

FRANCISCAN ESSAYS

by Noel Muscat OFM



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**The *Transitus* of Saint Francis:
A paraliturgical celebration
presented by
Tommaso da Celano**

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The accounts of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, particularly those by Tommaso da Celano,¹ are often used as readings during the celebration of the *transitus* on 3rd October. The celebration itself is modelled upon the accounts of the death of famous saints like Martin of Tours and Benedict of Norcia.² The death of the holy founders and fathers, many of whom were hermits and monks, is often described as a paschal experience, or a passing over, with Christ to the Father. The moment of death is witnessed by the companions of the same founders who surround their death-bed and who weep over the fact that they are being deprived of their spiritual fathers.³ It is often described as a moment of peace and reconciliation, as an experience of a return to the pure origins of the calling of the same founders, who succeed in involving their sons in their same enthusiasm. Moreover, the passing away of the holy founders is centred upon the importance of the *sacra pagina* in the life of the monastic or eremitic community, evoking the examples of the patriarchs (Jacob) and prophets (Moses and Elijah). It is presented as an experience of letting go of all worldly possessions in order to be united to Christ, poor and crucified. Above all, it is the moment in which the holy founder blesses his sons and entrusts those he designates with the responsibility of leading the community and ensuring its faithfulness to the original charism.⁴

During this celebration of the 800th anniversary of the *transitus* of Francis of Assisi, we intend to propose a short reflection upon the way in which his prime biographer, namely Tommaso da Celano, presents the moment of his death as a kind of paraliturgical celebration. In our analysis of the texts we have to keep in mind the differences, more than the similarities, between the account in the *Vita beati Francisci*, written in 1228-1229, that in the *Legenda ad usum chori*, written in 1230-1232, the one in the *Vita beati patris nostri Francisci (Vita brevior)* dated 1232-1239, and that in the *Memoriale in desiderio animae*, composed in 1246-1247. These differences are, first and foremost, linked with the image of the saint that Celano is asked to portray, first by Pope Gregory IX, then by the minister general Elias of Cortona, and lastly by Crescenzo da Iesi, minister general, but with the documentary material produced by the brothers of the first generation, which Celano utilised from the famous *florilegium* composed in Greccio by the three companions, Leo, Rufino and Angelo, with abundant additions to their *memoirs* by many of the other companions of the saint.

Our aim is that of trying to understand how Celano intended to present the *transitus* of Saint Francis not only in the style of similar accounts in the lives of holy founders, but especially as a re-enactment of the Eucharist in the style of a last supper which Francis wanted to celebrate with his brothers before leaving them to be joined to Christ.⁵

¹ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Vita beati Francisci* 109-110; *Legenda ad usum chori* V,1-13; *Memoriale in desiderio animae* 214-217, in *Analecta Franciscana*, Vol. X, Quaracchi 1926-1941. Jacques Dalarun, *Thome Celanensis Vita beati patris nostri Francisci (Vita brevior)*, Présentation et édition critique, in *Analecta Bollandiana*, Vol. 133 (2015) 23-86.

² JACQUES DALARUN, *The Death of Holy Founders from Martin to Francis*, in *Greyfriars Review* 14,1 (2000) 1-19.

³ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita beati Martini*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* [PL] 20, 160-176. For the episode of the *transitus* of Martin: Sulpicius Severus, *Episola ad Bassulam*, PL 20, 181-183. Gregorius Magnus, *Vita Sancti Benedicti, Ex Libro II Dialogorum S. Gregorii Magni*, PL 65, 125-204.

⁴ Pietro Maranesi, *La morte di un uomo cristiano. Gli ultimi anni di vita di Francesco d'Assisi*, in *Miscellanea Francescana* 112 (2012) 581-599.

⁵ Noel Muscat, *The Last Supper of Saint Francis and the Image of the New Adam*, in www.franciscanstudies.com

The *Transitus* in the *Vita beati Francisci* 108-110 - Text⁶

108 When he saw his final day drawing near, as shown to him two years earlier by divine revelation, [Francis] *called to him* the brothers he *chose* (Mk 3:13). He blessed each one as it was *given to him from above* (Jn 19:11), just as Jacob of old, the patriarch, blessed his sons. He

⁶ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Vita beati Francisci* 108-110 in *Analecta Franciscana sive Chronica aliaque varia documenta ad historiam fratrum minorum spectantium (Legendae S. Francisci Assisiensis saeculis XIII et XIV conscriptae)*, Quaracchi 1928: Caput VIII - Quid fecerit et dixerit quando feliciter obiit:

108 Enimvero cum videret sibi imminere diem extremum, quod etiam per revelationem divinam ante duobus annis ei fuerit indicatum, *vocatis ad se fratribus quos volebat* (Mc 3:13), unicuique, *sicut ei desuper dabatur* (Jn 19:11), velut olim patriarcha Iacob suis filiis benedixit, *immo velut alter Moyses ascensurus in montem quem constituit ei Deus* (Dt 32:49), filios Israel benedictionibus ampliavit. Cumque a sinistris ipsius resideret frater Helias, circumsedentibus reliquis filiis, *cancellatis manibus dexteram posuit super caput* (Gen 48:14) eius, et exteriorum oculorum lumine privatus et usu: “Super quem”, inquit, “teneo dexteram meam?” “Super fratrem Heliam”, inquit. “Et ego sic volo”, ait. “Te”, inquit, “fili, *in omnibus et per omnia* (Eph 4:6) benedico, et sicut in manibus tuis fratres meos et filios augmentavit Altissimus, ita et super te et in te omnibus benedico. *In caelo ete in terra benedicat te rex omnium Deus* (Ps 112:6: Tob 9:9). Benedico te sicut possum et plus quam possum, et quod non possum ego, possit in te qui omnia potest. *Recordetur Deus* (Dan 14:37) operis et laboris tui, *et in retributione iustorum* (Heb 2:2) sors tua servetur. Omnem benedictionem, quam cupis, invenias, et quod digne postulas impleatur”. “Valete, fili omnes, *in timore Dei* (Sir :22), et parmenete in ipso semper, *quoniam futura est super vos tentatio maxima et tribulatio* (Sir 27:6; Ps 21:12) appropinquat. *Felices qui in his quae coeperunt perseverabunt* (Mt 10:22), a quibus nonnullos frustra scandala separabunt. Ego enim ad Dominum propero, et ad Deum meum, *cui devote in spiritu meo servivi* (Ps 29:9; Rom 1:9) iam ire confido”. Erat tunc temporis manens in palatio Assisinati episcopi, et propterea rogavit fratres ut eum ad locum Sanctae Mariae de Portiuncula citissime transportarent. Volebat enim ibi animam reddere Deo, ubi, sicut dictum est, *primo perfecte viam veritatis* (Ps 118:30) agnovit.

109 Conversionis suae tempus iam erat viginti annorum spatio consummatum, sicut sibi divina innotuerat voluntate. Nam cum ipse beatus pater et frater Helias tempore quodam apud Fulgineum morarentur, nocte quadam cum se sopori dedissent, adstitit fratri Heliae sacerdos quidam albis indutus, grandaevae ac provectae aetatis, aspectu venerabilis, dicens: “Surge, frater, et dic fratri Francisco, quoniam expleti sunt decem et octo anni ex quo mundo renuntians, Christo adhaesit, *et duobus tantum annis dehinc in hac vita manens viam universae carnis* (Josh 23:14), *vocante ipsum ad se Domino* (Gen 3:9), introibit”. Sicque factum est ut sermo Domini, quem diu ante praedixerat, *constituto termino compleretur* (2Chron 36:21). Cum igitur in loco sibi valde desiderato paucis quievisset diebus, *et cognosceret tempus propinquae mortis instare* (Heb 9:9), vocavit ad se duos fratres et suos filios speciales, praecipiens eis de morte propinqua, immo de vita sic proxima, *in exultatione* (Ps 106:22) spiritus, alta voce Laudes Domino decantare. Ipse vero, prout potuit, in illum Davidicum psalmum erupit: “*Voce mea*”, inquit, “*ad Dominum clamavi, voce mea ad Dominum deprecatus sum*” (Ps 141:2-8). Frater autem quidam de assistantibus, quem sanctus satis magno diligebat amore, pro fratribus omnibus plurimum exsistens sollicitus, cum haec intueretur et sancti cognosceret exitum propinquare, dixit ad eum: “Benigne pater, heu absque patre iam remanent filii, *et oculorum privantur lumine vero!* (1Jn 2:8) Recordare igitur orphanorum quos deseris, et omnibus culpis remissis, tam praesentes quam absentes omnes tua sancta benedictione laetifica”. Ad quem sanctus: “Ecce”, inquit, “ego vocor a Deo, fili! Fratribus meis tam absentibus quam praesentibus offensas omnes et culpas remitto, et eos, sicut possum, absolvo; quibus tu haec denuntians, ex parte mea omnibus benedices”.

110 Iussit denique codicem Evangeliorum portari, et Evangelium secundum Iohannem sibi legi poposcit, ab eo loco ubi incipit: *Ante sex dies paschae* (Jn 12:1), *sciens Iesus quia venit hora eius, ut transeat ex hoc mundo ad Patrem* (Jn 13:1). Hoc etiam Evangelium legere proposuerat sibi minister, priusquam ei praeciperetur; hoc etiam in prima libri apertione occurrit, cum tota et plena Bibliotheca esset, in qua Evangelium legi debebat. Iussit proinde se superponi cilicio et conspargi cinere, *qui terra et cinis* (Sir 10:9; 17:31) mox erat futurus. *Convenientibus itaque multis* (Dt 31:11) fratribus, *quorum ipse pater et dux erat, reverenterque adstantibus et exspectantibus omnibus exitum beatum et consummationem* (Act 14:11) felicem, sanctissima illa anima carne soluta est, qua in abyso claritatis absorpta, *corpus obdormivit in Domino* (Act 7:60). Unus autem ex fratribus et discipulis eius, fama non modicum celebris, cuius nomen nunc existimo reticendum, *quoniam dum vivit in carne* (Gal 2:20) non vult praeconio gloriari, *vidit animam sanctissimi patris recto tramite in caelum conscendere super aquas multas* (Josh 8:20; Ps 28:3). *Erat enim quasi stella* (Sir 50:6) quoquo modo lunae immensitatem habens, solis vero utcumque retinens claritatem, *a candida subvecta nubecula* (Apoc 14:14).

English translation: THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Life of St. Francis* 108-110, in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*. Vol. I. *Francis the Saint*, Eds. R.J. Armstrong – J.A. Wayne Hellmann – W.J. Short, New City Press, New York 2023, 276-278 [FAED I, 276-278].

was like another Moses about *to ascend the mountain that the Lord had shown* (Dt 32:39) him, when imparting the blessings on the children of Israel.

