

# 6

## DICTATED WRITINGS

Jacques Cambell introduced the term «dictated writings». In medieval Franciscan literature we sometimes find that Francis is said to have dictated some letters or other writings, whose contents are described, but without the original written form in which they were composed. They are accepted as Writings of Saint Francis, of which we know the existence, but whose content remains lost to us.

### 6.1 Blessing given to Brother Bernard

There are various witnesses among the Franciscan Sources, who state that Francis gave this blessing to Brother Bernard of Quintavalle, his first disciple. The *Assisi Compilation* 12, says: “Sitting next to the bed where blessed Francis was lying, Brother Bernard said: ‘Father! I beg you, bless me and show me your love. I believe that, if you show me your love with fatherly affection, God Himself and the other brothers of the religion will love me more’ ... Brother Bernard immediately drew closer to him. Blessed Francis, placing his hand on his head, blessed him, ‘Write what I tell you,’ he then said to one of his companions. ‘Brother Bernard was the first brother the Lord gave me. He began first and most perfectly fulfilled the perfection of the holy Gospel, distributing all his goods to the poor. Because of this and his many other prerogatives, I am bound to love him more than any other brother in the whole religion. As much as I am able, it is my will and command that whoever becomes general minister should love and honour him as he would me. Let the other provincial ministers and the brothers of the whole religion hold him in my place.’ Because of this, Brother Bernard was greatly consoled as were the other brothers who saw this.” Parallel texts are found in the *Mirror of Perfection* (Lemmens edition) 17, and (Sabatier edition) 107.

According to the Sources, this blessing was given during the same period of the visit of Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli, that is, during the last week of the life of Saint Francis, when he was waiting for “Sister Death” at the Porziuncola.

### 6.2 Blessing given to Saint Clare and to her Sisters

The *Assisi Compilation* 13 gives us the following information regarding a letter which Francis is supposed to have sent to Clare before his death: “During the week in which blessed Francis died, Lady Clare was seriously ill. She was the first plant of the Order of Sisters, the abbess of the Poor Sisters of the monastery of San Damiano in Assisi, who emulated Saint Francis in observing always the poverty of the Son of God. She feared that she would die before blessed Francis. She wept in bitterness of spirit and could not be comforted, because she would not be able before her death to see her only

father after God, that is, blessed Francis, her comforter both internally and externally, and her first founder in God's grace. She sent word of this to blessed Francis through one of the brothers. Blessed Francis heard this and was moved to piety, since he loved her and her sisters with fatherly affection because of their holy manner of living, and especially because, a few years after he began to have brothers, she was converted to the Lord through his advice, working with the Lord. Her conversion not only greatly edified the religion of the brothers, but also the entire Church of God. Blessed Francis considered that what she desired, that is, to see him, could not be done then since they were both seriously ill. To console her, he wrote his blessing in a letter and also absolved her from any failings, if she had any, regarding his commands and wishes or the commands and wishes of the Son of God. Moreover, so that she would put aside all her grief and be consoled in the Lord, he, or rather the Spirit of God speaking through him, spoke to the brother she had sent: 'Go and take this letter to Lady Clare, and tell her to put aside all her grief and sorrow over not being able to see me now. Let her be assured that before her death, both she and her sisters will see me and will receive the greatest consolation from me.'" Parallel texts in the *Mirror of Perfection* (Lemmens) 18, and (Sabatier) 108.

### **6.3 A Letter sent to the citizens of Bologna**

The reference to this letter is found in Thomas of Eccleston, *De Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*, the Chronicle regarding the arrival of the Friars Minor in England. The information is given by Brother Martin of Barton, who was vicar in England and custos of York. Thomas of Eccleston writes: "Brother Martin of Barton also said that a brother was absorbed in prayer at Brescia, on Christmasday (1222), and he was found unscathed under the ruins of the church which collapsed during the earthquake which Saint Francis had predicted and which he had asked the brothers to announce in all the schools of Bologna, when he sent them a letter in very poor Latin."

The earthquake to which the letter refers was recorded by many chronicles of the period, and it seems that the town of Brescia, in Lombardy, had been badly hit. The letter shows that Francis did have contacts with the university city of Bologna, in which the friars had their first school of theology in 1222.

### **6.4 A Letter sent to Saint Clare regarding fasting**

The reference to this letter is given to us by Clare herself in her third letter to Agnes of Prague, written probably in 1238. There is therefore no doubt regarding its authenticity. Agnes had asked Clare to inform her regarding the practice of fasting which the Poor Ladies observed at San Damiano. Clare answers referring to the advice of Saint Francis transmitted to her in one of his writings. This is the text of the Letter of Clare to Agnes of Prague, which gives us the information regarding this Dictated Writing:

"Now concerning those matters that you have asked me to clarify for you: which are the specific feasts our most glorious Father Saint Francis urged us to celebrate in a

special way by a change of food – feasts of which, I believe, you already have some knowledge, - I propose to respond to your love. Your prudence should know, then, that except for the weak and the sick, for whom [Saint Francis] advised and admonished us to show every possible discretion in matters of food, none of us who are healthy and strong should eat anything other than Lenten fare, either on ferial days or on feast days. Thus, we must fast every day except Sundays and the Nativity of the Lord, on which days we may have two meals. And on ordinary Thursdays everyone may do as she wishes, so that she who does not wish to fast is not obliged. However, we who are well should fast every day except on Sundays and on Christmas. During the entire Easter week, as the writing of Saint Francis tells us, and on the feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the holy Apostles, we are not obliged to fast, unless these feasts occur on a Friday. And, as I have already said, let us who are well and strong always eat Lenten fare.”<sup>54</sup>

## 6.5 Letter written to Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli

This letter is one of the most popular and well-documented among the Franciscan Sources. Among the principal witnesses we find Thomas of Celano, in the *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* 37-38, the *Book of Exemplary Stories of the Friars Minor*, which gives the information attributed to Brother Leo, the *Assisi Compilation* 8, the *Mirror of Perfection* (Lemmens) 11 and (Sabatier) 112, the *Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions* 18, and Bartholomew of Pisa, *Book of Conformities (Analecta Franciscana V, 180-181)*. Wadding also gives the text of the Letter in his *Opuscula*, 69. We here reproduce the account of Thomas of Celano and that of the *Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions*.

