

THE SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

Lecture 3

FRANCIS, THE SAINT

The Sources which were written in the period immediately starting from the death of St. Francis to 1239 are mainly the result of the first generation of Francis's followers. They have the aim of presenting Francis as a new saint, who becomes an object of veneration for the whole Church. The Sources we shall be considering include the *Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano, the *Liturgical Texts* and *Life of St. Francis* by Julian of Speyer, the *Versified Life of St. Francis* by Henry d'Avranches, the *Sacred Exchange between St. Francis and Lady Poverty*, and the Papal Bulls *Mira circa nos* and *Quo elongati* by Gregory IX.

The Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano

Thomas was born in Celano, in the Abruzzi region of central Italy, in 1185-1190. We do not know the exact date of his entry into the Franciscan Order, but in 1C 56-57, referring to events in 1214, Thomas writes: "The good God, out of pure kindness, was pleased to be mindful of me and many others. After he [Francis] reached Spain God withstood him to his face, striking him with illness, and called him back from the journey he had begun. Shortly afterwards, when Francis returned to the Church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, some literate men and nobles gladly joined him." Thomas may have been among these educated men who received the habit from Francis. During the Chapter of 1221 Thomas was chosen to accompany the missionary expedition to Germany, led by Ceasar of Speyer. In Germany Thomas was elected custodian of the friars at Worms, Speyer and Köln, and became vicar of the German mission. He must have returned to Italy in 1224, but did not live with Francis during the last two years of the Saint's life. He was certainly present at the canonisation ceremony of St. Francis, which Gregory IX conducted in Assisi on 16th July 1228, because he gives a detailed eye-witness account of the celebration.

Pope Gregory IX wanted to glorify Francis personally. On 29th April 1228 he issued the Bull *Recolentes qualiter*, announcing that a "special church" (*specialis ecclesia*) was to be built to enshrine Francis's mortal remains on the *colle inferiore*, outside the Assisi walls. This building was to consist of a burial crypt and a monastic church, and brother Elias was entrusted with supervising the construction works. The second plan of the Pope was to present an official biography of *legenda* of St. Francis, which he entrusted to the expert pen of brother Thomas of Celano. Thomas immediately started working, and on 25th February 1229 Gregory IX approved the new Life as the official Legend of St. Francis.¹

¹ The text of the *Vita Prima* found in Paris Bib. Nat. Latin MS 3817 includes the following notice: "Apud Perusium felix dominus Papa Gregorius nonus, secundo gloriosi Pontificatus sui anno quinto kalendas

In the prologue Thomas writes that he learned many things about Francis “from trustworthy and esteemed witnesses, just as the illustrious Lord Pope Gregory commanded.” 1C is planned to follow a chronological sequence. It is divided into three books. Book one deals with the Saint’s life, from birth to the Christmas celebration at Greccio in 1223. It insists mainly on the events regarding the conversion of Francis and the foundation of the Order. Book two regards the last two years of the life of St. Francis, dealing with the events of the stigmatisation on La Verna and the death at the Portiuncula. Book three deals with the glorification of St. Francis, describing the ceremony of the canonisation, and also giving a list of miracles which were attributed to the Saint’s intercession.

Thomas of Celano follows the rules of the *ars dictaminis*, that is, the particular polished style of writing Latin according to the rules of the *cursus*. This was the style which was adopted in the papal curia in Rome. Another important aspect is that 1C abides by the conventional method of hagiography common in patristic and medieval times. The Legend had to look like other classical Legends about saints. Thomas used as his patterns the famous lives of St. Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus, of Saint Benedict by Pope St. Gregory the Great, and of St. Bernard by William of St. Thierry. The case of St. Martin is particularly important, because Thomas often presents Francis as “the new soldier of Christ” (1C 9,36). The Legend is also rich in biblical images, as well as in references to classical literature from Augustine, Seneca and Virgil.

The plan of 1C is outlined in the prologue: “The first book follows an historical sequence and is devoted principally to the purity of his blessed way of life, to his virtuous conduct and his wholesome teaching...The second book tells of his deeds from the next to last year of his life up to his happy death...The third book contains many miracles which our most glorious Saint performed on earth while reigning with Christ in the heavens. Also recorded in this section are the veneration, honour, praise and glory paid to him by the blessed Pope Gregory IX, together with all the cardinals of the holy Roman Church, when they enrolled him in the catalogue of the saints.”

