# The Word of God in the Writings of Francis

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### 1. The Writings of Francis: Word of God?

Is it by chance, unaware of the implications, that the topic of this symposium is the three Latin words taken from the Second Letter to the Faithful, 2: Verba Domini mei? Or does it mean that in the eyes of the organizers the content and overall message of Francis's writings is and presents itself, first and foremost, as a transmission or communication of the Word of God?

Whatever the intention of the organizers may be, there is no doubt that the writings themselves express this conviction—should we say, this claim?—several times. Thus the two versions of the *Letter to the Faithful* present themselves as "the fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ," Francis being only minister or servant. The long project for Christian life set forth in these texts is simply identified with "the words of our Lord Jesus Christ." The Rules for the brothers make the same claim: the first in its title (whether or not it is from Francis), "This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," the second when it states, "The Rule and Life of the Lesser

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>1LtF 2, 19; 2LtF 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>2LtF 3, 87.

<sup>3</sup>ER Prol. 2

118 Matura

Brothers is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the exhortations of the important letter addressed to the entire Order, Francis's "my words" are identified in the next verse with the "voice of the Son of God." On a more personal level, Francis says in his *Testament* that "the Most High himself revealed" that he and his brothers "should live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel."

We see that it is in the main texts of the collection of his writings, which are life projects for all Christians<sup>7</sup> or for the group of brothers, <sup>7a</sup> that Francis expresses his conviction—exorbitant perhaps—that these writings are simply transmitting "the words of my Lord." Seeing also the importance he attaches, nine different times, <sup>8</sup> to all his writings and to their transmission, preservation and rumination, we can ask whether this concern is based on the respect due to the Word of God that he is convinced he is communicating by means of them.

### 2. The Place of Scripture in the Writings

By "Word of God" we mean, in Christian usage, primarily the writings of the Old and New Testaments, in other words, the biblical texts or Scripture.

What precisely is the place of Scripture in Francis's writings? The frequency, the importance of the citations could perhaps explain and justify the claim that his message simply transmits the Word of God. So it is not surprising that exegetes are interested in them, and that doctoral theses in biblical studies have been devoted to them. Without going into the details of these studies, here are some of the more or less definitive findings.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>LR I, 1; XII, 4; ER XXII, 41.

<sup>5</sup>LtOrd 5, 6.

<sup>6</sup>Test 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Letters to the Faithful.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7a</sup>Rule, Testament, Letter to the Order

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>ER XXIV, 1, 2; 1LtF 2, 20; 2LtF 88; LtR 9; 1LtCust 9; 1LtCl 15; LtMin 21; LtOrd 47; Test 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>D. Dozzi, *Il Vangelo nella Regola non bollata di Francesco d'Assisi*, Rome 1989; F. Mann, "François d'Assise, exégète; vrai ou faux problème?" in *Francesco d'Assisi*, nel 750 della morte, Jerusalem 1976, 201-24. The following bibliography contains only works explicitly devoted to study of the use and interpretation of Scripture in the writings of Francis. They show what has been done and what remains to be done. Use of the Johannine texts has been studied the most. The same cannot be said of the Synoptics, still less of Paul. We have no study at all of the hymn citations from the Apocalypse, as well as of the Old Testament. Another study, more exegetical, has been begun by Gallant on the Psalms arranged by Francis. Finally, there is no overall

In the writings of Francis, the term *verbum* ("word") is found 65 times. <sup>10</sup> In over two-thirds of the cases (43 to be exact), the term refers to the sacred divine Word, either in its written form in the liturgical books ("divine written words" - 14 times), or as God's word or message proclaimed. Twice<sup>11</sup> the term is used as a personal name, following the Gospel of John (Jesus as Word of the Father).

#### Massive Presence

If we take the explicit citations of the Bible, the figures, which virtually agree, list about 436: 156 from the Old Testament, 280 from the New, 12 of which 75 are from Matthew, 58 from Luke, 13 from Mark, 61 from John and 50 from Paul. For comparison, the works of John of the Cross, at least ten times longer, contain 1526 citations. 13

