

The Sources of Francis's Biographies

EDITH PÁSZTOR

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Translated by Patrick Colbourne, O.F.M.Cap.

In the two centuries between 1768 (the year that the first collection of the sources of St. Francis's biographies was published in the second volume of the *Acta sanctorum*) and 1980 (the year that Raoul Manselli blazed a new trail for the study of "The Franciscan Question" in his work *Nos qui cum eo fuimus*), historical research devoted itself to investigating the personality and work of Assisi's saint with a much more concerted and concentrated effort than is usually given even to well-known medieval personages.¹ Consequently a great deal of investigation was generated about medieval topics, which uncovered their distinctive characteristics by looking at them simultaneously as ways of life and religious movements and as themes of social history, literature and culture, in a joint venture to broaden horizons from the point of view of philology, hagiography, spirituality. The extremes of this chronological continuum immediately allow us to pinpoint the principal areas in which this research developed. On the one hand there was the discovery and publication of new sources, or rather, of new manuscripts of well-known sources. On the other hand there was an effort to clarify the relationship between these sources to discover the best description of the spiritual and human personality of Francis.

In the first area, the most significant achievements in chronological order after 1786 are represented by:

- the basic edition of Celano's *Second Life* edited by Rinaldi in 1806;
- the editing of the *Mirror of Perfection* by Sabatier in 1898, and subsequently between 1928 and 1932;
- the editing of the *Mirror of Perfection* by Lemmens in 1901;

1. I publish the text of this paper just as I read it to the convention. A whole stock of footnotes do not seem necessary to me when dealing with a report of the historical development of this question. Unfortunately, my proposal for a common, unified program for future research fell on deaf ears at the convention. I reassert it here for my present readers.

- the editing of the *Anonymous of Perugia* by van Ortro in 1902, and the subsequent edition by Di Fonzo in 1972, reprinted by Beguin in 1979;
- the partial publication of the *Little Manuscript* by Little in 1914, which had been previously unedited;
- the editing of the *Legend of Perugia* by Delorme in 1922 and the subsequent editions by Delorme in 1926, by Cambell in 1967, by Brooke in 1979, and finally by Bigaroni in 1975 (*The Assisi Collection*) – the first complete edition of the Perugian manuscript to contain the original text;
- the editing of the *Legend of the Three Companions* by Abate in 1939;
- the critical edition of the *Legends of St. Francis of Assisi* contained in volume ten of the *Analecta Franciscana* in 1941 and the *Legend of the Three Companions* by Desbonnets in 1974.

Obviously I refer to some of the more important publications, leaving out works of undoubted significant historical importance, such as, among others, various Leonine collections, chronicles, and numerous translations. The most important result of this rush of discoveries and publications of sources was the increased number of critical editions, such as Lemmens's *Mirror of Perfection*, the Leonine text in the Manuscript of St. Isidore's, and the *Little Manuscript*, to mention only a few. In the case of the so-called *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, the omission of an integral part of the text, because it was erroneously thought certain passages could be identified, renders this edition incomplete and, therefore, of dubious critical value. The synopsis of Franciscan texts promised by Father Di Fonzo during the first convention of the Society of Franciscan Studies in Assisi is still missing. However, a very useful preliminary to this is furnished by the complex of Tables of Concordance contained in the Desbonnets-Vorreux edition of the sources, which is now an indispensable tool for research. Another initiative has been realized and outlined only recently in Raoul Manselli's book *Nos qui cum eo fuimus*. I refer to a collection of the sayings of St. Francis which have been handed down in the sources unchanged, even when the narrative framework in which they were set has been changed. This finding was so valuable that it deserved publication and critical evaluation.

In the second research area, Sabatier's *Etude critique des sources* in 1894, the work of Moorman in 1940, of Cavallin in 1954, of Clasen in 1967, and the work of Manselli in 1980, which we have already mentioned, represent decisive steps. Though the examination and editing of new texts continues, a conclusive treatment of the identity and mutual relationship of the sources is still lacking. However, the quest for a solution was recently set off in a new direction, one of which shows, as we shall see, more promise of concrete results and of saving time.

As we are among experts, this is not the place to ask what are the biographical sources of St. Francis, nor what are the philological and historical problems that arise within them. I just want to hint at some results which have been achieved in more recent research which could furnish a safe basis and guide for further studies. Franciscan historical research has already revealed a few firm facts which need be questioned no longer if one wants to avoid delay and repetition in a field of study where much remains to be done. Consequently, it might be good to establish the *status quaestionis* in this regard.

