The Writings of Francis as Sources for the History of Franciscan Origins

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"Gli scritti di Francesco come fonti per la storia delle origini minoritche"

Verba Domini mei, Rome 2003: 149-171

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It is Paul Sabatier—as everyone now acknowledges—who deserves credit for bringing the writings of Francis back to the center of studies on Franciscan origins. Just a few years earlier, in an otherwise very scholarly book, Karl Müller felt they had so little to offer in terms of knowledge that they could be almost entirely ignored.¹ But the question is not only one of professional historiography. There is the history of the religious families that look to Francis, and more broadly, the history of Christian practice itself: in what manner and terms was it expressed and depicted in late medieval European society. It would be no small thing to try to understand why, for centuries, they were considered to be mere edifying works of asceticism and piety, thus obscuring their importance.² They are essential for understanding the characteristics and expressions of Francis's Christian proposal, which no doubt has elements in common with other contemporary religious experiences, but is also special and new because the terms in which he tried to express it are extraordinarily concise and coherent. Deeply

¹Die Anfänge des Minoritenordens und der Bußbrüderschaften, Freiburg in B. 1885, 3, n. 1.

²Further observations in this regard may be found in G. Miccoli, "Gli scritti di Francesco," in *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francescana*, Turin 1997, 54ff [English translation *Greyfriars Review* 12:2 (2001) 135-170].

theological and spiritual, they are able to take concrete ways of behavior, gradually assumed or suggested, and graft them inseparably onto the fundamental choice that was, and must have been, their constant inspiration. The studies on these writings now number in the many hundreds. Nor do I think that they have no more surprises to offer, especially to the extent that we do not lose sight of the hidden thread that makes them a unified whole, despite the variety of occasions and circumstances that produced them.

But I was not invited here to speak about such things. The approach suggested to me—or at least that is how I understood it—is altogether specific and more limited. I am to examine the *Writings* for the information and evidence they offer on the history of Franciscan origins. This is when a growing number of men and women were gradually beginning to gather, form, and organize around Francis and his original nucleus of followers. In a few years they give birth to a religious order of men and a conventual community of women, which in turn founded a congregation or religious order whose reference point would be the Poor Ladies of San Damiano.

It is almost too obvious to recall that all this was based on Francis's choice and Christian proposal, which were centered on following the footprints of Christ. He wanted to propose anew in the society of his time the way of life and actions that, for him, had characterized Christ's whole life on earth, starting with his incarnation. Francis chose to live as poor among the poor, with no possessions or goods, living by the work of his hands, or like other poor by begging when he could not get enough to live on from working, without security or fixed dwelling place, rejecting all instruments of power and self-affirmation. Thus he could offer again, first by the witness of his own life, a way of life that overturned society's standards, values and usual way of acting, following the example of Christ, "who though he was rich, he wished, together with the most Blessed Virgin, his mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else."

Because the situations and circumstances to which they refer are so varied, Francis's writings constantly repeat this basic theme, rethought and readapted in terms suited to the conditions of the moment, with the eloquent concreteness of a way of life constantly called to express an experience. Francis's choice to follow the footprints of Christ and to live according to the form of the holy Gospel marked the endpoint of those two or three years of searching, between his decision to leave the world and the discovery of his final vocation. It is not wrong to think that the many concrete ways of expressing that choice gradually became clearer in the following years, as attested by the process of discursive expansion that

³²LtF 5.

characterized the formation of the *Earlier Rule*. Likewise it is easy enough to admit that the first group of followers that gathered around him adhered essentially to the basic elements of that choice, which must have been particularly persuasive, fascinating and attractive, thanks to the mysterious charism of that little man.

But I am not going to dwell here on Francis's proposal and its essential elements just mentioned, even though they are the skeleton on which the formation and growth of the group were hung and took shape, the project that for Francis was supposed to be at the heart of the fraternity and then of the Order of Friars Minor. I have written about this more than once, and it is annoying to oneself and others to continue to repeat it. So, taking for granted the central place of these elements in the history of Francis and his followers, I have re-examined his writings from a another standpoint and with other intentions. The questions I have tried to address to them are different.

The standpoint and the questions are an attempt to see what those writings provide, directly or indirectly, in the way of information about the characteristics acquired and the problems created by the group's growth, about its differences and difficulties, its inner dynamics and its interactions with its surroundings. Granted, these things are all incidental to Francis's project, yet they are an integral, and in some ways decisive part of the first fifteen years of the history of the Friars Minor.

The analysis and gathering of information are very complicated and can lead to unfounded or arbitrary conclusions. Francis's writings not only explain the characteristics of his proposal; they are also filled with warnings, rebukes, commands and exhortations on conduct to avoid, on behavior to shun. I do not think all of them can always be interpreted or taken as an indication or sign of phenomena present in the fraternity and then in the Order. But I also think that in more than one case they can. The problem of distinguishing between the certain or probable and the uncertain and improbable arises constantly and is not easy to solve. Nor can such a choice, with regard to the history of the Friars Minor, be limited to the detection of prohibitions or "negative insertions." We cannot help but ask whether and

[†]See "La proposta cristiana di Francesco d'Assisi," in Francesco d'Assisi. Realtà e memoria di un'esperienza cristiana, Turin 1991, 33-96 [English trans. Greyfriars Review 3:2 (1989) 127-72]; "Un'esperienza cristiana tra Vangelo e istituzione," in Dalla 'sequela Christi' di Francesco d'Assisi all'apologia della povertà. Atti del XVIII convegno internazionale (Assisi, 18-20 October 1990) Spoleto 1992, 3-40; "Gli scritti di Francesco," op.cit., 35-69; "Francesco e la Verna," in Itinerarium montis Alvernae. Atti del convegno di studi storici, Vol. I, ed. Alvaro Cacciotti, Studi francescani 97 (2000) 21-55.

to what extent the changes that took place in the group over time, whether from the standpoint of numbers or from the fact that it became a religious order, are reflected and echoed in Francis's writings, in reference to the functions to which he and his brothers were called and as to how they situated themselves and interacted in society.

