicity which they never expressed in the Gospel accounts. Yet another opposing tendency came later on, during the time of the reformation, and it was largely based upon the rational analysis of the phenomenon of the stigmata, which led these exponents to believe that there was no miraculous element in such a mystical manifestation in the body of St. Francis.

The study by Octavian Schmucki on the stigmata of St. Francis remains a cornerstone in the scientific analysis of the texts of the Sources and in the documentary material that goes to prove the historical truth regarding the event of the stigmatisation.³

Our aim in this paper is that of concentrating our attention on some documentary sources which speak about

¹ 1C 94-96 (FAED I, 263-265); LSJ 59-63 (FAED I, 409-411); THOMAS DE CELANO, *Legenda ad usum chori*, 11 (*Analecta Franciscana* X, 123); J. DALARUN, *The Rediscovered Life of St. Francis of Assisi. Thomas of Celano*, 70-74, Franciscan Institute Publications, St. Bonaventure University, NY 2016, 26-27; AP 46 (FAED II, 57-58); L3C 68-70 (FAED II, 107-109); AC 118 (FAED II, 226-227); 2C 135-138 (FAED II, 334-336); 3C 2-13 (FAED II, 401-408); *An Umbrian Choir Legend* (FAED II, 474); *A Letter on the Transitus of St. Francis attributed to Brother Elias* (FAED II, 490-491); LMj 13,1-9 (FAED II, 630-639); Lmin 6 (FAED II, 707-713); ABF 9 and 55 (FAED III, 452-

458 and 559-561); *Fioretti: Considerations on the Sacred Stigmata* (Italian edition in *Fonti Francescane*. Nuova edizione, Editrici Francescane, Padova 2011, 1896-1958); *Donation of La Verna* (1274) (FAED III, 801-803); *Inscription of Brother Leo* (1257-60) (FAED II, 773).

² A. VAUCHEZ, *The Stigmata of St. Francis and Its Medieval Detractors*, Translated by E. HAGMAN, in *Greyfriars Review*, Vol. 13. No. 1 (1999) 61-89.

³ O. SCHMUCKI, *The Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. A Critical Investigation in the Light of Thirteenth-century Sources*, Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1991.

the stigmata of St. Francis as witnessed by persons who were close to him, particularly his companions. We shall not repeat what these studies have proposed so professionally, and neither shall we concentrate our attention on the various Papal documents that were published during the 13th century, in order to prove the truthfulness of the stigmata, the most famous of which is the Bulla *Benigna operatio* of Alexander IV (Anagni, 29 October 1255).⁴ Neither shall we enter into the merits of the discussion that has been raised fairly recently by Chiara Frugoni⁵ and which has continued to find support by contemporary scholars, particularly in view of the present 8th centenary of the event of the stigmatisation of Francis.

The historical truth of the stigmata according to the *Tractatus de miraculis* by Tommaso da Celano

Tommaso da Celano wrote the *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* in 1250-1252. The work seems to have been prompted by the desire of the brothers to have yet another collection of miracles in order to complement the *Memorial in the Desire of a Soul*, written by the same

Celano in 1246-1247. Here we shall not enter into the question of the importance of this treatise, *which* has been studied particularly by Jacques Dalarun⁶ and Felice Accrocca.⁷ What is important to note is that Celano does not begin the treatise with a list of classical miracles which one would expect, but rather dedicates the first two chapters to two themes which become miraculous if one considers them in a theological perspective, namely the beginning of the Order and the miracle of the stigmata.

The event of the stigmata is studied in the *Treatise on the Miracles* in chapter 2, entitled “The Miracle of the Stigmata and the manner in which the Seraph appeared to him”.⁸ Before proceeding to study the contents of this chapter as a document proving the historical truth of the stigmata, one has to bear in mind that the *Treatise on the Miracles* was composed in a critical moment in the history of the Order, namely during the generalate of Giovanni Buralli da Parma (1247-1257), when the heated controversy between the secular Masters and the Mendicants flared up in the University of Paris, and also when the two Mendicant Orders were in competition among themselves, to the point that the

