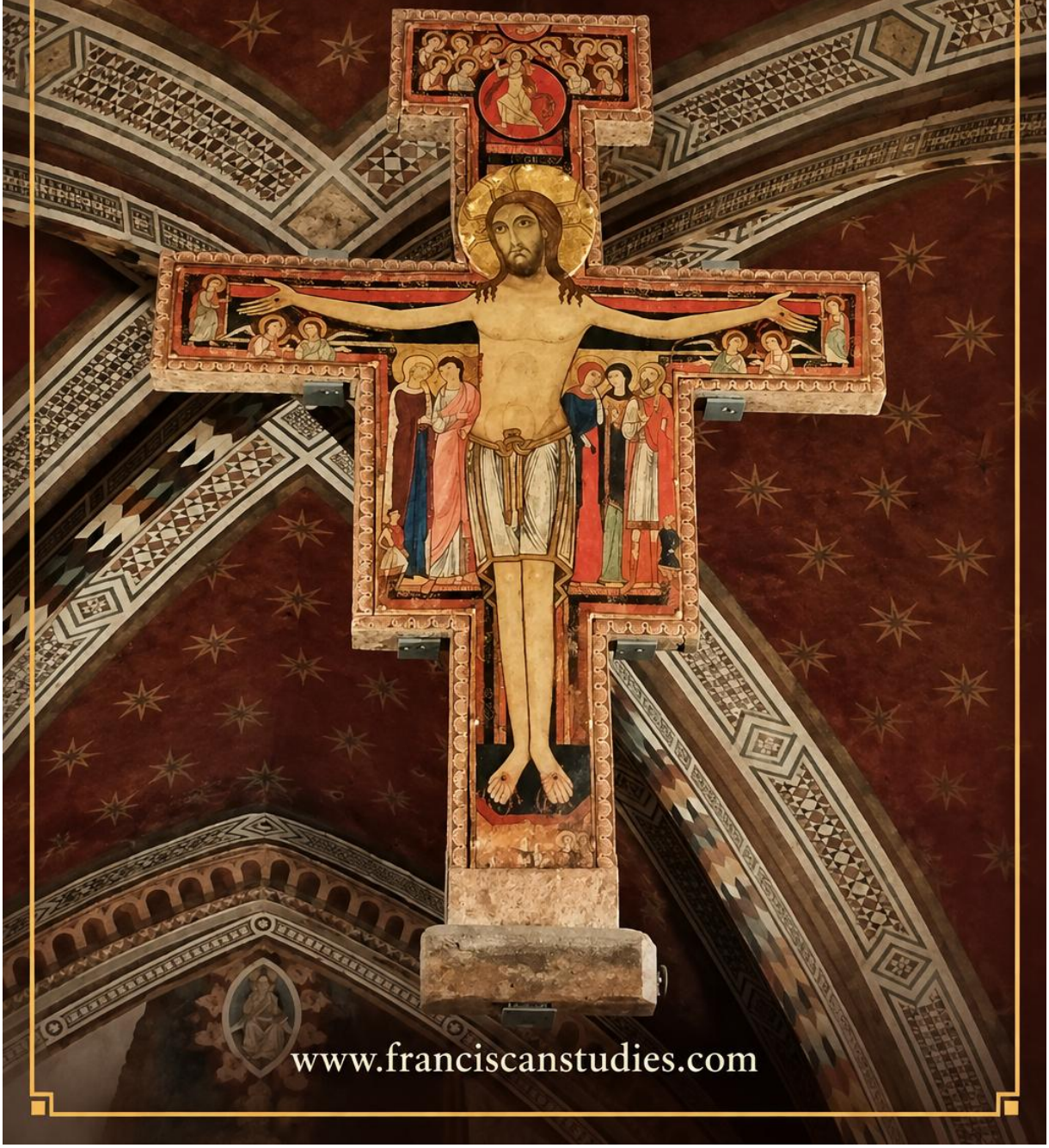
FRANCISCAN ESSAYS

by Noel Muscat OFM



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"Amodo sum mortuus vobis"
Francis' renunciation of the leadership of the Order

Noel Muscat OFM[1]

The chronicler Thomas of Eccleston writes that, during the general chapter of 1230, under the leadership of the minister general Giovanni Parenti, the brothers decided to send a delegation of learned brothers to Pope Gregory IX, made up of brothers Anthony of Lisbon, Gerard Rusinol, Haymo of Faversham, Leo of Perego, and Peter of Brescia, in order to request an official interpretation of the obligatory nature or otherwise of the *Testament* and of some obscure points in the *Regola bullata* of 1223.[2] The Pope, who had been the cardinal protector of the Order by the name of Ugo di Segni, and who had been a good friend of St. Francis, answered in a very precise and professional manner, being an expert canonist, regarding the obligatory nature of the *Testament*:

"We certainly believe that in the *Testament* the confessor of Christ demonstrated a single-hearted purpose and that you therefore aspire to conform to his just longings and holy desires. Nevertheless, we are aware of the danger to your souls and of the difficulties you could incur because of this. And so, wishing to remove all anxiety from your hearts, we declare that you are not bound by the *Testament*. For without the consent of the brothers, and especially of the ministers, Francis could not make obligatory a matter that touches everyone. Nor could he in any way whatsoever bind his successor because an equal has no authority over his equal."[3]

The Pope refers to the fact that, when Francis dictated his *Testament* some weeks before he died on 3 October 1226, he was no longer the leader of the Order. In fact, Francis had decided to relinquish his post as leader of the Order during the chapter of 1220, which was celebrated on that year on 29 September, feast of St. Michael the Archangel. Francis had just returned from his long journey to join the Fifth Crusade in 1219. He had left Italy after the chapter of Pentecost of that year, embarking from Ancona or Brindisi on 24 June and landing in Acre (Acco) on the coast of Palestine, where the friars Minor had established their presence in the Holy Land in 1217 with brother Elias of Cortona as the first minister of the province of Syria, or *Terrae Promissionis*, or *Outremer*. From there Francis proceeded to Damietta, on the Nile

[1] **Disclaimer:** I have made use of AI for the cover page of this paper, as well as for some of the entries that I quote in the footnotes, which unfortunately I have not been able to verify personally by consulting the printed papers or volumes. I indicate each time that the reference is made with the help of AI.

