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Editorial

NEL CRUDO SASSO

Dante Alighieri describes Mount La Verna as the *crudo sasso intra Tevere e Arno*. The mountain is a harsh rock full of crevices and ravines, which reminded St. Francis of the rock of Calvary and especially of the stigmata of Jesus. It was for this reason that he loved the mountain and retreated to its lofty heights in the embracing shelter of its forests in order to find peace. No one has succeeded in expressing this great mystery of the life of St. Francis who on La Verna became an icon of the crucified Christ better than St. Bonaventure. The Seraphic Doctor had his own mystical experience on the holy mountain in 1259, just two years after being elected as minister general. During the 800 years which mark the event of La Verna no other person has been able to fathom Francis' closeness to Christ on the cross in the mystical vision of the Crucified Seraph. In the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* Bonaventure re-enacts this experience in mystical terms. In our celebration of this event a meditative reading of this mystical treatise will help us to enter into the spirit of the mystery of the cross in the life of St. Francis. A spiritual pilgrimage to Mount La Verna, the Franciscan Calvary, shows the friars daily singing the liturgical hymn that echoes the mystery in the *crudo sasso*: *Crucis Christi mons Alvernæ recenset mysteria ubi salutis aeternae dantur privilegia: dum Franciscus dat lucernae crucis sua studia* [Mount La Verna hides the mysteries of Christ crucified, where the mystery of eternal salvation shows the privilege of Francis who is enlightened by his intense love of the cross].

Noel Muscat OFM

SAINT BONAVENTURE ON LA VERNA AND THE STIGMATA OF SAINT FRANCIS

Noel Muscat OFM

The eighth centenary of the receiving of the stigmata of Christ Crucified by St. Francis of Assisi on Mount La Verna (1224-2024) coincides with the 750 years since the death of the Seraphic Doctor St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1274-2024). The two events were 50 years apart, but they are still intimately related to one another, for the simple reason that Bonaventure left us a legacy of mystical writings that concentrate on the mystery of the Cross in the life of St. Francis. In this paper we intend to concentrate on two of the writings of the Seraphic Doctor which speak explicitly on the stigmata of St. Francis, namely the mystical treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*.

St. Bonaventure spent some time on Mount La Verna just two years after being elected minister general of the Order on 2 February 1257. He was on La Verna during some weeks in the autumn of 1259. The result of this period of retreat was the production of the treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. La Verna still cherishes the presence of Franciscan saints and mystics. Close to the chapel of the stigmata pilgrims can visit two tiny chapels, one dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua and the other one to St. Bonaventure, thus marking the presence of these two important saints in this holy place. La Verna was also the place where Blessed Giovanni della Verna (1259-1322) lived for many years and where his remains are venerated to this very day. There is a

chapel in the woods above the hermitage commemorating his presence on the holy mountain. La Verna was also the place where the famous Franciscan Spiritual Ubertino da Casale wrote the *Arbor Vitæ Crucifixæ Iesu* in 1305.

Celebrating the 800 years since St. Francis received the stigmata on La Verna on a morning close to the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, 14 September 1224, we also commemorate the presence of St. Bonaventure on the holy mountain, as well as his profound meditations on the mystery of the Passion of Christ as they were made manifest in the body of the *Poverello*. We shall begin with a glance on the contents of the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* which refer to St. Francis and the stigmata, and then present the description of the event itself as it is presented by the Seraphic Doctor in the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*.

This paper is not meant to be a scientific analysis of the event of the stigmata and lacks the proper bibliographical indications that are abundantly necessary to uphold its contents. The aim is simply that of providing a simple presentation of the way in which Bonaventure describes the event of the stigmatisation of St. Francis both on a historical and a mystical-spiritual level.

The stigmata of St. Francis in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*

It is Bonaventure himself who presents the circumstances of his stay on Mount La

Verna in 1259: “Following the example of our most blessed father Francis, I was seeking this peace with panting spirit – I a sinner and utterly unworthy who after our blessed father’s death had become the seventh Minister General of the Friars. It happened that about the time of the thirty-third anniversary of the Saint’s death, under divine impulse, I withdrew to Mount La Verna, seeking a place of quiet and desiring to find there peace of spirit. While I was there reflecting on various ways by which the soul ascends into God, there came to mind, among other things, the miracle which had occurred to blessed Francis in this very place: the vision of the winged Seraph in the form of the Crucified.”¹

Bonaventure had inherited a rather difficult situation in the Order when he was elected minister general during the Chapter of Aracoeli in 1257. A proof of this is the fact that the first thing he did was to send a circular letter to the entire Order on 23 April of the same year, in which he denounced many abuses on the part of the friars.² Above all the Order was going through a period of turmoil, and had to face difficulties both from within and outside its ranks. From within the Order was facing the problem of some brothers who were adhering to the spiritualist and eschatological doctrine of Gioacchino da Fiore, and applying them to the life and message of St. Francis. Outside its ranks the Order was facing the opposition of the secular masters in the University of Paris, who had accused the Mendicants of being a danger to the Church and of advocating a kind of evangelical poverty which not even Christ and his apostles had embraced. Bonaventure himself had been in the fray when he was lecturing in Paris, and he

knew that he had to defend the Order from these false accusations.

It comes as no surprise that Bonaventure needed a period of reflection on La Verna in the autumn months of 1259. His experience is aptly described in the subtitle that he gives to the *Itinerarium: Incipit speculatio pauperis in deserto* – Here begins the reflection of the poor man in the desert. The mystical experience of Bonaventure is described as a *speculatio*, a kind of mirroring contemplation. He could not find a more fitting model for this than the person of St. Francis, the truly poor man who contemplated the glory of God in the reflection of His image in the form of the Crucified Seraph on La Verna.

On La Verna Bonaventure would have found a very rudimentary Franciscan hermitage. We know that the only solid building that Francis and the first brothers constructed, with the help of Count Orlando da Chiusi, was the small chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, which marks the nucleus of the Franciscan presence on the mountain. Some years before Bonaventure’s visit to the mountain, in 1250, Cardinal Rainaldo da Segni, who was Protector of the Order during the pontificate of Innocent IV, had enlarged the small chapel, which was consecrated in 1260 when Bonaventure was minister general, just some months after he had been on the holy mountain. When we look at the back of the original chapel, we see a beautiful terracotta basrelief by Andrea della Robbia, dated 1488. It represents the Virgin Mary surrounded by angels, who hands over her belt to St. Thomas, a reference to the apocryphal tradition of the *Dormitio Virginis*. The other saints who are depicted

¹ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Prologue 2, in *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis*, Translation and Introduction by E. COUSINS, Paulist Press, New York 1978, 54.

² BONAVENTURE, *First Encyclical Letter* (23 April 1257), in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*. Volume V: *Writings Concerning The Franciscan Order*, Introduction and Translation by D. MONTI, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1994, 57-62.

are St. Gregory the Great, St. Francis and St. Bonaventure.

It was in this chapel that Bonaventure would have spent long hours of prayer during his retreat, besides, of course, the other places associated with the stigmata of St. Francis, like the cleft in the rock known as *Sasso Spicco* and the place of the stigmata itself, where in 1263, again when he was minister general of the Order, Bonaventure ordered the building of the chapel that encloses this sacred space and marks the very spot of the apparition of the Crucified Seraph to St. Francis on the morning close to 14 September 1224, Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

This physical presentation of the shrine of La Verna as it would have looked like during the visit of St. Bonaventure, maybe with the addition of some rudimentary cells or a kind of small friary and hermitage, brings us to see how the Seraphic Doctor meditated the event of the stigmatisation in this holy place, and immortalised his meditations in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*.

