

4

THE LETTERS OF SAINT FRANCIS

4.1 First Version of the Letter to the Faithful (1209-1215)

Paul Sabatier first published the *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful* in 1900, from the codex of Volterra. He gave it the title *Verba vitae et salutis (Words of life and salvation)*. Franciscan scholars thought that it was a later extract of what is today known as the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, but when Kajetan Esser studied the manuscripts containing the letter, he found that the Volterra manuscript was truly unique, and that it merited a study on its own, just as Sabatier had insisted.

Esser concluded that the actual *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* is the development of the document which contains its original nucleus, namely, the manuscript of Volterra. He compares this development to the same process of maturation which occurred between the primitive *Propositum* of 1209 and the *Earlier Rule* of 1221.

Other indications regarding the originality of the Volterra codex include its quotations of the Roman Psalter, which are definitely older than all the other quotations of the Gallican Psalter in all the other manuscripts containing the *Letter to the Faithful*. The same manuscript does not contain the example of the death of the sick man who does not live in penance, as is found in the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, which could indicate the example of a homily inserted in the text. Its style is also more simple and straightforward.

Regarding the persons to whom this Letter was directed, generally called *fideles* (faithful), Esser is of the opinion that they include a specific category of Christians, namely, the Order of Penitents. He takes his cue from the *Legend of the Three Companions* 60: “Similarly, both married men and women given in marriage, unable to separate because of the law of matrimony, committed themselves to more severe penance in their own homes on the wholesome advice of the brothers.” Similarly the *Anonymous of Perugia* 41 says: “Similarly, married men said: ‘We have wives who will not permit us to send them away. Teach us, therefore, the way that we can take more securely.’ The brothers founded an order for them, called the Order of Penitents, and had it approved by the Supreme Pontiff.”

Since the Volterra Codex contains no title for the letter, Esser suggests that the title be given taking into account the contents of the Letter. Now the Letter speaks about those Christians “who produce worthy fruits of penance”. Therefore he chooses the title *Exhortatio ad fratres et sorores de poenitentia (Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance)*. In fact, judging from the contents, the Letter is simply divided into two sections, one regarding those who do penance, and the second one regarding those who do not do penance.

Regarding the date of this Writing, Esser proposes a period of time before the *Earlier Rule* and before the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*. Since it is a Letter dedicated to the Penitents, one is tempted to regard it as the oldest document we possess which regards the penitential Franciscan movement. Now, the first document we know of, directed to the Franciscan Penitents, is the *Memoriale Propositi*, of Cardinal Hugolino, dated 1221. This version of the *Letter to the Faithful* comes before this date.

Esser suggests that this Letter could very well have been the original *forma vivendi*, or way of life, which Francis gave to the Order of Penitents, on the basis of what the Franciscan Sources suggest. Thomas of Celano, in his *Life of Saint Francis*, 37, writes: “Many people, well-born and lowly, cleric and lay, driven by divine inspiration, began to come to Saint Francis, for they desired to serve under his constant training and leadership. All of these the holy one of God, like a fertile stream of heavenly grace, watered with showers of gifts and he adorned the field of their hearts with the flowers of perfection ... Furthermore, to all he gave a norm of life and to those of every rank he sincerely pointed out the way of salvation.” Julian of Speyer, in his *Life of Saint Francis*, 23, also states: “He founded three Orders ... The Third, also an order of considerable perfection, is called the Order of Penitents, which profitably brings together clerics and laity, virgins, unmarried, and married persons of both sexes.” In the *Major Legend of Saint Francis*, IV,6, Bonaventure writes: “Set on fire by the fervour of his preaching, a great number of people bound themselves by new laws of penance according to the rule which they received from the man of God. Christ’s servant decided to name this way of life the Order of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. As the road of penance is common to all those who are striving toward heaven, so this way of life admits clerics and lay, virgins and married of both sexes.”