After setting these limits on my area of investigation, I think it is proper to add two further preliminary remarks. If it is true, as Father Esser wrote, that "only the one who keeps asking questions will get answers," it is also true that these texts give rise to many more questions than the answers they can provide. Based on the study I have done, I do not think I can be said to have found new things, but rather to have brought out certain aspects, here considered from a standpoint I would say is not the usual one.

If we ask what elements and information Francis's writings provide about the growth, organization and situation of the group in time and space, we must seek an answer by turning first to the *Earlier Rule*, in other words, to the text that is not exclusively his. The fundamental studies by David Flood on the formation of the text, to which must be added the many valuable comments by Théophile Desbonnets, have shown this clearly. As if by successive stratifications, it juxtaposes what the group collectively decided as they went along, their purpose being to cope with the events of life in terms that would remain faithful to their proposal, but also to respond to requests coming from the Roman Curia. It is not only an essential document for understanding the terms and characteristics with which the project of living according to the form of the holy Gospel was taking shape; it also provides important information about the changes taking place in the fraternity, the forces and internal tensions, the influences and external pressures that affected its development.

Little or nothing can be said with certainty about what effect the deliberations of Lateran IV had on the Rule. But other things are quite obvious and have been pointed out many times. There is no doubt, for

⁵K. Esser, "Présentation," in D. Flood – W. van Dijk – T. Matura, La naissance d'un charisme. Une lecture de la première Règle de saint François, Présence de saint François 24, Paris 1973, 6.

⁶See D. Flood, *Die Regula non bullata der Minderbrüder*, Franziskanische Forschungen 19, Werl/Westf. 1967, 168; Idem, "La genèse de la Règle," in D. Flood – W. van Dijk – T. Matura, *La naissance d'un charisme*, 25-84; Th. Desbonnets, *De l'intuition à l'istitution. Les franciscains*, Paris 1983, esp. 41-48.

⁷D. Flood, *Die Regula non bullata*, 125ff. But Flood finds an echo of the council's themes in Chapters XVIII-XX and evidence of its directions in Chapters XVI and XVII (pp. 128ff). But his observations, penetrating as always, do not seem to me conclusive.

example, that the year of probation envisioned for new candidates in Chapter II of the Rule⁸—a decisive passage in the fraternity's becoming a religious order—is simply taking into account the provisions of *Cum secundum consilium* of September 22, 1220. The latter was the result of confusion and criticism in ecclesiastical circles because of the uncontrolled freedom of the Friars Minor, confusion and criticism explicitly attested in the letter of Jacques de Vitry in the spring of that same year.⁹

The chapter on work, expressed in a series of juxtapositions, indirectly provides valuable information about the growth and recruitment of the group, but also on the ways of doing things that still characterize its life. In fact, using one of those negative insertions, the product of recent experience, it says that "in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others," the brothers "may not be in charge in the houses in which they serve nor accept any office which would generate scandal or be harmful to their souls."10 This tells us several things. First of all, when these prohibitions were written, the most common way of life among the members of the group was itinerancy, with no fixed dwellings. That is the only way to explain the reference to those places where the brothers happened to be "among others" in order to serve or work. This must have happened at an already relatively advanced stage of development, when persons with some education and authority were being recruited, since among the suggested works were jobs of supervision and offices that presupposed basic abilities.

Such a process was widespread after 1215. As a result, educated clerics had joined the group, and quite naturally they aspired to positions of supervision and command, and to preaching as a permanent activity. This is also attested in Chapter XVII, where it is prescribed: "No minister or preacher may make a ministry of the brothers or the office of preaching his own, but, when he is told, let him set it aside without objection." The presence of situations and tendencies like this is clearly suggested in the warning not to boast about their preaching or the approval they receive, nor to trust in "the wisdom of this world" and the brilliance of their words. 12

^{*}ER II, 8.

⁹See Lettres de Jacques de Vitry, ed. R.B.C. Huyghens, Leiden 1960, 131ff. See R. Rusconi, "Clerici secundum alios clericos': Francesco d'Assisi e l'istituzione ecclesiastica," in *Frate Francesco d'Assisi*. Atti del XXI convegno internazionale (Assisi, 14-16 October) Spoleto 1994, 90.

¹⁰ ER VII, 1.

[&]quot;ER XVII, 4.

¹²ER XVII, 5-6; 9-11.

