

THE SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

Lecture 5

FRANCIS, THE FOUNDER [PART II]

The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul by Thomas of Celano

In the prologue to *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* (2C), Thomas of Celano states the principal motives of his new biography on St. Francis: “In the first place, this work contains some marvelous deeds about the conversion of Saint Francis not included in the earlier legends written about him because they were never brought to the author’s attention. Then we will attempt to express and carefully state the good, pleasing and perfect will of our most holy father. This concerns both himself and his followers, the exercise of heavenly discipline, and that striving for highest perfection which he always expressed in love for God and in living example for others” (Prol 2,1-2).

If this prologue speaks about legends in the plural, then it is clear that Thomas is not referring only to his *Life of St. Francis*, but also to the other legends which derive their information from it, namely the *Legend for the Use in the Choir*, the LJS and the VL. When Crescentius of Iesi, in 1244, asked the friars to submit to him in writing whatever they remembered about the life and prodigies of St. Francis, his aim was certainly that of completing the missing parts of 1C, which, as we have already noted, was an *opus perfectibile* (a document which had to be brought to completion). Here is where the memories of the companions of St. Francis come in, to help Thomas of Celano draft an entirely new biography of St. Francis.

Thomas undertook the task of composing a new legend in 1246. He presented the 2C to the General Chapter of Lyons in July 1247. 1C was commissioned directly by Gregory IX. 2C, on the other hand, was the result of the wishes of the authority of the Order, in the person of the Minister General Crescentius of Iesi. As a legend it shows that it is the work of collaborators, even though the style of Thomas’s pen is evident. Thomas had access to a bundle of documentary information, which could very well have been supplied by Crescentius as a result of the memories which brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo had sent from Greccio in 1246, as well as other memories coming from other friars who had personally known Francis. Thomas himself was one of the companions who knew Francis. In fact, in the prologue, Thomas states: “We, more than others, learned these things through constant living together and mutual intimacy with him over a long time.”

The title of 2C in Latin, *Memoriale in Desiderio Animae* (*The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*) is taken from Isaiah 26:8, *nomen tuum et memoriale tuum in desiderio animae* (“your name and your memory are the desire of the soul.”) We come to know about the choice of this particular title to 2C from the *Chronicle of Salimbene Adam of Parma*, 166: “In the year of the Lord 1244, Brother Haymo of England, general

minister of the Order of Friars Minor, died, and elected in his place was Brother Crescentius of the March of Ancona, who was an old man. Crescentius then commanded Brother Thomas of Celano, who had written the first Legend of Saint Francis, to write another book, because many things about Saint Francis had been discovered which had never been written. And so Thomas of Celano wrote a very beautiful book about the miracles, as well as the life of Saint Francis, which he entitled *The Remembrance of the Blessed Francis in the Desire of the Soul.*”

2C has the aim of portraying the sanctity of Francis’s life, even by arriving at a mitigation of the sinful life of the family of Francis, which 1C had insisted upon. It gives some new insights into the life of St. Francis, namely, the episode of the crucifix of San Damiano and of the dream which Innocent III has of the Lateran Basilica supported by Francis (2C 10,17). Thomas underlines the ecclesial nature of the vocation of the Friars Minor, as well as the importance of St. Francis as the Founder of one of the two great spiritual movements in the Church of the 13th century, that is, the Order of Minors, which was one of the great mendicant Orders, together with the Order of Preachers.

2C is divided into two parts of divergent length. Book I is a reminiscence of 1C in many of its details, even though it has many new insights. It is composed of 17 chapters. Book II, on the other hand, is much longer. It has 166 chapters, which are not organised according to a chronological sequence, but rather recall many episodes arranged upon the model of virtues, will, sayings and deeds of Francis, with the explicit aim of portraying an example of evangelical Franciscan life to all the brothers. It is in this second part that we are tempted to see the material which the companions of Greccio sent to Crescentius in 1246. Chapter 167 concludes 2C with a prayer to St. Francis by his companions.