⁴ J.F. SBARALEAE, *Bullarium Franciscanum* II, Romae 1761, 85-86. Extract of the original Latin text in which Pope Alexander describes the stigmata and mentions the witness of the brothers who saw them and touched them: “Signanter vobis ante oculos proponere volumus recolenda frequentius, et vehementius admiranda illa saltem jucunda dominicae passionis insignia; quae in ejusdem Sancti corpore manus caelestis operationis impressit. Viderunt namque oculi fideliter intuentes, et certissimi palpantium digiti palpaverunt; quod in manibus ejus, et pedibus expressa undique similitudo clavorum de subjecto proprio carnis excrevit, vel de materia novae creationis accrevit, quae equidem idem Sanctus studiose ab oculis hominum, quorum refugiebat gloriam, dum viveret, abscondebat. Inventa est patentius in ipsius Defuncti corpore non inflata humanitus, nec facta plaga vulneris lateralis, quasi aliquid instar lateris Salvatoris, quod salvationis, et redemptionis humanae in Redemptore Nostro protulit Sacramentum: quae quidem plaga, sicut quosdam ex Fratribus sibi familiariter adhaerentibus latere non

potuit propter defluxum humoris; sic diu ante viruerat in vivente.”

⁵ C. FRUGONI, *Francesco e l'invenzione delle stimmate. Una storia per parole e immagini fino a Bonaventura e Giotto*, Einaudi, Torino 2010; R.BARTOLINI, *Stimmate di S. Francesco d'Assisi. Il 'Processo'. Ottavo Centenario (1224-2024)*, in *Monteluco di Spoleto* (15-17 Settembre 2023), in www.academia.edu; A. BARTOLOMEI ROMAGNOLI, *Un viaggio dentro i racconti delle stimmate*, in *Collectanea Franciscana*, 92 (2022), fasc. 1-2, 357-365.

⁶ J. DALARUN, *Il Tractatus de Miraculis, vertice dell'opera Celaniana*, in *La Malavventura di San Francesco: per un uso storico delle Leggende Francescane*, Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, Milano 1996, 97-119.

⁷ F. ACCROCCA, *I Miracoli del Beato Francesco, ovvero la forza narrativa di Tommaso*, in *Un Santo di carta. Le Fonti biografiche di San Francesco d'Assisi*, Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, Milano 2013, 293-329.

⁸ 3C 2-13 (FAED II, 401-408).

historical event of the stigmata was being doubted by some members of the Order of Preachers, and Giovanni da Parma had to join forces with Humbert de Romans, the Master General of the Preachers, to write an encyclical letter to all the brothers in order to calm tensions between Minors and Preachers.⁹ This occurred in 1255, one year after the *Treatise on the Miracles* had been approved by the chapter of Metz in 1254.

This goes to show that Celano was under pressure to produce a treatise that would be a further proof of the sanctity of St. Francis and of the validity of his Order at a time when its core values were being put to test. The miraculous element would provide a proof of this sanctity and validity. Among the divine portents visible during the life of St. Francis, Celano rates the episode of the stigmatisation as the prime witness of Francis' unique holiness.

Celano begins chapter 2 of the *Tractatus de miraculis* with a theological and mystical presentation of the miracle of the stigmata: "The new man, Francis, became famous for a new and stupendous miracle. By a singular privilege, not granted in previous ages, he appeared marked, adorned with the sacred stigmata, and conformed in this body of death to the body of the Crucified."¹⁰

One notes the characteristic note of *novitas* that Celano had already spoken about in the *Vita beati Francisci*. Francis is "a new man", and the fame of his holiness is proved by the miracle of the stigmata, which Celano presents as a unique

privilege. Indeed, no other person before Francis was known to have carried the marks of the Passion of Christ in his body, at least not in the way in which Celano describes them, namely as stigmata and not simply wounds. This miracle made Francis *conformed* to the body of Christ Crucified, a true likeness, an icon.