When brother Elias sat down on his left side with the other brothers around him, the blessed father crossed his arms and *placed his right hand on Elias' head* (Gn 48:14). He had lost the sight and use of his bodily eyes, so he asked: "Over whom am I holding my right hand?" "Over brother Elias," they replied. "And this is what I wish to do," he said, "I bless you my son, *in all and through all* (Eph 4:6), and just as the most High has increased my brothers and sons in your hands, so too, upon you and in you, I bless them all. May the king of all *bless you in heaven and on earth* (Ps 113:6; Tb 9:9). I bless you as I can, and more than I can, and what I cannot do may the One who can do all things do in you. *May God remember* (Dn 14:37) your work and labours, and may a place be reserved for you among *the rewards of the just* (Heb 2:2). May you receive every blessing you desire and may your every worthy request be fulfilled."

"Good bye, all my sons. Live *in the fear of God* (Eccl 9:22) and remain in Him always, for a great *test* will come upon you and tribulation is drawing near! Happy are those *who will persevere* (Mt 10:22) in what they have begun: many will be separated from them by the scandals that are to come. But now I am hurrying to the Lord *and I am confident that I am going to my God whom I have served in my spirit*" (Ps 30:9; Rm 1:19).

He was staying then in the palace of the bishop of Assisi, and he asked the brothers to carry him quickly to the place of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula. For he wanted to give back his soul to God in that place where, as noted above, he first came to know perfectly *the way of truth* (Ps 19:30).

Chapter VIII: What he did and said at his blessed death

109 Twenty years had now passed since his conversion, and his time was ending just as it had been shown to him by God's will. For, once the blessed father and brother Elias was staying at Foligno, and one night while they were sleeping, a priest of venerable appearance and great age dressed in white clothing appeared to brother Elias. "Get up, brother," he said, "and tell brother Francis that eighteen years have passed since he renounced the world and clung to Christ. He will remain in this life only two more years; then he will go *the way of all flesh when the Lord calls* (Jos 23:14; Gn 3:9) him to Himself." So it came to pass that, at the established time, the *word of the Lord* spoken long before now *was fulfilled* (2Chr 36:21).

After he had rested a few days in that place he so longed for, knowing *the time* of his death *was close at hand* (Heb 9:9), he called to him two brothers, his special sons, and told them to sing *The Praises of the Lord* with a loud voice and joyful spirit, rejoicing at his approaching death, or rather at the life that was so near. He himself, as best he could, broke into that psalm of David: *With a loud voice I cried to the Lord; with a loud voice I beseeched the Lord* (Ps 142:2-8).

There was a brother there whom the holy man loved with great affection. Seeing what was happening and realizing the saint was nearing the end, he grew very concerned about all the other brothers and said: "Oh, kind father, your sons will now be *without a father* (Lam 5:3), and will be deprived of *the true light* (1Jn 2:8) of their eyes! Remember the orphans you are leaving behind; forgive all their faults, and gladden them all, whether present or absent, with your holy blessing." The holy man answered: "See, my son, I am being called by God. I forgive all my brothers, present and absent, all their faults and offenses, and I absolve them insofar as I am able. When you give them this message, bless them all for me."

110 Then he ordered the book of the Gospels to be brought in. He asked that the Gospel according to John be read to him, starting with the passage that begins: *Six days before the Passover* (Jn 12:1), *Jesus, knowing that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father* (Jn 13:1). This was the very gospel his minister had planned to read, even before he was told to do so; that was the passage that met his eye as he first opened the book, although he had the complete Bible from which to read the gospel. Then he told them to cover him with sackcloth and to sprinkle him with ashes, as he was soon to become *dust and ashes* (Sir 10:9; 17:27).

Many brothers gathered there, for whom he was both father and leader (Dt 31:11; Acts 14:11). They stood there reverently, all awaiting his blessed *departure* and happy *end* (Sir 33:24). And then that most holy soul was released from the flesh, and as it was absorbed into the abyss of light, his body *fell asleep in the Lord* (Acts 7:60).

One of his brothers and followers, a man of some fame, whose name I will conceal for now since he does not wish to glory in such fame while still *living in the flesh* (Gal 2:20), saw the soul of the most holy father *rise straight to heaven over many waters* (Jos 8:20; Ps 29:3). It was *like a star* (Sir 50:6) but as big as the moon, with *the brilliance of the sun* (1Cor 15:41), and *carried up upon a small white cloud* (Rv 14:14).

The *Transitus* in the *Vita beati Francisci* 108-110 - Comment

The *Vita beati Francisci* is the first document among the sources which describes the episode of Francis' death at the Portiuncula on the evening of Saturday 3rd October 1226. Tommaso da Celano wrote it as the first official *legenda* of Saint Francis, upon the command of Pope Gregory IX and presented it for approval on 25th February 1229, barely seven months after the canonisation of Saint Francis on 16th July 1228. It remains the basis for the study of all subsequent sources.

The text we have quoted above (1C 108-110) presents the episode of Francis' *transitus* in various stages. Celano begins by presenting Francis who is aware of the time of his death and who carefully prepares for this moment. We shall dwell particularly on the choice of the Scripture texts that Celano quotes, since they say a lot about the intentions of the biographer. Francis first calls to him the brothers he chose, just as Jesus called to himself the apostles he wanted to send to preach the Gospel. Celano quotes Mk 3:13 regarding the disciples who Christ willed (*quos volebat*) to call. Celano himself was not physically present at the moment of Francis' death, and he obviously bases his narration on the witness of those companions who were closest to Francis during that solemn moment.⁷ Francis then blesses these brothers. The image that Celano quotes is that of the patriarch Jacob who blesses his twelve sons in Genesis 48-49. This image was a common theme in hagiographic literature, particularly in the episodes in which the founding fathers of religious families are presented blessing their disciples before they die. Celano also describes Francis as another Moses, who is commanded by God to ascend on Mount Nebo in order to bless the tribes of Israel before contemplating the promised land and dying on that mountain.

⁷ FRANCESCO CARTA, *Tommaso da Celano*, in Treccani, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 96 (2019) with abundant bibliography. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tommaso-da-celano_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tommaso-da-celano_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (14.09.2026).

ENGELBERT GRAU, *Thomas of Celano. Life and Work*, in *Greyfriars Review* 8/2 (1994).

As we shall see in other biographies by the same Celano, the biographer gives great importance to the blessing that Francis reserves for his vicar, brother Elias of Cortona. The episode of the blessing of brother Elias has been an object of much study, since it marks the theme of the tension present later on in the Order's history regarding the first brothers who remained truly faithful to Francis' inspiration. In 1229 the authority of Elias was not questioned, even though he was not elected minister general in 1227 when Giovanni Parenti was elected instead. Elias had been Francis' vicar since 1221 and was respected as one of the most trustworthy brothers by the saint. The subsequent events of his generalate in 1232-1239 were still to come. This is the reason why Elias has pride of place and is mentioned by name as the one upon whose head Francis lays his right hand to bless him, and also promises him retribution from the Lord for his hard and faithful work as vicar of the Order.⁸

Together with brother Elias Francis then blesses all the other brothers. Celano states that this solemn blessing took place in the bishop's palace in Assisi. This is an important note, since the presence of the saint within the city walls of Assisi was one of the most controversial issues surrounding the facts of his death. The fact that Francis was kept for some weeks in the bishop's residence above Porta Moiano is a sign that the citizens of Assisi were adamant that he should die within the city walls in order to protect his body from being stolen by enemies, such as the city of Perugia. Celano states that Francis asked the brothers to transport him with haste to the Portiuncula. Therefore, the episode of the blessing of Elias and the brothers is a kind of introduction to the *transitus* account which begins in paragraph 109.⁹

The account of the *transitus* begins with a reference to a dream or vision that brother Elias had while he was sleeping in Foligno some two years before Francis died. The vision itself is rather strange, since Celano states that Elias saw a priest of venerable age who was dressed in white liturgical vestments and who informed him that Francis would soon die, commanding him to break the news to Francis himself. Now the time frame presented is eighteen years since Francis' conversion and two years before his death. That brings us to 1224. So the vision is, in a way, linked to the event of the stigmatisation of Francis that occurred on La Verna in September 1224, and which marks the beginning of the final two years of his life. The fact that Elias saw a priest is also rather strange, since Elias himself was a lay brother, even though he was the vicar of the saint and governed the Order with the authority given to him by Francis, who himself was not a priest. Why did Elias not see an angel dressed in white, but a priest with a white chasuble? Could it be a veiled reference to Malachi 2:7: "The priest's lips ought to safeguard knowledge; his mouth is where the law should be sought, since he is the Lord of Host's messenger (angel)?"¹⁰ In the episode the priest assumes an angelic ministry and could have been inserted by Celano in order to underline an important issue which would regard

⁸ The bibliography on Brother Elias is abundant. Here are some of the most important studies: GIULIA BARONE, *Frate Elia*, in *Bollettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo e Archivio Muratoriano* 85 (1974-1975) 89-144; GIULIA BARONE, *Frate Elia: suggestioni da una rilettura*, in *I compagni di Francesco e la prima generazione minoritica*. Atti del XIX Convegno della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (Assisi 1991), Spoleto 1992, 61-80; SILVANA VECCHIO, *Elia d'Assisi (Elia da Cortona, al secolo Bombarone)*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Treccani, Vol. 42, Roma 1993, 450-458; GIULIA BARONE, *Da Frate Elia agli Spirituali*, Biblioteca Francescana, Milano 1999; FILIPPO SEDDA, *La 'malavventura' di frate Elia. Un percorso attraverso le fonti biografiche*, in *Il Santo* 41 (2001), 215-300; GIULIA BARONE – JACQUES DALARUN – FELICE ACCROCCA – MARIA PIA ALBERZONI – FILIPPO SEDDA ET ALII, *Frate Elia di Cortona tra realtà e mito*. Atti dell'Incontro di studio, Cortona (12-13 luglio 2013), Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto 2014.

⁹ For a study of the reasons why the Assisi citizens kept Francis secure in the city walls but had to give way to his insistence to be carried to the Portiuncula to die there, see FELICE ACCROCCA, *Un corpo conteso. Gli ultimi giorni di Francesco d'Assisi*, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 2025.

¹⁰ The text of the Latin Vulgate states: *Labia enim sacerdotis custodiunt scientiam, et legem requirunt ex ore eius, quia angelus Domini exercituum est.*

the Order during the following decade, namely the role of the priest brothers in the leadership roles of the fraternity.