This touches on matters that recur several times in the *Admonitions*.¹³ Similarly, this chapter seems to reflect the growing social success of the Friars Minor, seeing that Francis feels the need to emphasize strongly that the good they do must be attributed to God and his grace alone, even as he warns all his brothers against boasting or exalting themselves because of their accomplishments.¹⁴

The stratification of norms, prescriptions, admonitions and prohibitions that were gradually inserted and juxtaposed in the text of the Earlier Rule in the ten years between Innocent III's approval of the few and simple words that were its original nucleus15 and its definitive version of 1221, mirrors the diversity of situations and acceptance that accompanied the development and growth of the Friars Minor during those years. A state of precariousness and itinerancy are reflected in the great freedom the brothers enjoy in matters of food 6-but a norm on this is also found in the Later Rule''-and especially the constant appeals to "necessity" and "manifest necessity" as factors that can strongly affect their life, with broad consequences and in terms that later disappear. The exhortation that ends the part of Chapter II on the extreme poverty that should characterize the brothers' clothing also clearly describes an initial situation that is still one of mockery and rejection by those around them: "Even though they may be called hypocrites, let them nevertheless not cease doing good..."18 And if other passages in the Earlier Rule, like some of those just mentioned, are clear signs of a situation that had changed greatly in the meantime, the change Francis is forced to record a few years later in the Later Rule, in the same context as in the Earlier Rule, is spectacular:

Let all the brothers wear poor clothes and they may mend them with pieces of sackcloth or other material with the blessing of God. I admonish and exhort them not to look down upon or judge those whom they see dressed in soft and fine clothes and enjoying the choicest food and drink, but rather let everyone judge and look down upon himself.¹⁹

As before, the brothers must continue to wear extremely poor clothes. But the danger is no longer that those around them will mock them,

¹³Adm VII; XIX, 3; XX, 3; XXI, 2-3.

¹⁴ER XVII, 5-7; 17-18.

¹⁵ Test 15.

¹⁶ER III, 13; IX, 13; XIV, 3.

¹⁷LR III, 14.

¹⁸ER II, 15.

¹⁹LR II, 16-17.

calling them hypocrites. The situation is reversed, and the danger now is that the brothers will assume attitudes of superiority and criticism toward those who are not like them and do not act as they do. From Francis's viewpoint the warning was completely obvious and expected, but the fact that it was unthinkable a few years earlier attests to the deep shift that had taken place in relations between the Friars Minor and society. This was not least among the reasons that had dictated the transformation into a religious order that was run, at least in part, according to the traditional criteria inevitably suggested by the solid experience of centuries. The Earlier Rule already provides much evidence of the results of these pressures on the Friars Minor-pressures that were probably not only external, but that also arose from within. The institution of the year of novitiate, just mentioned, is a notable example. And I think that relationships with women, as known from the few references in Francis's writings, must also be examined from this viewpoint. Here again the question has been amply discussed, especially by Roberto Rusconi, Optatus van Asseldonk and Jacques Dalarun,20 but they are not the only ones. And so I will recall just some of the essential features.

The Earlier Rule devotes Chapter XII to the question. It is an odd mixture of prohibitions. All the brothers, "wherever they may be or may go," must avoid "evil glances and association with women." No one may counsel women or travel alone with them or eat at table out of the same dish with them. These prohibitions clearly refer to a state of itinerancy and the customs of temporary hospitality. Also excluded are relationships that would imply direct involvement in their religious choices: "Absolutely no woman may be received to obedience by any brother," and although spiritual advice is allowed, no brother may interfere with her subsequent decisions, "but after spiritual advice has been given to her, let her do penance wherever she wants." As the presence of priests in the fraternity became more common and pastoral forms of activity began to appear, it seemed appropriate to add a clarification softening the drastic prohibition against speaking alone with women: "When giving penance or some spiritual advice, let priests speak

²⁰See R. Rusconi "L'espansione del francescanesimo femminile nel secolo XIII," in *Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII*. Atti del VII convegno internazionale (Assisi 11-13 October 1979) Assisi 1980, 263-313 [English trans. *Greyfriars Review* 12:1 (1998) 35-75]; O. van Asseldonk, "Sorores minores.' Una nuova impostazione del problema," in *Collectanea Franciscana* 62 (1992) 595-634; J. Dalarun, *Francesco: un passaggio. Donna e donne negli scritti e nelle leggende di Francesco d'Assisi*, afterword by G. Miccoli, Rome 1994 [English translation, *Francis and the Feminine*, St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications 2006].

²¹ER XII, 1-2. For an analysis of the chapter see Dalarun, Francesco: un passaggio, 29ff.

²² ER XX, 4.

with them in a becoming way." But this expected concession did not weaken the express prohibition against having a part or becoming directly involved in their religious choices.

David Flood has related all these measures to the young community of Friars Minor and its need to distinguish itself clearly from contemporary evangelical movements that were linking men and women in a common experience, giving rise to suspicion and condemnation by the Church's hierarchy. The supposition is convincing. Besides, Francis's concern to point out, reassert and carefully protect the complete orthodoxy of his followers is widely attested in his writings. I will return to this concern, but in any case it shows that he was aware that confusion and compromise in this area were a constant trap. Perhaps it is also the result of advice and warnings from those in the curia who truly cared about the path and destiny of a group whose presence and action in society could prove valuable.

But I do not think that such considerations fully account for the impact and implications of Chapter XII of the Earlier Rule. The desire to avoid all relationships and permanent involvement with women, even those who have begun a life of penance, is bound to raise the question of the relationship of Francis and the Friars Minor with Clare and those "lesser sisters" who would become the "poor ladies" of San Damiano. The very fact that the brothers traveled widely, well beyond Assisi, meant that there were opportunities for relationships and contacts with women. But even if they were thinking of a religious choice, these women had nothing to do with the Damianites. Yet it is obvious that the relationship of Francis and his brothers with the Damianites must also be situated in this context and within a process that is complicated.