Indeed, Francis was marked by Christ Crucified from the very beginning of his conversion. Celano is keen to state that the proof of the truthfulness of the stigmata lay precisely in a life-long commitment to the service of Christ Crucified:

"All the striving of this man of God, whether in public or in private, revolved around the cross of the Lord. From the earliest days when he began his knightly service for the Crucified, various mysteries of the cross shone around him. At the beginning of his conversion, when he had decided to take leave of the allurements of this life, Christ spoke to him from the wood of the cross while he prayed. From the mouth of Christ's image a voice declared: 'Francis, go rebuild my house, which, as you see, it is all being destroyed.' From that moment the memory of the Lord's passion was stamped on his heart with a deep brand-mark, and as conversion reached his deepest self, his soul began to melt, as his beloved spoke. And he also enclosed himself in the cross itself when he put on the habit of a penitent, bearing the image of the cross."¹¹

⁹ N. MUSCAT, *The joint Letter of John of Parma and Humbert of Romans to the Franciscans and Dominicans*, in *Spirit+Life* 95 (January-March 2011), 12-18.

¹⁰ 3C 2 (FAED II, 401). Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 272: Novus homo Franciscus novo et stupendo miraculo claruit, cum singulari privilegio, retroactis saeculis non concesso, insignitus apparuit, sacris videlicet stigmatibus decoratus, et configuratus in corpore mortis huius corpori Crucifixi.

¹¹ 3C 2 (FAED II, 401). Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 272-273: Totum viri Dei studium, tam publicum quam privatum, circa crucem Domini

versabatur; et a primaevo temporis quo Crucifixio coeperat militare, diversa circa eum crucis mysteria praefulserunt. Cum enim in principio suae conversionis vitae huius illecebris valefacere decrevisset, orantem cum Christus de ligno crucis alloquitur, et ab ipsius ore imaginis vox ista dilabatur: 'Francisce,' inquit, 'vade, repara domum meam, quae, ut cernis, tota destruitur.' Ex tunc profundo caractere impressa fuit cordi eius memoria dominicae passionis, et alta in sese conversione reducta, liquefieri coepit anima eius, ut dilectus locutus est. Nonne etiam in ipsa se cruce recludens, habitum poenitentiae sumpsit, crucis imaginem praeferentem?

Celano then speaks about the relationship between Francis' poverty and the cross of Christ. The argument he provides is another indication of the need to present Francis as a Christ-like man whose holiness did not depend upon his striving to live in poverty, but rather upon the confirmation of the seal of Christ himself upon his body. This is an obvious reference to the need to defend the historical truth of the stigmata as having been a miracle that would support the way of life of poverty of Francis and the brothers:

"Though for him the more the habit reflected poverty, the more appropriate it would be to his plan, the saint approved in it even more the mystery of the cross, because just as, internally, his mind had put on the crucified Lord, so, externally, his whole body put on the cross of Christ."¹²

Francis had been gifted with many apparitions of the cross in his life, and Celano lists some of them, which later on would be taken over by Bonaventure and developed in the mystical framework of the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*. We shall not consider them here, but rather move on directly to the account of the stigmatisation of St. Francis as it is narrated in the *Treatise on the Miracles*:

"Two years prior to the time that he returned his spirit to heaven, in the hermitage called La Verna, which is in the province of Tuscany, he was wholly intent on heavenly glory in the recesses of devout contemplation.

He saw in a vision a Seraph upon a cross, having six wings, extended above him, arms and feet affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up over his head, two were stretched out as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. Seeing this, he was filled with the greatest awe, but as he did not know what this vision meant for him, joy mixed with sorrow flooded his heart. He greatly rejoiced at the gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him, but the fact that it was fixed to the cross terrified him. With concern his mind pondered what this revelation could mean, and the search for some meaning made his spirit anxious. But understanding came from discovery: while he was searching outside himself, the meaning was shown to him in his very self. At once signs of the nails began to appear on his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little while earlier on the crucified man in the air over him. His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the middle by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner part of his hands and on the upper part of his feet, and their points protruding on opposite sides. The heads of the nails in his hands and feet were round and black, while their points were oblong and flattened, rising from the flesh itself, and extended beyond the flesh around them. His right side was marked with an oblong red scar as if pierced by a lance, and, since this often dripped blood, his tunic and undergarments were stained with his holy blood."¹³

¹² 3C 2 (FAED II, 401). Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 273: Qui habitus licet pro eo quod magis esset aemulus paupertatis, magis suo proposito conveniret, plus tamen in eo sanctus crucis mysterium comprobavit, quatenus ut mens eius intro Dominum crucifixum induerat, et in quo signo Deus potestates aereas debellarat, in eodem suus exercitus Deo militaret.

