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## INTRODUCTION TO THE WRITINGS OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

### 1.1 Critical Editions of the Writings

The knowledge regarding the life and charism of Saint Francis of Assisi, until thirty years ago, was largely limited to some of the sources of his life, particularly *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* and *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, the latter by Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. Few persons realized that Francis of Assisi is, in fact, the author of a group of Writings, among which three are autobiographical. Nowadays, we can be thankful to the Franciscan researchers who have unearthed the manuscripts containing the Writings of Saint Francis, and have handed them down to us in critical editions. These Writings provide us with the personality of Saint Francis as it is revealed in the ideals and values he cherished and transmitted to his followers.

The Franciscan scholar Luke Wadding published the first critical edition of the writings of Saint Francis in 1623.<sup>1</sup> Wadding published many of the Letters of Saint Francis, together with his Testament and Admonitions, the Earlier and Later Rules, the Canticle of Brother Sun, Office of the Passion, and other prayers, besides other documents which are not part of the writings of Saint Francis, such as the Rule of Saint Clare and the «Memoriale Propositi» of Cardinal Hugolino to the Order of Penitents. This edition is known as the «editio princeps». Wadding introduced the term «Opuscula» when referring to the Writings. This term denotes a group of writings which are short, but which were not necessarily born as documents which were immediately written down. They could well have been sayings, prayers or short conferences, which were handed down orally, until they were written in order to be preserved for posterity. The translation into modern languages of the Latin word «opusculum» (plural «opuscula»), can only be approximate: «schriften», «escritos», «scritti», «écrits», «writings».

The edition of Wadding remained the only critical edition until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The publication of Paul Sabatier's «Vie de Saint François d'Assise» in 1894 marked the beginning of modern research into the writings of Saint Francis and the sources of his life. In 1904 three editions of the writings appeared, that of Leonhard Lemmens, a Franciscan scholar at the Collegio San Bonaventura of Quaracchi,<sup>2</sup> that of Heinrich Boehmer, at Tübingen, Germany,<sup>3</sup> and that of W. Goetz.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L. WADDING, *B.P. Francisci Assisiatis Opuscula*. Nunc primum collecta tribus tomis distincta, notis et commentariis asceticis illustrata, Antwerp 1623.

<sup>2</sup> L. LEMMENS, *Opuscula sancti patris Francisci Assisiensis* (Bibliotheca Franciscana Ascetica Medii Aevi I), Quaracchi 1904.

<sup>3</sup> H. BOEHMER, *Analekten zur Geschicthe des Franziskus von Assisi*, Tübingen und Leipzig 1904.

<sup>4</sup> W. GOETZ, *Die Quellen zur Geschichte des heiligen Franz von Assisi. Eine kritische Untersuchung*, Gotha 1904.

In more recent times the writings of Saint Francis were the object of study according to more sophisticated research. In 1976 the Université Catholique de Louvain published the electronic concordance of the texts of the writings of Saint Francis and Saint Clare, by Jean-François Godet and Georges Mailleux.<sup>5</sup> In the same year Giovanni M. Boccali published the «Concordantiae verbales» of the writings of Saint Francis and Saint Clare.<sup>6</sup> Boccali also published his edition of the writings of Saint Francis and Saint Clare, two years after the famous edition of Kajetan Esser (see below), in which he includes the Canticum of Exhortation to the Poor Ladies of San Damiano «Audite Poverelle», which he had discovered in 1976 at the monastery of the Poor Clares in Verona.<sup>7</sup>

The most famous edition of the writings of Saint Francis in recent times is that of Kajetan Esser, published for the first time in 1976, some time before the death of this German Franciscan scholar, member of the team of researchers at the Collegio San Bonaventura of Grottaferrata.<sup>8</sup> An updated edition of the same work was published in 1989 by Englebert Grau.<sup>9</sup> This edition forms the basis of most of the modern translations of the writings of Saint Francis in the main European languages.<sup>10</sup>

