

THE SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

Lecture 1 INTRODUCTION

The Sources for the life of St. Francis embrace the first two centuries of Franciscan history, from the death of St. Francis in 1226 to roughly the last decades of the 14th century. They are fundamental to understand not only the life of St. Francis, but also that of the movement of which he is the founder. Although secondary in importance to the writings of St. Francis, which remain the prime source for his life and ideals, the Sources provide an indispensable aid to situate Francis within the historical context of medieval Italy and within the social, political and ecclesiastical framework in which he lived. The Sources are primarily documents of spirituality, but they are also rich in historical content. Their aim is to be a mirror of the ideals and intentions which Francis lived and which he proposed to his followers. That is why the study of the Sources has to be accompanied by the analysis of the history of the Franciscan Order during the first two centuries of its existence.

We are fortunate to live in a period when the majority of the Sources for the life of St. Francis have been critically edited in the original Latin, and when many of them are also translated into modern languages. The most recent version in English of the Sources is now available and will constitute the basis of these study units: *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I: The Saint; Vol. II: The Founder; Vol. III: The Prophet; Index, Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1999-2002.

The study of the Sources can now also be done following a chronological order. The period between the death of St. Francis in 1226 and the end of the generalate of brother Elias in 1239 marks the time when the sanctity of Francis is celebrated by biographers like Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer. A second period goes from the beginning of the generalate of brother Haymo of Faversham in 1240 to the end of the generalate of St. Bonaventure in 1274. This period witnesses the institutionalisation of the Order and its presentation as one of the great movements of reform in the Church. In this period Francis is presented as the founder of this great movement of evangelical reform. The third period starts from the Chapter of Padova in 1276 and moves on to the last decades of the 14th century. This period is one of the most interesting in Franciscan history, because it is closely linked with the Order's growing self-awareness of its eschatological mission. In this period Francis is shown to be a prophet who incarnates the values of the Gospel and announces them through his movement, which is seen as a harbinger of a new era of salvation.

The medieval lives we shall be studying comprise a variety of documents and authors. Some of them are known as Legends (from the Latin *legendae*, or classical lives of the saints of patristic times), having the aim of being treatises of spirituality and mystical theology centred upon the Christ-like figure of Francis of Assisi. Others are

Compilations, or groupings of written testimonies about St. Francis and his movement. Still others are Chronicles, or historical documents centred upon a particular period of time or place. The style is dependent upon the source of the documentary material, which could be of an oral or written tradition. The authors range from friars who composed these biographies under the explicit command of the Pope or of the authorities of the Order, to the companions of St. Francis and their disciples, to authors who did not belong to the Order, or even to the Pope himself, who interprets Francis's intentions to the brothers in a series of papal documents. It is important to keep in mind all these varieties of Sources in order to form a coherent image of Francis and his movement which would be as close as possible to historical truth. One thing is certain: historical accuracy as we understand it today was not a priority for these medieval biographers. They were more interested in the charismatic figure of Francis and his ideals, as they were experiencing it in their own lives as followers of the Poverello within the unfolding developments of the Order and the Church in which they were living. This approach to the Sources is the only guarantee for an unbiased and open approach to the figure of St. Francis who eludes all attempts to channel him into a well-defined frame of mind or document of history.

Francis the Saint

The first period we shall cover begins immediately after the death of Francis on 3rd October 1226. The Cardinal Protector of the Order, Hugolino, who was Francis's close friend and counsellor, became Pope Gregory IX on 19th March 1227. He immediately set himself the task of declaring Francis a saint, and proposed the building of a *specialis ecclesia* (special church) to enshrine his relics. On 16th July 1228 he declared Francis a saint in Assisi. For the canonisation the Pope published a Bull with the title *Mira circa nos* (19th July 1228), which is the first one among a good number of Papal documents included within the category of the Sources for the life of St. Francis. It was during the occasion of the canonisation that Gregory IX asked brother Thomas of Celano to compose a *Life of St. Francis* [hereafter 1C] on the model of the classical patristic Legends of the saints. This would be the official biography of the new saint. Celano presented his *Life of St. Francis* to the Pope, who approved it on 25th February 1229. Besides this first *Life* Thomas of Celano is also the author of a *Legend for Use in the Choir* [hereafter LCh], dated 1230-32.