The fact that the chapter consists mostly of a series of prohibitions suggests a state of relations between the brothers and the "religious women" that had presented itself, and perhaps was still partly presenting itself, in very different terms. That this was indeed the case is confirmed by the well-known cases of women received to obedience by Francis himself, is and by the common terms used to refer to a movement perceived as an experience shared by men and women, terms used by Jacques de Vitry to describe the "lesser brothers" and "lesser sisters" he met in Perugia. But the Form of

²³ER XII. 3.

²⁴See Flood, Die Regula non bullata, 127.

²⁵See RCl VI, 1 ("I, together with my sisters, willingly promised him obedience shortly after his own conversion"); see also the testimony of Sister Beatrice in Proc XII, 4, as well as LegCl 12; 3C 181 (for the case of Prassede).

²⁶Lettres de Jacques de Vitry, 75ff.

Life that Francis wrote for the group of women gathered around Clare describes a situation in complete conflict with Chapter XII of the Earlier Rule. Clare recalls it in Chapter VI of her own Rule. The words she uses to introduce Francis's writing, describing it as a "form of life," seem to me to imply a longer text. The words attributed to Francis do not suggest the terms of a form of life, but actually consist of a promise made because of the choice of life these women have made, which is recalled only briefly:

Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High King, the heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers to always have that same loving care and solicitude for you as [I have] for them.¹⁷

As Jacques Dalarun has noted, Francis describes these women in terms very close to those commonly used for Mary.28 He goes on to note that they are terms that refer to that web of familial relationships with Christ (spouses, brothers, mothers) referred to in the Letter to the Faithful, which involves those men and women who do the works of the Father and are his children.29 These terms correspond in turn to the formulas used in the Marian antiphon in the Office of the Passion.30 The occurrence of such references already suggests important aspects of common choices and common involvements. But even more decisive in this regard for the relationships that it reveals is the binding promise Francis makes to those women for himself and his brothers, to have "loving care and solicitude" for them. He has recourse to a formula that is the umpteenth example of repetition in his writings, with the obvious intention of reinforcing to the highest degree the idea expressed." Nor does Francis limit himself to this; he also says that the care he will have for these women will be the same that he has for his brothers. The analogy attests to extremely close bonds. This is further highlighted by these women's choice of life ("to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel"), which I think we can say is the same as that of him and his brothers, a choice that is precisely the reason for that promise.

²⁷FormViv 1-2; RCl VI, 2-3.

²⁸Dalarun, Francesco: un passaggio, 37ff.

²⁹2LtF 49-53; see Dalarun, Francesco: un passaggio, 45ff.

³⁰ OfP I, 2; Dalarun, Francesco: un passaggio, 37ff.

³¹See G. Pozzi, "Lo stile di san Francesco," in *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 41 (2000) 9ff.

In short, everything seems to indicate that the situation described here represents a set of relations opposed to and in conflict with what is said in Chapter XII of the *Earlier Rule*. And so I find it hard not to conclude that the chapter not only wanted to avoid confusion with contemporary evangelical movements capable of creating suspicions of heterodoxy; even more precisely, and probably at least partly for the same reasons, it also wanted to drastically sever the bonds that had originally linked the "lesser brothers" and the "lesser sisters." Those bonds, created as they were by a special relationship and close solidarity, made the subsequent process of separation somehow even more rending.

It is superfluous to point out that we are in an area where there is a lack of real data and precise information. The Form of Life and Chapter XII of the Earlier Rule undoubtedly mark different stages in a path that will not be without losses and moments of conflict. Another stage is provided by Chapter XI of the Later Rule, which Roberto Rusconi rightly describes as "a text that clearly smacks of canon law." The accent is always on clear separation from women, as the series of phrases all introduced by the negative conjunction [in the original Latin] clearly emphasizes: "I strictly command all the brothers not to have any suspicious dealings or conversations with women, and they may not enter the monasteries of nuns...." But the brothers belong to a canonically erected religious order, and so an exception is provided, but only for those who have special permission from the Apostolic See, presumably to act as visitors and chaplains in monasteries of women.

A boundary line was thus drawn, and the clear dissociation of the Friars Minor from the women's religious movements was confirmed, even if pastoral care of communities of women was permitted under certain conditions. But caution in this area remained strong and was not to be taken for granted, since this permission was reserved to Rome and not, as would seem obvious, to the ministers of the Order. That the reasons for such caution were linked to the former special relationship of the Friars Minor to the sisters of San Damiano is fully confirmed, I think, by the interpretation *Quo elongati* would give, a few years after Francis's death, to Chapter XI of the *Later Rule*.

The question posed to Gregory IX by the delegation of brothers was whether the prohibition against entering women's monasteries without special permission from the Apostolic See applied to all women's monasteries without distinction, or, as the brothers had understood it until

^{32&}quot;L'espansione del francescanesimo femminile nel secolo XIII," 282.