Book II has the aim of presenting Francis as “the holiest mirror of the holiness of the Lord, the image of his perfection.” It speaks about the spirit of prophecy of Francis, his poverty, the use of money, almsgiving, his compassion towards the poor, his dedication to prayer, the Saint’s understanding of Scripture, his virtue of chastity, the temptations he endured, true and false joy, the hiding of the stigmata, his humility, his obedience, good and bad example, idleness, the ministers of God’s Word, the contemplation of the Creator in creatures, the virtue of charity, the vice of slander, a description of the Minister General and of the other ministers of the Order, holy simplicity, Francis’s special devotions, the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, the Rule of the brothers, the illnesses and sufferings which Francis endured, and his death, canonisation and transferral of his body.

The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul is a piece of spiritual literature that illustrates splendidly the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. A more detailed study needs to be done to see the relationship between 2C and the other Sources coming directly from the companions of St. Francis, namely AP, L3C, and AC.

The Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano

Crescentius of Iesi concluded his mandate as Minister General of the Order during the Chapter of Lyons in the summer of 1247. In his place the friars elected brother John Buralli of Parma (1247-57), a very humble and holy friar, who was inclined to be sympathetic towards the “zelanti”. It was John of Parma who, some time before 1252, asked Thomas of Celano to complete his works regarding the life of St. Francis, this time by producing a *Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis* (3C). The effort of Thomas, who was by this time an old man, can be understood in the light of the medieval frame of mind which enhanced the role of miracles in sanctity. Thomas had already inserted many miracles in the first part of 1C and as an appendix to this Legend, as well as having included many others here and there in 2C. This time he intended to give an ordered and detailed account of the miracles, truly a *Tractatus Miraculorum*.

3C deals with the miracles which happened through the intercession of St. Francis while he was still alive, with many others which occurred *post mortem*. The Treatise presents 198 paragraphs. It is interesting to note that the first two chapters deal with two miracles which are unique in their form and content, namely the miracle of the birth and development of the Order and the miracle of the stigmata. Another unique section is chapters 3-5, regarding the miraculous power which Francis had over creatures, and chapter 6, dealing with Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli, who hurries to the deathbed of St. Francis. In all Thomas of Celano presents 157 miracles. About one third of them are taken from sources which predate 3C, namely 1C, the *Legend for Use in the Choir*, and 2C. Other collections of miracles show striking resemblances with the AC and suggest a common source, while others are probably the result of a group of miracles presented during Francis’s “process of canonisation”, as they are also evident at the end of 1C.

The Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis was presented to the Chapter of Metz for approval in 1254. The first printed edition of 3C appeared in 1899 when Francis van Ortruy published it in the *Analecta Bollandiana*. It was subsequently published by Edouard d’Alençon in 1906, and by the Quaracchi editors of *Analecta Franciscana*.

Although 3C completes what is known as Thomas of Celano’s “trilogy” on St. Francis, it has received fairly limited attention by scholars (but see Jacque Dalarun’s book, *The Misadventure of Francis of Assisi*). It is important to rediscover the value of this work as more than simply a list of miracles, but rather an account of the evangelical *novitas* (newness) of Francis of Assisi:

“Just then, suddenly, there leapt upon the earth, a new man: a new army quickly appeared; and the peoples marvelled at the signs of an apostolic newness.” These words from chapter 1 of 3C explain the very nature of the Franciscan calling according to the form of life of the apostles (*apostolica vivendi forma*) as a new Order with a new vision for a new Church.

The Major Legend of St. Francis by St. Bonaventure

The *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci* (*Major Legend of St. Francis* = LMj), together with its abridged edition, the *Legenda minor Sancti Francisci* (*Minor Life of St. Francis* = LMn), by St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274), written between the Chapter of Narbonne (1260) and the Chapter of Pisa (1263), constitutes probably the best-known Source for the life of St. Francis. For many centuries it was considered to be the only official life of St. Francis, composed as it was by a man of great stature and sanctity, a Minister General who gave the Order a new direction and who has often been regarded as the one who provided for it a solid structure which lasted for centuries. This was the common opinion of scholars as well as of many of the brothers, but it inevitably had to pass through the critical analysis of modern studies, which have “rediscovered” many of the “lost” Franciscan Sources of the 13th century.