Celano states that Francis rested for a few days at the Portiuncula. The time is therefore the end of September or the beginning of October. At this point Francis calls two brothers to himself and asks them to sing the *Laudes creaturarum* (The Canticle of Brother Sun). Here Celano does not mention the two brothers by name, but we come to know who they are in the *Vita beati patris Francisci* or *Vita brevior*, which we shall present below. They were Angelo and Leo. They appear to be close to Francis in a special way on La Verna and during the last period of his life. Maybe they were also the brothers who Francis sent to sing the same praises of the Lord in his creatures in front of the mayor of Assisi, Bernardo de Oportulo, and bishop Guido II, when he added the part regarding forgiveness.

A recurring detail of Francis' *transitus* is his reciting of Psalm 142 (141):2-8. It is mentioned in all the accounts of the *transitus* of Francis by Celano. The Psalm was part of the Divine Office and was prayed at Vespers on Fridays. Therefore, it is Psalm associated with the death of Christ on the cross. Francis also prayed the first 5 verses of the same Psalm in the hour of Sext of the *Officium Passionis Domini*. The fact that Francis prayed this Psalm during his *transitus* is a sign of his desire that his moment of death be lived as a paraliturgical celebration by himself and the brothers. Indeed, the singing of the *Laudes creaturarum* and the reciting of this Psalm take on the form of the divine office to which Francis was so devout.

The next stage in the narration is the blessing of all the brothers. This is a second blessing, distinct from the one reserved for brother Elias. Celano states that one of the brothers who Francis loved dearly pleaded with him to bless all the brothers and forgive their faults. The reference to the beloved brother is evident in the narration, and could refer to one of the first brothers who were closest to Francis (Angelo, or Leo, or Bernard, or Elias) but we cannot draw any conclusion as to who Celano is referring. It seems, however, that Celano had in mind the image of the beloved disciple of Jesus (John?) in the fourth Gospel. The entire episode is very close to that of the *transitus* of Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus, who speaks about the weeping of the monks who were around Martin at the time of his death.¹¹

At this point Celano refers to the importance of the *pagina sacra* in the moment of the *transitus* of Francis. The saint asks the brothers to bring the Book of the Gospels¹² and to read out to him the text from John's Gospel referring to the episode of the washing of the disciples' feet during the Last Supper in Jn 13:1ff. However, Celano begins the quotation from Jn 12:1,

¹¹ SULPICIIUS SEVERUS, *Epistola III ad Bassulam*, in PL 182: Tum vero moeror et luctus omnium, vox una plangentium: "Cur nos, pater, deseris? aut cui nos desolatos relinquis? invadent enim gregem tuum lupi rapaces: et quis nos a morsibus eorum, percusso pastore prohibebit? Scimus quidem desiderare te Christum; sed salva tibi sunt tua praemia; bec dilata minnentur: nostri potius miserere, quos deseris."

¹² The Latin text states: *codicem Evangeliorum portare*. This refers to the *Evangelarium*, or Book of the Gospels. Among the liturgical books in use during mediaeval times the *Evangelarium* was the book used for the chanting of the Gospel, especially during high Mass in cathedral churches or abbeys. That the brothers possessed an *Evangelarium* might seem strange, since their poor way of life might not have permitted them to own such costly volumes. However, Celano is quite clear when he states *tota et plena Bibliotheca esset, in qua Evangelium legi debebat*. That means that the Portiuncula fraternity had an *Evangelarium*. In fact we come to know this fact also from the episode in the *Memoriale in desiderio animae* [2C] 91 (FAED II, 306) when Francis orders Peter of Cattanio to give the only copy of the New Testament that the friars had at the Portiuncula as alms to a poor mother of one of the brothers. This could very well have been a volume containing the Gospels and maybe the Acts and Letters of St. Paul. In small churches there would normally have been only a *Missale*, just as in the case of the church of San Niccolò *ad pedem plataeam*, where Francis and Bernard of Quintavalle consulted the Gospel by opening three times the *Missale* of the small church, which still exists in Walters Gallery, Baltimore, USA.

Six days before the Passover and then skips on to Jn 13:1. It is hardly possible that a learned friar like Celano would have mixed the verses of the Gospel unintentionally. He does so because he intends to portray the *transitus* of Francis as a Paschal celebration. Indeed, the quotation from Jn 12:1 does not refer to the Last Supper, but to the supper prepared by the friends of Jesus Martha, Mary and Lazarus in the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany. What is important is obviously the fact that the whole episode revolves around a supper, or rather around two suppers, one in which Jesus makes the experience of love of his dear friends in Bethany and the other one in which Jesus shows his love to the apostles during the Last Supper by washing their feet. In the first supper Mary also anoints Jesus with perfumed nard oils. It might also be quite possible that Francis wanted to listen to the Gospel account beginning precisely in Jn 12:1, since in a certain way it is the moment in which Jesus begins to face the events of his passion. John concludes the *book of signs* in chapter 12 to begin the *book of the hour of Jesus* in chapter 13. The minister who reads the Gospel passage had already planned to do so even before Francis had asked him and the page of the *Evangeliarium* is found in a quasi-miraculous way on the first opening of the volume. We have referred to the importance of liturgical prayer of the psalms in the episode of the *transitus*, and now we see the importance of the reading of the Gospel account of the Last Supper and washing of the feet of the apostles. These are all details that point out to a paraliturgical celebration.

The next detail regards Francis who asks the brothers to cover him with sack-cloth and sprinkle him with ashes. The penitential element of this action is evident and is also biblical. We know that Francis wanted his brothers to sew sack-cloth on his habit and that he sprinkled ashes on his head when he went to preach to Clare and the Poor Ladies, limiting his sermon to the recitation of Psalm 51(50), the *Miserere*.¹³ Maybe there is also a link between this gesture and the first words of the *Testament* that Francis is supposed to have dictated some days before his death at the Portiuncula and which begins with the words: “The Lord gave me, brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance.”¹⁴

The solemn moment of death is described as an experience of peace and intimate fraternity. Moreover, the quotation is from Acts 7:60: *cum hoc dixisset, obdormivit*, referring to the death of the deacon Stephen. The reference can be simply linked with the verb “to sleep” in order to describe death. However, the choice of the episode of Stephen’s martyrdom at this point could have been intentional on the part of Celano. Besides the remote possibility of the link between Stephen and Francis who Celano describes as wearing the vestments of a “levite” (deacon) and singing the Gospel in the Nativity episode of Greccio,¹⁵ the reference to death as a “sleeping in the Lord” forms part of the hagiographic tradition of the lives of the founding fathers. It could also be that Celano intends to present Francis’ death as an experience of martyrdom, which could very well be the case given that Francis was assailed by much suffering and also bore the stigmata of Christ crucified.

The last note regarding the *transitus* episode is the vision of a certain brother, who Celano does not mention, stating that he wanted to preserve humility, in which this brother sees Francis’ soul ascend into heaven shining like a star or like the sun, having the splendour of the moon and being borne aloft above many waters on a white cloud. Now we know that the references to these images are biblical, namely Sirach 50:6, referring to the praise of the high priest Simon I son of Onias, and Rev 14:14, describing the vision of the Son of man appearing on a white cloud and bearing the sickle to harvest the earth and to trample God’s wine-press

¹³ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Memoriale in desiderio animae*, 207. English text in FAED II, 379-380.

¹⁴ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, *Testament* 1 (FAED I, 124).

¹⁵ 1C 86: Induitur sanctus Dei leviticis ornamentis, quia levita erat, et voce sonora sanctum Evangelium cantat.

with his authority as the supreme judge at the end of times. These Scripture texts are found in all the accounts of Francis' *transitus* by Tommaso da Celano. Their importance in the liturgy of the feast of Saint Francis is well-known, at least in the case of Sir 50:6, which is nowadays the first reading of the solemnity of the Saint. The choice of this biblical passage is fairly recent in liturgical use. However, the significance of the verse goes back to Celano himself and to the first generation of Franciscan biographers, as is the case of the lost *legenda* "*Quasi stella matutina*" attributed to Giovanni da Ceprano.¹⁶ The same biblical text was also used by Gregory IX in the Bulla of canonisation of Saint Francis *Mira circa nos*.¹⁷

The *Vita beati Francisci* was not intended to be used during the liturgical celebrations of Saint Francis, but remains the official *legenda* of the saint, and forms the basis for a liturgical summary composed by the same Celano entitled *Legenda ad usum chori*, where the episode of the *transitus* follows the same pattern of the *Vita beati Francisci*. Again, our intention is that of underlining what we are calling the paraliturgical elements of the narration, whereby Celano intends to present the *transitus* within the framework of a liturgical celebration of the intimate members of the fraternity of the Portiuncula, based upon the prayer of the divine office, the reading of the Gospel, reference to the commandment of love linked with the episode of the Last Supper, actions denoting penance and reference to the eschatological dimension of the glorification of the soul of Francis which ascends to heaven.¹⁸

The *Transitus* in the *Legenda ad usum chori* V,1-13 - Text¹⁹

Throughout this period, his body suffered from illness more severely than it had previously; and when he approached his last day and had by then been completely deprived in the light and use of his outward eyes, *he blessed his sons with crossed hands* (Gn 48:14-15), just as long ago the patriarch Jacob did. Then the day of his release came and he ordered the brothers to sing joyfully the Praises of the Lord at his passing. He himself broke into the song of the psalmist, saying: *With my voice I cried to the Lord; with my own voice I beseeched the Lord* (Ps 142:2-8), and so he continued with the rest of the psalm. Then the gospel was read, a sackcloth was placed over him, and he bade farewell to his sons. His most holy soul was released from the flesh and taken up into the abyss of light, and his body *fell asleep in the Lord* (Acts 7:60).

¹⁶ ALBERTO SPATARO, *Quasi stella matutina*, in *Francesco d'Assisi. Enciclopedia Francescana*, Vol. II, Treccani, Roma 2025-2026, 346-348.

¹⁷ GREGORY IX, Bulla *Mira circa nos* [19th July 1228] (FAED I, 568): Certainly, he did not seek his own interests, but those of Christ, serving him zealously like an industrious bee. *Like the morning star among the clouds, like the full moon in its days, like the sun shining on the Church of God*, he took into his hands a lamp to attract the humble to grace with the example of his shining deeds, and a trumpet to recall the shameless from their baneful excesses by striking fear into them with his stern reproaches.

¹⁸ We shall not refer to the paraliturgical significance of the stigmata of Christ on Francis' body, which is also highly evident in the description made by Celano of the dead body of Saint Francis. This can be an object of further reflection.