[2] THOMAS OF ECCLESTON, *Tractatus de adventu fratrum minorum in Angliam*, c. 13, in *XIIIth Century Chronicles. Jordan of Giano. Thomas of Eccleston. Salimbene degli Adami*. Translated from the Latin by PLACID HERMANN, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1961, 153: "From this chapter a solemn delegation was sent with the minister general to Pope Gregory to obtain an exposition of the Rule, namely, St. Anthony, Brother Gerard Rusinol, penitentiary to the lord pope, Brother Haymo, who later became minister general, Brother Leo, who later was made archbishop of Milan, Brother Gerard of Modena, and Brother Peter of Brescia."

[3] GREGORY IX, *Bulla «Quo elongati»* (28 Sept 1230), 3, in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*. Vol. I. *Francis the Saint* [FAED I], Edited by R.J. ARMSTRONG, J.A. WAYNE HELLMANN, W.J. SHORT, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 2023[10] FAED I, 571. Cf. FELICE ACCROCCA, *«Quo elongati». Il tentativo di una doppia fedeltà*, in *Frate Francesco* 81 (2015) 133-166.

delta in Egypt, where the crusaders were besieging this town. During a period of truce, most probably during September 1219, he had crossed over the enemy lines to meet the sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil, who handed him with a *signaculum*, a kind of official permit, authorising him and the brothers to travel freely in his realms.[4] Francis might have also been present during the capture of Damietta on 5 November 1219 and maybe also during the official purification of the city by the crusaders on 2 February 1220. He returned to Italy after receiving disturbing news about the Order,[5] most probably during the early summer of 1220, when navigation was again possible, and proceeded immediately to Rome in order to request Pope Honorius III to give the Order a cardinal protector in the person of cardinal Ugo di Segni.[6]

Although many scholars disagree with this interpretation of facts, and opt to make Francis return to Italy right after his meeting with the sultan of Egypt, the possibility of his having stopped for some time in the Holy Land is by no means to be discarded, since we hardly have any news as to his whereabouts during the first months of 1220, and there is no certainty that the general chapter in that year was celebrated on Pentecost. It is more probable that the turn of events necessitated a chapter for the feast of St. Michael on 29 September, which could have been a chapter attended only by the cismontane friars in Italy. It was during that chapter that Francis announced that he was resigning from the post of leader of the Order, and appointed Pietro Cattani as his vicar.

The events leading to the resignation of Francis from leader of the Order

"In order to preserve the virtue of holy humility, a few years after his conversion, at a chapter, he resigned the office of prelate before all the brothers of the religion, saying: «From now on, I am dead to you. But here you have Brother Peter of Catanio; let us all, you and I, obey him.» And bowing down immediately, he promised him obedience and reverence. The brothers were weeping, and sorrow drew deep groans from them, as they saw themselves orphaned of such a father. As blessed Francis got up, he joined his hands and, lifting his eyes to heaven, said: «Lord, I give back to you the family which until now you have entrusted to me. Now, sweetest Lord, because of my infirmities, which you know, I can no longer take care of them

[4] ANGELO CLARENO, *Chronicon seu Historia Septem Tribulationum Ordinis fratrum Minorum* [*The Book of Chronicles of the Tribulations of the Order of Lesser Brothers*], Prologue, *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*. Vol. III. *Francis the Prophet* [FAED III], Edited by R.J. ARMSTRONG, J.A. WAYNE HELLMANN, W.J. SHORT, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 2001, 398: "[Francis] preached to him Christ Jesus and the faith of the Gospel with such force, such lively and moving words, that the Sultan and the bystanders were amazed. By the power of the words which Christ spoke through him the Sultan, moved to gentleness, willingly listened to his words against the decree of his own wicked law, and insistently invited him to arrange to stay in his land. He ordered that Francis and all his brothers were to be able to have access to the Sepulcher freely, without paying tribute."

[5] JORDAN OF GIANO, *Chronicle* 11-14, in *XIIIth Century Chronicles*, 26-31.

[6] GIROLAMO GOLUBOVICH, *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Francescano*, Tomo I (1215-1300), Collegio S. Bonaventura, Ad Claras Aquas, Quaracchi 1906, 85-104: "Regesto cronologico del viaggio di S. Francesco in Oriente." Golubovich, who is the most renowned among the historians of the Custody of the Holy Land, states that Francis stayed in the East until the spring of 1221 and that the chapter of 29 September 1220 had elected Pietro Cattani as vicar of the saint. But Pietro Cattani was still in Acre and returned with Francis to Italy. He died at the Portiuncula on 10 March 1221. So it is not possible to accept that he was elected during Francis' absence from Italy. It is more probable to assume that Francis stayed in the East until the spring or early summer of 1220 and then returned to Italy, in time to go to Pope Honorius III and ask him to intervene to solve the crisis brought to the Order by the two vicars Gregorio da Napoli and Matteo da Narni, by appointing Cardinal Ugo di Segni as protector of the Order.