³³LR XI, 1-2.

then, only to those of the "poor cloistered nuns" (the terminology refers without a doubt to San Damiano and the monasteries linked to it). Such was believed to be the gist of a statute issued by the provincial ministers at the time when the Rule was approved and Francis was still alive.³⁴

The prohibition applies to all monasteries, replied Gregory IX, thus respecting the letter of Chapter XI. But the distinction he introduces immediately after, clarifies and drastically limits its impact. Gregory IX distinguishes between women's monasteries in general and those of the "poor cloistered nuns." While staying out of the places more specifically reserved to the nuns ("the cloister, the living quarters, and the inner shops"), suitable and mature brothers can go into the other areas—which "lay people" may also do—to preach or beg alms, with the simple permission of their superiors. But this, explains the Pope, does not hold in the second case, for which special permission from the Apostolic See remains necessary ("...with the exception always of the monasteries of the aforesaid cloistered nuns. No one has any access to them without the express permission of the Apostolic See").³⁵

It is an important distinction. I do not think it can refer only to the particular way of life in those monasteries (as we know, by this time there were women's monastic congregations in which stricter enclosure had been introduced for some time), nor to the special excellence of withdrawal, prayer and contemplation, which Rome expected to be implicit in their choice. It is a distinction which, in the light of everything that went before, is hard to not see as also meant to maintain strict separation between those nuns and the brothers. The fact that this distinction is linked to a tradition in the Order, attested by the statute of the provincial ministers, suggests that the primary purpose of the prohibition in Chapter XI of the Later Rule is also to sever and end the special relations that continued to link the Friars Minor (some Friars Minor?) to the Damianites. Seven years later the situation had not changed. For the Damianites, and for them alone, it was felt necessary to keep a special prohibition that did not hold, or no longer held, in other cases. Why? Because the brothers were requesting it? One group certainly yes, as suggested by the question from the delegation and the statute of the provincial ministers to which they refer. But another group probably no, if we consider that all the questions submitted to Gregory IX refer to important discussions and debates that took place during the

³⁴See *Quo elongati*, in H. Grundmann, "Die Bulle 'Quo elongati' Papst Gregors IX," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 54 (1961) 24ff [English translation in FA:ED I, 570-75].

³⁵ Ibid.

previous chapter. It was because they were unable to resolve them that they had decided to bring them to the Pope.

Gregory IX sided with the first group. But to say that the brothers could not even have the same kind of relations with the Poor Ladies as they had with other nuns shows that the problem was not one of avoiding carnal temptations by avoiding visits to women's monasteries except under certain conditions. Rather, something in that relationship was still appealing, something that had created bonds and behaviors that were hard to break, something that was causing embarrassment and difficulties to an Order that had by this time resolutely set out on paths different from the original one. In short, it seems to me that the drastic nature of this norm can be understood only in reference to what had been the bonds-I would be tempted to say in the primitive fraternity-between brothers and poor sisters. I do not think it should be seen as the first manifestation of reluctance on the part of the brothers to assume responsibility for Clare's sisters (a kind of preamble to the debate on the care of nuns that would rage in the decades to come). Rather, it is another expression of the need to reaffirm in every way the severing of an original bond and relationship whose memory was still alive, and was so strong, so hard to erase, that even after many years it still called for a special prohibition.

This process of separation and detachment, as I have already pointed out, was certainly not without losses, resistance and difficulties. I will not dwell on the scattered evidence in the chronicles and documents that attests to the persistence of bonds and relationships between brothers and Damianites even outside of institutional assignments and well beyond the 1220s. But there is also another writing of Francis that raises further questions in this regard. This is the "last will" that he addressed to the ladies of San Damiano, shortly before his death, and whose text Clare cites in Chapter VI of her Rule:

I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of his holy mother and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and poverty. And keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.³⁷

In comparing this text with the Form of Life, Jacques Dalarun pointed out, in the very language used, there is evidence of the break that has taken place. No more "loving care" and "special solicitude" but only a

³⁶See G. Miccoli, Afterword to Dalarun, Francesco: un passaggio, 232ff.

³⁷UltVol 1-3; RCl VI, 6-9.

"counsel," as the *Earlier Rule* had already established.¹⁸ But there is also something else showing that Francis had not forgotten his former promise. I think it is no accident that, just as in the *Testament* addressed to all his brothers, so here, addressing "his ladies," he first states characteristics and terms of his choice, and then recalls, in obvious connection with that choice, the commitment of the ladies and the brothers. "I, little brother Francis, wish to follow...and I ask and counsel you, my ladies...." We find the same discursive development in the *Testament*: "And I worked with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all brothers to give themselves to honest work." "And I firmly wish to obey the general minister...and the other guardian whom it pleases him to give me.... And let all the brothers be bound to obey their guardians...." In both cases Francis recalls his own choice in order to remind the ladies and the brothers of theirs. In both cases he sets himself up in some way as an authentic point of reference.

Seen this way, the comparison between the *Last Will* and the *Testament* brings out even more the different tone used by Francis for the ladies with respect to that used for the brothers. On the one hand, "I ask and counsel you"; on the other hand, "I firmly wish" and "let all the brothers be bound." Whether it is old memories of an approach suggested by courtly and chivalric literature, or whether it is the refusal to exercise authority over women penitents, as the *Earlier Rule* had decreed, there is evidently something that prevents Francis from addressing his ladies (not "sisters") in the terms he uses to address his brothers. But I do not think this lessens the profound significance of that discursive development. Even though the bonds had by now grown looser, Francis continues to feel involved in the choice of the brothers and the ladies. He feels a personal responsibility in both directions.