#### Uneven Distribution

Leaving aside the three works made up entirely of biblical citations (the 15 Psalms in the Office of the Passion, The Praises To Be Said at All the Hours, Exhortation to the Praise of God), it must be noted that the use of Scripture is unevenly distributed. It is most abundant in the Earlier Rule, the Letters to the Faithful, the Letter to the Entire Order and in about half of the

presentation, synthetic and critical, based on careful examination of the biblical texts (as Dozzi has done for the Rule). The works of Bartoli Langeli, Paolazzi and Messa, although they do not deal directly with Scripture, are cited because of their contribution with regard to the "personal" authenticity of Francis's writings. AA.VV., Parola di Dio e Francesco d'Assisi, Assisi 1982; G. C. Bottini, "La Lettera di Giacomo negli scritti di s. Francesco," in Studia Hierosolymitana III, Jerusalem 1982, 159-68; L. Gallant, The Geste of the Great King. Office of the Passion of Francis of Assisi, New York 2001; P. Ghezzi, Le Lettere di San Paolo nelle Regole e nel Testamento di San Francesco, Jerusalem 1987 (typewritten); T. Matura, "Comment François lit et interprète l'Evangile," Evangile aujourd'hui 190 (2001) 35-41; F. Urricchio, "Francesco legge Matteo," Miscellanea Francescana 82 (1982) 326-416; O. Van Asseldonk, "San Giovanni evangelista negli scritti di S. Francesco," Laurentianum 18 (1977) 225-55; idem, "Le Lettere di san Pietro negli scritti di S. Francesco," Antonianum 54 (1979) 447-86 [English trans. Greyfriars Review 11:3 (1997) 243-55]; idem, "Lo Spirito del Signore e la sua santa operazione negli scritti di Francesco," Laurentianum 23 (1982) 133-95 [English trans. Greyfriars Review 5:1 (1991) 105-58]; idem, "Insegnamenti biblici 'privilegiati' negli scritti...," Analecta OFMCap. 95 (1979) 146-65 [English trans. Greyfriars Review 3:3 (1989) 287-314]; W. Viviani, L'ermeneutica di Francesco d'Assisi. Indagine alla luce di Gv 13-17 nei suoi scritti, Rome 1983.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>ER 19 times; 2LtF 8; Adm, Test, LtOrd 7, LtCl 5 etc.

<sup>112</sup>LtF 3, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>See the indexes in Esser's two critical editions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>Jean de la Croix, Oeuvres complètes, Paris 1990, 57.

120 Matura

Admonitions (14 of the 28). When Francis intends to propose to the laity or the brothers an overall view of life according to the Gospel, the citations multiply. Some texts, for example the Canticle of the Creatures, some of the Admonitions, and the Letter to the Custodians, contain none at all. Others, such as the Later Rule, the Testament, the Rule for Hermitages, the Letters to the Clergy and the Letter to a Minister, contain only a few.

#### Varied Presentation

Francis's use of Scripture varies. Three completely autonomous texts, just mentioned, are compositions made up entirely of biblical texts, arranged like a mosaic around a unifying theme such as the prayer of Christ, the praise of God, etc.

In addition, we find within some writings, such as the Earlier Rule, the Letters to the Faithful and the Admonitions, groups called centos, which are part of the very structure and development of the ideas. With the aid of citations from various sources, a theme, sometimes very rich, is presented. The Earlier Rule is the favorite place for this. There we find five centos of this genre: following of Christ (I, 2-5); conduct in the presence of others (XIV, 1-5); attitude in trials (XVI, 11-21); adoration with a pure heart (XXII, 27-31); community assembled around its shepherd (XXII, 32-40). It is the same in the magnificent theological introduction on the Word who chooses poverty and death, in the Second Letter to the Faithful 4-13, or again in Admonition I, 1-6.

At other times what we have are long citations taken from the Synoptics, where one evangelist's account is completed and harmonized with additions taken from another (the sower: ER XX, 11-17; the return of the unclean spirit: ER XXII, 21-24). The text of the prayer of Jesus from chapter 17 of John is repeated three times, each time at greater length.<sup>14</sup>

Most often, a single brief citation serves as the starting point, conclusion or confirmation of an exhortation or an instruction on behavior, or it provides material for a sort of meditation. The most numerous examples are found particularly in the *Rules*<sup>15</sup> and the *Admonitions*. <sup>16</sup>

To these four ways we should add a kind of biblical impregnation of certain passages. Although there are no explicit citations, to one familiar

<sup>141</sup>LtF 1, 14-19; 2LtF 56-60; ER XXII, 41-55.

<sup>15</sup>ER III, 1-2; IV, 5-6; LR IX, 3.

<sup>16</sup>II-V; VII-IX; XIII-XVI.

with the Latin of the Vulgate it seems evident that the words used by Francis come from it and are drawn from Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

Based on these statistical data, quickly recalled here, it seems legitimate to conclude that Scripture, primarily the New Testament, forms a kind of structure or framework—in a word, a foundation for all the writings, even those relatively rare ones where it is not cited explicitly.