Bonaventure describes the significance of the vision of the Crucified Seraph in the Prologue of the *Itinerarium*: “The six wings of the Seraph can rightly be taken to symbolise the six levels of illumination by which, as if by steps or stages, the soul can pass over to peace through ecstatic elevations of Christian wisdom. There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified [...] This love also so absorbed the soul of Francis that his spirit shone through his flesh when for two years before his death he carried in his body the sacred stigmata of the passion. The six wings of the Seraph, therefore, symbolise the six steps of illumination that begin from creatures and lead up to God, to whom no

one rightly enters except through the Crucified.”³

Besides describing the structure of the *Itinerarium*, which unfolds along six steps or stages leading up from creation to man and to God, Bonaventure is showing that, for him, the experience that Francis made on La Verna was a kind of transfiguration. Just as the divinity of Christ shone through his human body on Mount Tabor, the spirit of Francis, reflecting the glory of the Crucified Seraph, shone through his body which became marked with the signs of the Passion, just as the glorious body of Christ remained marked with the same signs of the wounds of the cross.

Bonaventure often speaks about this experience of reflecting the glory of Christ, the experience of transfiguration. What he personally went through on La Verna must have been such an experience, which he was seeking with passionate love in order to acquire inner peace in his mind and body. Francis himself had been on La Verna in 1224 with the same sentiments. His experience on the holy mountain was that of an impassioned search for peace in order to acquire inner spiritual comfort in the face of an Order that was gradually falling away from his paternal grasp in its quest for a kind of life that would give it the privilege of being an established religious family in the Church. Maybe Bonaventure was aware that times had changed, but he still felt that Francis’ inspiration could inflame his heart and the hearts of the brothers.

Being a great scholar himself Bonaventure understood that study alone could not give him inner peace. This is how he continues in the Prologue: “First, therefore, I invite the reader to the groans of prayer through Christ crucified, through whose blood we are cleansed from the filth of vice – so that

³ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Prologue 3, in *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God*, 54-55.

he not believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavour without divine grace, reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom.”⁴

On La Verna Bonaventure tries to forget for a moment that he was a great scholar in the most prestigious University of the time. He felt small and insignificant in the midst of the craggy rocks and the forests that cover the mountain. Above all, he felt small and insignificant in front of the great mystery which unfolded in that holy place, when the glory of the divinity appeared mingled as one with the humility and suffering of the human flesh of the Son of God, and stamped the same image on the frail body of the *Poverello* of Assisi, making of him truly a man of contemplation as much as he had been a man of apostolic action in his calling.

It is in chapter 7 of the *Itinerarium* that we find the apex of Bonaventure’s mystical experience on La Verna. After having described the six wings of the Seraph as six stages of ascent into ecstatic rapture in God, Bonaventure becomes, as he himself states, “the true man of peace [resting] in a peaceful mind as in the interior Jerusalem.”⁵

It is in this state of ecstatic peace that Bonaventure, like Francis, contemplates, with the help of divine illumination, the mystery of “the First and Supreme Principle, the mediator of God and men, Jesus Christ.”⁶ Bonaventure describes this experience as a *transitus*, a passing over,

from this world to the Father: “In this passing over, Christ is the way and the door; Christ is the ladder and the vehicle, like the Mercy Seat placed above the ark of God and the mystery hidden from eternity.”⁷ The experience of the stigmata becomes for Bonaventure a paschal experience. The Seraphic Doctor has the capability of looking deep into the mystical experience of St. Francis in a biblical perspective, comparing it to the paschal experience of the people of Israel who pass over from bondage to freedom in the passage of the Red Sea, and to the experience of Jesus Christ who passes over from this world to the Father in the mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection.

In the same chapter Bonaventure describes the full significance of the mystical experience of Francis upon his own person: “This was shown also to blessed Francis, when in ecstatic contemplation on the height of the mountain – where I thought out these things I have written – there appeared to him a six-winged Seraph fastened to a cross, as I and several others heard in that very place from his companion who was with him then. There he passed over into God in ecstatic contemplation and became an example of perfect contemplation as he had previously been of action, like another Jacob and Israel, so that through him, more by example than by word, God might invite all truly spiritual men to this kind of passing over and spiritual ecstasy.”⁸

It was Brother Illuminato who could give witness of the event of the stigmatisation of St. Francis to the minister general Bonaventure. This prompted the Seraphic

⁴ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Prologue 4, in *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God*, 55-56.

⁵ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, 7,1, in *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God*, 110.

⁶ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, 7,1, in *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God*, 111.

⁷ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, 7,1, in *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God*, 111.

⁸ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, 7,3, in *Bonaventure. The Soul’s Journey into God*, 112-113.

Doctor to write down not only a description of the mystical experience of Francis, but above all, a description of his own mystical experience on Mount La Verna. We can visually consider Bonaventure on La Verna passively going through a kind of mystical experience through meditation in that silence and desert, but also cherishing his reflections in such a way as to stamp them in his memory and intellect and express them so eloquently when he applied ink on parchment and composed the *Itinerarium*. When he was still in Paris in 1255, Bonaventure had preached on the feast of St. Francis, and had said: “This miracle was made necessary because of Saint Francis’ eminent holiness which found expression in his most fervent love of the Crucified Lord. For the sake of that love he so weakened his eyes by tears of compassion that he lost his sight [...] Love of the Crucified Lord was supremely and gloriously aflame in his heart, and so the Crucified himself, in the form of the Seraph, an angelic spirit buring with the fire of love, appeared before his saintly eyes and imprinted the sacred stigmata on his body.”⁹

It was this miracle that Bonaventure wanted to verify during his retreat on Mount La Verna in 1259, and which he wanted to proclaim to the entire brotherhood first in the *Itinerarium* and then in the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, his official rendering of the life of St. Francis.

The stigmata of St. Francis in the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*

Upon returning to his normal duties from the retreat on Mount La Verna, Bonaventure embarked upon a swift and efficient reorganisation of the Order. The year 1260 marked the moment in which a general chapter would be celebrated in

Narbonne. One of the principal aims of the chapter was that of drafting a new set of constitutions for the Order. Indeed, the Order already had a *corpus* of laws emanated by various general chapters, beginning from the year 1239. These included all aspects of Franciscan life and mission, and had been gradually developed from the time of Brother Elias of Cortona, on to Albert of Pisa, Haymo of Faversham, Crescenzo da Iesi and Giovanni Buralli da Parma. Each minister general had left his particular mark on the Order’s legislation. Thus Elias had reorganised the geographical setup of the Order, Haymo had been instrumental in drafting liturgical norms, Crescenzo encouraged the Order to ask for the second papal interpretation of the Rule during the time of Innocent IV who emanated the *Ordinem vestrum* in 1245. He had also instructed the companions of St. Francis who were still alive to hand him over their documented *memoirs* of their experience with Francis. In 1246 the three companions of Greccio, Leo, Rufino and Angelo, had consigned a *florilegium* of records in which they documented not only their own experiences but also those of many other brothers. Giovanni da Parma had encouraged legislation regarding studies in the Order. In the same period of time the Order was also closely looking at the experience of the Order of Preachers in matters of studies, liturgy and other fields of pastoral activity, and had also tried, rather unsuccessfully, to imitate the more decentralised form of government that the Preachers had adopted in their chapters of diffinitors. By 1260 Bonaventure was aware that he needed to create a more organised legislative *corpus* for the Order, and he did so during the Chapter of Narbonne.

⁹ BONAVENTURE, *The Morning Sermon on Saint Francis*, 1255 (FAED II, 515).

Another point that needed attention was the hagiographic literature regarding the life of St. Francis. Bonaventure was aware of the various sources that had been written by that time, and also realised that they had portrayed an image of Francis that could be, in a way, manipulated by elements in the Order who wanted to impose their own vision of Francis and his message. By 1260 the Order had produced a rather complicated *corpus* of *legendæ* and *compilationes*, some of which were the result of official initiatives on the part of the Popes or ministers general, others the result of individual friars who were, in a certain way, linked with the companions of St. Francis.