and I entrust them to the ministers. If any brother should perish because of their negligence, or example, or even harsh correction, let them be bound to render an account for it before You, Lord, on the Day of Judgment» From that time on, he remained subject until his death, behaving more humbly than any of the others."[7]

According to the chronicler Jordan (Giordano) of Giano, who composed his Chronicle around the year 1260, upon returning to Italy Francis went directly to meet Pope Honorius III. From the same Chronicle we know that the Order had gone through a period of crisis during the absence of Francis. The Saint had appointed two vicars, namely Matteo da Narni, who was ordered to stay at the Portiuncula to receive new brothers, and Gregorio da Napoli, who was entrusted with visiting the brothers. During the one year absence of Francis, from 24 June 1219 to roughly the early summer of 1220, these had introduced new rules regarding fasting and abstinence that were reminiscent of the customs of monastic Orders, particularly of the Cistercians, and which were in no way compatible with the itinerant way of life of the friars Minor, who are allowed by the Rule to eat whatever is presented to them during their journeys and also in view of their vow of poverty. Brother Philip (Filippo Longo), visitator of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, had also overstepped the limits of his office, whereas brother Giovanni Compello had gathered a community of lepers with whom he wanted to found a new Order. Francis had come to know of all this trouble by a certain brother Stefano who crossed the sea and found him, probably in Acre, together with brothers Elias of Cortona, Caesar of Speyer, Illuminato and Pietro Cattani. At this Francis decided that it was time to go back to Italy. According to Jordan he presented himself to Honorius III and requested a cardinal protector to correct the faults of the brothers in the Order. Honorius asked Francis who he wished to have as protector, and he mentioned Cardinal Ugo di Segni.

As we have seen, we do not know whether it was possible to celebrate a general chapter for Pentecost of 1220, since Francis was still in the Holy Land or was returning back during the spring of early summer months. The practice of holding the general chapter on Pentecost as legislated in the *Regola bullata* of 1223 was rather different in the years before this date. The *Regola non bullata* of 1221 states: "Once a year on the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel, each minister can come together with his brothers wherever they wish to treat of those things that pertain to God. All the ministers who are in regions overseas and beyond the Alps may come to the Chapter of Pentecost in the church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula once every

[7] THOMAS OF CELANO, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [2C] 143, in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*. Vol. II. *Francis the Founder* [FAED II], Edited by R.J. ARMSTRONG, J.A. WAYNE HELLMANN, W.J. SHORT, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 2023[4], 340. Latin text: THOMAS DE CELANO, *Memoriale in desiderio animae*, caput CIV, 143. *Editio critico-synoptica duarum redactionum ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum, curaverunt* FELICE ACCROCCA – ALEKSANDER HOROWSKI (Subsidia scientifica franciscalia, 12), Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Roma 2011: "Ad servandam humilitatis sanctae virtutem, paucis annis elapsis post suam conversionem, in quodam capitulo, coram omnibus fratribus de religione praelationis officium resignavit, dicens: «Amodo sum mortuus vobis. Sed ecce», inquit, «frater Petrus, cui ego et vos omnes obediamus». Et inclinans se protinus coram ipso, 'obedientiam et reverentiam' promisit eidem. Flebant igitur fratres, et altos extorquebat gemitus dolor, cum videbant se tanto patre quodammodo orphanos fieri. — Surgens beatus Franciscus, iunctis manibus et oculis in caelum erectis, dixit: «Domine, tibi recommendo familiam, quam mihi hactenus commisisti. Et nunc, propter infirmitates quas tu nosti, dulcissime Domine, curam eius habere non valens, ipsam recommendo ministris. Teneantur in die iudicii coram te, Domine, reddere rationem, si aliquis frater eorum vel negligentia, vel exemplo, seu etiam aspera correctione perierit». — Permansit exinde subditus usque ad mortem, humilius agens quam aliquis aliorum."

three years, and the other ministers once a year, unless it has been decreed otherwise by the minister and servant of the entire fraternity."[8]

The practice of holding the chapter of Pentecost every year seems to have been consistent from 1216 onwards, given that we know that Jacques de Vitry mentions the custom in a very generic way in the *Letter written in Genoa* in 1216, and that in 1217 the Order was divided into missionary entities (provinces) to which the brothers were sent to preach. The chapter of 1219 had decided upon further missions, including Francis' own journey to the East. The chapter of 1221 is traditionally thought to have been the so-called "chapter of mats".[9] The Rule of 1221 states that the brothers "beyond the Alps" and "beyond the sea" were obliged to come to the chapter once every three years, whereas the others, namely the Cismontane brothers living in Italy, had to convene every year. The ministers were then obliged to hold their own chapters every year on the feast of St. Michael on 29 September. As we have seen, in 1220 we do not know whether a general chapter was held on Pentecost, but it would have been possible to convene a kind of Cismontane chapter for the friars in Italy on 29 September. Given that the problems referred to above largely concerned the friars living in Italy, it is comprehensible that such a kind of chapter was celebrated, during which Francis took the bold decision to relinquish his post as leader of the Order and appoint as vicar brother Pietro Cattani.

Thomas of Celano does not give us any details regarding the date of this chapter, limiting himself to the generic expression, which is also historically incorrect, "a few years after his conversion, at a chapter, he resigned the office of prelate before all the brothers of the religion." The year 1220 does not correspond to "a few years" after Francis' "conversion" in 1206. The decision taken by Francis has to be weighed against the events in the Order during a period of around 15 years, during which the Order grew to around 3 thousand brothers who were by then present not only in Italy, but in Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Hungary, Dalmatia, Morocco, Tunis and the region of the Province of Syria (*Outremer*) including Greece, Cyprus, Syria and Acre on the coast of Palestine.