This is also confirmed by the obscure imperative that concludes the writing: "And keep most careful watch that you never depart from this [most holy life and poverty] by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone." It is hard to imagine a generic warning, devoid of concrete references. The warning is imperative and refers to possible interventions, which must be of some importance if Francis believes he can describe them with terms such as "teaching" and "advice." I think it is useless to ask what person or persons Francis is thinking of. Attempts to steer the Damianites more and more into the wake of the Benedictine model (as was happening with other women's

³⁸ See Dalarun, Francesco: un passaggio, 39.

³⁹Test 20.

⁴⁰ Test 27-30.

monastic groups) were no doubt being made at the end of the 1220s.41 Similar attempts had probably been made even earlier. But what matters most is Francis's awareness that attempts were being made-or at any rate could be foreseen-to draw the ladies away from the poverty they had chosen. Again the analogy with the Testament becomes convincing in this regard. Francis's peremptory commands not to regard the places where they lived as their own, nor to ask for letters from the Roman Curia⁴² are opposed to phenomena and trends that were finding favor and support either within the Order or in Rome. This was obviously contrary to the things he had considered essential to a choice of evangelical poverty. It is unnecessary to recall any of the clear signs in the hagiographic sources on the emergence of such trends. So also from this point of view there emerges a warning that, in Francis, still puts the brothers and the ladies on a par, created by the perception that both groups had been subjected to the same pressures. A further indication, I think, that the memory of common roots, mutual bonds and a common journey persisted in Francis, even though a separation had taken place; but also evidence that a "normalization" of the experiences arising from Francis's choice and proposal was clearly taking place.

The rise and fall of relations between the Friars Minor and women, especially the "religious women"—obviously Clare and her companions were among these—is a significant part of the process that accompanied the transformation of the original fraternity into a religious order. As a result of this gradual transformation, those experiences and behaviors that at first had allowed for the establishment of close bonds with the women gathered at San Damiano (but also with other "religious women" whom the brothers had received to obedience) were abandoned. The process was variously influenced by curial concerns, the danger of confusion with contemporary evangelical movements that reeked of heresy, and the monastic view of women that was creeping in among the brothers (the Legend of the Three Companions tells us that the Lives of the Fathers were read at the chapters).43 It ended with the women being strictly confined to monasteries and the brothers being subjected to a discipline that was carried out, at least in part, according to the canons for regulars. Thus they were gradually led to modify lifestyles, internal equilibria and relations with the surrounding society.

To try to fix precisely, through the writings of Francis, the different stages and moments that marked and determined these changes, is possible

⁴¹See M. Bartoli, Chiara d'Assisi, Rome 1989, 172ff.

⁺²Test 24-26.

⁴³L3C 59.

only in rare cases. Much more revealing-as Roberto Rusconi showed years ago4-are the bulls addressed by the Curia with increasing frequency to the new "religion," starting in the late 1210s. For the most part, Francis's writings go back to the final years of his life. They correspond to a period when the fraternity had already experienced a first and unexpected expansion, extending its presence beyond the very boundaries of Christendom and becoming, as a result, a religious order that was supposed to be governed by a well-defined rule, fixed once and for all. For this reason I would say that Francis's writings are a reflection and record of the profound changes that had taken place. They point out the dangers and oppose what were considered to be the deviations; they also welcome and accept the opportunities as fruits of grace. But they do not allow us to determine whether or to what extent Francis perceived the full impact of the institutional change associated with the establishment of the fraternity as a religious order. Nor can the results of this change always be interpreted by means of a well-defined standard. Regarding the state of the Order, we get the impression of conflicting elements that are juxtaposed and interwoven. An unexpected and positive expansion of tasks, functions and responsibilities is matched by deviations and deletions whose roots and raison d'être lie in that very expansion.

A text such as the Letter to the Faithful—Raimondo Michetti's penetrating and persuasive pages have shed much light on it 5—shows very clearly the extraordinary breadth Francis had by then come to assign to his mission of proclamation and witness, framed in a particular view of salvation history. It also shows his desire to speak directly to all Christians and his awareness that he must do so, going well beyond the circle of his Order and the bands of penitents variously connected with it. This is attested not only by the letter's explicit heading, but also by the many interlocutors who appear in the course of it. Although different by reason of their state of life and choices, all are united in the one project of salvation begun by the incarnation of Christ.

This opening to a universal setting that embraces all humanity is presented again in the hymn of prayer and praise in Chapter XXIII of the *Earlier Rule*. There Francis's appeal, in his own name and that of his brothers, to persevere "in the true faith and in penance for otherwise no one will be saved," is addressed to all classes in society. Beginning with

[&]quot;"Clerici secundum alios clericos," 88ff.

⁴⁵R. Michetti, "Lettera ai fedeli – A," in Francesco d'Assisi, *Scritti*, ed. A. Cabassi, Milan 2002, 467ff.