The first book gives great importance to the conversion of Francis and to the foundation of the Order. Thomas of Celano gives a rather negative picture of the family background of Francis, which he then corrects in *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*. This section gives us the first insights into the youthful years of Francis, and his dreams to become a knight, the process of conversion and his act of renouncing his father’s possessions in front of bishop Guido of Assisi, the first brothers and the first missions, the calling at the Portiuncula, the journey to Rome for the approval of the primitive way of Gospel life. The first book also speaks about some miracles which Francis performed while he was still alive, and gives great importance to his love for creatures. The episode of Greccio concludes this section. As the introduction to 1C in the new English edition of the Sources says, this section corresponds to the picture of the

Marcii, legendam hanc recepit, confirmavit et censuit fore tenendam.” The date on which the *vita* had been formally accepted was, therefore, 25 February 1229.

mystery of the Incarnation in the life of Francis, and finds in the Christmas experience its most clear expression.

The second book begins with a clear reference to the date and time of Francis's death at the Portiuncula. It mentions the most important moments of the last two years of the saint's life, namely the vision of the crucified Seraph on La Verna in September 1224. The episode is followed by a reference to the various journeys of Francis's frail person, and especially to the sufferings he endured. The episode of his "transitus" at the Portiuncula is described with vivid detail. The funeral is also described in detail, especially the moment when the saint's body was taken to San Damiano to be seen for the last time by Clare and the Poor Ladies. The second book corresponds to the mystery of Christ's Redemption, and finds its expression in the body of St. Francis, who becomes a living icon of Christ Crucified.

The third book is concerned with the glorification of Francis after his death. The style shows a great rhetorical skill on the part of Thomas of Celano. It dwells mostly upon the ceremony of the saint's canonisation and the homily of Gregory IX. Thomas gives the theme of the Pope's homily, taken from Sirach 50: "Like the morning star in the midst of the clouds, like the full moon, like the shining sun, so in his days did he shine in the temple of God." The third book also contains many miracles which probably were presented during the same ceremony of canonisation, and corresponds to a Pentecost experience.

1C is imbued with the notion of "Franciscan newness", seen in the use of such words as renewal, new spirit, new Order, new evangelist, and new miracle referred to the stigmata.

In 1230 Thomas of Celano also produced an abridged form of his *Life of St. Francis*, known as *The Legend for the Use in the Choir*. It consists of nine lessons for the readings of the breviary for the feastday of St. Francis. In the introduction, dedicated to a certain brother Benedict, Thomas of Celano states that he divides his legend into nine sections or lessons, to correspond to the liturgical structure of the Office of Matins. This division is not found in any manuscript of the legend, but is a proof that the document was meant to be a liturgical text. The legend is important because in it Thomas gives us the exact date and time of Francis's death: "Freed from the fetters of this mortal life, he blessedly departed to Christ in the year of the Incarnation of Our Lord 1226, on the fourth day of the Nones of October, a Sunday; by then he had spent twenty years perfectly adhering to Christ."

The Life of St. Francis and Liturgical Texts by Julian of Speyer

Julian of Speyer is author of the *Life of St. Francis* and a liturgical text, the *Rhymed Office of St. Francis*. Julian came from Speyer, in the Rhine Palatinate of Germany. He was a *magister cantus* in the palace of the king of France. He became a Franciscan before 1227, and after the General Chapter of Assisi (30th May 1227) he went to Germany, with brother Simon the Englishman, Minister Provincial in Normandy, who

was appointed Minister in Germany. Julian received the teaching post of *lector* of theology. In May 1230 he was back in Assisi for the translation of the relics of St. Francis to the new basilica. He then went to Paris and lectured at the General house of studies of the Order. There he wrote the liturgical offices for the feast of St. Francis and St. Anthony, as well as the *Life of St. Francis*. It seems that he died in 1250, according to what the editors of *Analecta Franciscana* state in their introduction to his works.

The date of composition of LJS is normally fixed after 30th May 1232, the solemnity of Pentecost, when Gregory IX canonised St. Anthony of Padova. The reason for this is that Julian speaks of Anthony as being “a holy and glorious confessor of Christ.” *The Rhymed Office of St. Francis* was in use certainly in 1235, because Thomas of Eccleston, in his Chronicle about the coming of the Friars Minor in England (*De Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*) states that on that occasion, in the Pope’s presence and in his honour, the friars sang the antiphon for the first vespers of the Office of Julian of Speyer, in which Gregory IX was mentioned.

