

THE MISSAL SAINT FRANCIS CONSULTED

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In the beginning of the last century, the attention of scholars of Franciscan history was drawn to a medieval 13th century Missal coming from Umbria, which was the property of Joseph Baer, a librarian and antiquarian at Frankfurt in Germany.¹ The Missal was considered as being the one which contained the Gospel texts which Francis of Assisi had consulted together with Bernardo da Quintavalle and Pietro Cattanio in the church of San Nicolò in the main square of Assisi in 1208. The Missal was subsequently bought by Henry Walters and taken over to the United States, where it is kept at the Walters Art Gallery (600 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21201 USA) among the medieval manuscripts (marked as codex W 75). I personally had the unique opportunity to visit the manuscript section and consult this Missal which Saint Francis knew.²

The Sources account regarding the Missal of San Nicolò

In 1209 Francis and his first companions went to Rome in order to receive the oral approval of their evangelical form of life from Pope Innocent III. Francis presented the Pope with his “Propositum”, or “Forma Vitae”, based on the words of the Gospel.

This form of life, sometimes known as the “Protoregula”, or First Rule, of the brothers, and which received oral approval by Innocent III, is considered to be lost. However, we do have some indications of its existence in the Testament, in the Rule of 1221, and in some of the medieval biographers of the life of Saint Francis.

In the Testament Francis writes: “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.”³

There have been many attempts to reconstruct the famous “Propositum vitae” of 1209, but all have been unsuccessful. What we can say, however, is that the same Gospel texts which Francis found in the Missal of San Nicolò, are to be found in sections of the “Regola non Bullata”, or Earlier Rule, of 1221. The texts are the following:

“The rule and life of these brothers is this, namely: to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own, and to follow the teaching and footprints of

¹ This article is based upon a study by GEBHARD C.P. VOORVELT, BERTULF P. VAN LEEUWEN, “L’Evangélique de Baltimore: Étude Critique sur le Missel que Saint François aurait consulté”, *Collectanea Franciscana* 59 (1989) 261-278, appendix 278-321.

² A special word of thanks to Ms. Kirsten Jensen, Curator of the Commissariat of the Holy Land in Washington, for having made it possible for me to visit the manuscript section of Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore on 17th May 2005. I would also like to thank the Curator, Mr. William Noel, for his kindness in letting me handle the Missal for half an hour, and for permission given to Br. Fadi Azar OFM, who accompanied me, to take digital photos of the manuscript.

³ Test 14-15, *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, edited by R.J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, W. J. Short, Vol. I: The Saint, (New City Press) New York – London – Manila, 125 [hereafter FAED plus volume number].

our Lord Jesus Christ, who says: «If you wish to be perfect, go, sell every thing you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me» (Mt 19:21). And: «If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me» (Mt 16:24).⁴

“When the brothers go through the world, let them «take nothing for the journey, neither knapsack, nor purse, nor bread, nor money, nor walking stick» (Lk 9:3). «Whatever house they enter, let them first say: Peace to this house» (Lk 10:5).”⁵

In his “Life of Saint Francis”, Thomas of Celano gives us the oldest account of Francis’ visit to Pope Innocent III: “When blessed Francis saw that the Lord God was daily increasing their numbers, he wrote for himself and his brothers present and future, simply and in a few words, a form of life and a rule. He used primarily words of the holy gospel, longing only for its perfection. He inserted a few other things necessary for the practice of a holy way of life. Then he went to Rome with all his brothers, since he greatly desired that the Lord Pope Innocent the Third confirm for him what he had written.”⁶

How are we to interpret the words of the Testament, where Francis states that no one revealed to him the Gospel way of life if not the Almighty? The answer is to be found in the account of the consultation of the Gospel texts in the Missal of the church of San Nicolò in Assisi.⁷

The church of San Nicolò “iuxta plateam civitatis Assisii” was built round about the year 1000 in the central square of Assisi, today Piazza del Comune. According to the Assisi historian Arnaldo Fortini, the merchants had a particular devotion to Saint Nicholas, and that is why this church was built in the market place of the town, and quite close to Pietro di Bernardone’s own house in Via Portica. It was the parish church of Francis of Assisi. Today the church of San Nicolò does not exist any more, but one can still visit its romanesque crypt, which is a museum of historical remains from the Roman Forum of Assisi. In the place where the church once stood there is still a small chapel with a 14th century painting by the school of Simone Martini, depicting the Virgin, and known as the “Madonna del Popolo”. This painting was once on the facade of the church of San Nicolò.⁸

The Gospel texts which Francis found in the Missal of San Nicolò are given to us by the Sources. We quote the Legend of Three Companions 28-29:

“Rising at daybreak, then, together with another man named Peter [Pietro Cattanio], who also wanted to become a brother, [Francis and Bernardo da Quintavalle] went to the church of San Nicolò next to the piazza of the city of Assisi. They entered for prayer, but, because they were simple, they did not know how to find the passage in the

⁴ RegNB I,1-3 [FAED I,63-64].