The General Chapter of Assisi of 1230, when the relics of St. Francis were transported from the burial site at the church of San Giorgio to the new basilica built in his honour, was also the scene of the first difficulties which the Order encountered regarding the correct interpretation of the Later Rule, or *Regula Bullata* of 1223. A group of friars made recourse to Pope Gregory's deep knowledge of Francis and his intentions, and the Pope responded with the Bull *Quo elongati* (28th September 1230), which is the first of a list of papal interpretations of the Franciscan Rule.

During the same period, another friar was working in Paris to compose a *Legend of St. Francis*. Brother Julian of Speyer employed Celano's biography to write his *Life of St. Francis* [hereafter LJS] in 1232-35. During the same time, probably in 1230-32, just

before composing the Life, Julian also wrote a *Rhymed Office of St. Francis* [hereafter Off], including hymns, antiphons and responsories for the liturgical celebration of the feast day of St. Francis, in which we also find compositions by other authors, including Gregory IX himself.

Another attempt to proclaim the greatness of the sanctity of St. Francis was done by a secular priest, Henri d'Avranches, author of the Versified Life of St. Francis [hereafter VL], a long epic poem written in 1232-34 and dedicated to Gregory IX.

To the same period belongs *The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty* (hereafter ScEx), a beautiful allegory which praises the lofty ideal of poverty upon which Francis built the first brotherhood. The author and date of composition are unknown, although scholars propose the years 1237-39 as the most probable time of composition.

Francis the Founder

With the downfall of brother Elias of Cortona in 1239, the Order entered a new phase in its history. From 1240 onwards the Order became markedly more clericalised and more institutionalised. This was partly due to the great strides forward which the Order had made in the spheres of studies and apostolic preaching. The friars had established themselves in large conventual houses in the towns, besides holding on to their primitive hermitages. They were present and active in all the great European centres of learning, like Paris, Oxford and Bologna. This new image of the Order necessitated the emergence of a new image of Francis as the founder of such a great movement, which, together with the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), was a great bulwark of reform in the Church.

The interpretation of the Rule was further developed during this second period with the publication of the Bull of Innocent IV, *Ordinem vestrum* (14th November 1245), which favoured further relaxation of the primitive ideal of poverty.

This second period is marked by an increasing interest in the figure of Francis on the part of those companions who had known him. *The Beginning or the Founding of the Order and the Deeds of Those Friars Minor Who Were the First in Religion and the Companions of the Blessed Francis*, written by brother John of Perugia (4th March 1240 – 22nd August 1241), is also known by the name *Anonymous of Perugia* (hereafter AP). It is a gem among the Franciscan Sources, for its originality and concise presentation of the primitive Franciscan fraternity.

The Minister General Crescentius of Iesi, in 1244, ordered the friars to send him all their written information about the life of St. Francis, which was not already included in the Legends of Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer. The response was generous. On 11th August 1246, a group of three brothers, Leo, Rufino and Angelo, companions of St. Francis, sent a letter to the Minister General from the hermitage of Greccio, together with a bundle of documentary information they gathered from their own memories and

from those of many other brothers. The question as to how this documentary material may have been used is still open to discussion, more so because the original memories of the companions have not been preserved.

One of the results of this initiative of the companions of the saint is the well-known *Legend of the Three Companions* (hereafter L3C), whose manuscript *tradition* often presents the Letter of Greccio as a kind of prologue. The date of composition is rather problematic, because it revolves around the discussion regarding the Greccio documentary material. In any case, authors nowadays present the period 1241-47 as the probable time of its composition. We should, however, not be misled by its title. The “three companions” of Greccio, as they state in their letter, never intended to compose a Legend.

Another result of the documentary material sent to Crescentius is the *Assisi Compilation*, also known as *Legend of Perugia* (hereafter AC), dated 1244-60. As its title says, it is not a Legend but a Compilation of episodes from the life of St. Francis, written by an anonymous group of friars who describe themselves as *nos, qui cum eo fuimus* (“We who were with him”). It is thus a bold affirmation of faithfulness to the original ideals of St. Francis which these same companions embraced. Included within the AC are two sections made up of brother Leo’s scrolls, namely the *Verba Sancti Francisci* (*Words of St. Francis*) and the *Intentio Regulae* (*Intention of the Rule*).