The Franciscan Sources portray an image of the primitive fraternity that can help us understand the method of government in the Order during the early years of its existence. If we consider that, until 1209, the year in which Francis and the first brothers went to Rome to present their *forma vitae* to Pope Innocent III, the fraternity was itinerant in nature, there was hardly any need for a structure of government. Francis, as charismatic leader, would be the animator of the brothers who are presented as "penitents coming from the town of Assisi"[10]

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[8] *Regola non bullata*, c. XVIII [FAED I, 76-77].

[9] The traditional date of the "chapter of mats" (1221) has been contested by scholars of Franciscan history. Felice Accrocca is of the opinion that this chapter refers to 1223, namely the same year in which the *Regola bullata* was confirmed. Cf. FELICE ACCROCCA, *I frati e il lavoro manuale dalle origini al secondo Duecento*, in *Italia Francescana* 82 (2007) 285-312 (esp. p. 299, note 42). He quotes LUIGI DI FONZO, *Il famoso capitolo delle stuoie O.Min. nel 1223*, in *Miscellanea Francescana* 98 (1998) 367-390. (References found with the help of AI).

[10] *Anonymous of Perugia* [AP] 19 [FAED II, 43]: "Some people willingly and joyfully listened to the brothers; others, however, jeered at them. Many people repeatedly questioned them, and it was extremely wearisome to answer so many questions because new situations often gave rise to new questions. Some asked them: «Where do you come from?» While others asked: «To which Order do you belong?» They answered simply: «We are penitents and were born in Assisi». At that time the religion of the Brothers was not yet called an order." Parallel text in *Legend of Three Companions* [L3C] 37 [FAED II, 90].

and as a group of mostly laymen who went, two by two, on the model of the mission of the 72 disciples in Lk 10:1, and returned periodically to the Portiuncula,[11] or as a fraternity who for time lived in the hut of Rivo Torto.[12]

Even after receiving the oral approval of the *forma vitae* in 1209 the fraternity was still in its initial stages of development. The only stable form of life was that at the Portiuncula, where the brothers would meet periodically between their apostolic missions. The role of St. Francis was mostly that of being a guarantee of unity and inspiration among the brothers, since he himself embarked upon itinerant journeys of preaching, even trying to go to preach to the Muslims first in Syria and then in Spain.[13] The Order gradually grew in fame and numbers with the entry of learned brothers and with the consecration of Clare of Assisi and the first Poor Ladies of San Damiano in 1211-1212.[14] Things remained fairly the same until 1215, the year of the celebration of the Fourth Lateran Council. This could have been a moment when the leadership of the Order necessitated more expertise. Francis seems to have been still at the helm, even by being present in Rome during the Council and also encouraging the brothers to implement the decisions and decrees of the same Council, as is evident in the letters he sent to the Clergy, to the Custodians, to the Faithful and to the Order.

Judging from what Jacques de Vitry states in his *Letter written in Genoa* in 1216, the brothers were now spread all over Italy: "With great profit, the brothers of this Order assemble once a year in a designated place to rejoice in the Lord and eat together; with the advice of good men they drew up and promulgate holy laws and have them confirmed by the Lord Pope. After this they disperse again for the whole year throughout Lombardy and Tuscany, Apulia and Sicily."[15] This important witness, coming from the pen of the newly-consecrated bishop of Acre and therefore from a person outside the Order, is a proof that, by 1216, the brothers were meeting regularly for the annual general chapter at the Portiuncula, and that they were now present in the entire Italian peninsula and Sicily. This means that the Order had, by now, began to create a framework of internal structures and organisation that was necessary, and that Francis was still the driving force behind all this effort.

Just one year later, in 1217, Francis presided over a general chapter during which the Order took important decisions regarding its evangelising ministry. According to the chronicler Jordan of Giano, who erroneously places the date of the chapter two years later, in 1219, it was in this occasion that Francis sent the brothers beyond the Alps and beyond the sea.[16] This was the first instance when the Order embarked upon a radically new and perilous mission,

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[11] For an account of the mission of the first brothers and their return to the Portiuncula, cf. 1C 29 [FAED I, 207]; AP 19-24 [FAED II, 41-44].

[12] 1C 42-44 [FAED I, 220-222]; L3C 55 [FF 99-100].

[13] 1C 55-56 [FAED I, 229-230].

[14] 1C 57 [FAED I, 231]; 1C 18 [FAED I, 195-196].

[15] JACQUES DE VITRY, *Letter written in Genoa (1216)* [FAED I, 580].

[16] JORDAN OF GIANO, 3, in *XIIIth Century Chronicles*, 21: "In the year of Our Lord 1219 and the tenth year of his conversion, in the chapter held at St. Mary of the Portiuncula, Brother Francis sent brothers to France, Germany, Hungary, Spain, and the other provinces of Italy to which the brothers had not yet gone." The 10th year of Francis' "conversion" could not possibly have been 1219, but rather 1216-1217. In the same *Chronicle*, 7, in *XIIIth Century Chronicles*, 24, Jordan states that brother Elias was sent to the lands beyond the sea, namely to the Province of Syria, in Acre, where he became the first minister provincial.