On the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the «Opuscula», or Writings, of Saint Francis of Assisi by Kajetan Esser, from 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> April 2002, an International Conference was organized at the Pontificio Ateneo Antonianum in Rome, with the theme «Verba Domini Mei». The main areas of research and discussion included the Writings in relation to Francis and the Origin of the Franciscan Movement; the Writings in History and in Franciscan Spirituality; the Philological aspects of the Writings; Francis and his Writings from Tradition to Prophecy. The aim of this international meeting was also that of preparing the way for a new edition of the Writings of Saint Francis, 25 years after the monumental work accomplished by Esser and his collaborators.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> J.F. GODET – G. MAILLEUX, *Opuscula sancti Francisci. Scripta sanctae Clarae. Concordance, Index, Listes de fréquence, Tables comparatives*, Louvain 1976 (Corpus de sources franciscaines, 5. Travaux publiés par le Centre de traitement électronique des documents de l'Université Catholique de Louvain).

<sup>6</sup> G. BOCCALI, *Concordantiae verbales Opusculorum s. Francisci et s. Clarae Assisiensium*. Editio textus aliaque multae adnotationes cura et studio G. Boccali dispositae, Assisi 1976.

<sup>7</sup> G. BOCCALI, *Opuscula s. Francisci et scripta s. Clarae Assisiensium* variis adnotationibus et indicibus cura et studio I.M. Boccali ofm ornata, con traduzione italiana a fronte, presentazione e note a cura di L. Canonici ofm, Assisi 1978 (Pubblicazioni della Biblioteca Franciscana Chiesa Nuova – Assisi, I).

<sup>8</sup> K. ESSER, *Die Opuscula des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi*. Neue textkritische Edition, Grottaferrata 1976 (Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, XIII). *Opuscula sancti patris Francisci Assisiensis*, denuo editum iuxta codices mss. K. Esser, Grottaferrata 1978 (Bibliotheca Franciscana Ascetica Medii Aevi, XII).

<sup>9</sup> K. ESSER, *Die Opuscula des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi*. Neue textkritische Edition. Zweite, erweiterte und verbesserte Auflage, besorgt von E. GRAU, Grottaferrata (Roma) 1989 (Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, XIII).

<sup>10</sup> The English edition of the Writings is that edited by R.J. ARMSTRONG and I. BRADY, *Francis and Clare. The Complete Works*, New York (Paulist Press) 1982.

<sup>11</sup> «Verba Domini mei». *The Opuscula of Francis of Assisi, 25 years after the edition of Kajetan Esser OFM* (Acts of the International Congress, Rome 10-12 April 2002), ed. Alvaro Cacciotti (Collana Medioevo 6), Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, Rome 2003.

## 1.2 An approach to the Writings

Some preliminary observations have to be made regarding the Writings of Saint Francis. The Writings are all in Latin, with the exception of the Canticle of Brother Sun and the Canticle of Exhortation to the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. Now we know that Francis went to the cathedral school of San Giorgio, as a child, but he hardly had any further education, and his Latin was probably rudimentary. He himself states in his Letter to the Entire Order: “I am ignorant and stupid”.<sup>12</sup> This expression means that Francis did not receive a higher education. We only possess three autographs of Saint Francis, namely, the Praises of God and the Blessing given to Brother Leo, both written on the same parchment on La Verna in 1224, and a Letter to Brother Leo. All we can say is that Francis betrays a limited knowledge of Latin, and he often mixes it up with the Umbrian dialect he would use in everyday life. On the other hand, the Canticle of Brother Sun, which was written directly in the Umbrian dialect, is considered to be a masterpiece of literature.

The «Opuscula» which we now have are only 28, together with a group of dictated writings. They are mostly legislative, exhortative, and poetic texts, together with a group of letters. However, Esser found that they exist in a good number of manuscripts. This shows that they were copied and used by the friars in many places where the Order was established. Probably Francis could have written more texts, which unfortunately have not been handed down to us. From the Sources we know that he would often give conferences to the brothers, particularly during the Chapters at the Porziuncola. From the style and content of the Writings we can deduce that Francis normally dictated his words to a secretary-scribe, possibly Brother Leo.