The direct result of Crescentius’s request to the brothers was, however, the initiative of Thomas of Celano to compose a new Life of St. Francis, known as *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* (hereafter 2C), written in 1246-47. The aim of this Life is that of completing the initial work of Celano in 1229. The bulk of the biography is concerned not with a historical account of the life of Francis, but rather with a portrait of his virtues, which make Thomas say: “I consider blessed Francis the holiest mirror of the holiness of the Lord, the image of his perfection” (introduction to Book 2).

The brothers were still not content with the rich contributions of Thomas of Celano. The new Minister General, John of Parma, asked him in 1250 to compose a *Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis*, which Celano presented to the General Chapter of Metz for approval in 1254.

The turn of events in the Order during John of Parma’s tenure of office (1247-1257) brought the Order to a moment of crisis, when the Minister General was accused of harbouring sympathies towards the friars who were following the doctrines of Joachim of Fiore regarding the age of the Spirit and the *ecclesia spiritualis* (spiritual Church). John of Parma had to resign, but he was given the opportunity to designate his successor in the person of brother Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. The new Minister General, a doctor of theology in the university of Paris, set out to give a new direction to the Order. In 1260, during the General Chapter of Narbonne, the brothers issued the following decree: “We order that one good legend of blessed Francis be compiled from all those already in existence.” Thus Bonaventure started to compose the *Legenda Maior*, or *Major Legend of St. Francis* (hereafter LMj), which he presented to the Chapter of Pisa in 1263,

together with an abridged form for liturgical use, the *Legenda Minor*, or *Minor Legend* (hereafter LMn). The result of the efforts of Bonaventure was that he not only produced a life of St. Francis taken essentially from Thomas of Celano, but he gave it a style which is that of a theologian and mystic. The LMj shows a close resemblance to the mystical treatise of Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Soul into God (Itinerarium mentis in Deum)*. Its prologue portrays Francis as the angel bearing the seal of the living God in his stigmata, and it depicts the spiritual journey of Francis according to the three ways of purification, illumination and union.

The General Chapter of Paris in 1266 decreed “that all the legends of the Blessed Francis that have been made should be removed (*deleantur*). Wherever they find these outside the Order, let the brothers strive to remove them. For this Legend made by the general minister has been compiled as he received it from the mouth of those who were always with the blessed Francis and had certain knowledge of everything, and proven facts have been diligently placed in it.” The reasons for this startling decision are not clear, but we cannot interpret them in our contemporary mentality. It is certainly true that Bonaventure, in order to bring unity to the Order, wanted to create an image of St. Francis which would be well-documented and appreciated by all the friars, that is, by the majority of the Order (the community) and by the rigorists (or *zelanti*). The result of such a decree was that, for many centuries, the Legends of Thomas of Celano were out of bounds for many friars, and it was only at the end of the 19th century that manuscripts containing the Legends of Celano were found in libraries outside Franciscan houses.

Another biography written during this period is known as *The Book of Praises of the Blessed Francis* (hereafter BPr). Its author is Bonaventure’s secretary, Bernard of Besse, who composed the work in 1277-83, within the context of his *Chronicle of the Fourteen or Fifteen Ministers General of the Order of Friars Minor*.

Francis the Prophet

The last period of the Franciscan Sources starts with the Chapter of Padova in 1276, when the Minister General Jerome of Ascoli Piceno asked those brothers who knew Francis and who were still alive to send their written memories to him. Many of the first brothers had, by now, died, except for brother Leo who died in 1278, but there were many of their disciples who remembered episodes which they heard directly from the companions of St. Francis.

This period of the history of the Order was quite turbulent. The Spiritual family in the Order was drifting apart from the Community of the Order, because of its rejection of the papal interpretations of the Rule and its application of the Trinitarian doctrine of Joachim of Fiore to the Franciscan Order. At the same time Pope Nicholas III gave the Order a new interpretation of the Rule, in the Bull *Exiit qui seminat* (14th August 1279). This was to be followed by another, the *Exivi de Paradiso*, of Pope Clement V (6th May 1312). The road was being paved for the poverty controversy which was to take place between the Order and Pope John XXII during the first quarter of the 14th century, at a time when the Spiritual family was formally condemned. In this turn of events, a group

of friars with Spiritual tendencies, portrayed Francis as the prophet announcing the end of time and the beginning of a new age of the Spirit.