which in certain cases ended in failure, such as in the case of Germany and Hungary. However, it was a new beginning for the Order, which was now spreading far beyond the confines of the Italian peninsula. We are not informed directly regarding the decisional role of Francis in this endeavour. He must have surely supported it wholeheartedly. However, it is difficult to imagine that it was just the result of his intuition. The chapter of 1217 was attended by many friars who had now entered the Order and were academically gifted or quite capable of organisational qualities. They certainly could have been the driving force behind the decisions of the chapter, even though they might also have been responsible of sending unprepared brothers who ended up being persecuted because they were suspected of being heretics. That Francis was enthusiastic about these ventures is evident from the Sources, since he himself wanted to go to France but was dissuaded from doing so by cardinal Ugo, who at the time was Papal Legate in Tuscany and Lombardy.[17]

This text from the *Assisi Compilation* sheds light on Francis' role as superior of the Order in 1217. There can be no doubt to the fact that Francis was enthusiastic about the decision of the chapter to send the brothers to far away lands. He himself chose to go to France. At the same time, when he met cardinal Ugo di Segni in Florence, he had to renounce to his expedition. Now at that time Ugo was not yet cardinal protector of the Order, but it is evident that he knew Francis and protected him. His words betray two preoccupations. The first one regarded the plight of the Order before the prelates, that is, bishops and other prelates in the Roman curia. From the words of Ugo we come to know that not all of them were enthusiastic about the new Order, and some were even keen not to let it grow and flourish. The presence of Francis in Italy was important to keep these attempts in check. The second preoccupation of the cardinal regarded the friars themselves who were sent in mission. In this regard the cardinal certainly had good reasons to be worried, since we know that the friars did, in fact, suffer persecution in many of the regions where they were sent to evangelise. This was the reason why, two years later, in 1219, the expedition to Germany was reorganised under the expert guidance of brother Caesar of Speyer and with the presence of well-educated brothers like Thomas of Celano.

One can conclude that, in 1217, Francis was still very much in charge of the Order and even took great risks to see it flourish and spread, even to the point of placing himself and the

[17] *Assisi Compilation* [AC] 108 [FAED II, 216]: "When blessed Francis reached Florence, he found there Lord Hugolino, the bishop of Ostia, who later became pope. He had been sent by Pope Honorius as a legate for the Duchy of Tuscany, and Lombardy, and the Marches of Treviso as far as Venice. The lord Bishop greatly rejoiced at his arrival, but when he heard from blessed Francis that he wanted to go to France, he prohibited him from going, telling him: «Brother, I do not want you to go beyond the mountains, because there are many prelates and others who would willingly block the religion's interests in the Roman Curia. The other cardinals and I, who love your religion, can protect and help it more willingly if you stay within the confines of this region». But blessed Francis said to him: «Lord, it is a great shame to me, if I remain in these regions when I send my brothers to remote and far away regions.» The lord Bishop, however, said to him as if rebuking him: «Why did you send your brothers so far away to die of hunger and to so many other trials?» In great fervour of spirit and in the spirit of prophecy, blessed Francis answered him: «Lord, do you think or believe that the Lord sent the brothers only for these regions? But I tell you in truth that the Lord chose and sent the brothers for the benefit and salvation of the souls of all people in the whole world and they should be received not only in the land of believers, but also in that of non-believers. As long as they observe what they promised the Lord, the Lord will minister to them in the land of non-believers as well as in the countries of believers.» The lord Bishop marvelled at his words and admitted that he spoke the truth. But the lord Bishop did not allow him to go to France. Instead blessed Francis sent brother Pacifico there with other brothers, and he returned to the valley of Spoleto."

brothers in danger of persecution. This does not mean that Francis was reckless as leader of the Order. His words to cardinal Ugo convey a youthful enthusiasm to evangelise that was fruit of the freshness of the Order in those times. This attitude did not wane since, two years later, again during the general chapter of 1219, Francis decides to make a much longer journey, this time to join the Fifth Crusade in Damietta, Egypt.

We have already seen what happened during this crucial year. Besides the obvious successful attempt to meet the sultan of Egypt and preach Christ in front of him, and besides the probable possibility of visiting the Holy Sepulchre and obviously the brothers in Acre, the absence of Francis from Italy in 1219-1220 brought with it a major crisis in the Order. Maybe Francis, for all his youthful enthusiasm and sense of adventure, was also prone to place too much trust upon those brothers who he committed with serious responsibilities. In this case, we have seen that he entrusted the care of the brothers in Italy to Matteo da Narni and Gregorio da Napoli. What did this decision exactly imply?

In order to understand the implications of this decision we have to place ourselves in the position of a man who crossed the Mediterranean from Italy to Egypt during the 13th century in the company of crusaders who had embarked with the aim of waging war against their Muslim enemies. It is true that the crusading spirit of the Middle Ages was seen as a penitential pilgrimage. However, it was also a military expedition. This brought with it all kinds of risks for the participants. Even pilgrims who went on peaceful purposes to the Holy Land knew that they were leaving home with no assurance that they would come back alive. To imagine that Francis would have wanted to make such an experience while knowing that he would leave Italy without knowing whether he would return safe and sound might seem to be utterly foolish. It can only be understood in the light of the genuine crusading spirit and enthusiasm for spreading the Gospel that transformed Francis from a Christian warrior into a pilgrim of peace. But even with all his good intentions, Francis knew that he had to place his trust in the competence of other brothers who could lead the Order in his absence. His sense of trust must have been quite strong, but the brothers he entrusted with the office failed him miserably.