The first fact which has been established is that the division between the official and non-official biographies, which had been a traditional axiom of historical research, and which was hotly debated between in 1927 and between 1946 and 1948, has now been significantly relaxed. Obviously this does not mean ignoring the question of who commissioned or approved a given biography, because this knowledge is essential for an exact interpretation of the different points of view in the various sources. It does mean placing more emphasis upon the influence of oral tradition in the formation of different writings, as Clasen had already insisted, and also taking into account the special position of Thomas of Celano's *Second Life*, which undoubtedly is an official biography, but is also a composite of elements which in their turn were bits and pieces of non-official sources.

Meanwhile with regard to the group of official biographies, there is only one significant point to be added to volume ten of the *Analecta Franciscana* and that is that there are various and important new facts in the field of the so-called non-official biographies.

Firstly, Clasen strongly criticized the system adopted by the Quaracchi editors because it implied mechanical transmission of passages from author to author which ignored any kind of influence from oral tradition which was undoubtedly present in the thirteenth century. This led to the conclusion that the relationship between these sources appeared to be inflexible and weak. Secondly, the priority in time of Celano's *First Life* has been confirmed. In 1940 Moorman argued that another writing had preceded both the *First Life* and the *Legend of the Three Companions*. At the first Assisi congress Moorman modified this to the conjecture that Celano used a "notebook" prior to editing the *First Life*, and that the editor of the *Legend of the Three Companions* would have had access to this. There is still no proof of such a hypothesis. In the present state of research Clasen's opinion seems to be the correct one. He speaks with much more critical sensitivity of an oral tradition prior to the *First Life* as an explanation of Celano's sources. He does not question the absolute priority of the *First Life* as a written text. On the other hand, Father Bihl's contention that Julian of Spire's *Life* contributes nothing to Celano's *First Life* has turned out to be incorrect. Moorman correctly drew attention to the fact that,

when explaining Francis's difficulties in the transition from manual work (reconstructing churches) to a hermit's way of life and the beginnings of a new fraternity, Julian does not make use of Celano, but of another no-longer-existing source, a "lost document." What makes this interpretation of Julian's so interesting is that the editor of the *Legend of the Three Companions*, and through him, St. Bonaventure in his *Major Life*, makes use of Julian's version and not that of Celano.

Let us go on to the changes in the area of the so-called non-official sources. First of all, it has emerged that on the whole it is untenable to consider them as of Leonine or Spiritualist derivation. [The Spirituals were not so much an organized group as they were adherents to tendencies towards a preference for rural hermitages, strict observance of the unmediated Rule and Testament, strict poverty and opposition to studies. Some later groups showed a strain of apocalypticism which applied the theories of Joachim of Fiore. – Ed.] This had almost become the traditional opinion. It was often accompanied by a somewhat arbitrary evaluation, which separated the official legends, which were primary in their historical value from the spiritual legends, which were of uncertain authenticity and to be used with discretion. Apart from the obvious gratuitousness of such assertions, the indiscriminate attribution of them to Brother Leo and the Spirituals raises various problems. Father Clasen had already made it clear that Brother Leo could not have been the author of all the texts which make up the non-official group of sources. He had substituted for the label "Leonine" another label according to which they were "based upon the testimony of the companions of the saint" (*auf das Zeugnis der Gefährten*). This label was also accepted in Italy.

Once more we have an inexact label, because it refers to the *florilegio* of 1246 that has been the subject of different interpretations recently. [The term *florilegio* is used here to refer to the whole collection of stories both oral and written which provided the pool of information from which the early biographies of St. Francis were written. It does not refer to any one written collection. – Ed.] Such a label would also involve Celano's *Second Life*, which is an official biography, and which is based on notes sent in by the companions of St. Francis. Nor is it correct to speak of these non-official sources as representative of the Spirituals, not only because, as recent studies have demonstrated, there is a great diversity in the thinking and the course of action taken by various Spirituals, which does not permit us to restrict the phenomenon of Spiritualism to a common heritage; but also because there are chronological reasons which oppose it, unless one does not want to admit Spiritualist tendencies in the history of the order prior to 1246. Even then the Spiritualist character of the sources would still have to be proven, for example, for the *Legend of the Three Companions*. What is more, labels such as these do not sufficiently take into account the

profound differences that occur among the non-official sources with respect to their purpose and structure.

The problem of the label of these sources is in reality closely associated with their makeup. It was only in this context that a solution was found. The decisive step was taken in this regard in what was undoubtedly the most important discovery in Franciscan historical research in recent years: the separation of the *Legend of the Three Companions* from the *florilegio*. Clasen had always insisted on the validity of the connection; it had been the hypothesis upon which Desbonnets based his critical edition. The attempt to link the famous *Legend of the Three Companions* with the *Legend of Perugia*, by making it appear to be the work of the Three Companions, was unsuccessful because it lacked any manuscript, philological or historical basis. This failure showed the untenability of trying to identify the *florilegio* with one of the known texts.