¹⁹ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Legenda ad usum chori*, 12-13, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 119-126: Per idem tempus corpus suum vehementius solito infirmitate urgebatur, et ad diem appropinquans extremum, exteriorum oculorum lumine privatus et usu, velut olim patriarcha *Iacob*, cancellatis *manibus filios benedixit* (Gen 48:14-15). Instat iam dies resolutionis eius, iubet fratres de transitu suo Laudes Domino decantare laetanter. Ipse vero in vocem psalmi prorumpit: *Voce mea*, inquiens, *ad Dominum clamavi, voce mea ad Dominum deprecatus sum* (Ps 141:2-8). Sic et reliquum psalmi prosequitur. Legitur Evangelium, cilicio superponitur, filiis valedicens. Anima illa sanctissima sic carne resolvitur et in abyso claritatis absorpta, *obdormivit corpus in Domino* (Act 7:60). Conspicitur anima eius a quodam caelum conscendere, a *candida nubecula* subvehi, velut stella coruscans.

Latin text also in: *Fontes Franciscani*, a cura di ENRICO MENESTÒ, STEFANO BRUFANO ET ALII, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 1995, 427-439.

English translation: THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Legend for Use in the Choir*, in FAED I, 323.

His soul was seen by one person in a vision: it was rising to heaven, carried on a *little white cloud* and shone like a star.

The *Transitus* in the *Legenda ad usum chori* V,1-13 – Comment

Tommaso da Celano composed the *Legenda ad usum chori*²⁰ upon the request of brother Benedetto da Arezzo.²¹ “An abbreviated *legenda*, inserted within the brothers’ breviaries, would have provided a common text that could be read during liturgical celebrations and meals in the refectory.”²² The importance of this liturgical legend lies in the fact that it seems to have been intended precisely for the celebration of the hagiographical readings of the divine office for the feast of Saint Francis. Its relevance in the field of the study of the Franciscan sources has only been underlined fairly recently.²³ It can be considered the prototype of subsequent liturgical compositions, including the *Officium Rythmicum* by Julian of Speyer, the *Legenda choralis Umbra* and many others.²⁴

The short paragraph is evidently a summary of the episode in the *Vita beati Francisci* of Celano. It contextualises the event of the *transitus* within the last years of Francis, noting his sickness and especially his eye disease. Francis is presented blessing the brothers by crossing his arms like the patriarch Jacob who is presented in this attitude when blessing Joseph’s sons, namely Ephraim and Manasseh, placing his right hand on the head of the younger Ephraim. This could just be a reference to Francis placing his arms in the form of a cross, and in the episode there is no reference to later descriptions of Francis’ preference towards Elias, as in the case of the *Vita brevior* below, or towards his preferring Bernardo da Quintavalle, his first brother, in the case of chapter 5 of the *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius*, which were written more than a century after the death of Saint Francis.²⁵ The narration also mentions the singing of the *Laudes creaturarum*, the recitation of Psalm 142 (141) *Voce mea*, the reading of John’s Gospel, the covering of Francis with a hair-shirt (*cilicio*), which could also refer to sack-cloth, no mention of the ashes, and the description of Francis’ soul ascending into heaven on a white cloud, with a veiled reference to Sirach 50:6. All in all, one can state that, in just a few sentences, Celano succeeds in presenting a complete picture of the episode of the *transitus* of

²⁰ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Legenda ad usum chori*, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 119-130.

²¹ ELEONORA RAVA – FILIPPO SEDDA, *Sulle tracce dell’autore della Legenda ad usum chori beati Francisci. Analisi lessicografica e ipotesi di attribuzione*, in *Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi*, Tome 69 (2011), 107-175. Benedetto Sigardi da Arezzo was minister of the province of *Terra Promissionis*, or *Outremer*, or Greece or Romania, with headquarters in Constantinople and also in Antioch from 1221 to 1237, following brother Elias of Cortona and a certain brother Luca. See PIERLUIGI LICCIARDELLO, *Sinigardi, Benedetto, beato*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Istituto Treccani, Roma, Vol. 92 (2018).

²² TIMOTHY JOHNSON, *Lost in Sacred Space: Textual Hermeneutics, Liturgical Worship, and Celano’s Legenda ad usum chori*, in *Franciscan Studies* 59 (2001), 109-131.

²³ FRANCESCO DOLCIAMI, *Francesco d’Assisi tra devozione, culto e liturgia*, Perugia 2001, 12-13: In base ai dati in nostro possesso, un primo, riuscito, tentativo di scrivere liturgicamente su Francesco d’Assisi, può essere fatto rimontare alla *legenda ad usum chori*, attribuita ormai unanimamente a Tommaso da Celano e adottata con tutta certezza a partire dalla presentazione della *Vita prima*. La leggenda corale celanense, grazie anche a questa sua relativa precocità, ma soprattutto in funzione dello stato attuale delle ricerche, può essere considerata l’archetipo delle leggende liturgiche sanfrancescane. Divisa in diciassette lezioni, il cui testo è stato ricavato dalla collazione di undici codici, la *legenda ad usum chori* celanense è una fonte di primo piano per lo studio dell’immagine di Francesco, tuttora al centro di animate discussioni. Ma non ci illudiamo: anche se è possibile considerarla leggenda ufficiale a tutti gli effetti, ha goduto di una scarsa diffusione nel contesto liturgico francescano e non. (quoted from PDF in www.academia.edu [15.09.2026]).

²⁴ FILIPPO SEDDA – JACQUES DALARUN (a cura di), *Franciscus Liturgicus. Editio Fontium Saeculi XIII*, Editrici Franciscane, Padova 2015.

²⁵ UGOLINO BONISCAMBI DA MONTE SANTA MARIA, *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and his companions*, c. 5 (FAED III, 446-447).

Saint Francis, within the context of an orderly celebration that has a liturgical flavour and fits very well within the framework of a document intended to be used by the friars during the prayer of the divine office in choir.

The *Transitus* in the *Vita beati patris nostri Francisci* 83-87 - Text²⁶

How brother Elias led Francis sick from Siena to Assisi. How Francis blessed him and how he ordered the brothers to sing the praises and how one of them saw his soul ascend into heaven.

83 Six months before he died, when he was in Siena, [Francis] suffered a sickness in his stomach and his eye disease became more serious. Since all his body was suffering greatly, it seemed that death was approaching. Brother Elias hastened to come to him. At his arrival

²⁶ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Vita beati patris nostri Francisci (Vita brevior)* 83-87, in Jacques Dalarun, *Thome Celanensis Vita beati patris nostri Francisci (Vita brevior). Présentation et édition critique*, in *Analecta Bollandiana* 133 (2015) 63-65: Qualiter frater Helyas eum de Senis Assisium infirmum perduxit. De benedictione quam sibi dedit et de laude quam instanter cantari fecit et quomodo ad celum ascendentem quidam animam suam vidit.

83 In mense autem sexto ante obitus sui diem, cum esset apud Senas, stomachi defectus infirmitate prevaluit oculorum et, gravius solito corpore toto attritus, morti visus est propinquare. Frater Helyas festinans venit ad eum, de cuius adventu gaudens, convaluit et ad Cellam de Cortona cum ipso recessit. Ubi morbo gravius invalescente, fecit se Assisium deportari. *Letata est civitas* (Est 8:15) *in adventu* (2Co 7:6) eius et, tam pretiosissimum *thesaurum* apud se in proximo *recondi* (Tb 12,8) sperantes, omnes unanimiter exultabant. Interea infirmitate crescente, dum esset in palatio Assisinati episcopi, omne robur corporis eius elanguit et, viribus destitutus omnibus, in singulis fere membris torqueri cepit attritius. Interrogatus namque quid sentiret de tanta quam tolerabat corporis passione, mitius fore sibi asseruit aliud quodcumque genus martirii. “Sed Dei voluntas,” inquit, “leve fecit omne difficile.”

84 Enimvero, cum iam sibi diem videret propinquare extremum, sicut a fratre Helya biennium ante didicerat, cui Dominus patris exitum dignatus est revelare, *vocatis ad se* fratribus et filiis *quos volebat* (Mc 3:13), sicut ei *dabatur desuper* (Jn 19:11), velut olym patriarcha Iacob, unicuique benedixit. Cumque a sinistris ipsius residerat frater Helyas, circumsedentibus reliquis filiis, cancellatis *manibus*, *dexteram posuit super caput* (Gn 48:14) eius. Sed exteriorum oculorum lumine pene privatus et usu: “Super quem”, inquit, “teneo dexteram meam?” – “Super fratrem Helyam”, inquit. “Et ego sic volo”, ait. “Tibi”, inquit, “fili, *in omnibus et per omnia* (Ep 4:6) benedico, qui, humeris propriis honera mea suscipiens, fratrum necessitates viriliter subportasti. Et sicut in manibus tuis eos augmentavit et conservavit Altissimus, ita et in te omnibus benedico. *In celo et in terra* (Ps 112:6) *benedicat te rex omnium Deus* (Tb 9:9). Benedico te sicut possum et plus quam possum. Et quod non possum ego, possit in te qui omnia potest. *Recordetur Deus* (Dan 14:37) operis et laboris tui, et in *retributione iustorum* (He 2:2) sors tua servetur. Omnem benedictionem quam cupis invenias et quod digne postulas impleatur. Valet, filii omnes, *in timore Dei* (2R 23:3; 2Par 19:9; 2Esd 5:9) et permanete in ipso semper. Et *quoniam futura temptatio et tribulatio* (Si 27:6; Ps 21:12) appropinquat, felices *qui in hiis que ceperunt perseverabunt* (Mt 10:22). Ego enim ad Dominum propero, cuius gratie vos omnes commendo”.

85 Post hec ad Sanctam Mariam de Portiuncula se portari precepit, ut ibi animam redderet Domino ubi primo perfecte *viam veritatis* (Ps 118:30) agnovit. Hunc locum expertus fuerat gratis uberiori repletum et supernorum visitatione spirituum frequentatum. Hunc locum semper voluit a fratribus honorifice custodiri, eo quod religionis *novella* (Ps 143:12) plantatio, illic primum excrescens, repleverit orbem terre.

86 Paucis igitur diebus in loco sibi desiderato quiescens, cum iam *tempus* propinquare mortis *instare* (He 9:9) cognosceret, accersiti sunt ab eo frater Angelus et frater Leo, inter omnes sibi karissimi, precepitque eis de transitu sic vicino laudes alacriter Domino decantare. Ipse vero, prout potuit, in hunc psalmum erupuit: *Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi. Voce mea ad Dominum deprecatus sum* (Ps 141:2). Statimque codicem Evangeliorum apportari precipiens, Evangelium secundum Iohannem, ab eo loco quo incipit *Ante sex dies Pasce* (Jn 12:1), sibi legi poposcit. Et conversus ad quendam *quem diligebat* (Jn 13:23; 19:26; 21:20): “Fratribus meis”, inquit, “tam presentibus quam absentibus ex parte mea omnibus benedicas, quorum culpas et offensas omnes remitto, et eos, sicut possum, absolvo”.