This brings us to consider the reasons which prompted Francis to renounce the leadership of the Order when he arrived safely back in Italy in 1220. To do so we have to consider what the Sources say, but also what they do not say, regarding the intentions of Francis and regarding the way he was looking at his own competence as a leader. As we shall see, the easy way out would be that of stating that Francis renounced the leadership of the Order out of humility. On a deeper level there must have been other motives behind his decision, and it was these motives that truly formed the basis of Francis' attitude when, between 1220 and 1226, retreated in the background of effective leadership to remain, however, the undisputed charismatic inspiration of the brothers who had been with him from the beginnings.

Was Francis truly "dead" to the brothers after 1220?

We now return to the account by Celano regarding Francis' resignation from his office of superior of the Order during the chapter of 1220. The text of the *Memoriale* states that Francis wanted to observe the holy virtue of humility. This is the main reason why he resigned from office. It also erroneously states that Francis resigned some years after his conversion,

whereas we know that the event occurred 14 years after 1206, which is normally considered to be the year in which Francis decided to consecrate his life totally to God. Celano does not indicate which chapter he is referring to. He simply states *in quodam capitulo*, in a certain chapter. It is one of the few instances in which Celano does not seem to have documented his sources. This seems rather strange, since he was making use of the memoirs of the brothers who were closest to Francis, and who would certainly have remembered the precise details of this important event. But since they were sending their documentary material to the minister general Crescenzio da Iesi some 20 years after Francis died, we might assume that they might not have been so sharp in recalling the exact date. Maybe the event was not even considered so important by them, given that they would have regarded Francis as the supreme leader of the Order until his death, even though he officially resigned from his post. Celano states that Francis resigned from his *praelationis officium*, which would imply the office of a prelate, or superior, of the Order. In effect, that is how he was regarded to be in practice. What is even more intriguing is that, even after Francis resigned from the post of leader or superior of the Order, and delegated his authority to the vicars, namely first to Pietro Cattani and then to Elias of Cortona, a papal document of fundamental importance, such as the Bulla *Solet annuere* confirming the *Regola bullata* of 1223, is addressed to him personally and also to the brothers. This means that, even though he was not effectively the superior of the Order in the legal sense, the Holy See still considered him to be the founder.

Francis seems to have resigned in the chapter with a spontaneous act of his will. One asks with what right could he accomplish such a thing, when the resignation from the leadership of a religious Order has normally to be confirmed by the Holy See? It is highly probable that Francis had informed cardinal Ugo of his intention and had been given the go ahead by the Pope himself. We are not in a position to know for sure, since we do not know whether the newly-appointed cardinal protector was present for the chapter of 1220, if this was truly the chapter in which Francis resigned from office.

Francis addresses the brothers with the words: *Amodo sum mortuus vobis*. He describes his resignation from office as a "death", a kind of perennial absence, from decision-making in the fraternity. This could very well indicate a figure of speech, but the intention of Francis is clear. He intended to retreat completely from any duties pertaining to the office of prelacy, to acts of government, to legal decisions, binding the brothers to obedience. And yet, in his *Testament*, we are surprised by the tone of voice used by Francis when he states, more than once, "I strictly command", when speaking about issues that were closest to his heart. One questions the reason for this apparent contradiction in Francis' attitude. Besides being psychologically understandable, the attitude is that of a charismatic leader who maybe does not give much importance to the legalities of formal obedience, but who is very strict when it is a question of defending the foundational values he fought to protect all his life. There is an episode in the life of St. Francis that can help us understand this attitude. It is found in the *Memoriale*, but it also recurs in parallel texts in the *Assisi Compilation* and *Mirror of Perfection*, thus indicating that it comes from the pen of the companions of the saint:

"Once a brother asked him why he had renounced the care of all the brothers and turned them over into the hands of others as if they did not belong to him. He replied: «Son, I love the brothers as I can, but if they would follow my footsteps, I would surely love them more, and would not make myself a stranger to them. For there are some among the prelates who

draw them in a different direction, placing before them the examples of the ancients and paying little attention to my warnings. But what they are doing will be seen in the end.» A short time later, when he was suffering from a serious illness, he raised himself up in bed in an angry spirit: «Who are these people? They have snatched out of my hands my religion and that of the brothers. If I go to the general chapter, then I'll show them what my will is!»[18]

Francis expresses the sentiments of a person who had been a charismatic leader and inspirator and then had to witness the gradual erosion of his ideals by persons who came in the Order later on and presented themselves as innovators, basing their assertions on their academic preparation. It is a very human experience which is part and parcel of life when a charismatic leader has to admit that he has to let go of radical ideals in the face of developments that do not depend entirely upon him. Psychologically this is the experience of persons who, as they grow older, see their ideals and achievements being changed or even discarded by newcomers, who do not bother much to continue upon their footsteps. The friars who were deemed as academically gifted were showing Francis that they had more expert plans and projects for the Order. They were making recourse to the "examples of the ancients" (*antiquorum eis proponentes exempla*). This could be a reference to another episode we find in the Sources, in which Cardinal Ugo himself was implicated, and which regarded Francis' insistence that the form of life of the Minors was innovative and could not be closed within the limits of earlier monastic and canonical rules of Augustine, Benedict or Bernard.[19] In this episode, which probably occurred during the chapter of 1223, and not in 1221, when cardinal Raniero Capocci da Viterbo presided since cardinal Ugo was in Veneto at the time, Francis acts with a rather violent attitude towards the learned friars of the Order, and states that the Lord had called him to be a *novellus pazzus*, "a new fool."[20] This is another example of the vehemence of Francis when he was no longer leader of the Order.