In 1229 Tommaso da Celano had produced the *Vita beati Francisci* upon orders from Pope Gregory IX, who wanted an official biography of the saint after having canonised him in 1228. Celano would spend the rest of his life composing other biographies, including the *Vita sancti Patris nostri Francisci*, or *Vita brevior*, and the *Legenda ad usum chori*, both composed during the time of Brother Elias (1232-1239). In the meantime, in the University of Paris, Julian of Speyer produced the *Officium Rhythmicum Sancti Francisci* and the *Vita sancti Francisci* (1232-1235). The poet Henri d'Avranches had written a *Legenda versificata sancti Francisci* during the same period. Maybe also during the same years we can date the allegory *Sacrum commercium sancti Francisci cum Domina Paupertate*, most probably written by an anonymous brother who was quite close to the companions of the Saint.

In 1241 Brother Giovanni da Perugia composed the *De inceptione vel fundamentum Ordinis*, or as it is popularly known, the *Anonymus Perusinus*, in which we find the testimony of Brother Giles of Assisi and many episodes from the simple beginnings of the Order in Assisi. The general chapter of Genoa in 1246 ordered

the brothers who knew Francis personally and who were still alive to send their memories to Brother Crescenzo da Iesi, the minister general. The result of this endeavour was the famous *florilegium* of Greccio, with the accompanying letter of Brothers Leo, Angelo and Rufino of 11 August 1246. This material was used extensively by Tommaso da Celano in the *Memoriale in desiderio animæ* (1247), by the *Compilatio Assisiensis*, the work of a group of brothers who compiled these memories later on, but always based upon the *florilegium*, the *Legenda trium sociorum*, which would integrate the ancient biography by Celano with the new material of the companions, and the ever-growing need to have an account of miracles attributed to the intercession of Francis, resulting in Celano's *Tractatus de miraculis* (1253).

This whole mixture of sources had led to a confusion as to the genuine intentions of Francis, since they had been contaminated with the historical development of the Order and the various interpretations given to the *intentio Francisci* by brothers coming from both sides of the spectrum, namely from the *Communitas Ordinis* and from the Zealots, who later on would be known as Spirituals. Bonaventure was aware of this problem and resolved to set things right in his own way, namely, by producing a new official biography of St. Francis from the ones already in circulation. This resulted in the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, with its summary for liturgical use, the *Legenda minor Sancti Francisci*, presented to the general chapter of Pisa in 1263, and officially declared as the only biography that could be read by the brothers in the chapter of Paris of 1266, to the detriment of all the other *legendæ* and *compilationes*, which had to be obliterated (*deleantur*).

What was the reason for such a drastic move on Bonaventure's part, which would hardly be judged as correct by

contemporary scientific standards, if not even a criminal act of destruction of relevant historical documentation? Bonaventure was acting as minister general. He was striving to keep the Order as one united family of brothers, knowing that his would be a herculean task which would also need the power of legal enforcement. Bonaventure needed to present Francis in such a way that all the brothers in the Order could mirror themselves in his image, and feel that they belonged to his holy intention and were living according to his ideals. The discussion as to whether Bonaventure succeeded in this endeavour will be endless and maybe will never arrive at a satisfactory solution. On our part we do not believe that Bonaventure thwarted the historical figure of St. Francis to suit his own policies for the Order. One still has to believe that the intention of the Seraphic Doctor was genuine, namely that of trying to convince the brothers that the tensions they were experiencing regarding the charism and figure of their founder were, in many instances, the fruit of their own making and did not reflect the original image of Francis or his message.

For these reasons the *Legenda Maior* is not merely a historical biography, but a work of spirituality and even a mystical treatise on the holiness of the *Poverello*. In no other part of the *Legenda* is this more evident than in chapters 13 and 14, which speak about the stigmatisation and *transitus* of St. Francis.

Before seeing the actual episode of the stigmatisation, it is important to refer to the prologue of the *Legenda Maior*, since Bonaventure here places Francis in an eschatological light, namely as a prophet aflame with Seraphic fire just like Elijah and John the Baptist, and having an angelic

ministry similar to the one described in Apocalypse 7:

“First endowed with the gifts of divine grace, he was then enriched by the merit of unshakable virtue; and *filled with the spirit* (Lk 1:67) of prophecy, he was also assigned an angelic ministry and was totally aflame with a Seraphic fire. Like a hierarchic man, lifted up on *a fiery chariot* (2Kgs 2:11), it may be reasonably accepted as true that he came *in the spirit and power of Elijah* (Lk 1:17), as will appear quite clearly in the course of his life. And so in the true prophecy of that other *friend of the Bridegroom* (Jn 3:29), John the Apostle and Evangelist, he is considered not without reason to be like the angel ascending from the rising of the sun bearing the seal of the living God. For *at the opening of the sixth seal* (Rv 6:12), John says in the Apocalypse, *I saw another Angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God* (Rv 7:2).”¹⁰

Bonaventure seems to be condescending to the spiritual and apocalyptic vision of the role of Francis which was popular among certain brothers, but he tries to disassociate himself from any spiritualist connotations that bear the seal of Joachimism. For Bonaventure Francis is a model for all truly spiritual men who do penance, namely who are humble and obedient. It was precisely this attitude of submission and humility that gave Francis the privilege of being marked by the stigmata of Christ:

“This conviction should be faithfully and devotedly in the forefront of our minds; not only does this advance the mission he held *of calling to weep and mourn, to shave one’s head and wear sackcloth, and to sign the Tau on the foreheads of those mourning and grieving* (Ez 9:4) with a sign of a penitential cross, and of a habit conformed to the cross; even more, it confirms the

¹⁰ BONAVENTURE, LMj, Prologue (FAED II, 526-527).

irrefutable testimony of truth that *the seal of the likeness* (Ez 28:12) of the living God, that is of Christ crucified, was imprinted on his body not by natural forces of human skill, but by the wondrous power of *the Spirit of the living God* (2Cor 3:3).¹¹

Bonaventure tries to address the brothers in such a way that they would be struck by the very first lines of the *Legenda Maior*. Indeed, one can say that the prologue is a splendid work of spiritual literature, and is a lace-work of scriptural references that would make it easy to see Francis as an apocalyptic prophet without necessarily falling in the trap of isolating him from the institutional ecclesiastical framework in which he lived his penitential calling to follow Jesus Christ poor and crucified. If the rest of the *Legenda Maior* is certainly a collage of texts and episodes already documented by the preceding biographers, nevertheless Bonaventure gives us here an original presentation of the figure of Francis which is not found in any other source, and then goes on to arrange his documentary material in such a way as to present the life of the *Poverello* as a journey towards the meeting with the Crucified Seraph on Mount La Verna.

Chapter 13 of the *Legenda Maior* is entirely dedicated to the episode of the stigmatisation. We shall simply make some annotations regarding the way in which Bonaventure proceeds to describe this event. He starts off by presenting Francis as a *vir angelicus*, an angelic man,¹² who was able to ascend to God in the heights of mystical contemplation in solitary places, without forgetting to descend to humanity in his apostolic mission.

La Verna is described as a *high place apart*,¹³ namely as a mountain of Transfiguration. Bonaventure refers to

what the evangelists describe: *in montem excelsum seorsum*, in the event of the Jesus who takes up Peter, John and James to Mount Tabor.

Bonaventure does not dwell on the various episodes that occurred on La Verna in that period of forty days from the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to that of St. Michael the Archangel of 1224. A splendid description of the various events is given in a document which comes much later, namely the *Considerations on the Holy Sacred Stigmata*, which are a kind of appendix to the *Fioretti of St. Francis*, and were composed a hundred years after the *Legenda Maior*. One of the events they narrate and which Bonaventure inserts in his description, is the triple opening of the book of the Gospel on La Verna, in which Francis always reads an episode of the Passion of Jesus. Bonaventure reflects upon this episode in a splendid description which is originally his:

“And although his body was already weakened by the great austerity of his past life and his continual carrying of the Lord’s cross, he was in no way terrified, but was inspired even more vigorously to endure martyrdom. The unconquerable enkindling of love in him for the good Jesus had grown into *lamps and flames of fire*, that *many waters could not quench so powerful a love* (Sg 8:6-7). With the seraphic ardour of desires, therefore, he was being borne aloft into God; and by compassionate sweetness he was being transformed into Him Who chose to be crucified out of *the excess of His love* (Eph 2:4).¹⁴

Bonaventure presents this episode as a preparation for the experience of martyrdom. Indeed, he had already spoken about this theme in the *Legend Maior*, particularly when he mentioned Francis

¹¹ BONAVENTURE, LMj, Prologue (FAED II, 527-528).