It is in this context of the birth of the Order of Penitents as a result of the preaching ministry of Francis, that nowadays, the Secular Franciscan Order has inserted this *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful* as the prologue of its Rule approved by Paul VI on 24th June 1978.⁴³

4.2 Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful (c. 1220)

The *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* is a development of what we have already seen in the case of the *First Version*. The date which is proposed is approximately that of 1220, when Francis returned from the Middle East. It is important, however, not to consider this Letter as simply an ulterior development of the *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful*. In fact, if one looks closely at its address, one notes that Francis is speaking “to all Christian religious people: clergy and laity, men and women, and to all who live in the whole world.” In other words, this Letter seems to be more universal in its outlook than the *First Version*, which was more concerned with the

⁴³ O. SCHMUCKI, “The Third Order in the Biographies of Saint Francis”, *Greyfriars Review* 6,1 (1992) 81-107; R. MANSELLI, “Francis of Assisi and Lay People Living in the World. Beginning of the Third Order?”, *Greyfriars Review* 11,1 (1997) 41-48.

Order of Penitents. The opening expression, *Universis christianis*, says it all. However, Esser interprets this opening phrase in a slightly different way, because of the lack of punctuation in the Latin original: *universis christianis religiosis clericis et laicis masculis et feminis omnibus qui habitant in universo mundo*. The Franciscan scholar places a comma after *religiosis*, and thus indicates all Christian religious people, namely those who live a more radical Christian life in the Order of Penitents.

One would ask: why did Francis feel the need to write a second Letter to the faithful? In the Letter he 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.”

In this presentation Francis speaks about himself as being “sick” and “weak”, and therefore unable to visit these persons personally. Some scholars have suggested that this Letter was written towards the end of his life, when he was so ill that he could not move at all, but had to be carried by the brothers. However, Esser suggests that Francis was sick much before this time, and the expression could very well indicate a period of his life in which he was feeling very weak. When he returned from Egypt in 1220, he certainly was not in the best of health, having contracted various diseases. That is why, the date 1220 is fairly acceptable.

Another interesting note about this Letter is that it was written after the Fourth Lateran Council, whereas the *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful* definitely comes before 1215. This is evident in the various themes developed in this *Second Version*, including the sacramental life of the Christians, in verses 22-25: “We must, of course, confess all our sins to a priest and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ from him. Whoever does not eat His flesh and drink His blood cannot enter the kingdom of God. But let him eat and drink worthily because anyone who receives unworthily, not distinguishing, that is, not discerning, the Body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself. In addition, let us produce worthy fruits of penance.”

Now this exhortation reflects Francis’ preoccupation to safeguard the penitents, and indeed, all Christians, in faithfulness to the Catholic doctrine regarding priesthood and the Eucharist, which was being attacked by the Cathars and Waldensians. In fact, the Fourth Lateran Council had commanded, in canon 21, that all Christians should confess their sins to their priest once a year, and do penance for them, as well as receive the Eucharist at least at Easter.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The full quotation of this canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council is found in, *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I: The Saint, 77, footnote b.

4.3 Letter to the Clergy (Earlier Edition – before 1219; Later Edition – 1220)

This is one of the most studied *opuscula* of Saint Francis. It is also one of the so-called “Eucharistic writings” of Saint Francis, in which the saint speaks about the reverence due to the Body and Blood of the Lord.⁴⁵ The Letter was sometimes considered to be part of the *Admonitions* of Saint Francis. Some late manuscripts also give it a title: *De reverentia corporis Domini et de munditia altaris; ad omnes clericos* (*Regarding the Body of the Lord and the tidiness of the altars; to all clerics*). That is why Esser concludes that there are two editions of the Letter, the earlier one dated before 1219, and the later one after 1220.

The oldest copy of this Letter, dating from the years before 1238, is conserved in a missal of the Benedictine abbey of Subiaco. The copyist even tried to imitate the *Thau cum capite*, which was the characteristic sign of Francis’ signatures, according to Bonaventure’s *Major Legend of Saint Francis* IV,9: “The holy man venerated this symbol (Tau) with great affection, often spoke of it with eloquence, and signed it with his own hand in the letters he sent.”