Celano also describes the psychological state of Francis when he resigned from his post as leader of the Order, by indicating how Francis conceived the office of prelacy as a service and not as an honour. Maybe this is the true reason why Francis' resignation was seen as an act of humility. It was not a question of Francis feeling that he was incapable of leading the brothers as a charismatic leader, but rather a question of Francis wanting to entrust the brothers in the hands of competent collaborators, while hoping that they would not accept their office

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[18] 2C 188 [FAED II, 366-367]. Parellel text in *AC* 44 [FF II, 145-146]; *Mirror of Perfection [Sabatier]* [MP] 41[FF III, 288].

[19] AC 18 [FAED II, 132-133]: "When blessed Francis ws at the general chapter called the Chapter of Mats, held at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, there were five thousand brothers present. Many wise and learned brothers told the Lord Cardinal, who later became Pope Gregory, who was present at the chapter, that he should persuade blessed Francis to follow the advice of those same wise brothers and allow himself to be guided by them for the time being. They cited the *Rule* of blessed Benedict, of blessed Augustine, and of blessed Bernard, which teach how to live in such order in such a way. Then blessed Francis, on hearing the cardinal's advice about this, took him by the hand and led him to the brothers assembled in chapter, and spoke to the brothers in this way: «My brothers! My brothers! God has called me by the way of simplicity and showed me the way of simplicity. I do not want you to mention to me any *Rule*, whether of Saint Augustine, or of Saint Bernard, or of Saint Benedict. And the Lord told me what He wanted: He wanted me to be a new fool in the world. God did not wish to lead us by any other than this knowledge, but God will confound you by your knowledge and wisdom. But I trust in the Lord's police that through them He will punish you, and you will return to your state, to your blame, like it or not.» The cardinal was shocked, and said nothing, and all the brothers were afraid."

[20] PIETRO MARANESI, *«Novellus pazzus»: La categoria di "follia" nella vicenda di frate Francesco*, in *Italia Francescana* 94 (2019). [accessed from https://bibliotecafrancescana.infoteca.it/ 23.10.2026].

because of a desire to become great and famous, but out of service to the brothers. Celano presents to us this episode, linked to the renunciation of Francis. It is an episode which betrays the state of affairs in the Order at the time in which Celano composed the *Memoriale*, and which places on Francis' lips words that were to prove to be prophetic in the long run:

"Seeing how some were panting for prelacies, an ambition which even by itself made them unworthy of presiding, he said that they were not Lesser Brothers, but that *they had fallen away from glory* (Gal 5:4) by forgetting *the vocation to which they were called* (Eph 4:1). He criticised the wretched few who were upset when removed from office; they were looking for honours, not burdens. He once said to his companion: «I would not consider myself a Lesser Brother unless I had the attitude which I will describe to you.» And he said: «Here I am, a prelate of the brothers, and I go to the chapter. I preach to the brothers and admonish them, and, in the end, they speak against me: 'An uneducated and despicable man is not right for us: *we do not want* you *to rule over us* (Lk 19:14). You cannot speak; you are *simple and ignorant* (Acts 4:13).' So in the end I'm thrown out in disgrace, looked down upon by everyone. I tell you, unless I hear these words with the same expression on my face, with the same joy in my heart, and with the same resolution for holiness, then I am in no sense a Lesser Brother.» And he would add: «In a prelacy there is a fall; in praise, a precipice; in the humility of a subject, profit for the soul. Why, then, do we pay attention to danger more than profits, while we have time for making profit?»"[21]

When Celano was writing the *Memoriale* he had in mind the fairly recent history of the Order. Francis' words are presented as a prophecy of what had already befallen the Order, particularly during the generalate of brother Elias of Cortona (1232-1239) and maybe also during that of Crescenzio da Iesi (1244-1247). This is not the place to examine the historical facts and to present a judgment on these two ministers general.[22] We must rather concentrate our attention on the way in which Celano presents Francis' state of mind in front of his decision to renounce to the government of the Order.

Francis presents himself to the chapter of brothers and is considered to be incapable of speaking and preaching by the brothers present. They call him uneducated, simple and ignorant and do not want him to rule over them. This description seems to be hypothetical, since we have no documentary source that states that Francis was treated in this way by the brothers during a chapter. Yet it could be a faithful picture of the truth. During the last six years of his life Francis found himself at the mercy of a good number of brothers who wanted a kind of leadership in the Order of which he did not approve. From his words it seems that Francis had in mind the situation of those brothers who desired prelacy not out of a service to the other brothers, but simply because of personal ambition. This state of affairs could very well have existed even when he was still alive, even though history teaches us that it became a great temptation in the aftermath of Francis' death and glorification. The events of the 1230 general chapter, during which Francis' remains were transported from the church of San Giorgio to the new basilica built in his honour, and which are narrated especially by Thomas of Eccleston, could very well have been the result of resentment towards brother Elias'

[21] 2C 145 [FAED II, 340-341].

[22] ROSALIND B. BROOKE, *Early Franciscan Government. Elias to Bonaventure*, Cambridge University Press, 1951.

autocratic form of government in 1232-1239, but they might also contain elements of historical truth.[23]

«Lord, I give back to you the family which until now you have entrusted to me»

We could be tempted to look at Francis' resignation in 1220 as an act of weakness in which he expresses a personal resentment and discontent with the brothers. We have seen that, partly, this is true. The human element in Francis' life is very important to keep in mind. Yet Francis shows a true courage and a positive sense also in this decision. After promising personal obedience to brother Pietro Cattani, who he designates as the vicar of the Order, Francis entrusts the brotherhood to the Lord in the words: *Domine, tibi recommendo familiam, quam mihi hactenus commisisti*. Francis was capable of giving back to the Lord whatever good he performs, since he was convinced that all good comes from God and must return to Him alone.