¹² BONAVENTURE, LMj, 13,1 (FAED II, 630).

¹³ BONAVENTURE, LMj, 13,1 (FAED II, 630).

¹⁴ BONAVENTURE, LMj, 13,2-3 (FAED II, 631-632).

who went to preach in front of the Sultan of Egypt in order to be able to die as a martyr. Here, however, it seems that the ideal of martyrdom is not presented as a striving to attain a martyr's crown, but rather as a direct and physical participation in Christ's own suffering. The Word of the Gospel which Francis consulted was a kind of spiritual preparation to make him ready to enter into a loving union with Jesus Christ crucified. One notes that Bonaventure describes this mystical union with the words of the Song of Songs, and therefore considers it as a kind of mystical espousal with the beloved. Francis was moved to *compassio* by his *excessus mentis*, the excess of mystical contemplation that would make of him a *vir desideriorum*, a man of desires, as Bonaventure describes him in the *Itinerarium*.

This kind of introduction to the historical account of the stigmatisation which we will now consider is very important. We have already noticed that it is an original composition of the Seraphic Doctor, and it is a genuine picture of his mystical theology. Many of the expressions used by Bonaventure are found in all the mystical works of the Seraphic Doctor, particularly in the *Itinerarium*.

Having prepared his readers by this meditation Bonaventure then proceeds to describe the actual episode of the stigmatisation "on a certain morning about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross."¹⁵ The description itself is highly dependent upon the *Vita beati Francisci* of Tommaso da Celano. This comes as no wonder to us, since Bonaventure was writing 36 years after the event itself, and he could only rely on the description of the first-hand witnesses of the episode, as documented by such an eminent hagiographer as Celano. Bonaventur follows closely the details that Celano had underlined. These include the

morning on which the vision took place, namely a morning close to the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. Francis was praying on the mountainside when he saw from heaven a fiery Seraph descending quickly and appearing with six wings and also with the image of a crucified man with his hands fastened to a cross. At this sight Francis felt a mixture of joy and sorrow, joy at the tender gaze of the Crucified Seraph, and compassionate sorrow when he saw him fastened to a cross.

It is at this stage that Bonaventure adds his own meditation on the event: "He marvelled exceedingly at the sight of so unfathomable a vision, knowing that the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the seraphic spirit. Eventually he understood from this, through the Lord revealing it, that Divine Providence had shown him a vision of this sort so that the friend of Christ might learn in advance that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the enkindling of his soul. As the vision was disappearing, it left in his heart a marvellous fire and imprinted in his flesh a likenss of signs no less marvellous."¹⁶

Bonaventure then describes the stigmata. His description relies essentially on that of Celano, given that Bonaventure had no way of verifying personally this phenomenon if not by making recourse to the descriptions given by other hagiographers, and also by interviewing some companions of the saint. In fact, further down, Bonaventure mentions Brother Illuminato, who was with Francis on La Verna. What is of importance regarding the description of the stigmata is that they are described as the signs or seals of Christ on the living body of St. Francis, in such a way that Francis became a living icon of Christ Crucified. Celano was the one who had handed down this unique

¹⁵ BONAVENTURE, LMj, 13,3 (FAED II, 632).

¹⁶ BONAVENTURE, LMj, 13,3 (FAED II, 632-633).

description of the phenomenon, probably basing his documentation on the testimony of Brother Elias, who was also a prime witness of the stigmatisation, particularly during his contacts with Francis in the last two years of life.¹⁷

Bonaventure concludes the part dedicated to the episode of the stigmatisation with another personal meditation on the true significance of the phenomenon in making Francis become more conformed to Christ Crucified. This description which follows would provide the basis for ulterior developments on the theme of conformity of Francis to Christ, particularly during the second half of the 14th century, in cases like the *Actus-Fioretti*, and Bartholomew of Pisa's *Book of Conformities*. The following is Bonaventure's reflection:

"After true love of Christ *transformed* the lover into His image (2Cor 3:18), when the forty days were over that he spent in solitude as he had desired, and the feast of St. Michael the Archangel had also arrived, the angelic man Francis *came down from the mountain* (Ex 19:1), bearing with him the likeness of the Crucified, depicted not on *tablets of stone* (Dt 4:13) or on panels of wood carved by hand, but engraved on parts of his flesh *by the finger of the living God* (Dt 9:10; Jn 11:27). And because *it is good to keep hidden the sacrament of the King* (Tb 12:7), the man aware of the royal secret would then hide from men those sacred signs. Since it is for God to reveal what He does for his own great glory, the Lord himself, who had secretly imprinted those marks, openly revealed some miracles

through them so that the hidden and marvellous power of the stigmata would display a brilliance of signs."¹⁸

At this point Bonaventure speaks at length on the miraculous power of the stigmata. For us it is important to dwell on the theme of the secrecy with which Francis wanted to keep these signs hidden from the prying eyes. This particular element was instrumental in rendering it very difficult for the brothers of later generations to defend the truthfulness of the stigmatisation of Francis in the face of the detractors who would challenge it.¹⁹

Bonaventure shows how it was only when Francis died that God willed that the stigmata would become visible to all, in order to prove the likeness of Christ shining in the body of the *Poverello* of Assisi. Even at the solemn moment of the *transitus*, Bonaventure repeats what Celano had stated, namely that Francis, "lying like this [naked] on the ground stripped of his sack-cloth garment, lifted up his face to heaven in his accustomed way, and wholly intent upon that glory, he covered with his left hand the wound in his right side, so that no one would see it."²⁰

It was only after his death, that Francis' stigmata were visible in such a way as to become a witness of his Christ-like holiness. This is the way in which Bonaventure describes the dead body of Francis as an icon of Christ crucified:

"For after the blessed man left the world, that sacred spirit, entering a home of eternity, and made glorious by a full draught from the fountain of life, left

¹⁷ F. ACCROCCA, «*Sacramentum magnum et praeogativae dilectionis*». *Le stimmate nelle testimonianze più antiche*, in *Frate Francesco* 90 (Aprile 2024) n. 1, 55: Tommaso, presentando le stimmate come escrescenze carnose in forma di chiodi, e insistendo su tale descrizione, scelse la via più difficile, perché parlare di fori, sulla scorta del testo evangelico, sarebbe stato per lui più semplice: se insistette con forza su tale aspetto fu – io credo – in obbedienza alle testimonianze ricevute,

dimostrazione evidente della sua onestà intellettuale. Nel corso degli anni Trenta del Duecento, il suo racconto diverrà il punto di riferimento anche per altri agiografi, che in varia misura ne dipesero.

¹⁸ BONAVENTURE, LMj, 13,5 (FAED II, 634).

¹⁹ A. VAUCHEZ, *The Stigmata of St. Francis and Its Medieval Detractors*, in *Greyfriars Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1999), 61-89

²⁰ BONAVENTURE, LMj, 14,3 (FAED II, 642).

certain signs of future glory imprinted on his body, so that, his most holy flesh, which, *crucified along with its vices* (Gal 5:24) *had already passed into a new creature* (2Cor 5:17), bore the likeness of Christ's passion by a singular privilege and would offer by the newness of a miracle a glimpse of the resurrection.

In his blessed hands and feet could be seen the nails that had been marvellously fashioned by divine power out of his flesh, and thus embedded in the flesh. From whatever point they were pressed, simultaneously, as if by a continuous and tough tendon, they pulsed at the opposite end. Also the wound in his side could be clearly seen, which was not inflicted on his body nor produced by human means; it was like the wound in the Saviour's side, which brought forth in our Redeemer the mystery of the redemption and regeneration of the human race. The nails were as black as iron; the wound in his side was red, and because it was drawn into a kind of circle by the contraction of the flesh looked like a most beautiful rose. The rest of his skin, which before was inclined to be black both naturally and from his illness, now shone white in its beauty, prefiguring the beauty of that glorious second stole."²¹

The concluding description of the stigmata of St. Francis is a picture of the glorious body of Jesus who appears to the apostles on Easter Sunday evening with the wounds of the passion still visible on His body. The *Legenda Maior* therefore presents the stigmata of St. Francis in much the same light as the *Itinerarium*, namely as a mystical experience of union with Christ.