87 Denique, cum esset cilicio superpositus cinereque conspersus, circumstantibus et flentibus filiis et fratribus, sanctissima illa anima carne soluta est et in abisso claritatis absorpta corpusque *obdormivit in Domino* (Ac 7:60). Unus autem ex discipulis eius, fama non modicum celebris, vidit animam sanctissimi patris, *quasi stelam lune* (Si 50:6) immensitatem habentem et *solis claritatem* (1Co 15:41) precedentem, *super multas aquas* (Ps 28:3; 1Co 14:41) a *candida* subventam *nubecula* (Ap 14:14), recto tramite in *celum conscendere* (Jos 8:20).

[Francis] rejoiced and his health took a turn for the better, and he went with him to Celle di Cortona. At that place, however, his sickness became even more serious, and so he was taken to Assisi. *The inhabitants of the town rejoiced* (Est 8:15) *at his coming* (2Cor 7:6), as if he were a most precious *treasure* that they had to *hide* close to themselves, and full of hope, they all rejoiced with one voice. In the meantime, his infirmity got worse during the time in which he was staying in the palace of the bishop of Assisi. All his physical forces abandoned him, and he was unable to move and every single member of his body became a torture for him. When he was asked how he could bear up with so much bodily suffering, he humbly replied that for him it was like a martyrdom. “But with God’s will,” he said, “all things which are difficult become easy to bear.”

84 Indeed, when it became clear that his death was approaching, as brother Elias had learned two years earlier, when the Lord had graciously revealed to him the end of the father’s life, *he called unto himself* the brothers and sons *whom he willed* (Mk 3:13), as *had been given to him from on high* (Jn 19:11), and just as the patriarch Jacob once did, he blessed them one by one. Since brother Elias was sitting on his left, while he was surrounded by the other brothers, [Francis] *crossed his hands and placed his right hand upon the head* (Gn 48:14) [of brother Elias]. But since he could not see since he had lost the use of the light of his eyes he asked: “Upon whom am I placing my right hand?” “Upon brother Elias,” the brothers answered. “And this is what I want,” he said. Then he added: “My son, I bless you *in all and above all* (Eph 4:6) since you have shouldered my own burden and you have courageously supported the brothers in their needs. And just as the Most High has made them grow and conserved them in your hands, so I bless them all in you. May *God* the king of all *bless you in heaven and on earth* (Ps 112:6; Tb 9:9). I bless you as I can and more than I can. And in what I cannot bless you may He who is all-powerful do so. *May God remember* (Dn 14:37) your works and your efforts and may He endow you with *the reward of the just* (Heb 2:2). May you find all the blessings you long for and may all your noble prayers be fulfilled. My sons, remain steadfast *in the fear of the Lord* (2Kg 23:3; 2Chr 19:9; Nh 5:9) and may you remain faithful in it always. And *since future temptation and tribulation* (Sir 27:6; Ps 21:12) is approaching, may they be happy *who persevere* (Mt 10:22) in those things they promised to live. I will now hasten to meet my Lord, to whose grace I commend all of you.”

85 After having said these words he commanded them to take him to Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, so that he could render his soul to the Lord in the place where he first came to know the perfect *way of truth* (Ps 118:30). This place was filled with more abundant graces and was often visited by the heavenly spirits. He always wanted the brothers to be faithful to their honour of being custodians of this place, since it was there that the *good news* (Ps 143:12) of the religion was planted, and it was there that it first grew and from there it filled the whole world.

86 [Francis] rested for some days in that place which he desired, and when he was aware that *the time* of his death *was approaching* (Hb 9:9), he summoned to himself brother Angelo and brother Leo, who were most dear to him among all the others, and he ordered them to sing with joy the praises of the Lord and the imminence of his *transitus*. He himself, as best he could, began to sing this psalm: *With my voice I call upon the Lord. With my voice I beseech the Lord* (Ps 141:2). He also ordered them to bring him immediately the Book of the Gospels, and asked them to read the Gospel according to John from that place where it begins with the words *Six days before Easter* (Jn 12:1). Turning towards one brother *whom he loved* (Jn 13:23; 19:26; 21:20), he said: “On my part I now bless all my brothers, both those present and those who are absent, and I hereby absolve all of them, as much as I can, from all their faults and offences.”

87 Finally, after having put on sackcloth and asked them to sprinkle him with ashes, while all the sons and brothers were gathered around him weeping, his most holy soul was liberated from the flesh and was absorbed in the abyss of light and his body *slept in the Lord* (Acts 7:60). One of his disciples, highly famous for his holiness, saw the soul of the most holy father. It seemed to be *like a star and a moon* (Sir 50:6) and had the immense *shining splendour of the sun* (1Cor 15:41). It was proceeding *over many waters* (Ps 28:3; 1Cor 14:41) and was carried *by a shining cloud* (Rv 14:14), and was ascending straight into heaven.²⁷

The *Transitus* in the *Vita beati patris nostri Francisci* 83-87 – Comment

The *Vita beati patris Francisci* is the latest addition to the list of Franciscan sources and especially in what used to be known as the “trilogy” of Tommaso da Celano, before the discovery of this gem of a mediaeval biography by Jacques Dalarun on 15th September 2014 in what is now Ms 3245 of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. In the text we quoted we have preferred to go back to the episodes leading up to the *transitus* of Saint Francis, beginning from the night when he dictated the first *Testament* in Siena in April 1226, to his transfer by brother Elias to the hermitage of Celle di Cortona, and then to his arrival in Assisi at the bishop’s palace, after having spent some time in the hills of Bagnara close to Nocera Umbra in order to escape from the intense heat of summer. The scholar Felice Accrocca, bishop of Assisi, Nocera Umbra and Gualdo Tadino, has documented with detail these movements of the saint and especially the insistence on the part of the Assisi commune to have the saint secure within the walls of Assisi, lest he died outside the *contado* under its jurisdiction.²⁸

Paragraph 83 begins with the reference to the martyrdom that Francis had to endure in Siena because of his multiple illnesses and immediately gives great importance to the role of his vicar, brother Elias, who hurries to transport Francis to the hermitage of Celle di Cortona. The *Vita brevior* is well known as a source for the importance it gives to the role of brother Elias. The reason is simple. Celano was writing this abridged life of Saint Francis upon the wish of brother Elias himself, who at the time was minister general of the Order (1232-1239). Given his role as one of the closest companions of Saint Francis, Elias is given pride of place in the *Vita brevior*, and Celano dedicates this work explicitly to him as minister general. We shall note the change of tone in the *Memoriale*, written in 1246-1247, at a time when Elias had fallen in disgrace and the friars preferred not to mention him by name. However, the role that Elias assumed during the last months of Francis’ life is of great importance, and this biography is a welcome enriching addition to our knowledge of the bond that existed between Francis and his vicar. In the same paragraph Francis is asked by a brother about his ability to endure suffering and answers that it was to him like a martyrdom, but that he could bear up with it with God’s help. This description echoes in a certain way what Julian of Speyer composed around the same time (1232-1235) in the *Officium Rythmicum Sancti Francisci*, when he described Francis as a *martyr desiderio* in the *Benedictus* antiphon of the Lauds of his feast day: “O Francis, martyr by desire, // Feeling His pain, with all your soul // You followed in the steps of Him // Whom suffering you found in the book // You took and opened wide. // While you were gazing at the sky // The Seraph on the cross you saw, // And thence you bore on hands and side // And felt the image of the wounds // Of Christ the Crucified. // Tend still the flock

²⁷ This English translation is my own since I do not currently have the published English version. See JACQUES DALARUN, *Thomas of Celano. The Rediscovered Life of Saint Francis*. Translated by Timothy J. Johnson, Franciscan Institute Publications, St. Bonaventure University, NY 2016.

²⁸ FELICE ACCROCCA, *Un corpo conteso*, cit.

you left behind; // For after you had passed away, // Though hard and dark your flesh till then,
// To all appearance you displayed // A body glorified.”²⁹

Paragraph 84 is dedicated to the special blessing that Francis reserved for brother Elias. Celano recalls the prophecy given to Elias in Foligno, although he does not mention the town by name, and then states that Francis called to him the brothers he willed, namely his most intimate companions, and blessed them all. This event, as we have seen, occurred in the bishop’s palace in Assisi. Then Celano states that Francis crossed his arms and laid his right hand on Elias’ head and blessed with a special blessing. The description of the blessing and the words which Francis uttered are even more detailed in the *Vita brevior*, since, as we have said, Celano seems to have wanted to please the minister general by extolling his closeness to Francis and his faithfulness to him as his vicar. Together with these words of blessing Francis also addresses the brothers foretelling that they would encounter days of tribulation in the future. Maybe Celano was not far off the mark, although in 1232 it was still early to speak about the tribulation that would ensue in the years to come, and which would involve also the relationship of the same brothers with their minister general Elias.

Paragraph 85 describes how Francis orders the brothers to take him down from the bishop’s palace in Assisi to the Portiuncula chapel. It seems that his strong will won over the decisions of the civil authorities in Assisi to keep watch over him in the secure fortress of the bishop’s palace. Above all Celano describes in a few words the reason why Francis wanted to go to die at the Portiuncula. In that place Francis had known the way of truth revealed to him by the Lord, an obvious reference to the *apostolica vivendi forma* discovered in that small chapel in 1208 when Francis heard the Gospel of the mission of the apostles. Celano then describes the Portiuncula’s importance in the life of Francis and in the life of the brothers. The words of praise of the Portiuncula are a summary of what Celano states in the *Vita beati Francisci* 106 regarding the duty of the brothers to cherish that holy place and never leave it. When Celano was writing the *Vita brevior* the Portiuncula was still important in the life of the brothers, but its importance was also being challenged by the building of the new basilica of Saint Francis, where the remains of the saint were triumphantly transported on 25th May 1230, not without unpleasant incidents. As we know, the basilica was the result of the explicit will of Pope Gregory IX, and as a fitting monument to the *poverello* it was also a product of the genius of brother Elias who oversaw its building in a relatively short period of time, first building the lower crypt in 1230 and then the elegant monastic church above it, which was complete with the bell-tower in 1236, when he was minister general. On 22nd April 1230 Gregory IX had published the Bulla *Is qui Ecclesiam*, declaring the basilica *caput et mater* (head and mother) of the Order of Minors.³⁰

Paragraph 86 describes the liturgy of the *transitus*. Francis calls to himself two of the brothers, who are here mentioned by name, that is, Leo and Angelo, and asks them to sing the *Laudes creaturarum*. Then he personally recites the Psalm *Voce mea*, and asks the brothers to read to him the Gospel according to John. Once more, the *Vita brevior*, like the *Vita beati Francisci*, states that the first verse of the reading was John 12:1, with an obvious reference to

²⁹ JULIAN OF SPEYER, *The Rhymed Office of Saint Francis, Benedictus Antiphon* (FAED I, 339-340). Latin text: O martyr desiderio, Francisce, quanto studio compatiens hunc sequeris, quem passum libro reperis, quem aperuisti! Tu contuens in aere Seraph in cruce positum, ex tunc in palmis, latere et pedibus effigiem fers plagarum Christi. Tu gregi tuo provide, qui post felicem transitum, dirae prius et lividae, glorificatae speciem carnis praetendisti.