¹³ 3C 4 (FAED II, 402-403). Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 273-274: Duobus annis antequam spiritum redderet caelo, in eremitorio quod Alverna dicitur et est in provincia Tusciae, ubi devotae contemplationis secessibus iam iam totus caelesti gloriae intendebat, vidit in visione Seraph in cruce positum, sex alas habentem, supra se extensum, manibus et pedibus cruci affixum. Duae alae supra caput elevabantur, duae ad volandum extendebantur, duae vero totum velabant corpus. Haec videns vehementer obstupuit, sed quid sibi vellet haec

visio dum advertere nescit, mixtum moerore gaudium cor eius incurrit. Laetabatur in gratioso aspectu, quo a Seraph conspici se videbat, sed crucis affixio terrebatur eundem. Sollicita mente revolvit, quid posset hoc oraculum designare, et ad concipiendum aliquem intellectum spiritus eius anxius reddebatur. Verum in dum extra se circuiens, ab inventionem defluit intellectus, protinus in seipso sibi ipsi manifestatur sensus.

Statim enim coeperunt in manibus eius et pedibus apparere signa clavorum, quemadmodum paulo ante virum supra se viderat in aëre crucifixum. Manus et pedes eius in ipso medio clavis confixae videbantur, clavorum capitibus in interiore parte manuum et superiore pedum apparentibus, et eorum acuminibus existentibus ex adverso. Erantque clavorum capita in manibus et pedibus rotunda et nigra, ipsorum vero acumina oblonga et reperiens, quae de ipsa carne surgentia carnem reliquam

The description of the stigmata as historical proof

Celano's description of the stigmata of St. Francis in this treatise resembles the other description he had offered in the *Vita beati Francisci*. Celano insists upon the fact that the full meaning of the vision of the Crucified Seraph became evident in the flesh of the *Poverello* some moments after he had this mystical experience on La Verna. The description is centred upon the physical appearance of the stigmata, describing them as rising from the flesh itself in his hands and feet. In other words, the description is based upon the witness of those brothers who actually saw these signs of the Passion on the body of Francis, and who could vouch for their historical truth, insisting that they were not merely wounds inflicted by natural causes, but rather a kind of supernatural seal stamped upon the body of St. Francis. The mark on the side of his body is described with detail, as dripping blood and also having been touched by Brother Rufino.

Celano then mentions the witness of the crowds who flocked to see the Saint as he lay dead at the Portiuncula on 3 October 1226 night, and who were also an undisputed proof of the historical truth of the stigmata in the body of St. Francis:

"A crowd of people came together praising and glorifying the name of the Lord. The whole city of Assisi rushed down as a group and the entire region hurried, eager to see that new wonder that God newly displayed in this world. The novelty of the miracle changed their weeping to jubilation, and swept up their bodily sight toward amazement and ecstasy. They observed the blessed body adorned with the

stigmata of Christ, not the holes of the nails, but the nails themselves, in the middle of his hands and feet, marvellously fashioned by divine power from his own flesh, in fact, grown in the flesh itself. From whatever point they were pressed, simultaneously, as if a single tendon, they pulsed at the opposite end. They also saw his side stained red with blood."¹⁴

The supposition that all these persons were naively gullible in their belief that Francis was truly marked by the stigmata of Christ Crucified cannot hold in front of such a clear-cut description of the phenomenon, no matter how mysterious and inexplicable it might sound. Indeed, Celano concludes this section, before embarking upon a list of miracles that occurred with the intercession of the stigmatised Francis, by giving us a kind of declaration that echoes the witness given by St. John in the prologue of his First Letter, where he speaks about the tangible truth of Christ's incarnation as seen, heard and touched by the apostles and their followers:

"We who say these things have seen these things; *we have touched with our hands* (1Jn 1:1-4) what we are writing by hand. With tears in our eyes, we have sketched what we profess with our lips, and what we once swore, while touching sacred things, we declare for all time.