Concluding remarks

For Bonaventure the height of mystical contemplation consists in the vision of

Christ Crucified, who expresses the unfathomable mystery of God's condescending love. Whenever the Seraphic Doctor speaks about St. Francis, he sees him in the light of this mystical contemplation, particularly in the light of the contemplation of Christ's passion and cross. The episode of the stigmatisation is the most eloquent example of this approach to the person of Francis. We have seen that Bonaventure documents the historical account of the stigmatisation on La Verna, basing himself on the earlier sources, but that he is original in his interpretation of this event. His originality is best seen in the meditations that he produces particularly in his mystical writings. Among these the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* is the most famous, since it is the direct result of the experience that Bonaventure made on Mount La Verna in the autumn months of 1259. During his retreat Bonaventure tried to fathom the depth of significance of Francis' vision of the Crucified Seraph. He continued to do so also when he wrote the *Legenda Maior*.

The mystery of the cross in the life of Francis never abandoned Bonaventure's centre of attraction and meditation. To the very end he continued to dwell upon the hidden centre of Francis' holiness. Here we would like to conclude our reflections by quoting some texts from the last theological treatise that Bonaventure composed, namely the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, which he commented in Paris in 1273.

In the eighth conference, or second vision, entitled "Understanding (*intelligentiae*) elevated by Faith", in the part which contemplates the Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, Bonaventure speaks about the profound mystery of God's humility in the Incarnation and Redemption:

²¹ BONAVENTURE, LMj, 15,1-2 (FAED II, 645-646).

“The height of faith consists in knowledge (*cognitiones*) of the eternal God, its depth in knowledge (*cognitiones*) of God made human (*humanati*). Of the first it is written: *God is higher than heaven, and what will you do?* (Job 11:8). Of the second it adds: *God is deeper than the nether world, and how will you know (cognosces)?* (Job 11:8). The profundity of God made human (*humanati*), namely humility, is so great that reason fails (*ratio deficit*).”²²

I imagine that these words echoed in the mind and heart of Bonaventure when he was alone on La Verna contemplating the mystery of the stigmatisation of St. Francis. The stigmata, in fact, are the manifestation of God’s profound humility. They show a *Deus humanatus*, a God-made-man, a human God, who descends from the heights of His glory in heaven, hiding the depths of his suffering humanity fastened to a cross by the six wings of the glorious Seraph. In the face of this vision Francis could only plunge in the abyss of God’s love by entering the darkness of unknowing, where human reason just becomes silent. In the vision of the Crucified Seraph, *ratio deficit*, there is no place for human understanding or reasoning. There is only place for the fire of love that consumes from within, and that makes Francis plunge into the depths of his own nothingness in order to discover in those depths the sublime majesty of the glory of God.

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THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF SAN RUFINO IN ASSISI IN THE LIFE OF SAINT FRANCIS

Noel Muscat OFM

One of the typical landmarks of Assisi is the Romanesque bell tower of the Cathedral Church of San Rufino, standing in the upper part of the town underneath the imposing structure of the Rocca that dominates from above. The panorama of Assisi from the Valle Spoleтана shows the two extremes of the town, on the left hand side the Basilica of St. Francis and the Sacro Convento, and on the right side the Basilica of St. Clare and the Protomonastero. San Rufino stands above them, closer to Santa Chiara. It is as if to remind pilgrims that Assisi is not only the town of Saints Francis and Clare, but that before them it had venerated for many centuries its patron saint, the Bishop and Martyr St. Rufino. It was in that Cathedral Church that Francis and Clare had been baptised. It is, therefore, important, to consider this church as one of the places that speak about Assisi during the time of Francis and Clare. We are lucky to have the documentation on its history, gathered by the famous Assisi historian Arnaldo Fortini,²³ as well as the fairly recent excavations of the crypt of the Cathedral that have yielded precious information upon its history and significance to Assisi.

A short history of the Cathedral of San Rufino

The building of the Cathedral of San Rufino was made upon a section of the town of

Assisi, which in Roman times was a kind of platform overlooking the Roman forum and the Temple of Minerva in what is now Piazza del Comune. The Cathedral itself was built some distance below the Roman amphitheatre which stands near Porta Perlici.

The most ancient reference to a church in this part of the town of Assisi goes back to 412, when, according to a tradition, a small basilica was built here in order to enshrine the relics of San Rufino, Bishop and Martyr. According to an ancient legend, which was also documented by Saint Peter Damiani, Rufino was the first bishop of Assisi and he was martyred in the year 238 by being drowned in the River Chiascio, close to Costano near Insula Romana (Bastia Umbra), after suffering cruel torments.

Arnaldo Fortini describes in detail the story of the translation of the relics of Bishop Rufino from an ancient Roman sarcophagus on the banks of the Chiascio to the ancient basilica. The sarcophagus itself was left abandoned close to the river, until Bishop Ugone and the citizens of Assisi decided to transport it inside the town, since it had held the precious relics of Bishop Rufino. The initiative of Bishop Ugone was hindered by an internal feud in the Assisi populace, since the Bishop was trying to take the sarcophagus to the ancient Cathedral Church of Santa Maria Maggiore,

²³ A. FORTINI, *Francis of Assisi. A Translation of Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Trans. H. MOAK, Crossroad, New York 1981, 28-37; 45-53. For a detailed description of the Cathedral Church of San

Rufino built by Bishop Ugone (1036-1052) see A. FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*. Volume III: *Assisi al tempo di San Francesco*, Assisi 1959, 34-43.

near Porta Moiano, whereas the Assisi population and the canons of San Rufino wanted the sarcophagus to be placed in the Romanesque church of San Rufino which was being rebuilt from 1029 onwards, and which had been given the title of Cathedral in 1036. At the end it was the Assisi townsfolk who took the upper hand, with the support of the powerful canons of San Rufino. The sarcophagus was placed in the Romanesque church, where it has remained ever since, and is nowadays exhibited in the ancient crypt.

In 1134 the chapter of canons under the direction of prior Rainerio, decided to demolish the Ugonian Cathedral and build a new church. The position of the new Cathedral was changed to the actual one, namely, it was built further away to the back in such a way that the square in front of the Cathedral was enlarged and the apse of the Romanesque Cathedral of Bishop Ugone found itself some metres behind the entrance of the new Cathedral. The remains of the apse are still visible today under the floor when one enters the Cathedral. The architect of the new church was Giovanni da Gubbio and work started in 1140. Work on the new Cathedral proceeded very slowly and we know that when Francis and Clare were baptised the new church had not yet been finished. In fact, from a document conserved in the Archives of the Comune of Assisi, we know that in 1210 an agreement between the *Maiores* and *Minores* of Assisi stipulated that work should continue and be brought to a completion (*opus nove ecclesie Sancti Rufini vadat in antea*). In 1212 the presbytery was ready and the remains of San Rufino were placed under the altar. The Cathedral Church of San Rufino was consecrated by Pope Innocent IV in 1253. This means that this was the year in which the church was completely built and ready to be consecrated. Unfortunately the Cathedral, in a Romanesque Umbrian style, of which remain the vestiges in the splendid façade and in the magnificent bell tower, which belongs to the older Ugonian basilica, and which has its foundations in an ancient Roman cistern, was

restructured by Galeazzo Alessi (1571-1585) in a late Renaissance style as it looks today, maybe because of static difficulties of the ancient building.²⁴

We shall now proceed to illustrate the remains of the Ugonian basilica which have been unearthed in the crypt of the Cathedral after the restorations that were made in fairly recent times, and which are now open to visitors.