⁵ RegNB XIV,1-2 [FAED I,73].

⁶ 1C 32 [FAED I,210].

⁷ The account is to be found in various Sources: 1C 24 [FAED I,203]; AP 10 [FAED 37-38]; L3C 27-29 [FAED II,85-86]; 2C 15 [FAED II,253-254]; LM III,3 [FAED II,543-544]; Actus Beati Francisci I,26-35 [FAED III,437-438]; Fioretti 2 [FAED III,567-569].

⁸ For the history of San Nicolò, cf: ARNALDO FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Vol. I, Part I, Assisi 1959, 120, 340-341; Vol. III, 13-15; GIUSEPPE ABATE, *La medievale “Piazza Grande” d’Assisi*, Assisi 1986, 59; GABRIELE ANDREOZZI, *San Nicolò “De Pede Plateae”, dove nacque il movimento francescano*, Roma 1986 (for the Missal, pp. 65-68).

Gospel about renunciation. They prayed devoutly that the Lord would show them his will on opening the book the first time.

Once they had finished prayer, blessed Francis took the closed book and, kneeling before the altar, opened it. At its first opening the Lord's counsel confronted them: «If you wish to be perfect, go, sell everything you possess and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven» (Mt 19:21 [?] = Mk 10:21).

Blessed Francis was overjoyed when he read this passage and thanked God. But since he was a true worshipper of the Trinity, he desired it to be confirmed by a threefold affirmation. He opened the book a second and a third time. When he opened it up the second time he saw: «Take nothing for your journey» (Lk 9:3), and at the third opening: «If any man wishes to come after me, he must deny himself» (Mt 16:24).

Each time he opened the book, blessed Francis thanked God for confirming his plan and the desire he had conceived earlier. After the third divine confirmation was pointed out and explained, he said to those men, Bernard and Peter: 'Brothers, this is our life and rule and that of all who will want to join our company. Go, therefore, and fulfill what you have heard.'"⁹

The Anonymous of Perugia gives us an interesting detail in the story: "After finishing the prayer, they asked the priest of the church who was there: 'Sir, would you show us the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.'"¹⁰

All the Sources agree that the church in which Francis and his companions consulted the Gospel texts in the Missal was that of the piazza of Assisi, namely, San Nicolò.¹¹ However, the Actus-Fioretti both state that the episode happened in the church of the vescovado, or bishop's residence, in Assisi. Considering that these texts come from the mid or second half of the 14th century, this location is probably the result of a lack of precision in the memory of the friars who transmitted the fact orally. The older texts all speak of San Nicolò, or "one of the city's churches."

The three Gospel texts supposedly were Mt 19:21, Lk 9:3 and Mt 16:24. The first text, however, presents various problems since, according to detailed studies of the contents of the Missal of San Nicolò at Baltimore by Laurent Gallant,¹² there is no reference to Mt 19:21, but rather to the parallel text of Mk 10:21. This detail led some scholars to question whether the Missal conserved at Baltimore was actually that which Francis had consulted. Since the two synoptic texts are quite similar, however, it is generally accepted that the text which Francis consulted was that of Mark and not that of Matthew.

The method used by Francis in opening for three times the Missal in a random way was already known in the Middle Ages by the name "sortes apostolorum," or "sortes sanctorum." It was a method based on an act of adoration of the Holy Trinity (three openings of the Missal) in order to decipher God's will in the Holy Gospel within a liturgical setting (the medieval missal of Baltimore contains the Gospel texts of the

⁹ L3C 28-29 [FAED II,85-86].

¹⁰ AP 10 [FAED II,38]. The text adds: "quia ipsi adhuc bene legere nesciebant" ("before this happened, none of them knew how to read very well").

¹¹ L3C 28 is quite explicit: "Venerunt ad ecclesiam Sancti Nicolai iuxta plateam civitatis Assisii" ("they went to the church of San Nicolò, close to the piazza of the city of Assisi").

¹² The author studied the Missal at Baltimore and published his conclusions in *Collectanea Franciscana* 54 (1984) 241-260.