The LJS is heavily dependent upon 1C. The concluding two numbers (75-76) provide a detailed account of the translation of the relics of Saint Francis to the new basilica on 25th May 1230. LJS was also, however, written in a different environment, namely that of the University of Paris, where the Friars Minor had a general house of studies, the “Grand Couvent des Cordeliers.” Julian of Speyer also differs from Celano in that he does not seem to have had many contacts with the companions of St. Francis living in Umbria. The geographical difference between Paris and Assisi is important in the early history of the Order. The mendicant Orders of Preachers (Dominicans) and Minors (Franciscans) had already been present in Paris for some time. The Friars Minor arrived in Paris in 1217, during the first mission to France. They settled close to the abbey of Saint Dennis. The friars who came during the second mission, in 1219, had letters of recommendation by Pope Honorius III. In 1225, when Francis was still alive, the friars attracted to their ranks some of the secular masters of the University of Paris, among them Haymo of Faversham. In 1229, through the help of King Louis IX, the friars transferred to new quarters given to them by the abbot of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and founded the “Grand Couvent des Cordeliers.” In this place the Order established its General house of studies in the University, especially in 1236, when Alexander of Hales, one of the Masters, became a Franciscan and thus the friars’ house had its first chair of theology. Julian’s *Life of St. Francis* was, therefore, written in this historical context.

The liturgical cult of St. Francis, who was canonised by Gregory IX on 16th July 1228, was enhanced by some renowned liturgical texts for the celebration of the Office and Mass on his feastday. The main texts of the liturgy, besides Thomas of Celano’s *Legend for the Use in the Choir*, are the following:

Julian of Speyer, *Officium Rhythmicum Sancti Francisci (Rhymed Office of St. Francis)*, dated before 1235.

Pope Gregory IX, Hymn for First Vespers *Proles de caelo prodiit* and Antiphons for the Octave of the feast of St. Francis.

Cardinal Thomas of Capua (+1243), Hymns *In caelesti collegio; Decus morum*.

Cardinal Raniero Capocci of Viterbo (+1250), Hymn *Plaude turba paupercula*, Antiphon *Caelorum candor splenduit*.

The development of these liturgical texts, particularly those regarding the Divine Office, has to be studied in the context of the development of the Roman liturgy and its importance in the Franciscan Order. The Rule of 1223 stated that the brothers had to celebrate the Divine Office “according to the rite of the holy Roman Church.” Under Innocent III, probably in 1215 in connection with the Fourth Lateran Council, an abridged, comprehensive book of the canonical hours was compiled in one volume, known as the breviary. With the final version of the Rule, the friars were committed once and for all to the *ordo*, or liturgical discipline, of the Roman Church, and accepted the breviary for praying the canonical hours of the Office. Thus, unlike the Dominicans, the Friars Minor did not develop an *ordo* of their own, but adopted that of the Roman Curia.

The *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Ministers Generals of the Order of Friars Minor* attributes to Julian of Speyer the paternity of a great part of the liturgical texts for the feastdays of St. Francis and St. Anthony of Padova: “Brother Julian the German was the author of the largest sections of the life of saints Francis and Anthony in words and music” (*Analecta Franciscana* III,381). The other parts of the Office were composed by persons who knew Francis very well, like Pope Gregory IX and Cardinal Raniero Capocci, a Cistercian monk who was very close to Francis in the Chapter of 1221.

The authorship of Julian of Speyer regarding the *Rhymed Office of St. Francis* is witnessed by the anonymous German Franciscan chronicler of the 14th century, who writes: “Brother Julian of Speyer composed the Office of saints Francis and Anthony in noble style and with a sweet melody.” The same is said by Bernard of Besse, in *The Book of the Praises of St. Francis* and by Arnald of Sarrant in *The Kinship of St. Francis*.

The text of the *Rhymed Office* has been transmitted by a rich manuscript tradition. The *Analecta Franciscana* edition states that 55 manuscripts have handed down to us the liturgical texts of Julian of Speyer, as well as 27 hymnals. Ten editions were printed and published, together with the musical notes which accompany the text. Although not all the liturgical texts of the *Rhymed Office* are the work of Julian, it is certain that he is the composer of the musical melody for all the texts, both his as well as those by Gregory IX, Thomas of Capua and Raniero Capocci.