From the time the *Legend of the Three Companions* regained its true place among the non-official sources, and was shown to have no special prerogative, it became possible to effect a classification of these writings with much more accuracy. It was due to Raoul Manselli that a new arrangement came about. Applying the method of *Formgeschichte*, he first divided the three official biographies from the non-official biographies. Then within the non-official biographies he distinguished between those which were set out systematically according to a plan, that is, those having their own organic and preconceived theme according to which the narrative was developed, and those which had no systematic organization. Those following a set plan include the *Anonymous of Perugia* and the *Legend of the Three Companions*, which follow a time sequence, and the *Mirror of Perfection*, which follows the theme of presenting a model of virtue. The non-systematically organized sources include the *Assisi Collection*, Lemmens's *Mirror*, and the *Little Manuscript*, which are composed of collections of passages set out according to personal inclinations of piety, reminiscence, or personal testimony.

The importance of this classification is much more important than may at first appear. It not only separates the texts in question from any arbitrary association with Brother Leo, the Companions, or the Spirituals, but opens a new methodological horizon for their study.

Starting with the knowledge that we are dealing with a group of composite texts, we proceed by identifying the various core components within them, in order to establish the interdependence of the passages and to identify the moment in history to which they belong. Only after this task of dissection and analysis has been done for each group can we go ahead with the examination of the collections in their entirety, taking into account on one hand the *Sitz im Leben* of the different core components in the complex of the individual sources, and on the other hand the historical

development within the order, and the corresponding changes in the image of St. Francis that accompanied this development, as steps towards various criteria of interpretation.

Proceeding along these lines, Raoul Manselli identified a fundamentally typical group within this collection of passages based upon the testimony of "we who were with him." This group yields precious insights into the image of Francis depicted by the companions who attended him during the last sad years of his life. They reveal important conclusions in respect of the relationship between all the biographical sources.

Using the same method, I was able to isolate another group of passages contained in these non-official sources which consist of texts ascribed basically to Brother Leo. What emerged from this research was a clear distinction between an authentically Leonine corpus made up of nine passages and a rich series of extravagant texts which had been handed down through a relatively recent tradition starting at the end of the thirteenth century which characteristically contain apocryphal revelations and secrets attributed to Francis regarding the future of the order and which had been preserved in stories of manifestly contentious tendencies.

There is no longer a question of a dispute between the proponents of the Celano school and those of the Leonine school, nor can the *florilegio* be considered as the sore spot of such discussions, even though Beguin recently furnished a new angle on it. The approach of Cavallin, Desbonnets and Manselli still prevails, because, while leaving aside all hypothetical suppositions, it focuses on what is correctly documented in the sources, using the most rigorously scientific methods possible.

The *Assisi Collection* and Celano's *Second Life* enjoy a special place in new research, but for different reasons. More than any other source, the *Assisi Collection* is outstanding for the completeness of its information and its relative accuracy of reporting. In comparison to the *Mirror of Perfection*, which is the only one comparable to it, it is immediately apparent that the same story often loses its freshness in the *Mirror of Perfection*, while its expression is more subject to literary construction. Celano's *Second Life* is important because it affords certain proof that certain stories which are common to other sources were already in circulation before 1247. In any case, in the present state of research, even though some of its core components certainly date from before 1247, the *Assisi Collection* as a whole appears to be subsequent to Celano's *Second Life*, if not also to the *Major Life*. In fact, none of the arguments advanced as proof for dating the complete work as prior to 1247, or for accepting it as a source of Celano's *Second Life*, go further than what is often mere conjecture.

On the other hand, the *Legend of the Three Companions* has taken on a new significance in regard to its date of composition because of the work of Desbonnets, and in regard to its content because of the work of Manselli. It

is now presented as the *Assisi Collection*, composed (with the exception of the last three chapters) about 1246. Father Di Fonzo's study on the precedence of the *Anonymus of Perugia* over the *Legend of the Three Companions* retains its validity. Beguin's arguments regarding the identity of the author of the *Anonymus* are purely hypothetical. The recent discovery of the Paris Latin *Manuscript 12707* could throw new light on the reciprocal relationship between these two sources.

Another valuable research tool for such studies comes from the publication of concordances and indices developed by means of data processing, which will slowly improve our knowledge.

Before going on to the biographical sources of St. Francis between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, a topic which raises questions different from those which we have treated so far and which justifies my division of the material, I feel obliged to recall two authors who have made contributions of notable importance and distinction to the study of "The Franciscan Question" and who have died in recent years: Father Clasen and Father Cambell. Without their effort the history of Franciscan sources would not have achieved the results we enjoy today. This can also be said of the critical edition of the writings of St. Francis by Father Esser, without which a comparison between what the saint actually wanted and what was attributed to him by our biographical sources would be impossible.