Thus a question arises, linked to the role attributed by Jordan of Giano to Caesar of Speyer who "embellished the Rule of blessed Francis with words from the Gospel." This role, which some have exaggerated to the point of seeing Caesar's hand everywhere citations appear, needs to be seriously re-evaluated. Sabatier already noted that the citations were so much a part of Francis's very text that they were its framework. Recent works by Paolazzi and Bartoli Langeli, based on rigorous philological examination, have concluded that Francis dictated his texts in the strict and personal sense, and that he insisted, with meticulous care, that they be written as given.

If no one seems to question that the arrangement of the Psalms—a superbly constructed mosaic as far as sense is concerned—is Francis's work, why refuse to accept his authorship of the other compositions of the same genre that were no more difficult than the former?

### 3. Theology of the Word

But what, for Francis, was this "word of the Lord" that is present in almost every line of his writings and with which he seems to identify his message as a whole?

The way it is described even on the level of vocabulary already reveals something of his understanding of it. This "word" for him is "the word of God" spoken of in Luke, 8:11.<sup>21</sup> Again, it is "the words of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>For example, LR III, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup>Analecta Francescana I, n. 15, p. 5. On this point, see the works of B. Vollot, "La première Règle de s. François et l'harmonie évangélique," Foi et langage 6 (1982) 89-102; 181-91; 276-86; idem, "Le Diatesseron et la première Règle de saint François," Franziskanische Studien 72 (1990) 341-64; idem, "Césaire de Spire et la Règle de 1221," Laurentianum 32 (1991) 173-220.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup>P. Sabatier, Études inédites sur S. François, Paris 1932, 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup>C. Paolazzi, "Gli 'Scritti' tra Francesco e is suoi scrivani: un nodo da scegliere," Antonianum 75 (2000) 481-97; A. Bartoli Langeli, Gli autografi di frate Francesco e di frate Leone, Turnhout 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup>ER XXII, 11; XVI, 7; LtOrd 34.

Lord,"<sup>22</sup> "the divine words,"<sup>23</sup> "the words of my Lord Jesus Christ,"<sup>24</sup> "the words of the Holy Spirit,"<sup>25</sup> "the words of the holy Gospel."<sup>26</sup> The adjectives that modify it—"most holy,"<sup>27</sup> "most sacred,"<sup>28</sup> "divine,"<sup>29</sup> and the unusual "fragrant,"<sup>30</sup>—are a sufficient indication of his reverence for it.

It is not a question of a formalistic or superstitious reverence for word as heard or written. The beginning of the Second Letter to the Faithful (3) presents in a few lines an authentic theology of the Word, original and surprising in a theologically uneducated layman: "I decided to offer you in this letter and message the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Word of the Father, and the words of the Holy Spirit, which are spirit and life."

This dense text states, first of all, Francis's conviction that his long message is only communicating words that are not his own. They are, according to him, the words of Jesus Christ, which elsewhere<sup>31</sup> he expands upon as "the words, the life, the teaching and the holy Gospel." These words, proclaimed, written, transmitted and related by Francis, are words of one who is himself Word. They are words of the Word (verba Verbi). Francis's intuition goes ever further. This personal word is spoken by someone else, the Father. He is Word of the Father (verbum Patris). And in order that this view might lack nothing in depth, the words of Francis, of Jesus, of the Father, are also those of the Spirit, animated by a powerful breath of life: Spirit and life that makes the Word living.<sup>32</sup> Such is the nature of the Word to which Francis assigns a fundamental place in his writings.

But how do we get in touch with the mystery of this multifaceted word? Admonition VII, repeating the Pauline expression, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2Cor 3:6), speaks of how the Word contained in the divine letters of Scripture must be received. There is a distinction between purely conceptual knowledge, "to know the words alone," often associated with ambition and the desire for social promotion, and the

<sup>22</sup>Adm I, 9.

<sup>23</sup>Test 13; LtOrd 35.

<sup>242</sup>LtF, 2, 3, 87.

<sup>252</sup>LtF 3.

<sup>26</sup>LR II, 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup>Test 12, 13.

<sup>28</sup>LtCl 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> LtOrd 35; Test 13.

<sup>30 1</sup>LtF 2, 19; 2LtF 2.

<sup>31</sup> ER XXII, 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Text of Jn 6:64, cited four times by Francis; ER XXII, 39; Test 13; 1LtF 2, 21; 2LtF 3; always in connection with the Word.

spiritual knowledge of those who, "brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter," recognize that their knowledge of it does not come from themselves. It is a gift of God and must be expressed through the example of their life. Knowledge of the Word, which another Admonition (XX) calls by a biblical term "words...of the Lord," produces "gladness and joy" in those who meditate on it. It leads them, in a movement of joy, to make known to everyone God's love for human beings.