Many brothers besides us saw it while the saint was alive; at his death, more than fifty of them with countless lay people venerated it.

Let there be no reason for ambiguity: let no one doubt this outpouring of everlasting goodness! If only the many members were joined in that same seraphic love to Christ their head! If only they were to be found worthy of such armour in a similar battle,

excedebant. Dextrum quoque latus, quasi lancea transfixum, rubra cicatrice obductum erat, quod saepe cum sanguinem emittebat, tunica et femoralia respergebantur sanguine sacro.

¹⁴ 3C 5 (FAED II, 403). Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 274: Catervim tota civitas Assisii ruit, et omnis accelerat regio, novum illud sitientes videre spectaculum, quod noviter Deus posuerat in hoc mundo. Miraculi novitas planctum vertebat in iubilum, et

corporeum visum in stuporem et ecstasim rapiebat. Cernebant beatum corpus Christi stigmatibus decoratum, in manibus videlicet et pedibus non clavorum puncturas, sed ipsos clavos ex eius carne virtute divina mirifice fabrefactos, immo carni eidem innatos, qui dum a parte qualibet premerentur, protinus quasi nervi continui ad partem oppositam resultabant. Latus quoque videbant sanguine rubricatum.

and be raised to the same rank in the Kingdom! Who of sane mind would not attribute this to the glory of Christ? But let the punishments already inflicted on unbelievers repay the irreverent and make the reverent even more confident.”¹⁵

This description also echoes an event that occurred during the general chapter of Genoa (1251) in which the Minister General Giovanni da Parma ordered Brother Bonizo of Bologna, the jurist who helped Francis write the *Regula bullata* in 1223, to give witness to the truth of the stigmata: “Brother John of Parma, the minister general, in the full general chapter at Genoa, ordered Brother Bonitius, who had been a companion of St. Francis, to tell the brothers the truth about the stigmata of the saint, because many in the world were doubting this matter. And he replied with tears: ‘These sinful eyes have seen them; and these sinful hands touched them.’”¹⁶

From the witness of Brother Elias himself in his *Encyclical Letter on the Transitus of St. Francis* right down to Giovanni da Parma, the Minister General who commissioned Tommaso da Celano to compose the *Treatise on the Miracles*, the testimony of the brothers and of many others, including Popes and citizens of Assisi, is in agreement with the historical truth of the stigmata of St. Francis. Celano continues to make a list of miracles which he attributes to the miraculous power of the stigmata, and which we will not consider at

this point. But there still remains one important event that crowns the witness of those who knew and loved Francis and who beheld the stigmata and touched them, namely the witness of Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli, to which Celano attaches unique importance in the *Tractatus de miraculis*.

Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli as an eminent witness to the truth of the stigmata

Chapter 6 of the *Tractatus de miraculis* is dedicated to a unique episode that Celano inserts as one of the miracles that he attributes to the intercession of St. Francis. He refers to the episode of the visit of the noble Roman lady Jacoba dei Settesoli, who miraculously arrived at the Portiuncula some time before Francis died, and thus made his wish come true, namely that of seeing this great friend which he affectionately called *frate Jacoba*, brother Jacoba.¹⁷

Jacoba is presented by Celano as an eminent witness to the stigmata of St. Francis in the moving episode of her weeping over the dead body of the *Poverello* as if she were a new Mary Magdalene:

“All wet with tears, she was brought in private and alone, and the body of her friend was placed in her arms. ‘Here,’ said his vicar [Elias], ‘hold, even in death, the one you loved when alive!’ Her warm tears bathed his body, and with sobs and sighs

¹⁵ 3C 5 (FAED II, 403-404). Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 274-275: *Vidimus ista qui ista dicimus, manibus contrectavimus quod manibus exaramus, lacrimosis oculis delinivimus quod labiis confitemur, tactisque sacrosanctis, quod semel iuravimus, omni tempore protestamur. Plures nobiscum fratres, dum viveret sanctus, id aspexerunt, in morte vero ultra quam quinquaginta cum innumeris saecularibus venerati sunt. Nulli sit ambiguitati locus, nulli sempiternae huius largitio bonitatis dubia videatur! Atque utinam illo amore seraphico multa membra capiti cohaerent Christo, quo et in bello simili armatura invenirentur condigna, et in regno ad similem ordinem subvehenda! Quis hoc sanae mentis nisi ad Christi gloriam diceret pertinere? Sed iam poena inflicta incredulis satisfacit indevotis et ipsos devotos efficiat certiores.*