“Jacoba dei Settesoli, equal in fame and holiness in the city of Rome, earned the privilege of special love from the saint ... The saint was bedridden with that illness by which, putting off all his weariness, he was about to complete the race with a blessed ending. A few days before his death he decided to send for Lady Jacoba in Rome, telling her that if she wanted to see the one whom she so loved so warmly as an exile, she should come with all haste, because he was about to return to his homeland. A letter was written; a messenger noted for his swiftness was sought and, once found, was outfitted for the journey. Just then there was heard at the door the sound of horses, the commotion of knights, the crowd of an escort. One of the companions, the one who had given instructions to the messenger, went to the door and found there present the one whom he sought because absent. He was struck with wonder and ran very quickly to the saint. Unable to restrain himself for joy, he said: ‘I have good news for you, father.’ Without a pause the saint immediately replied, ‘Blessed be God, who has brought our Brother Lady Jacoba to us! Open the doors and bring her in. The decree about women is not to be observed for Brother Jacoba!’

There was great rejoicing among the noble guests, but their spiritual delight was mingled with flowing tears. To make the miracle complete, it was discovered that the holy woman had brought with her everything that the letter just written had requested for

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<sup>54</sup> Text taken from *Clare of Assisi. Early Documents*, 47.

the father's burial. God had supplied everything that the spirit of this man wanted; she brought some ash-coloured cloth to cover the little body of the one who was departing; many candles; a cloth for his face; a cushion for his head; and a special dish the saint had a longing for." (3C 37-38)

"To Lady Jacoba, servant of the Most High, from Brother Francis, Christ's poor little one, greetings and fellowship with the Holy Spirit in the Lord Jesus Christ! You should know, my very dear one, that the blessed Christ by His grace has revealed to me that the end of my life is near. So, if you want to find me alive, come quickly to Saint Mary of the Angels as soon as you read this letter. For if you do not come before such-and-such a day, you will not be able to find me alive. Bring with you a piece of hair-shirt in which you may wrap my body, and wax for the burial. I ask you also to bring me some of those things to eat which you used to give me when I was sick in Rome." (*The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions*, 18).

## **6.6 Letter written to the Brothers in France**

Thomas of Eccleston is again the witness to the existence of this Letter, in his *De Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*. Martin of Barton again gives him this information. The text of Eccleston says: "The blessed Francis wrote a letter with his own hand (*propria manu*) ... to the minister and the brothers of France, exhorting them, as soon as they received the letter, to be joyful and praise God, the Trinity, saying: 'Let us bless the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.'"

We do not know who the recipients of the letter were. The province of France would cover not only present-day France, but even the regions further north, including Belgium.

## **6.7 The Testament dictated in Siena**

The *Assisi Compilation* 59 presents the circumstances of composition, as well as the contents of this important Writing of Saint Francis:

"During those days and in the same cell where blessed Francis spoke about these things [in Siena, in April 1226], one evening he wanted to vomit because of the disease of his stomach. Because of the strain he put on himself in vomiting, he vomited up blood all night until morning.

When his companions saw him already dying from weakness and the pain of his illness, they said to him with great sorrow and flowing tears: 'Father, what shall we do? Bless us and the rest of your brothers. In addition, leave your brothers some remembrance of your will, so that, if the Lord wants to call you away from this world, your brothers may always keep it in their memory and say: Our father left these words to his sons and brothers at his death.'

He then told them: ‘Call me Brother Benedict of Piratro.’ He was a brother priest, discerning and holy, an elder in religion. He sometimes celebrated for blessed Francis in that cell, since, although he was sick, he always wanted, gladly and devoutly, to hear Mass whenever he was able. And when he had come, blessed Francis told him: ‘Write that I bless all my brothers, those who are and who will be in the religion until the end of the world ... Since I cannot speak much because of weakness and the pain of my illness, I am showing my will to my brothers briefly in these three words: as a sign of remembrance of my blessing and my testament, may they always love each other; may they always love and observe our Lady Holy Poverty; and may they always remain faithful and subject to the prelates and all the clerics of holy Mother Church.’”

Parallel texts are to be found in the *Mirror of Perfection* (Lemmens) 36, and (Sabatier) 87. If one confronts this information with 1 Celano 105: “Six months before the day of his death, he was staying in Siena for treatment of his eye disease”, one would arrive at April 1226 for the exact chronological moment of the composition of the *Siena Testament*. The contents of this *Testament* are then developed in the *Testament of Saint Francis*, namely, brotherly love, poverty and obedience to the Church.

## **6.8 On True and Perfect Joy**

Wadding published this *opusculum*, basing himself on the accounts of *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions* 7, and on the *Fioretti* 8. The witness to this famous episode in the life of Saint Francis is Brother Leonardo d’Assisi, who according to 2 Celano 31, was a companion of Saint Francis after he returned from the East, and was a direct witness of many episodes of the life of the saint. The episodes in the *Actus* and *Fioretti* are later developments of the more sombre but authentic account given by Brother Leonard, and included in Wadding’s critical edition of the Writings of Saint Francis.

The entire text of Brother Leonard is included in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Volume I: The Saint, 166-167.