This exegesis of two passages from the writings shows that Francis was not content to amass biblical citations and combine them for better or for worse. He was also able to reflect, apart from every scholarly and systematic framework, on the mysterious reality of the Word and its spiritual use. His writings are steeped in it, because he believes they convey the words of him who is Word of the Father and the words of the divine Spirit.

### 4. Francis's Exegesis

Francis does not merely cite the biblical texts. He uses them, either to express his view of God, of human beings and the journey of one to the other, or to support and confirm the ethical behavior he proposes in the name of the Gospel. What can today's exegete say about their use and application—we would say hermeneutic—by this thirteenth-century man, a layman, moreover, who was not a product of the schools.

What is striking, first of all, is that his way of presenting and understanding Scripture avoids the learned manner of his time. We look in vain for traces of the four senses of Scripture, a usual framework for medieval exegesis. We find no allegorizing approach,<sup>33</sup> no artificial applications. Everything seems direct, immediate, simple and right. Literal—or rather literalist or fundamentalist—exegesis is not found (let us not forget the *ad litteram*, *sine glossa* of later Franciscan writings). Even the radical gospel texts on selling one's possessions, on clothing and shoes, are not take literally but interpreted "spiritually."<sup>34</sup> Modern exegetes feel more comfortable with many spiritual and patristic texts than with those from the Middle Ages.

As for the relative influence of the various New Testament currents (Synoptic, Johannine, Pauline), although each group of citations is approximately equal in number (Matthew 75; John 61; Paul 50), their influence varies. We can say that the divine mystery is approached from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Except perhaps in two cases: the *verbum abbreviatum* ("brief word") of Rom 9:28 and Is 10:23 in LR IX, 4; and Jer 48:10 in LtOrd 19.

<sup>34</sup> ER II 4, 8, 11, 13; LR II 15.

124 Matura

Johannine trinitarian perspective. Francis's anthropology, full of sharp contrasts, is strongly marked by that of Paul, and the proposals for evangelical conduct stress the teachings of Jesus as reported by the Synoptics.

#### 5. The Places of the Word

The question remains: How did Francis acquire such an extensive and such a correct knowledge of Scripture? So original, we might add, if we consider the absence of a clerical education, as well as the difficulty of access, even physical access, to the written text.

Certainly, even during his dissipated youth, Francis heard liturgical proclamations that he could more or less understand. Once he had left the world and was joined by others, he gradually began to celebrate the daily Liturgy of the Hours, which was repetitive and composed essentially of biblical texts. His breviary, written during the last years of his life and supplemented by an evangeliary containing 222 gospel readings, attests to an ongoing contact with Scripture.<sup>35</sup> The meditative atmosphere, the chant, the patristic commentaries, a phenomenal memory and—I think—an exceptional mind, coupled with a deep spiritual experience, enabled him to find in Scripture things hidden from the wise and revealed to the little ones (see Mt 11:25).

Thus the principal place for discovering the meaning of the Scriptures was, for Francis, the liturgical space with its biblical texts celebrated, meditated and commented on in the responses, hymns and patristic readings, as has been recently shown by Pietro Messa. That, of course, does not exclude personal rumination, sharing with his brothers, their knowledge and their suggestions (the case of Caesar of Speyer). One recommendation in the *Testament*, "We must honor all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words...as those who minister to us spirit and life," attests, at the level of faith, to his gratitude for a contribution from elsewhere.

## 6. By Way of Conclusion

From the preceding we can draw a few conclusions that relate to all the writings of Francis: their authenticity, their relation to the biographical sources as well the challenge they present to Franciscan research. I am

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> On this "evangeliary," see the articles by L. Gallant, "Evangéliaire de S. François d'Assise," *Collectanea Francescana* 53 (1983) 5-22; 54 (1984) 241-60.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> P. Messa, Le fonti patristiche negli scritti di Francesco d'Assisi, Assisi 1999.

purposely making these conclusions trenchant, a bit provocative, in order to stimulate discussion.

- The many biblical citations in the writings, in their various forms, are not artificial additions made afterwards. They are part of the framework and rationale of Francis's thought and go back to the author himself.
- The Word of God in its broadest sense is the basic structure of the writings; on it rests the view of God, of human beings, of the gospel journey proposed by the texts.
- 3. The author of the writings considers them, taken as a whole, to be the Word of God itself, and for that reason he gives them a unique importance.
- 4. The religious view that comes out of the writings is quite different from that attributed to Francis by the thirteenth-century hagiographers, formed as they are by other views and marked by other interests.
- 5. The writings of Francis are not primarily material for the history of a man (his life, his psychology, his works); they are, above all, spiritual writings, a subject for the history of ideas (theology, spirituality, literature).