The Versified Life of St. Francis by Henri d’Avranches

The VL is a long epic poem about St. Francis, written by Henri d’Avranches and dedicated to Pope Gregory IX. It is dated 1232-1239. Henri is supposed to have been born in Normandy in 1190-1200. In 1219 he went to England, where he became famous as a poet who wrote verse for eminent patrons. His thorough knowledge of Latin helped him in his endeavours. In medieval universities, students often memorised whole treatises in philosophy, law, medicine or theology, by reciting them in poetic verses. Henri was asked to write in verse the lives of English saints, such as St. Oswald (+641) and St. Thomas Becket (+1170). In 1228 Henri moved to Rome, to the papal curia of

Gregory IX. There he put into verse the famous *Decretum Gratiani* and the *Decretals* of Gregory IX, which are the first collections of ecclesiastical law. In 1234 he was canon at Avranches in Normandy, and in 1237 dean of the cathedral chapter of Maastricht. In 1239 he left Rome and travelled to the courts of Emperor Frederick II and King Louis IX of France. In 1245 he was back in England. He is usually considered to have died in 1272. He was the author of at least 162 poems.

The VL, published first by A. Cristofani in 1882, from the Assisi Codex 338, was first attributed to John of Kent, an English Franciscan, who was familiar with the classical Greek and Roman poets. But the discovery of another manuscript of the VL in the Codex of Cambridge University Library uncovered who its author was, because it states: “The life of St. Francis in verse by master Henri d’Avranches, dedicated to Pope Gregory IX.” The Cambridge manuscript gives the well-known division into 14 books. Each book begins with the first letter taken from the Latin name *Gregorius Nonus*, thus making it an acrostic poem. Another manuscript of the VL was found at the Versailles Municipal Library, with many modifications, and is probably an adaptation by a friar from Aquitaine, and follows the model of the *Major Life* by St. Bonaventure. The older manuscripts follow 1C and are therefore given more prominence as the ones coming directly from Henri’s pen.

The VL is full of references to classical poets and orators like Virgil, Ovidius, Horatius. Raoul Manselli has said that this work needs to be studied more profoundly, as a masterpiece of a *magister versificator* who does not belong to the Franciscan Order. The VL remains essentially a literary document, and has to be interpreted in this light.

The first eleven books follow the story of St. Francis as it is found in 1C. Large sections of them are digressions from the narrative, and express Henri’s personal imagination regarding these events, taken mostly from parallel stories in classical writers. Books 12-14 are shorter and reflect the second and third sections of 1C, namely the event of the stigmatisation on La Verna, the death of St. Francis and his glorification by Pope Gregory IX, to whom Henri dedicates many words of praise.

The VL is meant to be an epic celebrating the greatness of the new saint. The opening phrase summarises this concept: “Great feats of a godly captain are the theme of my song: / For mastery over monsters foremost was he and gave those / Called Minors the skill he required.”

The Sacred Exchange between St. Francis and Lady Poverty

The Latin name for this allegorical work is *Sacrum Commercium Sancti Francisci cum Domina Paupertate*. Various opinions have been raised regarding its author and date of composition. Authors like John Parenti, Minister General (1227-32) or John of Parma, Minister General (1247-57), as well as brother Leo (by Paul Sabatier), have been proposed. Desbonnets states that the ScEx is simply the work of an anonymous friar minor who wrote during the second half of the 13th century. Some scholars have also seen in the ScEx an echo of the poverty controversy between the mendicants and the

secular masters of the University of Paris during the time of St. Bonaventure, while others have come up with the possibility that the author is Caesar of Speyer and that the allegory was written towards the end of the generalate of brother Elias, in 1237-39. For a full discussion of these opinions, confer the introduction to the ScEx in Vol. 1 of *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*.

The ScEx has the aim of describing Franciscan poverty not simply as an ideal to be preached, but as a concrete commitment to be followed by all those who want to live the life of the Gospel. The theological character of the ScEx is found already present in the prologue, where Francis is led to search for Lady Poverty, because to her “the Lord had entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

The allegory is based upon a dialogue between Francis and Lady Poverty, who lives all by herself on a mountain. Francis easily climbs this mountain, because he is devoid of any cumbersome possessions. He praises Lady Poverty, “since the Son of God, the Lord of virtue and the King of glory, fell in love with this virtue with a special affection. He sought, found, and embraced it while achieving our salvation in the middle of the earth.” Lady Poverty is described as a most faithful spouse, a sweet lover, and the queen of virtues.