The manuscript tradition of the Writings is abundant. Kajetan Esser studied no less than 97 manuscripts and codices. The oldest and most famous among them is the Codex 338 of the Biblioteca Comunale of Assisi, written towards the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. It is treasured nowadays in the Library of the Sacro Convento in Assisi. Another important manuscript is the Codex 225 of the Biblioteca Guarnacci of Volterra, also written towards the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. Other manuscripts come from Berlin, Basel, Barcellona, London (British Museum), Bruxelles, Düsseldorf, Dublin, Florence (Codex F19 of Ognissanti friary), Rome (St. Isidore’s Irish College), Oxford (Bodleian Library), Madrid, Munich, Naples, Paris, the Vatican, Vienna, to mention some of the most important.

The limitations of Francis as a writer should not mislead the reader into thinking that these Writings offer scant theological content. In the Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful, verses 2-3, Francis states: “Because I am the servant of all, I am obliged to serve all and to administer the fragrant words of my Lord to them. Therefore, realizing that I could not visit each one of you personally because of sickness and the weakness of my body, I decided to offer you in this letter and message the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Word of the Father, and the words of the Holy Spirit, which are spirit and life.” Towards the end of his life Francis experienced a progressive deterioration of

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<sup>12</sup> EpOrd 39: “ignorans sum et idiota”. Cfr. O. SCHMUCKI, St. Francis’s Level of Education, *Greyfriars Review* Vol. 10,2 (1996) 153-170.

his health. We know that the sufferings he endured after receiving the stigmata, as well as his blindness, impeded him from travelling and preaching far and wide as he used to do. That is the reason why Francis decided to communicate his thoughts in his Writings.

The fact that Francis was helped by close collaborators when composing his Rules, Letters, Admonitions, is seen in the abundant quotations from Holy Scripture and from the Liturgy which we find in a good number of his Writings.<sup>13</sup> Given that many of the Writings of Saint Francis are not «original», since they depend heavily upon Scripture or other patristic and liturgical texts, can we accept them as being «authentic»? Franciscan scholars have discussed the problem at length. It is an accepted fact that many of the Writings, even the Testament itself, which is an autobiographical text, cannot be considered original in the sense that they come directly from Francis himself. However, one cannot then conclude that they are not authentic, since they express the ideals and values which Francis himself cherished. A critical text of the Writings can arrive at defining the limits of originality, but it is the competence of critical interpretation to arrive at the authenticity of the Writings. In fact, from the study of the Franciscan Sources, we come to know that Francis did compose a group of Writings. Thomas of Celano tells us that “when he had letters written as greetings or admonitions he would not allow a single letter or syllable to be erased from them even when they included a repetition or mistake.”<sup>14</sup> Celano himself mentions some of the Writings of Saint Francis, thus proving their authenticity: “Indeed he once had it written as a general rule that we should honor and revere all theologians and those who minister to us the words of God, as those who minister to us spirit and life. And once, when writing to blessed Anthony, he had this written at the beginning of the letter: To brother Anthony, my bishop.”<sup>15</sup>

Francis might have been “ignorant and stupid”, but he was certainly full of reverence towards the written words of the Lord. His reverence for anything which was written down and might contain the holy names and words of the Lord is shown in his Testament: “Wherever I find our Lord’s most holy names and written words in unbecoming places, I want to gather them up and I beg that they be gathered up and placed in a becoming place.”<sup>16</sup>

The biographers of Saint Francis also witness to his great reverence towards the written words of the Lord. “Whenever Francis would find anything written about God or anyone, along the way, or in a house, or on the floor, he would pick it up with the greatest reverence and put it in a sacred or decent place.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> O. VAN ASSELDONK, Favoured Biblical Teachings in the Writings of St. Francis of Assisi, *Greyfriars Review* Vol.3,3 (1989) 287-314.

<sup>14</sup> 1C 82.

