

THE SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

Lecture 2

THE MODERN STUDY OF THE SOURCES

The modern approach to the study of Franciscan hagiography began with the Irish Franciscan Luke Wadding, who in 1623 published a critical edition of the Writings of St. Francis, *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis*, in Antwerp. In 1625 Wadding began the publication of the *Annales Minorum*, a chronological history of the Order of Friars Minor from the beginnings till the year 1540. Other chronicles of the Order had been published by Nicholas Glassberger in 1508, Mark of Lisbon in 1557, and Francesco Gonzaga in 1587, to mention the most important.

In 1671 the Jesuit scholar Daniel Papenbroch discovered a manuscript in Perugia, containing a life of St. Francis by brother John of Perugia. The manuscript was published again in the *Acta Sanctorum* by another Jesuit, Cornelius Suyskens, in 1768, as part of the monumental work of the Bollandists. It became known as the *Anonymous of Perugia*. Suyskens had also discovered the *First Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano.

In 1803 Stefano Rinaldi discovered the manuscript containing the second portrait which Thomas of Celano gives of St. Francis in 1247, namely, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*. The discovery of these biographies prompted the scholar Niccolo Papini to publish two volumes entitled *La Storia di S. Francesco d'Assisi* (1825-27). In 1856 Stanislao Melchiorri published a compilation of the documentation which was discovered in his book *La Leggenda di San Francesco d'Ascesi scritta dalli suoi compagni*.

The interest in St. Francis's early biographies grew in many countries. In Germany various volumes of research were published by Görres, Karl von Hase (1856), Karl Müller (1885). The historical-critical approach to the Sources was also made by Henry Thode in 1885, when he published *Franz von Assisi und die Anfänge der Kunst der Renaissance in Italien*.

Hase's work drew the attention of the French writer Ernest Renan, author of the *Vie de Jésus* in 1863. One of his disciples was Paul Sabatier, whom he entrusted with the writing of a critical biography of St. Francis of Assisi.

Born on 3rd August 1858 in France, at Saint-Michel-de-Chabrilanoux, in a Protestant family, Paul Sabatier studied medicine, and then literature and theology at the protestant faculty of Paris between 1880 and 1885. One of his teachers at the Collège de France was Ernest Renan who invited him to write a life of St. Francis in 1884. Upon the completion of his theological studies Sabatier became vicar at Strasbourg and Saint-Cierge-la-Serre. He immediately started working on the life of St. Francis, by travelling to Italy and visiting many libraries and Franciscan sanctuaries. In 1894 Paul Sabatier

published his famous *Vie de Saint François d'Assise*, in Paris. This biography has placed Sabatier as the pioneer of modern research in Franciscan Sources. The biography was a huge success. Between 1898 and 1909 Sabatier published seven volumes relating to Franciscan Sources in the *Collection de documents pour l'histoire religieuse et littéraire du Moyen Âge*. Between 1903 and 1919 Sabatier also published the eighteen volumes of *Opuscules de critique historique*, and in 1902 he founded the International Society of Franciscan Studies. After his death, which occurred in 1931, his wife took care to publish the most updated edition of his *Vie de Saint François d'Assise*, and his lectures were published in the *Études inédites sur saint François d'Assise*.

In 1898 Paul Sabatier had discovered *The Mirror of Perfection* in a codex of the Mazzarino library of Paris, and entitled it *Speculum perfectionis seu S. Francisci Assisiensis legenda antiquissima auctore fratre Leone*. This manuscript convinced Paul Sabatier that brother Leo was the prime Source for the life of St. Francis, because of his scrolls containing *The Words of St. Francis* and *The Intention of the Rule*, and also because of a mistaken dating of the manuscript, which indicated 11th May 1228 as the date of composition of the 2MP, and which later manuscripts corrected to 1318. Sabatier was thus convinced that 2MP was even older than 1C, and that the Sources coming directly from the companions of St. Francis were more precious than the ones which were commissioned by the authority of the Church or the Order, which he called “official Sources.” This interpretation of the figure of St. Francis as discovered in the Sources and their interdependence gave rise to the so-called “Franciscan Question.” Théophile Desbonnets defined the Franciscan Question as “the search for the link between the various documents that take us back to the original documents, and those that are dependent on them.” (Cfr. Luigi Pellegrini, “A Century Reading the Sources for the Life of Saint Francis,” *Greyfriars Review* 7 (1993) 323-346.