The *Assisi Compilation* 60, shows how Francis often spoke to the poor priests about the importance of keeping churches, altars, and linens tidy, out of reverence to the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord: “At one time while blessed Francis was staying at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, and there were still only a few brothers, blessed Francis sometimes used to go through the villages and churches in the area around the city of Assisi, proclaiming and preaching to the people that they should do penance. And he would carry a broom to sweep the churches. For blessed Francis was very sad when he entered some church and saw that it was not clean. Therefore, after preaching to the people, at the end of the sermon, he would always have all the priests who were present assembled in some remote place so he could not be overheard by secular people. He would preach to them about the salvation of souls and, in particular, that they should exercise care and concern in keeping churches clean, as well as altars and everything that pertained to the celebration of the divine mysteries.”

The two editions of the Letter are similar, except for some details. The oldest edition, that of the Subiaco missal, reflects the doctrine of the Fourth Lateran Council regarding the custody of the Blessed Sacrament, which in the Middle Ages, was not given much importance. The second edition has one particular detail which merits attention, namely, the expression: “We know that we are bound to observe above all else all of these matters according to the precepts of the Lord and the constitutions of the holy mother Church.” This expression reflects the decree *Sane cum olim* of Pope Honorius III (22nd November 1219), which lays down norms for the decent custody of the Eucharist in the churches and for the decent celebration of the liturgy.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ L. OLIGER, “Textus antiquissimus Epistolae sancti Francisci de reverentia corporis Domini in Missali Sublacensi (cod. B.24 Vallicellanus)”, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 6 (1913) 3-12; B. CORNET, “Le «De reverentia Corporis Domini», exhortation et lettre de S. François”, *Études Franciscaines* 6 (1955) 65-91, 167-180; 7 (1956) 20-35, 155-177; 8 (1957) 33-58.

⁴⁶ See full text of decree in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I: The Saint, 55, footnote a.

4.4 Letter to the Custodians (First and Second Version – 1220)

Paul Sabatier published the text of the *First Letter to the Custodians* in 1902, from a manuscript in the Guarnacci Library of Volterra (Codex 225 - mid 13th century). Subsequent studies of the Letter were made by Goetz, Lemmens, Boehmer, Oliger and Van Dijk. This Letter, therefore, was found in only one manuscript, but this does not diminish its authenticity, since we know that various other writings of Francis have been transmitted by a small number of manuscripts, and we even know of some Letters which Francis wrote (to Cardinal Hugolino, to Clare, to the brothers in France), which are lost. This Letter also shows similarities with the *Letter to the Clerics* and the *Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*, particularly in its Eucharistic references.

The Letter is addressed to the *universis custodibus fratrum minorum* (to all the custodians of the friars minor). The Latin term *custos* (custodian) was first used in the Order after 1217, when the Order was divided into Provinces. A minister of a Province would have a certain number of custodians, according to the sub-divisions of the same Province. The term seemingly entered the Order's vocabulary after the papal document *Cum secundum consilium* of Pope Honorius III (22nd November 1220), which addressed the *dilectis filiis prioribus seu custodibus fratrum minorum* ("the beloved sons, the priors or custodians of the friars minor").⁴⁷

The insistence of Francis upon the care of "chalices, corporals, appointments of the altar, and everything that pertains to the sacrifice", is an important aspect which the friars always took very seriously. After the death of Saint Francis, during the 1230 Pentecost Chapter in Assisi, the Minister General Giovanni Parenti published a statute in which he exhorted the brothers to treat "with the greatest reverence" the body of the Lord, and conserve it "in a silver or golden pyx within a well-locked capsule".