⁴⁶ER XXIII, 7.

ecclesiastics, it is arranged in a chain whose minute, all-embracing list of the various classes of people, mentioned singly or in pairs, seems almost afraid of inadvertently omitting someone.⁴⁷

In the Letter to the Faithful, the Order as such is not specifically mentioned. Its members are reabsorbed, as it were, into the broader Christian community. I will return to the possible significance of this apparent absence. I do not think, however, there can be any doubt that in Francis's eyes the Order was called to carry out and continue his own mission. It is no accident that, speaking to all his brothers in a letter that probably goes back to the last period of his life, Francis reminds them that the Lord sent them "into the whole word that [they] may bear witness to his voice in word and deed and bring everyone to know that there is no one who is all-powerful except him." The same thing is presented in the two letters to the custodians (doubts about the present version of the second letter are not enough to call it into question), whose dealings with clergy and the secular powers must always be such that the primary end is the praises of God and reverence for the Eucharist. **

These invitations and overtures are a clear sign that Francis felt himself invested by God with a mission that had been entrusted to him, and precisely to him. It is an idea that found, if not its full justification, certainly its resounding confirmation in the growing bands of followers that gathered around him. In his *Testament*, Francis explicitly describes the arrival of the first brothers as a grace, followed by the choice of the Gospel as the model for his own life, as the Lord revealed to him. The interpretation of his conversion, his choices, the birth and formation of the "fraternity" (Francis returns to the earlier name in his last writing), all took place under the sign of grace. The entire process is depicted as the result of God's will. This element cannot be ignored if we wish to try to understand what Francis thought, in the 1220s, of the events that saw him and his brothers suddenly raised to the role of protagonists in the Church and society. The massive success that greeted his appearance and his word is unequivocal proof (the famous testimonies on his sermon in Bologna are a rare but clear sign).⁵⁰

⁴⁷See J. Le Goff, "Le vocabulaire des catégories sociales chez François d'Assise et ses biographes du XIII' siècle," in Idem, Saint François d'Assise, Paris 1999, 125ff [English translation: St. Francis of Assisi, London: Routledge, 2004].

⁴⁸LtOrd 9.

⁴⁹1LtCus 2-3; 2LtCus 4-7.

⁵⁰See L. Lemmens, Testimonia minora saeculi XIII de S. Francisco Assisiensi, Quaracchi 1926, 9ff (for the testimony of Thomas of Spalato); Les sermons et la visite pastorale de Federico Visconti archevêque de Pis (1253-1277), under the direction of N. Bériou, Rome 2001, 789 (for the testimony of Federico Visconti).

The rules he works out for judging these developments involve, first of all, an attitude of welcome and positive acceptance. The expansion of the group inevitably involved enlargement of its sphere of activity, gave new vigor and opened new possibilities in the tasks he had considered for himself and his brothers. Seen this way, it is hard not to believe that Francis saw the establishment of the Order and the support of Rome as providential. They were the confirmation (or sign?) that it was up to him and his brothers to bring to all people those "new signs of heaven and earth which are great and extraordinary in the sight of God yet regarded as of little importance by many religious and others."

But this is not the only thing the writings of Francis suggest with regard to the history of the Friars Minor. Even as they testify to the group's expansion, and thus to the enlargement of its sphere of activity and responsibilities, they also point out dangers, deviations, traps, the emergence of attitudes and tendencies that are viewed negatively. These cannot be regarded as mere indications of abstract future possibilities. Under the veil of allegory, the piece *True and Perfect Joy* testifies clearly to feelings of antagonism toward Francis among the brothers: toward the way he thought about the role of the Order and the characteristics of its presence in society. Nor does the *Testament* suggest a different conclusion, whether in the nostalgic memory of the brothers' original way of life, which, it is forcefully asserted, must continue, or in the drastic nature of the prohibitions that end the work. The unexpected severity that appears here, as in other almost contemporary writings of Francis, depict a situation felt to be one of extreme emergency. The only way out, apparently, is repression.

This element—appropriately stressed by Grado Merlo long ago⁵³—cannot be easily situated within the larger group of Francis's proposals and choices. It indicates his serious concerns about the life of the Order, the existence of disputes whose solution is deliberately entrusted to the judgment of the cardinal protector, as if he wished to remove them from the brothers' control.⁵⁴ But it is an emergency, I think we must add, that appears with multiple facets in Francis's writings; it cannot be lumped together under a single heading. There are brothers who do not observe the Rule (it

⁵¹¹LtCus 1.

⁵²See Miccoli, Un'esperienza cristiana, 10ff and 37ff.

⁵³G. G. Merlo, *Tensioni religiose agli inizi del Duecento*, Torre Pellice 1984, 11ff; see also K.V. Selge, "Franz von Assisi und Hugolino von Ostia," in *San Franceso nella ricerca storica degli ultimi ottanta anni*, Convegno del Centro di studi sulla spiritualità medioevale, IX, Todi 1971, 214ff.

⁵⁴Test 33.

is not always easy to determine just what the infractions are), and for that reason Francis will not consider them Catholics.55 But others are considered in the same category, though not for non-observance of the Rule.⁵⁶ Still others "wander about, having put aside the discipline of the Rule,"57 where the main element in the accusation is the wandering (reference to an old practice?). Then there are preachers and prelates who think they ought to be in positions where they can give orders. The Others, it would seem, are getting bogged down in ascetical practices and monastic customs, wrongly considering them an essential part of their religious choice (if such is the case, they should read the warnings in Admonitions VI and XIV).59 Still others Francis describes as too proud of their learning to accept the original criteria of minority. Most of all there are brothers, as I have already mentioned, who are clearly acting from the standpoint of pastoral service, which is causing them to downplay or abandon certain things Francis considered essential to "following the footprints of Christ," a foundational element of his life and that of his brothers.61

These references seem to depict the emergence or persistence of tendencies and driving forces in the Order. In Francis's writings they are all deviations, and so in a way they are joined together in the one insistent call to obedience and observance of the Rule, whose origin and importance the *Testament* tries to show.⁶² But the various figures that can be seen behind these calls already represent situations and diverging trends that will come to full light in the years and decades to come.