³⁰ GREGORIUS IX, *Is qui Ecclesiam* (22 Aprilis 1230), in *Bullarium Franciscanum*, ed. IOHANNNES HYCINTHUS SBARALEA, Tomus I, Romae 1759, 60-62: Ecclesia ipsa nulli nisi romano pontifici sit subiecta; et vestri Ordinis caput habeatur et mater, ac in ea per fratres eiusdem Ordinis perpetuo serviatur.

the six days before Passover, even though it also mentions the brothers that Francis loved, just as Christ loved his own to the very end in John 13:1.

Paragraph 87 describes the actions of Francis preceding his death, namely his covering with sack-cloth and sprinkling with ashes, the final words of blessing to the brothers and the moment of death described with the words of Acts referring to the peaceful sleep in death of the deacon Stephen, and then the vision of a special brother who enjoyed no small fame among the brothers (*Unus autem ex discipulis eius, fama non modicum celebris*) who sees the soul of Francis ascend into heaven according to the images of Sir 50:6 and Rev 14:14 which we have already seen. The detail about the fame of the anonymous brother again places us in front of the dilemma regarding what kind of fame such a brother might have had. If he was brother Elias, then he would certainly have been famous even for his role of governing the Order. But there was also another kind of fame which he might have enjoyed, namely the spiritual fame of being close to Francis in his faithfulness, and this would direct our attention to some of the brothers of the first generation, like Leo, Angelo, Bernard. Unfortunately we are not in a position to resolve the question since Celano prefers to keep the identity of this brother hidden. But his identity is then revealed by Bernard of Besse, who states that he was brother James.³¹

All in all, the *Vita brevior* gives an account which is very similar to that in the *Vita beati Francisci*, except for the fact that it lays great emphasis on the role of brother Elias in the entire narration of the episodes surrounding Francis' last months of physical ailments, from the episode of Siena in April to his *transitus* at the Portiuncula on 3rd October 1226.

The *Transitus* in the *Memoriale in desiderio animae* 214-217 - Text³²

³¹ BERNARD OF BESSE, *Liber de Laudibus beati Francisci*, c. 1: Brother James, who merited to observe the holy father's soul ascending into heaven like a star as brilliant as the sun (FAED III, 35).

³² THOMAS DE CELANO, *Memoriale in desiderio animae* 214-217 in *Analecta Franciscana* X: Caput CLXII – Quomodo hortatus est fratres et benedixit in fine:

214 *In fine hominis*, ait sapiens, *denudatio operum illius* (Sir 11:27-28), quod in sancto isto gloriose cernimus esse completum. *Qui mandatorum Dei viam mentis alacritate percurrens* (Ps 118:32), per omnium virtutum gradus ad summa pervenit, et velut ductile opus, sub multiplicis tribulationis malleo ad perfectionem adductus, *omnis consummationis vidit finem* (Ps 118:96). Tunc enim magis eius mirifica opera colluxerunt, et divinum fuisse omne quod vixit, *veritatis iudicio* (Ps 110:7) fulsit, cum vitae mortalis calcatis illecebris, liber evasit ad superos. Nam mundo vivere duxit opprobrium, *dilexit suos in finem* (Jn 13:1), mortem cantando suscepit. Cum enim ad dies iam propinquaret extremos, quibus, finibili luce subtracta, lux perpetua succedebat, virtutis exemplo monstravit, quod nihil comune illi erat cum mundo. Confectus namque infirmitate illa tam gravi, quae omni languori conclusit, super nudam humum se nudum fecit deponi, ut hora illa extrema, in qua poterat adhuc hostis irasci, *nudus luctaretur cum nudo*. Triumphum revera expectabat intrepidus, et consertis manibus *iustitiae* complectebatur *coronam* (2Tm 4:8). *Positus sic in terra* (Job 11:15), saccina veste deposita, *faciem solito levavit ad caelum*, et *intendens illi gloriae* (Act 7:55) totus, manu sinistra dextri lateris vulnus, ne videretur, obtexit. Et ait ad fratres: “Ego quod meum est feci; quod vestrum est, *Christus edoceat!*” (Eph 4:21).

215 Videntes haec filii producunt rivulos lacrimarum, et de intimis longa trahentes suspiria, nimio dolori compatiendo succumbunt. Interea sopitis utcumque singultibus, guardianus eius, qui votum sancti divina verius inspiratione cognovit, festinus surrexit et acceptam cum femoralibus tunicam saccinamque cappellulam, dixit ad patrem: “Tunicam istam et femoralia cum cappellula, obedientiae sanctae mandato, a me tibi accomodatam cognoveris! Sed, ut scias te nihil proprietatis in illis habere, dandi haec alicui omnem tibi aufero potestatem”. *Gaudet sanctus et iubilat prae laetitia cordis* (Cant 3:11), quoniam fidem tenuisse dominae paupertati *usque in finem* (Mt 10:22) se videt. Fecerat enim haec omnia paupertatis zelo, ut haec habitum quidem proprium in fine vellet habere sed quasi ab altero commodatum. Cappellulam vero saccinam portabat in capite, ut cicatrices contereret pro sanitate oculorum susceptas, cui satis necessarium erat pileum cuiusvis pretiosae lanae suavitate lenissimum.

216 *Levat* post haec sanctus *palmas ad caelum* (2Par 6:13), et Christum suum magnificat, quod iam exoneratus omnibus, liber vadit ad ipsum. Verum ut ostenderet se Dei sui *Christi verum imitatore* (1Cor 4:16) in omnibus, fratres et filios, *quos dilexerat* a principio, *in finem dilexit eos* (Jn 13:1). Fecit enim fratres omnes assistentes

214 *At a human's end*, says the wise man, *comes the disclosing of his works* (Sir 11:27-28), and we see this gloriously fulfilled in this saint. *Running eagerly on the road of God's commandments* (Ps 119:32), he scaled the steps of all the virtues until he reached the very summit. Like a malleable metal, he was brought to perfection under the hammering blows of many tribulations, and *saw the end of all perfection* (Ps 119:96). Then his wonderful work shone all the brighter, and it flared out in *the judgement of truth* (Ps 111:7) that everything he lived was divine. He trampled on the allure of mortal life and escaped free into the heights. For he considered it dishonour to live for the world, *loved his own to the very end* (Jn 13:1), and welcomed Death singing. When he approached his final days – when *light eternal* was replacing the limited light that had been removed – he showed by his example of virtue that he had nothing in common with the world.

As he was wasted by that grave illness which ended all his sufferings, he had himself placed naked on the naked ground, so that in that final hour, when the Enemy could still rage, he might wrestle naked with the naked. The fearless man awaited triumph and, with hands joined, held the *crown of justice* (2Tm 4:8). Placed *on the ground* (Jb 11:15) and stripped of his sackcloth garment, he *lifted up his face to heaven* as usual, and, totally, *intent upon that glory* (Acts 7:55), he covered the wound on his right side with his left hand, so no one would see it. Then he said to his brothers: “I have done *what is mine*; *may Christ teach* (Eph 4:21) you what is yours!”

ibidem ad se vocari, et *verbis consolatoriis* (Zac 1:13) eos pro sua morte demulcens, paterno affectu ad divinum est hortatus amorem. De patientia et paupertate servanda sermonem protaxit, caeteris institutis sanctum Evangelium anteponebat. Circumsedentibus vero omnibus fratribus, *extendit super eos dexteram suam*, et incipiens a vicario suo *capitibus singulorum imposuit* (Gen 48:14-22). “Valete”, inquit, “filii omnes, *in timore Domini* (Act 9:31) et permanete in ipso semper! Et quoniam futura tentatio et tribulatio appropinquat, felices qui perseverabunt in his quae coeperunt. Ego enim ad Deum propero, cuius gratiae vos omnes commendo”; benedixitque in illis qui erant ibi, etiam omnibus fratribus, qui ubique *conversabantur in mundo, et qui venturi erant post ipsos* (2Cor 1:12; Jn 1:13), usque *in finem saeculi saeculorum* (Dan 7:18). Nullus sibi hanc benedictionem usurpet quam pro absentibus in praesentibus promulgavit; ut alibi scripta est aliquid insonuit speciale, sed potius ad officium detorquendum.

Caput CLXIII – De morte eius et quid fecerit ante mortem.

217 Cum itaque amarissime lacrimarentur fratres et inconsolabiliter deplorarent, iussit pater sanctus *panem* sibi afferri. Quem *benedixit et fregit* (Mt 14:17.18; Mt 26:26), et particulam unicuique ad manducandum porrexit. Codicem etiam Evangeliorum apportari praecipiens, Evangelium secundum Ioannem ab eo loco qui incipit: *Ante diem festum Paschae* etc. (Jn 13:1), sibi legi poposcit. Recordabatur illius sacratissimae coenae, quam Dominus cum suis discipulis ultimam celebravit. In illis enim veneranda memoria, ostendens quem ad fratres habebat amoris affectum, fecit hoc totum. Proinde paucos dies, qui usque ad transitum eius restabant, expendit in laudem, socios suos valde dilectos secum Christum laudare instituens. Ipse vero, prout potuit, in huic psalmum erupuit: *Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi, voce mea ad Dominum deprecatus sum*, etc (Ps 141:2-8). Invitabat etiam omnes creaturas ad laudem Dei, et per verba quaedam quae olim composuerat, ipse eas ad divinum hortabatur amorem. Nam et mortem ipsam, cunctis terribilem et exosam, hortabatur ad laudem, *eique laetus occurrens* (Iud 19:3), ad suum invitabat hospitium: “Bene veniat”, inquit, “soror mea mors!” Ad mendicum autem: “Audacter, frater medice, proximam prognostica mortem, quae mihi erit ianua vitae!”. Ad fratres vero: “Cum me videritis ad extrema perducere, sicut me nudiustertius nudum vidistis, sic me super humum exponite, et per tam longum spatium iam defunctum sic iacere sinatis, quod unius milliarii tractum suaviter quis perficere posset”. *Venit igitur hora* (Jn 4:21), et cunctis in eum *Christi completis mysteriis* (Col 4:3), feliciter volavit ad Deum. Quomodo quidam frater vidit animam sancti patris in transitu ipsius. Unus frater ex discipulis eius, famae non modicum celebris, vidit animam sanctissimi patris *quasi stellam* (Sir 50:6), lunae immensitatem habentem et solis claritatem, praetendentem *super aquas multas* (Ps 29:3), *a candida subvecta nubecula*, recto tramite *in caelum conscendere* (Apoc 14:14).