<sup>15</sup> 2C 163. The two references are to the Testament, 13 and to the Letter to St. Anthony.

<sup>16</sup> Test 12.

<sup>17</sup> 1C 82.

### 1.3 The Writings of Saint Francis according to their style and content

It is not an easy task to classify the Writings of Saint Francis. Attempts to classify them according to date are never wholly satisfactory, since we do not know when all the Writings were composed. Another approach is to classify the Writings according to their style and content. It is the approach we choose here. This approach is of great help for didactic purposes, but it also has its flaws, since terms like «Legislative» Writings are only partly correct in such cases as the Earlier Rule, which tends also to be exhortative and spiritual rather than juridical. Kajetan Esser decided to adopt none of these approaches, but classifies the Writings according to alphabetical order, starting with the initials of their names in Latin (*Admonitiones*, *Canticum fratris solis*, etc.). At the end he includes the «Dictated» Writings, which do not come directly from Francis, but can be found in the writings of his biographers who attribute them to him. According to Esser the Dictated Writings are “rough drafts of sayings about whose written form nothing can be said, but whose existence is attested by various sources.” The following classification of the Writings of Saint Francis will be the one we shall follow in these notes, while stressing once again, that this list has been drawn up for purely didactic purposes.

#### *The Rules (Legislative Writings):*

Fragments (1209-1223) [*Fragmenta alterius Regulae non Bullatae*]

The Earlier Rule (1221) [*Regula non Bullata*]

The Later Rule (1223) [*Regula Bullata*]

#### *Exhortative and Spiritual Writings:*

Way of Life given to Saint Clare (1212) [*Forma Vivendi Sanctae Clarae datae*]

A Rule for Hermitages (1217-1221) [*Regula pro Eremitariis data*]

The Testament (1226) [*Testamentum*]

Last Will written to Saint Clare (1226) [*Ultima Voluntas Sanctae Clarae scripta*]

The Admonitions [*Admonitiones*]

#### *Letters:*

First Version of the Letter to the Faithful (1209-1215) [*Epistola ad Fideles I*]

Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful (c.1220) [*Epistola ad Fideles II*]

Letter to the Clergy (Earlier Edition – before 1219) [*Epistola ad Clericos I*]

Letter to the Clergy (Later Edition – 1220) [*Epistola ad Clericos II*]

First Letter to the Custodians (1220) [*Epistola ad Custodes I*]

Second Letter to the Custodians (1220) [*Epistola ad Custodes II*]

Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples (1220) [*Epistola ad Populorum Rectores*]

Letter to a Minister (1221-1223) [*Epistola ad Ministrum*]

Letter to Brother Anthony (1223) [*Epistola ad sanctum Antonium*]

Letter to the Entire Order (1225-1226) [*Epistola toti Ordini missa*]

Letter to Brother Leo (1224-1226) [*Epistola ad fratrem Leonem*]

*Prayers:*

Prayer before the Crucifix (1205/06) [*Oratio ante Crucifixum*]  
The Praises of God and the Blessing to Leo (1224) [*Chartula fratri Leoni data*]  
The Canticle of the Creatures (1225) [*Canticum Fratris Solis*]  
Canticle of Exhortation for the Ladies of San Damiano (1225) [*Audite Poverelle*]  
Exhortation to the Praise of God [*Exhortatio ad Laudem Dei*]  
The Praises to be said at all the Hours [*Laudes ad omnes horas dicendae*]  
The Office of the Passion [*Officium Passionis*]  
Prayer inspired by the Our Father [*Expositio in Pater Noster*]  
A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary [*Salutatio Beatae Mariae Virginis*]  
A Salutation of the Virtues [*Salutatio Virtutum*]

*Dictated Writings:*

A Blessing given to Brother Bernard  
A Blessing written to Saint Clare and her Sisters  
A Letter written to the citizens of Bologna  
A Letter written to Saint Clare regarding fasting  
A Letter written to Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli (1226)  
A Letter written to the brothers of France  
The Testament of Siena (1225)  
On True and Perfect Joy

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