Another interesting note in the Letter is Francis invitation to the Custodians, to "announce and preach His praise to all nations in such a way that praise and thanks may always be given to the all-powerful God by all people throughout the world at every hour and whenever bells are rung." Some scholars are of the opinion that this exhortation is linked with the experience which Francis made in 1219-1220 in the East, when he would hear the Islamic «salât» of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer.

⁴⁷ K. ESSER, *Origins of the Franciscan Order*, 67-68: "The term *custos* had not been used hitherto for the superiors of the Friars Minor, since its use in the Order can be traced only to a later date. It appears for the first time here (in *Cum secundum consilium* of 1220). The term does not seem to have been used at first in a proper sense only, inasmuch as the Final Rule prescribes that, in place of an incompetent minister general, the friars are to 'elect for themselves another as *custos* in the name of the Lord'. Thus, the term could apply even to the highest superior in the Order. In the same chapter we read: 'At his death, the election of a successor must be made by the provincial ministers and *custodibus* at the Chapter of Pentecost, in which the provincial ministers are always bound to convene'. As only the provincial ministers come to the Chapter, the term 'custos' cannot refer here either to any specific office; 'minister et custos' is, in all probability, originally a repetition similar to 'minister et servus'. Accordingly, we may interpret the address of the papal letter just mentioned to mean that 'custos' at first, like 'minister', was a general designation of office in the Order. Yet by the time St. Francis wrote his *Testament* the word had certainly come to mean a clearly defined office. The provinces by that time were, obviously, subdivided into smaller administrative units, headed by the 'custos'.

One last interesting feature is Francis' insistence upon "the holy names and written words that sanctify His Body". This expression occurs in other "Eucharistic" writings of Francis, and particularly in his *Testament*. The Latin verb *sanctificans* (sanctify) is a liturgically technical term indicating the consecration of the Eucharistic species. Francis places on the same level the reverence due to the Eucharist and that due to the "holy names and written words", which are used in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The *Second Letter to the Custodians* was first published by Wadding, who says that it was first written *hispano idiomate* (in Spanish) from Saragozza, and dates it from the time of Giovanni Parenti, who was the first minister provincial in Spain before becoming Minister General of the Order in 1227. Wadding translated it into Latin, and we do not possess the Spanish original which he quotes.

This Letter is interesting because it refers to three other Letters of Saint Francis, namely, the *Letter to the Clerics*, the *First Letter to the Custodians*, and the *Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*. In fact, it seems to be an accompanying Letter, since Francis states: "In the sight of our Lord God, I beg you, as much as I can, to give to bishops and other members of the clergy those letters treating of the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord ... Make many copies of the other letter I am sending you, in which it is written that the praises of God be proclaimed among the peoples and in the piazzas, to give to mayors, consuls and rulers, and distribute them with great zeal to those to whom they should be given."

4.5 Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples (1220)

This Letter was also discovered by Wadding in the historical work of Francisco Gonzaga, Minister General of the Order (1579-1587): *De origine seraphicae religionis franciscanae*. Gonzaga says that Giovanni Parenti, first Minister General after Saint Francis, brought this letter from Spain.

The Letter is written to the *populorum rectores* (rulers of the peoples). How are we to interpret this expression? Francis addresses it "to all mayors and consuls, magistrates and governors throughout the world". This reflects the typical medieval form of government of the Italian city-states, through the *Comune*. The *potestates* were the Podestà, or mayors, who presided over the towns. The *consules* were the Consuls, or the civil magistrates who made up the town councils. The *iudices* were the Judges who administered the law and justice, whereas the *rectores* were the Governors, who were responsible for administration in general.

The *Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples* shows Francis' typical way of exhortation to penance and to reverence towards the Body and Blood of the Lord. It is a moving example of the early Franciscan method of preaching, this time to the civil authorities. From the Sources we know that it was not the first time that Francis would address those in authority, as he did during the siege of Damietta on 29th August 1219, pleading with

king Jean de Brienne not to attack the town to prevent further bloodshed. So it is not surprising that he would address such a Letter to the Christian rulers of the Italian city-states. We know how he sends one of the brothers to remind Emperor Otto IV of the brevity of the glory of this world, when he was passing close to the brothers' hovel at Rivo Torto (*Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano, 43), as well as regarding Francis' wish to go to the emperor and plead him to enact laws for feeding animals on Christmas day (*Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, 200).