Mass). In fact, the manuscript of Baltimore is not a Gospel book, but a Missal, which was used for the celebration of Mass.¹³

The Missal of San Nicolò conserved in Baltimore

The Baltimore manuscript is a volume having the dimensions of 30cm in length and 20cm in width. It contains a total of 285 folios, written in two columns on both sides. It also contains a liturgical calendar.

The Missal commences with the “Proprium de tempore”, and goes from the “Dominica I de adventu” until the “Dominica XXVI post Pentecosten” (f. 1-159v). There follows the Ordinary of the Mass, (f. 160r-171r), with a beautiful Crucifixion scene on the folio where the Roman Canon starts with the Latin words “Te igitur”. Another section includes the Christmas season, comprising a “Proprium de sanctis”, and going from 24 December (“Vigilia nativitatis Domini”) until 13 January (Octava Epiphaniae) on folios 171r-182r. On folio 182v begins the “Proprium sanctorum” with the feasts of the saints in the calendar, excluding those in the Christmas season (f. 182v-244r). There is then a “Commune Sanctorum” (f. 244v-255v) and a series of “Missae diversae” (255v-278r). On folio 278v there is a Mass for the feast of St. Paul the Hermit, and one for the feast of St. Ubaldo. Interesting is the addition of a Mass in honour of the Eucharist, containing a reading (1Cor 11:23-29) and a Gospel (Jn 6:55-58), together with the Sequence “Lauda Sion” (f. 279rv).¹⁴ The rest of the manuscript (f. 280r-285v) contains a liturgical calendar. But this part seems to have been added later on to the Missal, because normally the calendar would be found in the opening pages of the Missal and not at the end.

In the Proper of the Saints, the Mass for the dedication of a church refers to that of Saint Rufinus (f. 282v), and this is a proof that the Missal was destined to be used in a church belonging to the diocese of Assisi, which has Saint Rufinus as its patron saint. The Missal also celebrates a “translatio sancti Nicolai”, and is a sign of the link between it and a church which was dedicated to this saint. In the Missal, we find some expressions referring to “clericos”, or “fratres” in the rubrics. For example, in the liturgy of Good Friday, the rubric states: “Interim, tres *fratres* in medio chori cantent versus grecos Agios, O Theos ... Finita antiphona: Ecce lignum, *fratres* in choro cantent istas antiphonas ... Tunc *fratres* dicunt vespere” (f. 93r). This detail has led scholars to suppose that the Missal was destined to be used in a canonical or monastic church. The difficulty lies in

¹³ Whereas L3C 28, 2C 15 and LM III,3 speak of an “Evangelii codex” or “Evangelii liber”, the Actus-Fioretti speak about a “Missal”. S. VAN DIJK, J. HAZELDEN WALKER, *The Origins of the modern Roman Liturgy*, London 1960, 58-59: “The celebrant’s book contained the canon of the Mass, collects, secret and postcommunions of Masses during the liturgical year and, occasionally, their proper prefaces. It had the specific name of Sacramentary ... Although each book had its specific name, any volume for the holy sacrifice was a *liber missalis*, a Mass book. Since the most ancient venerable Mass book was the celebrant’s *liber sacramentorum*, this book of the supreme mysteries was commonly referred to as the *liber missalis*, the Mass book.”

¹⁴ The feast of Corpus Christi was instituted in 1264 by Pope Urban IV.

the fact that the church of San Nicolò in Assisi was a small parish church, whereas there was a monastic church of San Nicolò di Campolungo, in the Assisi *contado*.¹⁵

This difficulty, coupled with the problem of the exact Gospel text in the case of Mt 19:21 or Mk 10:21, has prompted scholars to ask whether the manuscript of Baltimore could be the actual Missal consulted by Saint Francis in 1208.

The Missal which Saint Francis consulted

It seems that the first person to have studied in depth the Missal of San Nicolò was Michele Faloci Pulignani way back in 1914, when the Missal was still to be found in the property of Joseph Baer in Frankfurt.¹⁶

According to this scholar this was actually the Missal which Francis had consulted in 1208. The reason was that the list of saints which the Missal celebrates was familiar in Umbria, and particularly in Assisi. On folio 166r there is a rubric which was probably added afterwards, and which states that the Missal pertained to the church of San Nicolò: “Let everyone know the name of Girardo de Ugone, of whom this page mentions all the benefices and sacrifices of which he partakes in the church of blessed Nicholas, and which were celebrated by a cleric or by clerics, since he has done many good and useful deeds in favour of this said church.”¹⁷