In 1318, *The Mirror of Perfection* appeared. Two editions of this Source have been made, one by Leonard Lemmens, *A Mirror of Perfection, Rule, Profession, Life and True Calling of a Lesser Brother* (hereafter 1MP), and another one by Paul Sabatier, *The Beginning of A Mirror of Perfection of the Status of a Lesser Brother* (hereafter 2MP). Sabatier was instrumental in attributing the 2MP to brother Leo, and also initially stated that, according to the Mazzarino manuscript he discovered, it was to be dated 11th May 1228, that is, even before 1C. This position ignited the so-called “Franciscan Question” regarding the value and interdependence of the Franciscan Sources.

The circles of Spiritual friars produced various documents relating to the beginning of the Franciscan Order in the period we are examining. Their works are more of an eschatological and mystical rather than of a historical nature. However, they also provide some interesting insights into the state of the Order during the 14th century, as well as into the influence which the first companions of St. Francis still had upon the memories of the more zealous friars. This we find documents like the *Legenda Vetus*, or *Old Legend*, the *Words of brother Conrad of Offida*, and the *Words of St. Francis*, attributed to brother Leo. Two writers from the Spiritual group are worthy of attention. Ubertino da Casale is author of *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu (The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus)*, dated 1305 (hereafter TL). Angelo Clareno is author of the *Historia seu Chronicon septem tribulationum Ordinis Fratrum Minorum (The History of the Seven Tribulations of the Order of Friars Minor)*, composed in the period 1323-25 (hereafter HTrb).

The 14th century is also witness to the full development of the oral tradition of the companions of St. Francis as it was handed down through generations of friars, with the aim of presenting the ideal and humble beginnings of the Franciscan Order. The *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius (The Deeds of the Blessed Francis and His Companions)*, written by Hugolino of Monte Giorgio in 1328-1343 (hereafter ABF) seeks to do just this. Its translation into the Tuscan dialect by an unknown friar in the last decades of the 14th century produced the well-known *Fioretti*, or *Little Flowers of St. Francis* (hereafter LFI). The theme of the LFI is typical of all Franciscan Sources of the 14th century: “We must consider first of all how Saint Francis, in all the deeds of his life, conformed to the blessed Christ.” In the tradition of the *Fioretti*, but coming as late as the 15th century, we find the *Franceschina* or *Specchio dell’Ordine dei minori*, by Giacomo Oddi.

The theme of conformity of Francis to Jesus Christ is present in the *De Cognatione Sancti Francisci (The Kinship of Saint Francis)*, written in 1365 by Arnald of Sarrant (hereafter KnSF), author of the *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Ministers General of the Order of Friars Minor*, as well as in the *Liber de Conformitate (The Book of Conformities of the Life of the Blessed Francis to the Life of the Lord Jesus)*, a voluminous work by Bartholomew of Pisa, who began writing it in 1385 and presented it in 1399, at the very end of the period we are considering.

Included within the Franciscan Sources are also various related documents coming from outside the Order. Here we shall only mention the writings of Jacques de Vitry regarding the Franciscan Order (two letters, one from Genova in 1216 and one from Damietta in 1220, and chapter 32 of the *Historia Occidentalis*). Three other famous Chronicles come from within the Franciscan Order, namely the *Chronicle of Jordan of Giano* (hereafter ChrJG), regarding the Franciscan mission to Germany; the *Chronicle of Thomas of Eccleston* (hereafter ChrTE), regarding the Franciscan mission to England, and the *Chronicle of Salimbene of Parma*. Francis is also the object of praise in literary sources, such as in *The Praises of Jacopone da Todi* and in the famous *Canto XI of the Paradiso in Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy*. The first decades of the 14th century also saw the production of documentation defending the historic nature of the Portiuncula Indulgence, of which there is no trace in the Sources of the 13th century. Two documents are worthy of note, the *Diploma of Theobald, bishop of Assisi, on the Portiuncula Indulgence* (10th August 1310) and Francesco Bartholi's *Tractatus de Indulgentia S. Mariae de Portiuncula* (c.1340).