¹⁶ THOMAS OF ECCLESTON, *De adventu fratrum minorum in Angliam*, chapter 13, in 13th Century Chronicles. Jordan of Giano. Thomas of Eccleston. Salimbene degli Adami.

Translated from Latin by P. HERMANN, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1961, 161.

¹⁷ The episode is mentioned also in AC 8 (FAED II, 121-123), with the following footnote regarding Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli: “Jacoba dei Settesoli was of a noble Roman family of high rank, the descendant on her father’s side of the Norman knights who had conquered Sicily. Her husband, Graziano, was a member of one of Rome’s great families, the Frangipani. They were believed to be the descendants of Flavius Anicius, who in 717 A.D. saved the people of Rome from famine by giving them bread and so was given the name *Frangens panem*, (or Frangipani, “breaking bread”). The family also traced its descent from Aeneas, son of Anchises, the Trojan hero whose emigration to Italy is told in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The name Settesoli comes from the Septizonium, the imposing structure that the Frangipani acquired in 1145 from Camaldolese monks.”

she kept hugging and kissing him, and pulled back the veil to see him unveiled. What did she see? She gazed on that precious vessel that hid a precious treasure adorned with five pearls. She beheld those engravings that the hand of the Almighty alone had produced for the whole world to admire. Then she was refreshed with unusual joy over the death of her friend. Right then she counselled that such an unheard-of miracle should not be disguised or hidden any further. Rather, she wisely advised it should be displayed for all to see with their own eyes. All ran eagerly to see this sight. They were able to verify for themselves that God *had not done thus for any other nation* (Ps 147:20) and stood in awe.”¹⁸

This is the culmination of the first part of the *Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis*, in which Celano presents the undisputed proof of the historical truth of the stigmata on the body of Saint Francis, at a time when some were doubting regarding the validity of the eye-witnesses who had seen and touched the very marks of Christ’s Passion on the body of the *Poverello*.

The aim of Celano is that of recording an episode that serves his purpose very well, since it is a proof that the stigmata of St. Francis were an object of human experience by eye-witnesses who could vouch for their truthfulness. These witnesses included the brothers, particularly Brothers Leo, Rufino and Elias, who seem to be the ones who were closest to the Saint during his last years. However, Celano is also keen in proving that other persons, besides the brothers, had been witnesses to the stigmata. The *Vita beati Francisci* that he had written in 1228-1229,

made ample use of the acts of the process of canonisation of St. Francis. Although it does not insist so much on the miraculous aspect, since the sanctity of Francis was well known just after his death, the material that Celano obtained was reused later on when the companions began to die and it was more urgent to recall the event of the stigmata as a historically proven fact.

The *Tractatus de Miraculis* was composed precisely with this end in view. The call of Giovanni da Parma during the chapter of Genoa was that of producing the completion of an *opus* that had stretched on for more than 20 years. Celano was commissioned to bring to fruition this audacious plan. His aim was that of proving Francis’ sanctity by a list of miracles, but not in the sense that he intended the miracles to be a proof of sanctity in themselves. He was more interested in showing how the foundation of the Order, the approval of the Rule and the stigmata of St. Francis were the true miracles that God had worked through the intercession of his *Poverello* in order to provide a sign of the novelty of the Gospel calling.