The Sarcophagus of Saint Rufino

The Roman sarcophagus where the body of Saint Rufino was placed after his martyrdom in the year 238 stands in the centre of the crypt. The front part of the rectangular marble sarcophagus has the sculptures depicting the Greek myth of the love between Selene (the Moon) and Endymion. Selene stands on a chariot, whose horses are drawn by the nymph Aura. The goddess faces her beloved Endymion, who is lying down sleeping on the ground, with the winged god Hypnos who is showering poppy seeds on his head, in order to drug him to sleep. Among the figures who assist the scene there is Tellus with his cornucopia (goddess of earth and fecundity), pastoral persons and nymphs. High up on the right Selene is represented as going up to heaven on a wagon drawn by oxen. On the sides of the sarcophagus are the basrelief representations of Selene on one side and Endymion on the other. On the back of the sarcophagus there is a fragment of a fresco depicting Saint Rufino lying in death, the work of Maestro Raffaello in 1556.

The Roman cistern

From an opening in the crypt one sees the narrow corridor leading to the Roman cistern which served as the base for the Romanesque bell tower of the cathedral church of San Rufino. Originally the cistern must have served for the needs of the local community of the upper part of Assisi. The form of the cistern is square, measuring 7.55 metres by 5.04 metres by 7.47 metres of height, with a

²⁴ For a detailed description of the Cathedral of San Rufino, cfr. P.M. DELLA PORTA, E. GENOVESI, E.

LUNGHI, *Guida di Assisi. Storia e Arte*, Editrice Minerva, Assisi 2004⁵, 125-138.

barrel vault. The stones used were travertine marbles, and they were coated with waterproof materials made of pieces of earthenware. The water used to enter the cistern from an arched vertical opening behind which there is a well. The bell tower itself is an imposing structure, and luckily it is still standing. It was built with multiple purposes. The lower part is still the original structure of the Ugonian Basilica and it used to flank the apse of the church, while now it stands aligned to the façade of the Cathedral. The tower served not only to keep the bells in the upper chamber, but was also a defensive tower in case of siege. The fact that it was built on top of a cistern was a guarantee of a plentiful water supply in case of war.

The cloister

The 11th – 12th century cloister of the ancient rectory of the Basilica Ugoniana has double arches supported by crutch capitals around the Roman well, known as “Pozzo della Mensa” (2 century) and round side arches. The side arches were built in a later period, while part of the original double ones was found in 2006 during excavations.

Sculptured capitals

When the restructuring of the ancient Ugonian Cathedral of San Rufino (1029) was undertaken in 1571 under the direction of Galeazzo Alessi, many of the sculptured capitals of the 8th to 12th centuries were taken down to the crypt and buried there. In 1895 the canon of the Cathedral Giuseppe Elisei took the initiative to re-open the crypt and clean it from the debris, and these capitals were found, together with some columns. Many of these columns belong to the Romanesque interior of San Rufino (1140). Two of these capitals were re-utilised as fountains for holy water in the Cathedral.

The Capitular Archives

The Capitular Archives conserve documents relating to the college of canons of San Rufino. In 1727 Pope Benedict XIII, in the apostolic constitution *Maxima vigilantia*,

ordered the reorganisation and care of the archives of cathedrals and conventual churches. The San Rufino archives hold very ancient and precious documents, the oldest of which is a parchment going back to the year 963. The Capitular Archives also contain many other documents related to ancient confraternities of Assisi, and to the meetings of the cathedral chapter, property deeds, letters, etc.

The Polyptych of San Rufino (1462)

The Polyptych of San Rufino is the work of Niccolò di Liberatore detto l'Alunno (Foligno 1454-1502). It used to stand above the main altar of the medieval Cathedral of San Rufino and has the following inscription on the base of the throne of the Madonna: *Opus Nicolai de Fulgineo MCCCCLXIII*, and on the central bay of the predella: *Reparatum / cura Capituli Cathedralis / Anno MDCCCCLXXIV*.

In the centre of the Polyptych stands a *Madonna in trono con Gesù Bambino e angeli*. On the left there is a *Santo diacono e San Rufino*; on the right *San Giovanni Evangelista ed un altro santo diacono*. On the central cuspide *Dio Padre benedicente con angeli e San Michele arcangelo*; on the cuspide on the left *San Gabriele arcangelo annunciante e angeli*; on the cuspide on the right *Madonna annunciata e angeli*.

In the predella are represented three moments of the passion of San Rufino: *San Rufino thrown by the consul Aspasius in a burning furnace, but is miraculously freed from the flames*; *The Finding of the body of San Rufino on the banks of the river Chiascio*; *The Translation of the body of San Rufino in Assisi*.

Some scholars recognise in the two deacons the saints of the church of Assisi Esuperantius and Marcello, who were martyred together with bishop Rufino in the waters of the river Chiascio, after many torments.

A detail of the same predella presents one of the most ancient panoramas of the city. This renders the study of the ancient topography of Assisi very interesting. The image is taken from the west, from the plain of Santa Maria degli Angeli. The entire city is seen enclosed

within the walls. The Sacro Convento dominates on the rest of the buildings and shows the structure as it was before the interventions of Pope Sixtus IV. Clearly visible are the Rocca, the Cathedral and the Basilica of Santa Chiara, whose bell tower is represented with its original cusp.

The frescoes of San Rufinuccio (after 1348)

The *Flagellation*, *Crucifixion* and *Deposition* were painted after 1348 by Puccio Capanna, a painter who was active in Assisi and Firenze during the first half of the 14th century, and recognised as the greatest and certainly the most modern disciple of Giotto. The *Deposition* was designed by Capanna, but was painted by his collaborator Cecce di Saraceno. The three stories of the Passion used to adorn the upper half of the wall at the end of the *Oratorio di San Rufinuccio*.

The *Prayer in Garden*, which was originally placed close to the door of the sacristy, is the work of Pace di Bartolo, as is the *Madonna col Bambino, angeli e donatori*, which used to stand immediately above the altar table. The paintings constituted the ideal background of the Sacred Representations in the Oratory of the Confraternity of the Disciplinati of San Rufinuccio.

These frescoes were transported in 1955 from the walls of the oratory of the confraternity, where today one can simply see the preparatory designs of the same frescoes.

A note on Saint Francis' presence in San Rufino in the Franciscan Sources

The Cathedral Church of San Rufino is often mentioned in the life of St. Francis. In the mediaeval setting the cathedral was the *domus populi*, the house of the people. It signified divine protection upon the city, since it enshrined the relics of the patron saint. It was a sign of prestige and independence, besides being also a symbol of

ecclesiastical power, often in conflict with the resurgent aspirations for independence of the Italian communes. The cathedral was the place where important decisions were taken, where events that characterised local history were celebrated, where divine protection was sought during times of plague, war and famine. That is why, in the lives of Francis and Clare of Assisi, we find that the Cathedral Church of San Rufino played an important part.

Besides the episodes of the baptism of Francis and Clare, which are not recorded in the Sources, but which were certainly celebrated in San Rufino,²⁵ we find the first reference to the Cathedral in the calling of one of the first brothers. There is a reference to Peter Cattani, who Celano calls "a man [who was] highly respected in his way of life."²⁶ According to an unfounded tradition Peter was a canon of San Rufino. What we know is that it was brother Sylvester who was the first priest to join the Order and that he was canon in San Rufino. We read in the *Anonymous of Perugia*: "While they were doing this, and blessed Francis was present, a priest named Sylvester came. Blessed Francis had purchased stones from him for the repair of the church of San Damiano where he had lived before he acquired brothers."²⁷ Sylvester asked Francis to pay him handsomely for the stones, since he saw that Francis was distributing money lavishly to the poor. But then Sylvester had a moment of conversion and realised how money-minded he was, and that was the moment when he decided to renounce all and follow Francis.

The fact that Sylvester was a canon of San Rufino might also have helped Francis to approach the college of canons in order to request a small chapel where the brothers could meet in order to pray. We find the reference in the *Assisi Compilation*, in the section that deals with the acquisition of the Porziuncola chapel from the monks of the Abbey of San Benedetto al Subasio:

²⁵ Although some point out to the fact that the baptismal font in which Francis and Clare were baptised was originally in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, the old cathedral, and that when they were baptised San Rufino was still under construction, Arnaldo Fortini states that the

baptismal font would have stood on the right hand side of the main altar of the Ugonian basilica, and therefore was already in place before the birth of Francis and Clare.