Francis also reminds the civil authorities to give signals for specific times of prayer in their towns and cities. This detail, already present in the *Second Letter to the Custodians*, might have been inspired by the Muslim custom of praising God five times a day at specific moments.

4.6 Letter to a Minister (1217-1221)

The *Letter to a Minister* is an example of spiritual accompaniment and direction on the part of Saint Francis. It is directed “to a minister”, who unfortunately remains anonymous. Some manuscripts indicate the name of brother Elias, or brother Pietro Cattani, but there is no definite proof regarding this attribution. Esser opts to regard this Letter as an advice which Francis gives to an unknown minister.

The content of the first section of the Letter is of particular interest. Francis writes to this brother “regarding the state of his soul”. Therefore the document is one of spiritual direction to a brother in need. The minister was going through difficulties regarding his relations with the brothers, and would have liked to resign from his post and retire to a hermitage. Francis does not accept his wish, and advises him to continue doing his duty as a minister, and forgive the brothers who did him wrong, even though they would persecute him. Francis' words of encouragement are moving: “And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians. And let this be more than a hermitage for you.”

Other interesting notes in the Letter regard the mention of the “guardians”. According to the analysis of Kajetan Esser, the notion of “guardian” is born in the *Rule for Hermitages*, where the “mothers” are asked to guard (*custodiant*) their “sons” in contemplation. They carry out their duty as representatives of their minister. This idea, however, was not welcomed in the Rules, and indeed, we cannot find an description of the office of the local superior in the Rules “even in embryonic form”. However, Esser quotes the *Legenda Monacensis*, which says: “The term ‘guardian’, which means the same as ‘custos’, is not from the Rule, but is taken from the usage of the Roman tongue to distinguish the offices.”⁴⁸

The Letter also speaks about the Pentecost Chapter, in which seemingly all the brothers were still participating. Now we know that this practice in the Order was dropped in 1221, and that the reference to the legislation regarding brothers who sin

⁴⁸ K. ESSER, *Origins of the Franciscan Order*, 172-175.

mortality was no longer a problem after 1223, because the *Later Rule* has specific references in chapters 7 and 10 to this problem. The suggestion which Francis places before the Chapter for consideration, in verses 14 to 20, does not find any ways of expression in the *Earlier Rule*, chapters 5, 13 and 20. This indicates a gradual development of a praxis in the Order, which would eventually be incorporated in the Rules, but which, at this stage, was still in its embryonic form. All these elements point out to a period of time predating 1223 as the date of the composition of the *Letter to a Minister*. Esser prefers to date the Letter between 1217, the date of the institution of the office of Minister, and 1221, the date of the Pentecost Chapter which limited the participation in the Chapter to the ministers alone.

4.6 Letter to Brother Anthony (1223)

This short note is addressed to Brother Anthony, lecturer of theology at the *Studium* of the brothers in Bologna, the first house of studies of the Order. Anthony had entered the Order in 1220, after the martyrdom of Saint Bernard and Companions in Morocco, and after the General Chapter of 1221 was sent to the province of Romagna, to the hermitage of Monte Paolo. After a sermon at Forli, in which the brothers came to know his extraordinary qualities as theologian and preacher, Anthony was sent to lecture theology to the brothers at Bologna.

We have a proof that Francis wrote a short note to Anthony in the *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, 163: “He considered doctors of sacred theology to be worthy of even greater honour. Indeed he once had it written as a general rule that ‘we should honour 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.’”