A short biographical note on St. Bonaventure is here necessary. Born in 1217 (or 1221, according to other scholars) at Civita di Bagnoregio, in the Lazio region of Italy, Giovanni Fidanza was cured, as a *puerulus* (small boy) from an illness through the intercession of St. Francis. As a young man he was sent for higher studies at the University of Paris, where he came to know the Franciscans, who were present in their general house of studies since 1231. Bonaventure studied under four great Franciscan masters at the University, John de la Rochelle (+1245), Eudes Rigaud (+1275), William of Middleton (+1260) and Alexander of Hales (+1245). In 1243 Bonaventure himself entered the Order in Paris. He continued his studies by commenting the Book of Sentences of Peter Lombard. He also commented the Gospel of St. Luke. After writing a set of Disputed Questions on the Trinity, on the Knowledge of Christ and on Evangelical Perfection, Bonaventure also composed a compendium of theology, the *Breviloquium*, and was given a regent master’s chair at the Franciscan school in 1254. This was a period of great dispute between the secular masters of the University, led by William of Saint-Amour, and the two great mendicant Orders, Minors and Preachers. The secular masters were challenging the validity of the evangelical poverty of the mendicants, and their rights to direct their own schools in the University. The problem was aggravated by the fact that the Franciscan Order was being suspected of harbouring sympathies for the apocalyptic ideals of the Cistercian abbot visionary Joachim of Fiore (1132c.-1202). In 1254, a Franciscan friar, Gerard of Borgo San Donnino, published an *Introduction to the Everlasting Gospel*, which immediately drew criticism from the secular masters. A commission of cardinals in Anagni condemned the book in 1255. John of Parma, then Minister General, was also accused to protecting friars like Gerard, since he nurtured sympathies for the spiritualist doctrines of Joachim of Fiore. That is why John of Parma was asked by the Pope to step down during the General Chapter of Aracoeli, in Rome, on 2nd February 1257. He was given the choice of naming his successor, and he chose brother Bonaventure, who at the time was in Paris.

As Minister General, Bonaventure had a daunting task ahead of him. He had to reconcile the ever-widening divergent views of the friars, by presenting a moderate view of Franciscan life, which could safeguard its intrinsic values without making it appear unorthodox in the eyes of the Church. After a period of retreat on Mount La Verna in

1259, Bonaventure composed a mystical treatise, *The Journey of the Soul into God*, which presents six stages of spiritual ascent into mystical union with God, symbolised by the six-winged seraph which appeared to St. Francis in 1224. In 1260, during the General Chapter of Narbonne, he published a new set of laws or constitutions of the Order. The same Chapter asked Bonaventure to compose a new Legend of St. Francis: “Likewise it is ordained concerning the legend of blessed Francis, that one good one be compiled from all the others.” The new life of St. Francis was ready in 1263 and presented to the Chapter of Pisa, together with its abridged form, the *Legenda minor*. In the Chapter of Paris in 1266, the LMj was declared to be the official biography of St. Francis. All other biographies which existed before it had to be “erased” (*deleantur*), wherever they were found, including in places outside the friaries of the Order. The importance of this decree, unique in its nature, is evident. It meant that all manuscripts which contained the “trilogy” of Thomas of Celano, and the other legends of Julian of Speyer, had to disappear from all the friaries, so that the LMj would be the only “official” biography of St. Francis. In this way, Bonaventure hoped to present a balanced and moderate view of St. Francis, which could be accepted by all the brothers, in order to unify the Order. The “lost” legends were fortunately preserved in some rare cases. In 1768 1C was found, in 1806 2C and in 1899 3C.

Bonaventure also had to continue defending the rights of the mendicant Orders against the attacks of the secular masters of Paris. In 1270 he wrote the *Apologia Pauperum (In Defence of the Mendicants)* against the attacks of Gerard of Abbeville. He also lectured on the *Collationes in Hexaemeron (The Six Days of Creation)*, a theological interpretation of salvation history. On 20th May 1273 Pope Gregory X made him Cardinal Bishop of Albano, to pave the way for the Council of Lyon. Bonaventure took part in the opening session of the Council, but died soon after, on 14th July 1274.