²⁶ IC 24 (FAED I, 204).

²⁷ AP 12 (FAED II, 38).

“Blessed Francis got up and went to the bishop of Assisi. The same speech he made to the brothers he made to the bishop. ‘Brother,’ the bishop answered him, ‘I do not have any church that I can give you.’ Then he went to the canons of San Rufino and said the same thing to them. But they gave him the same answer as the bishop. He went, therefore, to the monastery of Saint Benedict on Mount Subasio, and made the same speech to the abbot he had made to the bishop and the canons, informing him also of how the bishop and the canons had responded. The abbot was moved to piety and took counsel with his brothers about this. As it was the will of God, they granted blessed Francis and his brothers the church of Saint Mary of the Porziuncola as the poorest little church they had. In fact, it was also the poorest little church in the area around the city of Assisi, something blessed Francis had desired for a long time.”²⁸

The fact that Francis consulted the bishop of Assisi first and then the college of canons of San Rufino shows very clearly that the cathedral church of Assisi had by that time gained an importance and independence as to merit special privileges. Indeed the cathedral was built on a section of the town of Assisi that was reserved for the *boni homines*, or nobles, or *maiores* of Assisi. Among these we find the family of Favarone di Offreduccio and Ortolana, the parents of St. Clare, whose house was to be found close to the Cathedral of San Rufino. We know this detail from the *Acts of the Process of Canonisation* of St. Clare:

“[Sister Pacifica de Guelfuccio of Assisi] said that Saint Clare began the Order that is now at San Damiano through the admonition of Saint Francis. She entered it as a virgin, and always remained such a virgin. When she was asked how she knew these things, she responded that when she was in the world she was her neighbour and distant relative and that only the piazza was between her house and that of the virgin Clare.”²⁹ This is an obvious reference to the piazza of San Rufino. The exact ubication of the house is a matter of some controversy. The traditional

palace which is still indicated today, close to the *campanile* of the cathedral, was defended by Giuseppe Abate, whereas Arnaldo Fortini opted for a palace further towards the entrance to the present piazza. This thesis might be correct, since, as Pacifica states, her house stood just in front of the Offreduccio palace, with only the piazza in between. Since the Ugonian Cathedral was further out than the present façade, it was not possible to imagine an empty piazza between the two houses at that point, but some metres further out, since the ancient Cathedral had by now been largely demolished to make way for the present façade further back in the piazza.³⁰

In the life of St. Francis the Cathedral of San Rufino played an important role in the preaching ministry of the brothers. We refer to two episodes in which Francis preached in San Rufino, and which are documented by St. Bonaventure in his *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*.

The first episode refers to the time in which Francis and the brothers were staying in the hut of Rivotorto: “While the brothers were still staying in the place already mentioned [Rivotorto], one Saturday the holy man entered the city of Assisi to preach in the cathedral on Sunday morning, as was his custom. In a hut situated in the garden of the canons, away from his sons in body, the man devoted to God spent the night in his customary way, in the prayer to God. About midnight, while some of the brothers were resting and others were persevering in prayer, behold, a *fiery chariot* (2Kgs 2:11-14) of wonderful brilliance entering the door of the house moved here and here through the little house three times. On top of it sat a bright globe that looked like the sun, and it made the night bright as day.”³¹

It was in San Rufino that Francis accused himself of weakness regarding penance in front of all the people who had gathered for his sermon: “Once it happened, because he was ill, he somewhat relaxed the rigour of his abstinence in order to recover his health. When his physical strength returned, he authentic scorner of himself was inspired to

²⁸ AC 56 (FAED II, 154).

²⁹ ProcCan I,2 (CAED, 144-145).

³⁰ For an analysis of the question cfr. A. FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Tomo 2, 351-382.

³¹ LMj 4,4 (FAED II, 551-552).

insult his own flesh. ‘It is not right,’ he said, ‘that people should believe I am abstaining while, in fact, I eat meat secretly.’ He got up, inflamed with the spirit of true humility, and after he had called the people together in the piazza of the city of Assisi, he solemnly entered the principal church with many of the brothers whom he had brought with him. He commanded that he be dragged before the eyes of all, with a cord tied around his neck and stripped to only his underwear, to the stone where criminals received their punishment. Climbing upon the stone, although he had a fever and was weak and the weather was bitter cold, he preached with much vigour and spirit. He asserted to all his hearers that he should not be honoured as a spiritual man but rather he should be despised by all as a carnal man and a glutton.”

Most probably the same episode is narrated with greater detail in the *Assisi Compilation*, and shows how Francis would often preach in the Cathedral church of San Rufino in the typical penitential style of the brotherhood:

“One time when he had recovered somewhat from a very serious illness, after some consideration, it seemed to him that he had received some little delicacies during that illness, although he ate only a little, since with his many, diverse, and serious illnesses he was not able to eat.

One day, although still sick from a quartan fever, he had the people of Assisi called to the piazza for a sermon. When he had finished preaching, he requested that no one leave until he returned.

Together with Brother Peter of Catanio, whom he chose as the first general minister, and with a few other brothers, he entered the church of San Rufino, going into the *confessio*. He ordered Brother Peter to obey and not contradict whatever he wanted to say and do to himself. And Brother Peter said to him: ‘Brother, in what concerns you and me, I cannot, and should not want anything else except what pleases you.’

Taking off his tunic, blessed Francis ordered Brother Peter to lead him naked with a rope tied around his neck in front of the people. He ordered another brother to take a bowl full of ashes and, mounting the place from where he had preached, to throw them and sprinkle them on his head. But moved by piety and compassion towards him, the brothers did not obey him. Brother Peter got up and, weeping bitterly with the other brothers, led him out as he had been ordered to do.

In this way he came back in front of the people naked, to the place where he had preached, and said: ‘You believe me to be a holy man, as do others who, following my example, leave the world and enter the religion and life of the brothers. But I confess to God and to you that during my illness, I ate meat and broth flavoured with meat.’”³²

The last episode to which we refer, without quoting the text in question, is the one when Francis ordered brother Rufino to go to a church in Assisi and preach naked to the people, dressed only in his underwear, as a sign of penance. Francis himself went to join him, since he felt guilty about the penance he had imposed on Rufino, and both preached naked to the people about the poverty of Jesus Christ crucified, moving all the audience to tears and penance.³³

The episode is narrated by both the *Actus Beati Francisci et sociorum eius* and the *Fioretti*. None of these sources indicate the church in which Rufino went to preach in Assisi. However, judging from the various references we have seen regarding Francis preaching in San Rufino, and given that the Cathedral church was truly the house of the people where all kinds of celebrations and public acts of speaking took place, it could be likely that the church was precisely the Cathedral of San Rufino.

³² AC 80 (FAED II, 181-182).

³³ ABF 24 (FAED III, 507-508); *Fioretti* 30 (FAED III, 620-621).

THE FRANCISCAN MARTYRS OF DAMASCUS: NEW SAINTS FOR THE HOLY LAND

On Sunday 20 October 2024 Pope Francis will canonise in Saint Peter's Square a group of 8 Friars Minor of the Custody of the Holy Land, together with 3 Christian Maronite laymen, who were martyred by Druze extremists in the church and friary of St. Paul of Bab Touma, in Damascus, Syria, during the night between 9 and 10 July 1860.

These martyrs were: Br. Manuel Ruiz López, a Spaniard of 56 years, who was the superior of the Franciscan fraternity of Bab Touma; Br. Carmelo Bolta Bañuls, 57 years, also from Spain; Br. Englebert Kolland, and Austrian brother, 33 years old; Br. Nicnor Ascanio Soria, a 46 year old Spaniard; Br. Nicolás Alberca Torres, 30 years, from Spain; Br. Pedro Nolasco Soler Méndez, 33 years old from Spain; Br. Francisco Pinazo Peñalver, 58 years old from Spain; Br. Juan Jacob Fernández, 52 years old from Spain. With them were martyred Francis Massabki, Abdel Mooti Massabki and Raphael Massakbi, all brothers who were Christian Maronites, and who were benefactors of the brothers and helped them in many of their pastoral activities.