Regarding the dating of the Missal, Faloci Pulignani states that the “terminus a quo” should be 1172, for the simple reason that the Missal has the Mass of Saint Thomas Becket, Bishop Martyr of Canterbury, who was canonized in 1172 (f. 177v). On the calendar pages, near the date 30 July, there is another rubric: “Guido episcopus Asisi obiit mccxxviii” (Guido, bishop of Assisi, died in 1228). So 1228 is the “terminus ad quem”. The Baltimore Missal is dated 1172-1228, and thus could very well have been known by Saint Francis who consulted it in 1208. The study of the illuminated folios in the manuscript shows that these artistic creations were made round about the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century.

In 1977 the microfilms of the Baltimore Missal were studied in depth by Aldo Brunacci, archivist of the Cathedral of Assisi. This scholar published his work and arrived at the same conclusions as Faloci Pulignani way back in 1914.¹⁸ Another study on the Missal by an anonymous author appeared in the official publication of the Order of Friars Minor in 1978, and it concludes that the Missal of Baltimore is an authentic

¹⁵ A. FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Vol. III, 130-131: “San Nicolò di Campolungo era un antico e celebre monastero benedettino, posto nel luogo oggi detto ‘la Badia’, al di qua di Torre Mammona, lungo il fosso di Paganzano. Questo monastero è nominato per la prima volta in un atto dell’ Arch. Catt. del 1066.”

¹⁶ M. FALOCI PULIGNANI, “Il Messale consultato da S. Francesco quando si convertì”, *Miscellanea Francescana* 15 (1914) 33-43a.

¹⁷ The full text of the original rubric in latin is the following: “Scitote omnes scire volentes eum nomine Girardum Ugonis de quo in hac pagina mentio habetur omnium beneficiorum totiusque sacrificii esse participem quae in hac ecclesia beati Nicolai per aliquem clericum vel clericos fuerint celebrata quoniam ipse idem bonum et utile pro iam dicta ecclesia iugiter est operatur quae dignum esse videtur iuxta sacram scripturam suum bonum non esse inremuneratum.” For Girardo de Ugone, cfr. A. FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Vol. I, Parte I, 99.

¹⁸ A. BRUNACCI, “Una scoperta di valore eccezionale, il Messale consultato da San Francesco all’inizio della sua nuova vita”, *San Francesco* 58 (Marzo 1978), Assisi, 80-88.

Franciscan relic.¹⁹ Other studies appeared later on,²⁰ particularly that of Laurent Gallant, which we have already quoted above.

The analysis of Gerard Voorvelt concluded that the three Gospel texts consulted by Saint Francis in the San Nicolò Missal are: Mk 10:21 (f. 132v-133r), Lk 9:3 (f. 119v) and Mt 16:24 (f. 216v). The author concludes that, even though the first text which traditionally was considered as the one which Francis found, namely Mt 19:21, does not exist in the Missal, the text of Mk 10:21 is identical, because it is a clear reference to a life of Gospel perfection, which was what Francis actually wanted to embrace.

The study of Voorvelt contains an interesting appendix giving the whole list of Gospel texts present in the Missal of San Nicolò. The scholar found 260 different readings from the Gospels, of which 83 are taken from Matthew, 29 from Mark, 78 from Luke and 70 from John.

Voorvelt states that an attentive reading of the articles of the various scholars cited above, plus the direct contact with the Missal kept at Baltimore, convinced him that the Missal originally came from Umbria, from the diocese of Assisi. It was the Missal which Francis consulted in 1208 in the church of San Nicolò, in order to discover the calling to the evangelical life. The link with the church of San Nicolò in the main square of Assisi is to be seen in the rubric regarding Girardo de Ugone, and particularly in the importance which the Missal gives to the celebration of the feastday of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of that particular church.²¹

The same scholar, after a detailed study of the manuscript at Walters Art Gallery in June 1988, managed to decipher some hidden details which were not present in the microfilm of the manuscript. He proved Faloci Pulignani right, because like him he found fragments of texts in the calendar section of the manuscript which mention the feastdays of St. Francis, confessor (4 October) and St. Dominic, confessor (5 August). This fact also throws light on the dating of the Missal (1172-1228), since Francis was canonized in 1228, and therefore his name, and that of St. Dominic, canonized in 1234, must have been added to the list of saints in the calendar.

The calendar conforms to the normal liturgical calendars in use at the Papal curia in the 13th century.²² The Missal of San Nicolò abounds with names of saints who were particularly venerated in Umbria. The same calendar also contains some astronomical indications.