It seems to me, from this point of view, that the Letter to the Entire Order deserves special attention. It is the other great text that Francis addressed to all his brothers, present and future, at a time that already seems marked by his approaching death. The title, "Testament of Blessed Francis," which one manuscript affixes to it, does not represent a total misunderstanding. This is not the place to analyze it in detail. No doubt the letter develops and expresses certain fundamental aspects of Francis's

⁵⁵LtOrd 44.

⁵⁶Test 31.

⁵⁷LtOrd 45.

⁵⁸ER XVII, 4; Adm XIX, 3-4.

⁵⁹AdmVI, 3; XIV, 2-4.

⁶⁰TPJ 11.

⁶¹ Test 24-26; TPI 4-6.

⁶² Test 34.

⁶³See K. Esser, *Die Opuscula des bl. Franziskus von Assisi*, zweite, erweiterte und verbessert Auglage besorgt von E. Grau, Grottaferrata – Rome 1989, 237.

religious vision. There is the large part devoted to the Eucharist, whose daily offering continues Christ's presence and teaching in history. Likewise, in the concluding prayer there is the theme of following the footprints of Christ, a symbol of Francis's choice of life and the prayer's central element and primary motive. Clearly connected to the treatment of the Eucharistic mystery is the fact that at least half the body of the letter is addressed to his brother priests. Lat this is a group, let us not forget, that all the available evidence shows to be relatively small in the Order at the time. Is that connection enough to explain the large amount of space Francis devotes to them, and his special insistence on the way of life the brother priests must make their own?

As for the attitude that the brothers, all the brothers, must have toward priests, all priests, even if they are sinners, Francis shows no hesitation or doubt. The words of the *Testament*, and also of the *Earlier Rule* and the *Admonitions*, leave no room for misunderstanding. Total reverence and submission must be shown them, because they and they alone administer to others the Body and Blood of Christ. But in addressing the priests in his Order, his brother priests, Francis expresses himself differently. We cannot help but notice that, for him, the very fact that they are the agents by which the Eucharistic mystery is accomplished each day imposes on them—I would like to say, more than all the other brothers— a way of life that must correspond fully to the model of submission and humility the Son of God offered in his incarnation, and constantly offers again in the Eucharist. Christ's total self-stripping and humiliation calls for a similar response on the part of the priest who receives him in his hands:

Let everyone be struck with fear,
let the whole world tremble,
and let the heavens exult
when Christ, the Son of the living God,
is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!
O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!
O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe,
God and the Son of God,

⁶⁴LtOrd 26-29.

⁶⁵LtOrd. 50-51.

⁶⁶LtOrd. 14-33.

⁶⁷ER XIX, 3; Adm XXVI, 1-4; Test 6-10.

⁶⁸LtOrd 26-29.

so humbles himself
that for our salvation
he hides himself
under an ordinary piece of bread!
Brothers, look at the humility of God,
and pour out your hearts before him!
Humble yourselves
that you may be exalted by him!
Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
that he who gives himself totally to you
may receive you totally!

This series of considerations could apply to all priests, but here it is addressed to the priests of the Order. It is for them and them alone. The humility and total self-stripping that must be theirs has its twofold reason in the privilege of being agents of the Eucharist, but also of having chosen as model for their lives the way of life implicit in that.

Thus the question: By insisting on this aspect, is Francis identifying a danger in the Order's internal relationships, namely, the danger of setting up rigidly fixed hierarchies, forms of pre-eminence opposed to the rules and fundamental principles of the fraternity? To say so with certainly would be to force things, but the explanation seems to me completely legitimate. It is not just a point that Francis was raising, as other statements of his clearly show. The establishment of rigid and distorted relationships in the Order may have also been suggested by a mechanical transfer within it of that attitude of reverence and submission toward priests that Francis had asked of all his brothers. It was a short circuit that should have been avoided. The very special place and the type of exhortations the *Letter to the Entire Order* devotes to the brother priests would thus have a plausible explanation. They attest to tendencies that were gaining ground among the Friars Minor, a trend that would be victorious not too many years later.

This short summary certainly does not contain all the ideas and information the writings of Francis provide on the origins and history of the Friars Minor between the 1210s and 1220s. For this, as for other problems, the investigation will have to continue. But there is one thing I wish to emphasize: the many things these writings reveal about the first group—its growth, its expansion, and the disagreements, difficulties and changes that accompanied this—testify also to the inconsistent manner in which Francis perceived and experienced its many aspects and developments. The Order, like the fraternity, was his creature. Francis experienced it as a work that had

⁶⁹LtOrd 26-29.

⁷⁰ER XVII, 4; Adm XIX, 3.

been accomplished around him by the will and grace of God. But there were signs that it was departing from him, that it was taking other paths. That, however, could pose no challenge to the mission with which he felt invested, a mission that may have found its natural expression in the Order, yet through the very terms that set that mission apart, went beyond the Order. The fact that the *Letter to the Faithful* does not explicitly mention his brothers, or the Order as such, seems to me tacit proof of this. Not so different, albeit from another point of view, is the meaning of those memorable words with which, according to Thomas of Celano, the dying Francis bid farewell to his brothers: "I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours." He had completed his task; the directions and problems of the Order were no longer in his hands.

⁷¹²C 214.