Critical Latin edition: Thomas de Celano, *Memoriale*, Editio critico-synoptica duarum redactionum ad fidem codicum manuseriptorum. Curaverunt Felice Accrocca, Aleksander Horowski, Istituto storico dei Cappuccini (Subsidia scientifica franciscalia, 12), Roma 2011, cxc + 594.

English translation: THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, 214-217 [FAED II, 385-388].

215 Seeing this, his sons wept streams of tears, drawing sighs from deep within, overwhelmed by sorrow and compassion. Meanwhile, as their sobs somewhat subsided, his guardian, who by divine inspiration better understood the saint's wish, quickly got up, took the tunic, underwear and sackcloth hood, and said to the father: "I command you under holy obedience to acknowledge that I am lending you this tunic, underwear and hood. And so that you know that they in no way belong to you, I take away all your authority to give them to anyone." The saint rejoiced, and his *heart* leaped for *joy* (Sg 3:11) seeing that he had kept faith *until the end* (Mt 10:22) with Lady Poverty. For he had done all of this out of zeal for poverty, not wanting to have at the end even a habit of his own, but one borrowed from another. He had been wearing a sackcloth cap on his head to cover the scars he had received in the treatment of his eyes; what was really needed for this was a smooth cap of the softest and most expensive wool.

216 After this the saint *raised his hands to heaven* (2Chr 6:13) and glorified his Christ: free now from all things, he was going to him free.

But in order to show himself in all things a true *imitator of Christ* (1Cor 4:16), his God, *he loved to the very end* the brothers and sons *he had loved* (Jn 13:1) from the beginning. He had them call to him all the brothers present there, and, comforting them about his death with *words of consolation* (Zac 1:13), he exhorted them to the love of God with fatherly affection. He spoke at length about patience, about persevering poverty, and about placing the Holy Gospel ahead of all other observances.

As all the brothers sat around him, *he stretched out his right hand over them* and, beginning with his vicar, *he placed it on each of their heads* (Gn 48:14-22) saying: "Good bye, my sons, live in the *fear of the Lord* (Acts 9:31) and remain in it always! A great trial and tribulation is at hand! Happy are they who will persevere in the things they have begun! I am hurrying to God, to whose grace I commend all of you!"

He then blessed in those who were there, all the other brothers who *were living* anywhere in *the world*, and those who *were to come after* (2Cor 1:12; Jn 1:13) them *unto the end of all ages* (Dn 7:18).

Let no one claim this blessing as his own for he pronounced it for those absent through those present. As written elsewhere it sounded like something for an individual; instead it should be redirected to the office.

217 As the brothers shed bitter tears and wept inconsolably, the holy father had *bread brought* to him. He *blessed and broke* (Mt 14:17.18; Mt 26:26) and gave each of them a piece to eat. He also ordered a Book of the Gospels to be brought and asked that the Gospel according to Saint John be read to him starting from that place which begins: *Before the feast of Passover* (Jn 13:1). He was remembering that most sacred Supper, the last one the Lord celebrated *with his disciples* (Mt 26:20). In reverent memory of this, to show his brothers how much he loved them, he did all of this.

The few days that remained to him before his passing he spent in praise of God, teaching his beloved companions how to praise Christ with him. As best he could, he broke out in this psalm, *With my voice I cried to the Lord, With my voice I beseeched the Lord* (Ps 142:2-8). He also invited all creatures to the praise of God, and exhorted them to love by some words which he had composed earlier. Even death itself, terrible and hateful everyone, he exhorted to praise, and *going to meet her joyfully* (Jgs 19:3), invited her to be his guest, saying: "Welcome, my

Sister Death!” And to the doctor he said: “Be bold, Brother Doctor, foretell death is near; for to me she will be the gate of life!” But to the brothers he said: “When you see I have come to my end put me out naked on the ground as you saw me naked the day before yesterday, and once I am dead, allow me to lie there for as long as it takes to walk a leisurely mile.”

The *hour came* (Jn 4:21). All *the mysteries of Christ* (Col 4:3) were fulfilled in him, and he happily flew off to God.

One of his disciples, a brother of no small fame, saw the soul of the most holy father *like a star ascending to heaven* (Sir 50:6), having the immensity of the moon and the brightness of the sun, extending *over many waters* (Ps 29:3) carried by *a little white cloud* (Rv 14:14).

The *Transitus* in the *Memoriale in desiderio animae* 214-217 – Comment

When Tommaso da Celano composed the *Memoriale in desiderio animae* in 1246-1247, twenty years had passed since Francis’ *transitus*. The documentary material which Celano used was much richer by that time, being, as we know, also the result of the *florilegium* that the three companions Leo, Angelo and Rufino had sent to the minister general Crescenzo da Iesi from Greccio with an accompanying letter on 11th August 1246, and which included the testimony of a good number of brothers of the first generation. Here we will not enter into the merits of the discussion regarding the fate of this documentary material and its use in the various Franciscan sources. What is sure is that Celano made good use of it to produce the *Memoriale*.³³

This documentary material enabled Celano to produce a different account, or rather a more detailed account, of the *transitus* of Saint Francis, which is not only rich in the details it presents, but is evidently intended to convey the idea of a paraliturgical celebration in the moment of Francis’ death.

Celano starts off by presenting Francis who endures physical suffering and illness with the spirit of martyrdom, and even in the midst of so much tribulation, he welcomes Death joyfully (*mortem cantando suscepit*). This could very well be a reference to the fact that Francis asked the brothers to sing the *Laudes creaturarum* in which he inserted the last part regarding *sora nostra morte corporale*.

Celano then directs our attention to the tiny hut which is nowadays revered as the chapel of the *transitus*, at the back of the Portiuncula, where Francis lay on the ground covered with sack-cloth and giving a courageous witness to poverty by staying naked on the naked ground. The idea of spiritual nakedness is very much present in the life of Saint Francis, beginning with his contemplation of the naked Crucified Christ in the church of San Damiano, his penitential gesture of embracing the leper and comparing him to Christ poor and naked on the cross, his renunciation of his father’s possessions in front of the bishop of Assisi, his first experience of poverty in scant clothing at the Benedictine abbey of San Verecondo, his expression of purity of heart in the episode of the carnal temptation that prompted him to throw himself naked on the snow in the bitter cold of a winter night, the episode of *perfetta letizia* with brother Leo. The list can go on. The theme of spiritual nakedness is present in the writings of the Church Fathers ever since Saint Jerome, who speaks of *nudam crucem nudus sequar* (following naked

³³ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Memoriale. Editio critico-synoptica duarum redactionum ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum*. Curaverunt Felice Accrocca – Aleksander Horowski, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Roma 2011 [Subsidia Scientifica Franciscalia, 12].

the naked cross).³⁴ This idea of nakedness also conveys the notion of wrestling with the naked enemy, since the image of naked wrestling in ancient Greek culture was often applied also to the belief that the devil is naked and that Christ won over him by dying naked on the cross and presenting spiritual nakedness to his disciples as their weapon against evil. Celano presents Francis who, although practically naked on the naked ground, covers the wound on his side with his hands as if to protect it. The image is that of a crucified man who bears the marks of the stigmata and dies poor and naked like Jesus on the cross.

At this point Francis speaks to the brothers inviting them to discover their own way of following Christ: “I have done *what is mine; may Christ teach* (Eph 4:21) you what is yours!” Words of wisdom which were to prove so problematic during the later history of the Order when the brothers were struggling to come to terms with the *intentio Francisci* while remaining faithful to his ideals without necessarily repeating his own gestures. The brothers are then presented as weeping over this image of a crucified man. It seems to be a re-enactment of the episode of Calvary with the beloved disciple and the women who weep at the foot of the cross. We shall also consider this attitude in the case of Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli in the *Tractatus de miraculis*, the last contribution of Celano.

The sight of the poor and naked body of Francis lying on the ground of the tiny infirmary at the back of the Portiuncula moved the “guardian” of the Saint to tears of compassion. We know how Francis always wanted to be submitted to holy obedience and to have a personal guardian in order to correct him and guide him in his faithfulness to the Gospel. The saint’s guardian, who might have been Elias himself, or rather another brother designated for the purpose, comes out with a stratagem in order to convince Francis to obey him and clothe himself with a habit. Celano shows how this guardian commands Francis to wear a habit which does not belong to him and which is lent to him on the condition that he had no right to give it to someone else. This prompted Francis to rejoice at his being deprived of all possessions to the very end, and he accepted willingly to be clothed in the habit. The gesture of clothing is considered to be a sign of dignity in the Bible, particularly in the image of the bride clothed in splendid vestments to meet her future husband, as in Ezekiel 16:10, Ps 44 (45):15, Rev 19:8. The image is a symbol of glory and dignity, as opposed to nakedness which is an image of poverty and weakness, just as Christ was stripped of his garments in Jn 19:23. Francis’ suffering was to endure to the very end, since he did not even have a soft covering for his head and eyes, which were under terrible strain from the trachoma that Francis had developed and especially after the barbaric intervention of the papal surgeon at the hermitage of Fonte Colombo.³⁵

Celano then presents Francis as a true imitator of Christ. This theme of imitation of Christ begins to be more present in the later sources, as from the mid-13th century, and is developed also by Bonaventure in the *Legenda Maior* and especially by the sources coming from the 14th

³⁴ FRANCO MORMANDO, “*Nudus nudum Christum sequi*”: *The Franciscans and Differing Interpretations of Male Nakedness in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, in *Fifteenth-Century Studies* Vol. 33, Woodbridge, Suffolk UK 2008, 172: Nudity became, in fact, a defining characteristic of Franciscanism, as established by St. Francis and promulgated through his first spiritual children. The public disrobing undertaken by the “Poverello” of Assisi and his community was probably meant to be a literal – than is, completely naked, or what contemporaries considered “naked” – enactment of the ancient Christian ascetic adage coined by St. Jerome that one should be “naked to follow the naked Christ” (*Nudus nudum Christum sequi*).