Returning to the LMj, Bonaventure made ample use of the Legends which were already in existence. We find many parallel texts between Thomas of Celano and LMj. It is evident that the LMj adds very little which is new to what already had been written. However, Bonaventure states that he also interviewed the few remaining companions of St. Francis who were still alive, such as brothers Giles and Illuminato. In this way, the LMj seems to be a compilation of documentary material which already existed, for the most part, in Thomas of Celano, together with some new elements taken directly by the author from the companions of St. Francis. The “new” biography is unique, since it makes use of all the documentary material in order to build a uniform picture of Francis and his charism which would be acceptable to all the friars. In this way, the LMj is much more than a Legend in the historical sense. It is a mystical treatise on the life and charism of St. Francis and his Order.

The merit of Bonaventure consists in having created a new framework for the documentary material he borrowed from the earlier sources. The LMj begins with a prologue which is unique in style and content. “The grace of God our Saviour has appeared in these last days in his servant Francis.” The opening words of the prologue strike us as a new presentation of the figure of St. Francis. Seen against the background of the events in the Order in the aftermath of John of Parma’s generalate, these words

immediately portray Francis in an apocalyptic light. In other words, Bonaventure did not think twice to place Francis in an apocalyptic setting which would appeal to the “zelanti”, and present him as a man of a new age. The prologue shows Francis as a new Elijah, a new John the Baptist, a “hierarchic man.” He was “lifted up” to heaven and “prepared a way in the desert by preaching penance.” Francis is shown as the angel of the seal of the living God (Apoc 7:2) who stamps the foreheads of the elect with the seal of salvation and marks them with the sign of the Tau, or penitential cross, and clothes them with the habit of penance in the form of a cross. Francis is therefore a living sign of conformity to Christ through his life and actions, and especially through the marks of the stigmata. The whole Legend also presents Francis in the setting of six visions of the cross, which culminate in the apparition of the crucified seraph on Mount La Verna.

Bonaventure is also intent to portray Francis as a model of virtue, and as a Founder who would appeal to the moderate views of the majority of the community of the Order, to which Bonaventure himself belonged. The LMj is divided into fifteen chapters. The first four chapters follow an historical sequence, and speak about Francis’s manner of life before conversion, his conversion to God and the restoration of three churches, the foundation of the Order and the approval of the Rule, and the progress of the Order and confirmation of the Rule. Chapters 5 through 13 provide three stages of spiritual ascent in the life of St. Francis, modelled upon the triple way of purification, illumination and mystical union, each with a set of three chapters indicating corresponding virtues:

Ch. 5: the austerity of his life and how creatures provided him comfort.

Ch. 6: his humility and obedience and God’s condescension to his slightest wish.

Ch. 7: his love of poverty and the miraculous fulfilment of his needs.

Ch. 8: his affectionate piety and how irrational creatures were affectionate towards him.

Ch. 9: the fervour of his charity and his desire for martyrdom.

Ch. 10: his zeal for prayer and the power of his prayer.

Ch. 11: his understanding of Scripture and his spirit of prophecy.

Ch. 12: the efficacy of his preaching and his grace of healing.

Ch. 13: his sacred stigmata.

Chapter 14 speaks about the patience of Francis in suffering and his death, while chapter 15 concludes the LMj with the account of the canonisation and transferral of the relics of St. Francis. An appendix with a list of miracles attributed to the Saint’s intercession sums up Bonaventure’s *Legenda Maior*.

The value of the LMj lies in presenting a mystical picture of St. Francis as a *typus Christi*. The theme of Francis as an *alter Christus* begins to take shape in the LMj in such a way as to influence many of the subsequent compositions of poetry, art, and popular cult regarding St. Francis. Examples include the *lauds* of Jacopone da Todi, the frescoes of Giotto in the upper basilica of St. Francis, the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, and the *Actus-Fioretti*.

The *Legenda Minor* was composed to be used during the Divine Office of the Octave of the feast of St. Francis. It is a “new” contribution to the liturgical texts already

composed by Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer. The LMn is best read as a celebrative text. Even though its contents are an abridged form of the LMj, it still produces some new insights, as for example, if one confronts LMj XIII,3 with LMn VI,3, regarding the description of the stigmata. The Legend is divided into eight chapters, each corresponding to a day within the Octave of the feast of St. Francis, and each having nine readings or lessons, as was the custom in the Office of Matins. The LMn had a major role in the diffusion of the cult of St. Francis.