The historical context in which the martyrdom occurred was that of the persecution of Christians by Shiite Druze extremists. The Druze are a monotheistic sect which can be seen as an offshot of Islam. Their faith is very secretive. They are present in substantial numbers in Lebanon, Syria and northern Galilee. The persecution began in Lebanon in 1860 and soon spread to neighbouring Syria. On 9 July 1860 fanatic crowds of Druze invaded

the Christian quarter of Bab Touma in Damascus. Around 3800 families lived in this quarter. They closed all access to the quarter and initiated various acts of violence against the population.

On that same night of 9 July 1860 a group of Druze extremists succeeded in entering the Franciscan friary of Bab Touma through a secret entrance, after they had been shown this door by a local traitor of the friars, who had been asked by the European Consulates in Damascus to close themselves in safety within the friary walls. In this way the brothers were rounded up, together with the Massabki brothers, and were brutally murdered after having refused to renounce their Christian faith. These heroes of the faith were beatified by Pope Pius XI on 10 October 1926. After nearly one century since their beatification, Pope Francis will now canonise them as martyrs of the faith, following an intense work of preparation on the part of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land and of the General Postulator of the Order, Br. Giovangiuseppe Califano.

Here we present some details about the martyrs.¹

Manuel Ruiz López was born in 1804 in San Martín de las Ollas, Burgos, Spain. He became a Franciscan and was ordained priest in 1830. One year later he went as a missionary to the Custody of the Holy Land. When he was martyred he was superior of the friary of Bab Touma in Damascus, where the Franciscan fraternity was made up largely of Spanish brothers. He was killed in the church when he went to the altar to consume the Eucharistic

¹ Cfr. the official website of the Custody of the Holy Land: www.custodia.org

species in order to avoid their profanation by the Druze extremists.

Carmelo Bolta Bañuls was born in 1803 in Real de Gandía, Valencia, Spain. He became a Franciscan in 1825 and was ordained priest in 1829. In 1831 he went as a missionary to the Holy Land, and worked in the friaries of Jaffa, Ain Karem (Visitation) and Damascus. He was the parish priest of Bab Touma and was also a teacher of Arabic.

Engelbert Kolland was born in Ramsau, Salzburg, Austria, in 1827. He became a Franciscan in 1847 and was ordained priest in 1851. In 1855 he arrived as a missionary in the Holy Land. He offered his services in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, and then in Damascus, where he was vice-parish priest. He was the only brother in the fraternity who was not a Spaniard. At the time of the massacre he was not in the friary, but was killed outside.

Nicanor Ascanio Soria was born in Villarejo de Salvanés, Madrid in 1814. He became a Franciscan in 1839. As a result of the religious suppression in Spain he had to become a secular priest. After the opening of the Missionary College of Priego de Cuenca, he resumed his life as a Franciscan friar and in 1859 he went to the Holy Land and was sent to Damascus.

Nicolás Alberca Torres was born in 1830 in Aguilar de la Frontera, Córdoba. In 1856 he joined the Franciscans and in 1858 was ordained priest. A year later he was sent as missionary to the Holy Land and to Damascus in order to learn Arabic.

Pedro Nolasco Soler Méndez was born in 1827 in Lorca, Murcia. In 1856 he entered the Franciscan Order and in 1857 was ordained priest. In 1859 he arrived as missionary in the Holy Land and was immediately sent to Bab Touma.

Francisco Pinazo Peñalver was born in 1802 in El Chopo de Alpuente, Valencia. In 1831 he became a Franciscan lay brother, and worked as sacristan. As a result of the suppression of the religious Orders in Spain, in 1835 he had to return to his family, but in 1843 he requested to go as

missionary to the Holy Land. For 17 years he was cook and tailor in various friaries of the Custody. When he died he was sacristan of the church of St. Paul in Bab Touma.

Juan Jacob Fernández was born in 1808 in Moire, Ourense, in Spain. In 1831 he became a Franciscan, but in 1835 he also had to go to his family because of the suppression of the religious. In 1858 he requested to be sent to the Custody of the Holy Land, where he was sent in 1859 to Bab Touma as cook of the friary.

The Massabki brothers were all Christian Maronites, which is the largest Catholic community in Lebanon. The main actor in the martyrdom among these brothers was Francis Massabki, who was a merchant and also a father of a numerous family. These three brothers were often seen with the Franciscan brothers in the friary and church of Bab Touma, where they would go to pray and to help the fraternity in various activities, including the teaching of Arabic and catechism to the children of the parish. These three brothers happened to be in the friary when the Druze extremists attacked the Franciscan fraternity and they were also killed because of their Christian faith.

The canonisation of the Franciscan Martyrs of Damascus is not only a historical commemoration of a persecution against the Christian community of Damascus. The Custody of the Holy Land, was always present not only in the Holy Places in what are now Israel and Palestine, but also in the entire Middle East, that is, in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Cyprus and Greece, always faced the problem of religious intolerance, either from other non-Christian religions and cults, or from other Christian Churches not in communion with the Church of Rome. In an environment in which, to this very day, there is a great need for a spirit of reconciliation and reciprocal forgiveness, in a region of wars and ethnic violence which is still being unfolded in front of our eyes, the witness of the Martyrs of Damascus remains an eloquent sign of the evangelical presence of the sons of St. Francis *inter Saracenos et alios infideles*.

800 YEARS SINCE THE ARRIVAL OF THE FRIARS MINOR IN ENGLAND

On 10 September 1224, which was a Tuesday following the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, a group of 9 friars Minor, led by Brother Agnello of Pisa, set foot in Dover, England, after having crossed the Channel from France. It was the same period of time during which St. Francis was on Mount La Verna on his retreat some days before he received the stigmata. The brothers first settled down in Canterbury, but after a few days a small group went to London. In Canterbury the brothers were welcomed at the poor priests' hospital and later on established a friary (Greyfriars). In London they were welcomed by the friars Preachers. Two of them proceeded to Oxford. Soon the brothers settled in the university towns, namely Oxford and Cambridge, besides also establishing friaries in Northampton and Lincoln. The English Province was to develop into one of the most flourishing Provinces of the Order until the Reformation. Although now the Franciscan presence in England is minimal, and the brothers form part of the Irish Province, the 800th anniversary of the arrival of the friars is a sign of the vitality of the English brothers along the centuries. The documentation of this arrival in England 800 years ago is the work of Br. Thomas of Eccleston, who wrote *De Adventu fratrum Minorum in Angliam*. It can be read in English translation in: *XIIIth Century Chronicles: Jordan of Giano. Thomas of Eccleston. Salimbene degli Adami*. Translated from Latin by P. HERMANN, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1961. The Latin critical edition: *FRATRIS THOMÆ VULGU DICTI DE ECCLESTON, Tractatus de Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*, edited by A.G. Little, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1951.

Latin Abbreviations

Writings of St. Francis

CantAudPov	Canticum 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, Vita beati Francisci
LCh	Celano, Legenda ad usum chori
VB	Celano, Vita brevior S. Francisci
2C	Celano, Memoriale in desiderio animæ
3C	Celano, Tractatus miraculorum
LJS	Julian of Speyer, Vita S. Francisci
OR	Officium Rhythmicum
AP	Anonymus Perusinus (De Inceptione)
L3C	Legenda trium sociorum
CA	Compilatio Assisiensis
LMj	S. Bonaventura, Legenda Maior
LMn	S. Bonaventura, Legenda Minor
SPMaj	Speculum Perfectionis (Sabatier)
SPMin	Speculum Perfectionis (Lemmens)
ABF	Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius
Fior	Fioretti di San Francesco



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Cover page: La Verna: the mountain of the Stigmata