The sources which come from the period between the editing of the *Mirror of Perfection* and John Brugman's *Mirror of Imperfection*, James Oddi's *Mirror of Life* and its Latin equivalent, are very different in nature from those of the thirteenth century. A long tradition which Clasen accepted attributed the last three to the Hungarian Fabian Igloi. At first there was a necessity to have a written biography of the founder. This necessity subsequently became a desire to have an example and model, to provide words and deeds by which real Franciscanism could be judged, and to confirm the Rule written by St. Francis as its authentic interpreter. Once the existential urgency of this demand ceased, the situation gradually changed, partly because the atmosphere of disquiet and tension ended and greater relaxation allowed memories to arise once more.

The great anthologies containing a rich diversity of Franciscan material did not appear only in the latter part of the fourteenth century. Nor did new manuscripts of thirteenth century texts appear. It was only with the coming of the Observant movement that, among other things, the need to investigate the Franciscan identity and the primitive fraternity received a fresh impulse. This is proved by the rediscovery of the word "mirror," which acquired major additional significance. When Brugman transposes the concept of the term "mirror" from its original meaning of "a paragon of virtue" to "a model of vice" he is illustrating the implications originally

attributed to the word. In a "mirror" called the *Franceschina*, Paoluccio Trinci is very effectively compared with Francis.

Going on to the examination of these fourteenth and fifteenth century biographical sources we must first of all note a deficiency in regard to history. They were not subjected to the same profound critical revision that was accorded to the thirteenth century sources. Even though the fourteenth and fifteenth century anthologies with very few exceptions were no longer pursuing a quest for more intimate details about St. Francis because they were working with material which had been evaluated in the thirteenth century, it still remains to be determined which aspects and events in the life of Francis agree or disagree with the ideological substratum of the thirteenth century. Because general references and the repetition of outdated schemata no longer suffice, the refinement of our current knowledge of "The Franciscan Question" also requires a revision of the critical observations which accompany the editions at the beginning of the century and which are taken for granted in recent studies.

Some of the most recent noteworthy results of research in the field of the sources include analytical tables, the list of manuscripts and critical observations by Clasen, the editing of a new manuscript of the *Little Flowers* by Father Marian of Alatro, and the most recent study by Micgalczyk on the Paris manuscript *On the Family of Francis*. Rather than summarize them, I prefer to offer suggestions towards an understanding of these topics which in my opinion will gather the essential elements into a unified perspective.

It appears to me that these sources demonstrate not only that the interests aroused by Francis had continued but that new issues had developed. These interests included both traditional and new elements which influenced each other. They arose out of actual hardships and have been expressed in the literature of the time. As a concrete example of what I mean by traditional elements and new prospects let me divide into two different camps the two currents of thought which appear to me to be clearly distinguishable in the complex of these sources. One is the development of the eschatological theme of Francis as the "image of Christ." This is a thirteenth century theme which acquired a deeper and changed meaning in the fifteenth century. It began with the *History of the Seven Tribulations* by Angelus of Clarenco, continued with Arnould de Sarrat's *On the Family of Francis*, and concluded in the *Conformities in the Life of St. Francis to the Life of Our Lord Jesus* by Bartholomew of Pisa. The second example is the attempt to adapt the specific spirituality of St. Francis to the level of the people. This unfolds "from the *Acts of Blessed Francis* to the vernacular *Little Flowers*," to use George Petrocchi's expression. Between these two currents of thought, one may insert a third, which in a way unites the two which we have divided above. This is the

survival of the chronicle histories, which may be exemplified by the *Chronicle of the Twentyfour Generals of the Order of Minors* by Arnould de Sarrat, whom we have already mentioned. If this continued one tradition, it also represented a new Franciscan experience, inasmuch as it focused upon the minister general and furnished us with a new scale of values, which applaud Francis not only for his personal sanctity and his place as founder of a new order but also as the head of the international hierarchy of this order. This is a new perspective.

Obviously my point of view raises a host of new difficulties, which once again confirm the need to analyze, evaluate and study the biographical sources of Francis in depth. May I conclude this balance sheet and review of what has been achieved so far with a request? I would like to formulate it as an invitation to profit by the presence of the leading Franciscan scholars at this congress, and to work out a common program for future work. This would facilitate the avoidance of simultaneous editing of the one source, as has already happened. It would also facilitate by common agreement the establishment of methodological criteria as the basis of future research.

The attempt to understand why there were so many different images of St. Francis in the Middle Ages, which forms the topic of our congress, is far too difficult not to demand the firm commitment of all.

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