³⁵ FRANCESCO M. GALASSI – ELENA VAROTTO, *Alcune considerazioni storico-mediche e paleopatologiche su San Francesco d’Assisi*. Articolo estratto dalla pagina di discussione del portale di Edizioni di Storia e Studi Sociali (www.edizionidistoria.com/discussione) 24 ottobre 2019. The same article quotes another study regarding the possibility that Francis might have had leprosy: J. SCHAZLEIN – D.P. SULMASY, *The Diagnosis of St. Francis: Evidence for Leprosy*, in *Franciscan Studies* 47 (1987) 181-217.

century, such as the *De cognatione* by Arnald of Sarrant and the *Liber de conformitate* by Bartolomeo da Pisa, culminating in the image of Francis *quasi alter Christus*, which became a source of trouble for the Franciscan Order when Erasmus Alberus (Alber) condemned it as heretic doctrine.³⁶ At this stage, however, the notion of *imitatio Christi* is concerned with a spiritual rendering of the virtues which Christ cherished more than as a physical imitation of whatever Christ did in his life.

Celano states that Francis comforted and consoled the brothers with many words, exhorting them to observe the Gospel to perfection and be faithful to their ideal. Maybe this is a reference to the contents of the *Testament* of Saint Francis, which is, as we know, the last among his writings, having been dictated most probably during these last days at the Portiuncula and expressing the autobiographical experience of Francis who recalls the first days of his conversion and the purity of intentions of the first brothers who joined him.

It is at this stage that Celano presents the central part of the *transitus* episode with the blessing of all the brothers. This time the brothers are mentioned before brother Elias, and Celano does not even mention him by name, but simply by indicating him as Francis' vicar. The reason is well known, since in 1247 Elias was in disgrace because of the events leading to his downfall from minister general in 1239, although he would return into the folds of the Order just before dying in 1252. Celano assumes a very prudent attitude towards Elias, although he insists that he was the first one to be blessed by Francis. Later sources would elaborate this episode with different interpretations, particularly by indicating brother Bernardo da Quintavalle as the preferred brother who Francis blessed before dying. Celano's prudence and diplomacy is seen in the words he uses: "Let no one claim this blessing as his own for he pronounced it for those absent through those present. As written elsewhere it sounded like something for an individual; instead, it should be redirected to the office."³⁷

One also notes a reference to the "hour of tribulation" that Francis prophesied for the Order. Again we are dealing with a retrospective reading of events, and Celano applies to the lips of the dying founder these words which announce a difficult time for the Order. By 1247 that difficult time had already come about with the crisis leading to the downfall of Elias in 1239 and with the difficult years of the generalate of Crescenzo da Iesi, even though it seems that Celano maintained cordial relations with the elderly minister general, as did, after all, the companions of Francis who collaborated with his appeal to send their *memoirs* to him in order to hand them over to Celano to compose a more detailed biography of the saint, since the *Vita beati Francisci* was, in effect, an *opus perfectibile*.

The para-liturgy of the *transitus* is here presented in more abundant detail. Paragraph 217 of the *Memoriale* presents Francis who asks the brothers to bring bread, which he breaks and hands over to all those present inviting them to eat it out of love for one another and as a memorial of the Last Supper of Christ before his Passion. At the same time, he asks the brothers to read out to him the event of the washing of the feet of the apostles in Jn 13:1ff, which is also part and parcel of the Last Supper narrative. In no other part of Celano's sources is this detail so developed and it is obvious that he came to know of these gestures from the very companions who were close to Francis during the moment of the *transitus*. The Eucharistic references to this gesture are all too obvious, and this paragraph remains one of the most original and

³⁶ ERASMUS ALBERUS, *Alcoranus Franciscanorum*, Geneva 1578.

³⁷ RAOUL MANSELLI, *L'ultima decisione di San Francesco. Bernardo di Quintavalle e la benedizione di San Francesco morente*, in *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo* 78 (1967) 137-153.

meaningful narrations of the *transitus*, that can be literally re-enacted in a celebration of the same event by the brothers.

The note that some days went by before Francis actually died show us that Celano placed the para-liturgy of the *transitus* not immediately before Francis' death. This is an interesting detail in the narration, because it explains the fact that the brothers were prepared for the final moments of Francis' life, and it also draws our attention to the episode of Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli who is inspired to come from Rome to visit the dying Francis. It is only when the final moments arrive that Francis is presented reciting Psalm 142 (141):2-8 and adding the greeting to welcome sister Death. Another new detail are the words that Francis tells his brothers regarding his wish that, after he died, they should leave him again naked on the naked ground for a brief period of time. This also seems to imply a reference to Christ's descent from the cross before he was prepared for burial. Francis wanted to welcome that solemn moment of his life as a new birth, as a moment in which he would remain naked to touch the naked earth which would soon receive his body marked for the glory of the resurrection. The link between the *transitus* of Saint Francis and the paschal mystery of Christ runs deep within the narration of the *Memoriale*. This is also evident in the expression: "The *hour came* (Jn 4:21). All the *mysteries of Christ* (Col 4:3) were fulfilled in him, and he happily flew off to God." The reference to the *hour* of Jesus, which is taken from the episode of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman but which is realised in the final hour of the passion leads Francis to pass over from this world into Christ just at the right time when all the mysteries of Christ's life had been fulfilled in him, that is, when he became truly conformed to the image of the crucified and risen Christ.

The episode concludes just like the others, with the reference to Francis' soul which ascends into heaven like a star, having the brilliance of the sun and the moon (Sir 50:6) and being carried on the white cloud of Rev 14:14 in which the Son of man appears as supreme judge of the world at the end of times. Thus, the eschatological dimension of Francis' life becomes apparent as the crowning moment of this paschal experience which is lived under the form of a para-liturgy in prayer, reading of the Gospel, penitential gestures, breaking of bread and true love of the brothers. In this paraliturgical celebration Francis becomes truly the *novus Adam*, the new Adam, the prophet of the new humanity born out of the pierced side of Christ crucified.³⁸

The episode of Jacoba dei Settesoli in the *Tractatus de Miraculis beati Francisci* 39 - Text³⁹

All wet with tears, [Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli] was brought in private and alone, and the body of her friend was placed in her arms. "Here," said his vicar, "hold, even in death, the one you loved when alive!" Her warm tears bathed his body, and with sobs and sighs she kept hugging and kissing him, and pulling 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

³⁸ ALESSANDRO MASTROMATTEO, *Francesco d'Assisi: Novus Adam. Lettura della tipologia adamitica nella Legenda Maior di Bonaventura*, in *Laurentianum* 51/3 (2010) 271-334.

³⁹ THOMAS DE CELANO, *Tractatus de Miraculis beati Francisci*, 39, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 269-331: *Seorsum igitur illa, tota madida lacrimis, ianculo ducitur, et proiecto inter brachia amici corpore: "Haecine", ait vicarius, "quem dilexisti vivum meas 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 fuerat pretiosus, quinque margaritis ornatum. Certat illas quas sola Omnipotentis manus toto orbe mirandas fecerat caelaturas, atque insuetis plena laetitiis in amico mortuo reviviscit.*

English translation: THOMAS OF CELANO, *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*, 39 (FAED II: 418).

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.

The episode of Jacoba dei Settesoli in the *Tractatus de Miraculis B Francisci* – Comment

Jacques Dalarun provides a thorough analysis of the *Tractatus de Miraculis beati Francisci* particularly regarding the nature of its contents and its strong link with the *Memoriale in desiderio animae*.⁴⁰ Here we shall not dwell on this issue, but rather comment on a short description in chapter 6 of the same Treatise which deals with the visit of Lady Jacoba dei Settesoli on the deathbed of Saint Francis, and which Celano interprets as a miraculous episode, given that the noble Roman lady came to Assisi after receiving a divine inspiration and brought with her all the things that were needed for a decent funeral of her beloved spiritual father and guide.

The episode is only concerned with the personal experience of Jacoba dei Settesoli, who is kindly permitted by brother Elias, the vicar of the Saint, to take into her arms the dead body of the stigmatised and gaze upon the miracle of the stigmata with the eyes of contemplation and weep over him like another Mary Magdalen and as the Virgin Mary wept over the dead body of her crucified Son. The deep significance of this portrait is that of inserting a kind of Marian element in the narration of the *transitus*, since all the other episodes we have seen speak only about the male brothers and members of the Order who were around Francis. Jacoba dei Settesoli marks the exception and at the same time adds a female touch to the para-liturgy of the *transitus*, seen also within the Marian context of the chapel of the Portiuncula, where Francis wanted to die in the embrace of the Virgin Mary of the Angels. If we unite this episode with that of the brief stopover in the monastery of San Damiano during the funeral procession of the Saint as described by the same Celano in the *Vita beati Francisci*, when Clare and the Poor Ladies could see their beloved founder through the window of the communion grate,⁴¹ we have a complete picture of the fraternity that celebrated this solemn moment as a para-liturgy of the paschal mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

Celano himself would have been at odds as to the various times he had been asked to write a life of Saint Francis and describe his blessed *transitus*. From the *Tractatus de miraculis* itself we come to know of his inner dilemma when, in 1252, when he must have been nearly sixty years old, just eight years before he died in 1260: “We cannot forge something new every day, nor square circles, nor bring to agreement the innumerable variety of times and wishes that we received in a single block. We did not set out to write these things to satisfy our vanity. Nor have we plunged into this set of such differing reports of our own will. The insistence of our brothers’ requests exhorted it, and the authority of our prelates ordered it.”⁴²

The documentary evidence that was examined by Celano in order to produce his various *legendae* and accounts of miracles was arranged by him in such a way as to provide as complete a picture as possible of the truthfulness of the events he narrated. But above all, it was meant to be an effort to portray the figure of Francis of Assisi in the light of the paschal mystery of Christ. This is highly evident in the *transitus* accounts. That is why the use of these paragraphs from Celano is significant during the celebration of the *transitus* of Saint Francis, of which this year we are commemorating the 800th anniversary.

⁴⁰ JACQUES DALARUN, *The Misadventure of Francis of Assisi*, Franciscan Institute Publications, St. Bonaventure University, NY 2002.

⁴¹ THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Life of Saint Francis* 114-117 (FAED I, 284-286).

⁴² THOMAS OF CELANO, *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* 198 (FAED II, 468).