The reaction against Sabatier of some scholars prompted a lively discussion. Michele Faloci Pulignani began publishing his views on the review *Miscellanea Franciscana*, and in the beginning of the 20th century published *San Francesco d'Assisi secondo Paul Sabatier*. New critical editions of the Sources were also made. In 1902 Francis van Ortroty published a critical edition of the *Anonymous of Perugia*. In 1922 Ferdinand Delorme discovered and published a manuscript of the Biblioteca Augusta of Perugia, which he entitled *Legenda Antiqua S. Francisci* (also known as the *Legend of Perugia*, or *Assisi Compilation*), in a critical edition he published in 1926.

A group of Franciscan scholars began working at the Collegio S. Bonaventura of Quaracchi, near Florence, to produce critical editions of the Franciscan Sources. These were collected in ten volumes of the *Analecta Franciscana*, published between 1926 and 1941. The tenth volume contains the official biographies of Thomas of Celano, Julian of Speyer, Henry d'Avranches and St. Bonaventure, together with the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacopo da Voragine and some monastic lives.

A great asset in the study of the old Franciscan Sources was the five volume biography by Arnaldo Fortini, a famous historian from Assisi who dedicated all his life to the analysis of the old archives at the cathedral and commune of Assisi. The work,

entitled *Nova Vita di San Francesco* was published in 1959, and is indispensable as a historical background to the social, political and ecclesiastical context in which Francis was born and in which he founded his Order. An abridged English translation of this volume was made by Helen Moak, *Francis of Assisi*, New York (Crossroad) 1982, with many explanatory footnotes.

The interest among scholars of Franciscan Sources grew during the last three decades of the 20th century. In 1972 Lorenzo di Fonzo published the most recent critical edition of the *Anonymous of Perugia*. In 1973 Franciscan scholars gathered in Assisi for the first of a series of international congresses organised by the International Society of Franciscan Studies. The congress theme was *La "questione francescana" dal Sabatier ad oggi* (*The "Franciscan Question" from Sabatier to Today*). Théophile Desbonnets published a critical edition of *The Legend of the Three Companions*, in the prestigious Franciscan review *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 67(1974) 38-114. In 1980 Raoul Manselli published *Nos Qui Cum Eo Fuimus: Contributo alla Questione Franciscana* (*We Who Were With Him: A Contribution to the Franciscan Question*). This publication examined all the documentation of the companions of St. Francis present in the AC and also in 2C and the *Mirror of Perfection*.

The importance of the Sources received further relevance with the publication of the critical edition of the Writings of St. Francis by Kajetan Esser, *Die Opuscula des Heiligen Franziskus von Assisi: Neue Textkritische Edition* (*The Complete Works of St. Francis of Assisi: New Critical Edition*) in 1976, which was reprinted in a smaller volume in 1978 at the Collegio S.Bonaventura of Grottaferrata, where Esser had spent many years working together with other Franciscan scholars. The title of this critical edition in Latin is *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis*.

Another indispensable asset for a scientific study of the Sources was the publication of the *Corpus des Sources Franciscaines* by George Mailleux and Jean-Francois Godet, at the Centre for the Electronic Treatment of Documents (CETEDOC) of the Catholic University of Louvain.