Francis writes to Anthony, calling him “my Bishop”, out of respect to his great wisdom in teaching theology and preaching, an office normally reserved for bishops. The short note is proof that Francis was not against the brothers studying theology. The recommendation that Francis gives to Anthony is included in the few words of this Letter which we now quote textually:

“I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers providing that, as is contained in the Rule, you do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion during study of this kind.” The reference is to the *Later Rule*, chapter 5. The chronology of Anthony’s life and the reference to the *Later Rule* point out to 1223 as the date of composition of this Letter.

4.7 Letter to the Entire Order (1225-1226)

This Letter has been given various names. Wadding calls it *Epistola ad capitulum generale* (Letter to the General Chapter), and adds: “To the priests of the entire Order”.

Lemmens gives it this title: *Litterae, quas in fine dierum suorum capitulo generali direxit et omnibus fratribus* (A Letter which he addressed towards the end of his life to the general chapter and to all the brothers). Boehmer calls it *Epistola ad capitulum generale* (Letter to the General Chapter), and adds the following note: “A Letter and exhortation which the most holy father Francis send to the chapter, when he was ill”. Esser is of the opinion that the Letter contains no explicit mention to a general chapter. Instead, the Letter is addressed to “the General Minister of the Order of Friars Minor, and the other general ministers who will come after him, and to the ministers, custodians, humble priests of this same brotherhood in Christ, and to all simple and obedient brothers, from the first to the last”. In other words, it is a *Letter to the Entire Order*.

The *Assisi Compilation* 108, states: “In fact one time he wanted to send some brothers through every region with pyxes and wherever they found the Body of Christ placed illicitly, they were to place It honourably in them. Out of reverence for the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, he wanted it placed in the Rule that, wherever the brothers find the written words and name of the Lord by which the most holy sacrament is conected, not well kept, or carelessly thrown around in some place, let them gather them up, honouring in the words the Lord Who spoke them. Many things are made holy by the words of God, and the sacrament of the altar is celebrated in the power of the words of Christ.” These words echo what Francis says in the *Letter to the Entire Order*, 35-37.

In his *Book of Conformities* (1385-1390), Bartholomew of Pisa states: “The holy man Francis wanted that the brothers in every place would be content to celebrate one Mass”, an obvious reference to verses 30 to 32 of the *Letter to the Entire Order*.

Regarding the date of composition of the *Letter to the Entire Order*, it is evident that this Letter was influenced by the papal document *Sane cum olim* which Honorius III sent to many bishops in 1219-1220. But, probably, the document which was instrumental in its composition was the promulgation of the *Quia populares tumultus*, on 3rd December 1224, which gave the friars permission to celebrate the Eucharist in their own churches and oratories.⁴⁹

The *Letter to the Entire Order* also shows a well-structured hierarchy within the Order, and thus could very well have been composed during the last years of Francis’ life. The fact that Francis calls himself “a worthless and weak man” further proves this assertion.

The contents of the *Letter to the Entire Order* can be summed up thus: v. 1-4: introduction; v. 5-11: exhortation to obedience to the voice of the Son of God; v. 12-13: reverence to the Body and Blood of the Lord; v. 14-20: exhortation to the brother priests to offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist with purity and reverence; v.21-25: exhortation to priests to be aware of the dignity of their ministry; v. 26-29: words of praise to the humility of God in the mystery of the Incarnation and Eucharist; v. 30-33: exhortation to celebrate one Mass a day in every fraternity; v. 34-37; exhortation to venerate the divine

⁴⁹ Text in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I: The Saint, 561-563.

words of the Lord; v. 38-39; a confession of sins on the part of Francis; v. 40-42: exhortation to observe the Rule and pray the Divine Office with devotion; v. 43: Francis' resolve to observe all these things; v. 44-46: Francis speaks out against the brothers who are not Catholics and who wander about outside obedience; v. 47-49: exhortation to the ministers, custodians and guardians to cherish the Letter, put it into practice and preserve it; v. 50-52: concluding prayer: "Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God".