Lady Poverty answers by giving an account of the whole history of salvation from Adam until Christ. Then she continues to analyse the history of the Church. From the period of the apostolic community of Jerusalem poverty passes over to the peace of Constantine, which marks the beginning of relaxation in the Church’s commitment to poverty. The birth of monasticism is presented as a provident moment when Poverty was rediscovered in the Church. The monastic Orders, however, did not remain faithful to their commitment towards Poverty. This is where the Christian proposal of Francis of Assisi enters as an answer to Poverty’s wishes.

The ScEx concludes by describing a meal which Francis and the brothers prepare for Lady Poverty. This is the most beautiful part of the allegory, in which Lady Poverty rejoices at the extremely poor way of life which Francis and the brothers lead. After having a frugal meal and resting on a stone for a pillow, Lady Poverty asks the friars to show her their enclosure (the monastic *claustrum*). Francis and the brothers lead her upon a hill and shows her all the world, telling her: “This, Lady, is our enclosure.”

The Bull of Canonisation of St. Francis

On 16th July 1228, Pope Gregory IX, who was at the time staying in Assisi, presided over the canonisation celebration of St. Francis (cfr. 1C 119-126). The stay of the Pope in Assisi had been marked by tumultuous events for the papacy. The emperor Frederick II had invaded the Papal States, and the people of Rome had risen up against the Pope on Easter Monday 1228. The Pope had to flee Rome and take refuge in Rieti, Spoleto and Perugia. It was while he was in Perugia that Gregory IX convened a consistory of Cardinals to decide upon the canonisation process of Francis of Assisi.

Three days after the canonisation, on 19th July, Gregory IX published the Bull of canonisation, *Mira circa nos*.

For a complete introduction to the Bull, cfr. R.J. Armstrong, “*Mira circa nos*. Gregory IX’s View of the Saint, Francis of Assisi,” *Greyfriars Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1990) 75-100.

The Bull “Quo elongati” of Pope Gregory IX

The General Chapter of Pentecost held in Assisi in 1230 raised the question of the correct interpretation of the Later Rule of the Friars Minor, and asked whether the Testament of St. Francis could bind the friars in conscience to its observance. A group of friars, including John Parenti, Minister General, brother Anthony, Minister of Romagna (St. Anthony of Padova), brother Gerard Rusinoll, penitentiary to the Pope, brother Haymo of Faversham, brother Leo (not Francis’s companion, but another Leo who became archbishop of Milan), brother Gerard of Modena, and brother Peter of Brescia, went to Pope Gregory IX, who answered them with the Bull *Quo elongati*, on 28th September 1230. This Bull is the first of a series of official papal interpretations of the Rule of the Order of Friars Minor.

In summary, the Bull first states that the Testament had no legal binding force on the brothers. Pope Gregory IX speaks as a jurist: “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.”

The Pope also gives an indication that he had helped Francis in drafting the Rule, when he was Cardinal Hugolino, Protector of the Order: “While we held a lesser rank, we stood by him both as he composed the aforesaid Rule and obtained its confirmation from the Apostolic See.”

The matters which the Bull addresses regard precepts in the Rule. These include the observance of the evangelical counsels, the prohibition to use money or to possess anything, the recourse to the Ministers on the part of brothers who sinned publicly, the approval of preachers, the acceptance of new brothers in the Order, the participation of the custodians in the General Chapter, the entry into monasteries of nuns. The Bull also introduced the notion of “poor use”, and the *nuntius*, or “spiritual friend”, who was to administer the friars’ alms according to the will of the almsgiver.

Rosalind Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government. Elias to Bonaventure*, Cambridge 1959, 133, has this to say regarding the Bull: “By obtaining the bulls *Quo elongati* and *Nimis iniqua* (regarding the nearly complete exemption from Episcopal jurisdiction), the brothers who were directing the development of the Order consciously repudiated much of their loyalty to the distinctive and original qualities that had characterised their institute. While John Parenti was Minister the greyfriars became less humble and less poor, and their way of life tended towards imitation of that of monks.

Many left wandering preaching for a settled life of study within their convent walls, where they were freed from urgent care about material things by the *nuncii* and *spirituales amici* mentioned in *Quo elongati*.” Cfr. M. Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty. The Doctrine of the Absolute Poverty of Christ and the Apostles in the Franciscan Order 1210-1323*, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY, 1988, 73-107.