The Sources for the Life of St. Francis also began to be published in the translations of the major European languages. In the 1960's Engelbert Grau, Sophronius Clasen and Kajetan Esser took care of the publication of the *Franziskanische Quellenschriften*. Théophile Desbonnets and Damien Vorreux published the French edition in 1968, *Saint François d'Assise: Documents, Ecrits et premières biographies*. The English edition, edited by Marion Habig, appeared in 1973, *Saint Francis of Assisi. Writings and Early Biographies. English Omnibus of Sources for the Life of Saint Francis*. The Italian edition of the Sources was published in 1977, with the title *Fonti Francescane. Scritti e biografie di san Francesco d'Assisi. Cronache e altre testimonianze del primo secolo francescano. Scritti e biografie di santa Chiara d'Assisi*. In 1978 Jose Antonio Guerra edited the Spanish edition of the Sources, *San Francisco de Asis: Escritos, Biografías, Documentos de la época*.

The most recent critical edition in Latin of the principal Sources is *Fontes Franciscani*, edited by Enrico Menestò and Stefano Brufani, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 1995.

The new edition of the Sources in English, *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, in three volumes, provides the most up-to-date basis for a thorough study of the Franciscan Sources and is the indispensable text-book for all English-speaking students of Franciscan Sources.

The Study of the Sources

The study of the Franciscan Sources is not concerned with chronological precedence among them, or with the study of their interdependence. It goes deeper to the genuine intentions of Francis as they were transmitted by his companions and their disciples. How can we interpret the words of Francis in his Testament: “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”? Do they simply mean that Francis’s genuine intention was to found a movement of a charismatic nature without any dependence upon the interpretation of the Church? Was Francis simply one of the many evangelical visionaries of his age? Did the Church alter his original intentions?

Paul Sabatier studied the primitive fraternity of Francis in the light of its lay spirit, but not necessarily in antithesis with the official hierarchical structure of the Church. The orthodoxy of the first friars was certainly the secret of the numerical expansion of the Order within the short lapse of time between 1210 and 1221. What Sabatier sees to be at stake was not necessarily the existence of the new movement in the Church, but the saint’s suffering experience of presenting his evangelical vision to his friars and to the authority of the Church. One could speak of a psychological anguish of Francis but without any connotation of open rebellion against the establishment.

The Franciscan Sources, according to Sabatier’s conclusions, have to be studied keeping in mind the intimate link between them and the historical developments within the Order. In this way the pioneer of modern Franciscan studies established a progressive importance between the various medieval Legends of St. Francis.

The Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano was written under the command of Pope Gregory IX and thus had to be an official biography to present Francis as a universal saint. It’s relevance as a Franciscan Source is undisputed. After the end of generalate of brother Elias in 1239, however, the Order had changed so much that it became necessary to make a new collection of documentary material. Sabatier regarded this new initiative as having produced the *Legend of the Three Companions*, which he saw as an incomplete document. The missing documentation was remedied by Thomas of Celano, when in 1246 he was asked to write *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*.

The *Major Legend* by St. Bonaventure became the determining factor in the development of the early Sources. Sabatier sees it as a political tool in the hands of the

minister general Bonaventure, who was trying to pacify the conflicting factions in the Order by promoting Francis as a founder within the accepted canons of sainthood, making him look more as a mystic and wonder-worker than as an ordinary human being. Sabatier concluded that Bonaventure also succeeded in writing an official biography of St. Francis.

It was because of this critical approach that Sabatier preferred what he called the non-official Sources. Among these the most important was the *Mirror of Perfection*. Sabatier published a critical edition of the MP from a codex in the Mazzarino library of Paris in 1898, and did not hesitate to consider it as the missing section of the L3C, and considered brother Leo as its author.

According to Sabatier, brother Leo writes the life of a man with whom he shared his existence, to whom he was secretary, confessor and faithful friend. The documentation of Leo and the companions is in stark contrast with the tendency of the Church and the authority of the Order, who tried to organise Francis's charism in such a way to make of his movement a respectable religious Order. The role of cardinal Hugolino in this endeavour was fundamental.

This approach by Paul Sabatier is today largely corrected by modern scholars, who have tended to reconcile the image of St. Francis as it is presented in the various Sources. Sabatier, however, will continue to be regarded as the one who launched a new era in the modern study of the Franciscan Sources.

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