One of the most problematic sections of the *Letter to the Entire Order* concerns verses 30-32: "I admonish and exhort you in the Lord, therefore, to celebrate only one Mass a day according to the rite of the Holy Church in those places where the brothers dwell. But if there is more than one priest there, let the other be content, for the love of charity, at hearing the celebration of the other priest; because our Lord Jesus Christ fills those present and absent who are worthy of Him."

Esser says that these expressions do not necessarily mean that Francis was condemning the medieval practice of private Masses, as Lemmens pointed out. Neither do they necessarily refer to the practice of the daily conventual Mass, as Van Dijk pointed out, referring to a practice among the Heremital Augustinian friars. Francis did not know the liturgical discipline of Cluny, which prohibited private celebrations of Masses during the celebration of conventual Mass. And there is absolutely no official prohibition on the part of the Roman Curia regarding private Masses, which can provide the basis for what Francis is asking out of his brother priests. In fact, a Missal of Honorius III explicitly states that if there are more priests in one place, they can privately sing the Mass they want. These words are, therefore, Francis' own personal preoccupation. What they could mean simply is that Francis insists on a decent celebration of the Eucharist "according to the rite of the Holy Church". The fact that Francis writes these words is a proof of the authenticity of the *Letter to the Entire Order*, since the later development of the doctrine on private Masses in scholastic theology could have rendered impossible such a prohibition on the part of Francis. What is of utmost importance, however, is not to interpret these words in the light of our contemporary theology of concelebration and community Mass.

Another interesting expression which might create difficulties of interpretation regards verse 41: "to have the clerics say the Office with devotion before God not concentrating on the melody of the voice but on the harmony of the mind, that the voice may be in harmony with the mind, the mind truly in harmony with God." This phrase is parallel to, but at the same time distinct from, chapter 19 of the Benedictine Rule: "Let us, therefore, consider in what state one must be in the sight of God and his angels; we shall, then, stand while chanting, so that our hearts will be in harmony with our voices."

The prayer "Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God", which concludes the Letter, is joined to it in the Assisi Codex 338, but at the same time many other manuscripts consider it as distinct. According to the Esser the prayer summarizes very well the contents of the *Letter to the Entire Order*, and should be joined to it as its conclusion.

4.7 Letter to Brother Leo (1225-1226)

The *Letter to Brother Leo* is another autograph of Saint Francis, together with the *Parchment given to Brother Leo*, containing the Praises of God and the Blessing given to Brother Leo. In 1640 we come to know of this Letter, because the Poor Clares of Spoleto gave it to the Friars Minor Conventuals of the town. Until 1860 this parchment was preserved in the Conventual friary of San Simone at Spoleto. When the friary was taken over by the state in 1860 the document passed under the care of the town council of Spoleto. In 1895 the document passed into the hands of a parish priest, called Clito Cardinali, who wanted to sell it in America. Fortunately the scholar M. Faloci Pulignani showed the document to Leo XIII, who offered a payment to the priest and took the parchment in the Vatican Library. The town council of Spoleto asked the Pope to hand the parchment to its care in 1902. The Pope acceded to the request, on the condition that the parchment be kept in the treasury of the cathedral church of Spoleto, where it still is.

The Letter has been studied by Attilio Bartoli Langeli, particularly with the aim of understanding the handwriting and style used by Francis. It shows marked similarities to the *Chartula*, or *Parchment*, which Francis wrote on La Verna in 1224, and probably also dates from the last years of Francis' life. It shows Francis' difficulty in writing, and his lack of knowledge of Latin, which he often mixes with the Italian dialect of Umbria.

The Letter is a moving expression of affection and spiritual friendship between Francis and brother Leo. It is a document which can be seen as a spiritual counsel or direction between Francis and his secretary and confessor Leo. Its style is thus very personal and vague: "I am putting everything we said on the road", says Francis to Leo. The *Letter to Brother Leo* shows also the sense of Gospel freedom which Francis experienced and his great respect for the conscience of each and every one of the brothers in making important decisions in life: "In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience."

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