Seen in this light the attitude of Francis is not one of resentment or personal weakness, or even of discontent. Francis succeeds in making a theological reading of the fraternity, to the point that, some time before he died, when he was dictating his *Testament*, he gives the following description of the primitive brotherhood, seeing the brothers as a gift from the Lord: "And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words, and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me. And those who came to receive life gave whatever they had to the poor and were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and short trousers. We desired nothing more. We clerical [brothers] said the Office as other clerics did; the lay brothers said the *Our Father*; and we quite willingly remained in churches. And we were simple and subject to all."[24]

This picture of the primitive fraternity says much about the way Francis regarded the brotherhood, in spite of all the difficulties he faced even by the same brothers towards the end of his life. He believed that the brothers were a gift from the Lord, and accompanied them by proposing a *forma vitae* that was approved by the Church and which would always be a reminder of their faithfulness to the original call of the *vita secundum sanctum Evangelium*. Whether the brothers would respond willingly to such a call was not in full control of Francis himself. It is this faith in the power of the Lord to inspire the brothers that made Francis so capable of giving back the same brothers to the Lord who called them. In the *Letter to a Minister* Francis expresses this act of faith in the Lord very clearly: "And love those who do those things to you and do not wish anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you. And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians."[25] One notes that Francis is not telling the minister to wish that his brothers would be better friars, but better Christians. This is the sign of his total surrender of the fraternity into the hands of the Lord. This is the spirit which prompted Francis to surrender in God's hands his office of prelate in order to entrust the future of the brothers in an act of faith.

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[23] For a recent study on this issue cf. N. D'ACUNTO, *La traslazione alla chiesa-santuario di S. Francesco (1230)*, in https://www.sisf-assisi.it/ online projection of the talk during the 54th Congress of the International Society of Franciscan Studies held in Assisi on 15-17 October 2026 with the theme *Francisus gloriosus. Frati Minori tra memoria e storia (1226-1232)*.

[24] *Testament* 14-19 [FAED I, 125].

[25] *Letter to a Minister* [FAED I, 97].

The image of St. Francis as a joyful, enthusiastic brother, full of life and initiative, highly receptive to human contact in the brotherhood, is often portrayed as a faithful picture of the character of the *Poverello* of Assisi. A more profound reading of the sources of his life shows, however, a different picture from the one normally portrayed in popular biographies and artistic expressions. The true sense of joy and pleasure in human company, which is evident in Francis' life, was also the result of his ability to withdraw in solitude and ponder upon his own life in a theological light. Francis' joy was not simply a product of psychological well-being, which is often portrayed as an antidote to melancholy and loneliness. Francis was not afraid of solitude. It was precisely in solitude that he found the true meaning of joy and human company. It was solitude which helped Francis come to terms with his own limitations, and accept his personal gifts in the eyes of God in order to arrive at sensible decisions concerning himself and the brothers.

Among the most difficult decisions of Francis we have just analysed the episode when he made up his mind, once and for all, to relinquish the leadership of his Order. Although the sources try to describe this episode and justify Francis' intentions by citing humility, we still remain with many unresolved questions as to why Francis relinquished his responsibility on legal grounds but in practice continued to exert a preponderant influence on the brothers to the very end. We remain perplexed by the apparent contradiction between his calm acceptance of the need to retire from governing the fraternity and the vehement moments of inner anguish in which he decried the erosion of the primitive ideals that had shaped the first fraternity of brothers. Such an attitude can only be understood in the case of a prophetic stance to life. The prophet is the one who is adamant in speaking out in God's name, although he is often misunderstood and discarded by the intelligentsia of his time. This would happen to Francis years after he returned to the Portiuncula after attempting to go to Spain in 1213 and "some literate men and nobles gladly joined him."[26]

Were these literate and noble men, among whom there certainly was brother Thomas of Celano, the reason why later on, in 1220, Francis decided to withdraw from leading the Order and entrusted to one of them, Pietro Cattani, who was a canon lawyer, the leadership of the Order? Were they the ones who convinced Cardinal Ugo di Segni to speak to Francis to try to change his Gospel ideal into a more acceptable and respectable way of life historically proven in the ancient monastic orders? And, above all, why did Francis choose brother Elias of Cortona to succeed Pietro Cattani after this brother died on 10 March 1221? As far as we know Elias was not a literate brother, but had pragmatic and organisational capabilities. Was Francis choosing a candidate who was not a member of the intelligentsia of the Order? And, in doing so, was he not also endangering the juridical framework of the same Order regarding the role of the ministers in decision-making, given that Elias would eventually rule with an iron fist and would be highly suspicious of the literate friars and ministers when he took over the reins of the Order in 1232-1239?

In conclusion, did Francis truly regard his decision in 1220 as being definite to the point that he considered himself *amodo sum mortuus vobis*, "from now on I am dead to you"? Could he, as a prophet, be dead to the fraternity he accepted as a gift from the Lord? We have to resign ourselves to refrain from answering such questions. Francis' enigmatic role as a new Jeremiah (*solus sedebam* – Jer 15:17) while at the same being a founder of an Order will remain unresolved and will continue to shape the course of Franciscan history.

[26] 1C 57 [FF I, 231]. Latin text: THOMAS DE CELANO, *Vita beati Francisci*, 57: "Revertente quoque ipso ad ecclesiam Sanctae Mariae de Portiuncula, tempore non multo post, quidam litterati viri et quidam nobiles ei gratissime adhaeserunt." [accessed from https://franciscus.app/book/1Cel/op1-20 (23.10.2026)].