Celano was at a very critical position. He was aware of the dangers that the Order was facing from many fronts, including the Secular Masters of the University of Paris, some elements of the Order of Preachers, and even brothers within the Order itself, who were trying to portray Francis in an eschatological light in order to present their opposition to the Church which had interpreted the charism of the *Poverello* not to their liking. Indeed, Celano might have felt pressed on all sides, and the *Tractatus de Miraculis* is his last effort to cling to the

¹⁸ 3C 39 (FAED II, 418-419). Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 287: Seorsum igitur illa, tota madida lacrimis, clanculo ducitur, et proiecto inter brachia amici corpore: “Haecine,” ait vicarius, “quem dilexisti vivum, teneas et defunctum!” Calidioribus illa super corpus lacrimis irrigata, flebiles voces et singultus ingeminat, et languidos iterans amplexus et oscula, solvit velamen ut videat revelatum. Quid plura? Contemplatur pretiosum illud vas, in quo et thesaurus latuerat pretiosus, quinque margaritis ornatum. Cernit illas quas sola Omnipotentis

manus toto orbe mirandas fecerat caelaturas, atque insuetis plena laetitiiis in amico mortuo reviviscit. Illico non dissimulandum consulit, nec aliquatenus obtegendum inauditum miraculum, sed provido nimis consilio cunctis oculo ad oculum demonstrandum. Certatim proinde omnes ad spectaculum currunt, quodque *non fecerat Deus taliter omni nationi* in veritate comperiunt, in stupore mirantur.

truth without creating dissension and division among the brothers.

Whether Celano succeeded in his endeavour is a question that will always remain open to discussion. Indeed, things were to take a turn towards new heights some years later, when in 1257 Giovanni da Parma was forced to resign and indicated Bonaventure of Bagnoregio as his successor. Celano was by then retired in Tagliacozzo, where he would die sometime after 1260.

The value of the *Tractatus de miraculis*, besides its political and historical nuances, consists precisely in having defended the true sanctity of Francis not in the fact that he was a wonder-worker in the style of Anthony of Padova, but rather in the Christ-like image that he projected to all those who followed his footsteps in the Order. The stigmata provided the most clear sign of such a kind of holiness, and Celano made good use of their genuine significance in proving the sanctity of Francis of Assisi.

Latin Abbreviations

Writings of St. Francis

CantAudPov	Canticle Audite Poverelle
CantSol	Canticum fratris Solis
LaudDei	Laudes Dei Altissimi
BenLeo	Benedictio fratri Leoni data
EpAnt	Epistola ad S. Antonium
EpClerI	Epistola ad Clericos
EpCust	Epistola ad Custodes
EpFid	Epistola ad Fideles
EpLeo	Epistola ad fratrem Leonem
EpMin	Epistola ad Ministrum
EpOrd	Epistola toti Ordini missa
EpRect	Epistola ad rectores
ExhLD	Exhortatio ad Laudem Dei
ExpPat	Expositio in Pater noster
FormViv	Forma vivendi S. Claræ
Fragm	Fragmenta alterius Regulæ
LaudHor	Laudes ad omnes horas
OffPass	Officium Passionis Domini
OrCruc	Oratio ante Crucifixum
RegB	Regula bullata
RegNB	Regula non bullata
RegEr	Regula pro eremotoriis
SalBVM	Salutatio Beatæ Mariæ Virg
SalVirt	Salutatio Virtutum
Test	Testamentum
UltVol	Ultima voluntas S. Claræ

Sources for the Life of St. Francis

FAED I	Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Saint
FAED II	Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Founder
FAED III	Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Prophet
1C	Celano, <i>Vita beati Francisci</i>
LCh	Celano, <i>Legenda ad usum chori</i>
VB	Celano, <i>Vita brevior S. Francisci</i>
2C	Celano, <i>Memoriale in desiderio animæ</i>
3C	Celano, <i>Tractatus miraculorum</i>
LJS	Julian of Speyer, <i>Vita S. Francisci</i>
OR	<i>Officium Rhythmicum</i>
AP	<i>Anonymus Perusinus (De Inceptione)</i>
L3C	<i>Legenda trium sociorum</i>
CA	<i>Compilatio Assisiensis</i>
LMj	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Maior</i>
LMn	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Minor</i>
SPMaj	<i>Speculum Perfectionis</i> (Sabatier)
SPMin	<i>Speculum Perfectionis</i> (Lemmens)
ABF	<i>Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius</i>
Fior	<i>Fioretti di San Francesco</i>



Cover page: La Verna: exterior of main church