¹⁹ Anonymous, "Missale manuscriptum a beato Francisco pro cognoscenda divina voluntate ter apertum", *Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum* 97 (1978) 111-113.

²⁰ GIRARD A. PRESEGHIN, "Prime candidate for Assisi missal at hand", *Catholic Review of Baltimore* (25 December 1981); MARION A. HABIG, "The Gospel book consulted by Francis", *Franciscan Herald* 61 (1982) 262-268.

²¹ G. VOORVELT, "L'Évangélaire de Baltimore", 272-273: "La lecture attentive et critique des articles mentionnés ci-dessus, spécialement ceux de Faloci Pulignani, de Garrison et de Brunacci, a suffisamment établi, à notre avis, que le missel était originaire de l'Ombrie, voire du diocèse d'Assise. Le fait de son existence dans l'année 1208, où saint François consulta l'Évangile pour connaître la volonté de Dieu, ne fait pas de doute non plus. Il est bien certain aussi que l'église, à laquelle le missel appartenait, était dédiée à saint Nicolas. Ce n'est pas tant l'inscription concernant Girardus Ugonis qui nous convainc sur ce point, car elle aurait pu être ajoutée plus tard, que la place accordée à la fête de saint Nicolas, une place extraordinairement large, beaucoup plus large que n'en occupe aucun autre saint."

²² Cf. S. VAN DIJK, *Sources of the modern Roman Liturgy*, Vol. II, Leiden 1963, 364-384.

Conclusion

Voorvelt concludes that it is almost certain that the Codex W 75, or the Missal at Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, was composed between 1172 (death of Saint Thomas Becket) and 1228 (canonization of Saint Francis). To be exact, one could state that the Missal was composed in the last quarter of the 12th century. It is not possible to give a more exact date.

It is highly probable that the Missal was composed in a “scriptorium” for the diocese of Assisi and for a church dedicated to Saint Nicholas. Most probably the place of origin of the Missal was the “scriptorium” of the abbey church of San Nicolò di Campolungo in the diocese of Assisi. A Bull of Innocent III (28 May 1198) states that this abbey depended from the diocese of Assisi. The mention of the term “fratres” is further proof of the monastic origins of the Missal. At a certain moment, it seems that the same Missal found its way in the church of San Nicolò “iuxta plateam civitatis Assisii”. The rubric which mentions Girardo de Ugone as benefactor of this church is proof that this was the church in which Francis of Assisi found the Missal he consulted together with Bernardo da Quintavalle and Pietro Cattanio on that eventful day of 16th April 1208.²³

²³ G. VOORVELT, “L’Evangélique de Baltimore”, 276-277: “Il est certain que le codex a été écrit après 1172, date de la canonisation de Thomas Becket, et avant celle de saint François (1228). Pour une datation plus exacte nous faisons appel à l’autorité du professeur Bernhard Bisschoff, qui est d’avis que le codex a été fait dans le dernier quart du XII^e siècle. Une datation plus précise est, pour l’instant, impossible. Il est fort probable que le codex a été fait dans un “scriptorium” du diocèse d’Assise pour une église Saint-Nicolas. Nous croyons que le “scriptorium” abbatial de l’église Saint-Nicolas de Campolungo a la meilleure chance d’être le lieu d’origine. D’après une bulle d’Innocent III, du 28 mai 1198, cette église dépendait du diocèse d’Assise. L’emploi fréquent du terme “fratres”, dans le corps du missel, renforce la possibilité d’une origine monastique du missel. Quoiqu’il en soit, il est bien certain que le codex, à un certain moment, a dû appartenir à l’église Saint-Nicolas, située dans le centre d’Assise. L’inscription relative à Girardus Ugonis ne nous laisse pas de doute là-dessus. Et c’est pourquoi nous souscrivons à la conclusion de Garrison, qui pense que le codex, peu de temps après sa naissance, a été cédé à une église Saint-Nicolas non monastique, laquelle doit être celle du centre de la ville d’Assise. C’est probablement le bienfaiteur de cette église, Girardus Ugonis, qui a enrichi cette église de ce don précieux. En fin de compte, en faisant le bilan des possibilités, des probabilités, des certitudes, en somme du pour et du contre, dans ce problème, nous concluons que l’opinion de ceux qui admettent que le missel de Baltimore est l’Evangélique consulté par saint François et ses deux premiers compagnons, est plus probable que l’opinion de ceux qui ne veulent admettre qu’une simple possibilité.”