

Thoughts from a Re-reading of the *Treatise on the Miracles* by Brother Thomas of Celano

Mariano D'Alatri

“Da una rilettura del Trattato dei miracoli di fra Tommaso da Celano”

L'Italia Francescana 53 (1978), 29-40.

Translated by Edward Hagman, O.F.M. Cap.

In the pages of this review we have repeatedly called attention to the importance of the *Fonti francescane*, which appeared toward the end of 1977.¹ Several readers have provided an opportunity for this, for as soon as they got hold of the work, they were quick to express their point of view.² For some, the project seemed so successful that they suggested that it be repeated for the early Capuchin historical sources.³ Something on this was written in the review of the volume in which Fr. Stanislao da Campagnola collected his introductory notes to the early *Lives* of Saint Francis.⁴

As can be seen, we can no longer announce something new. But we think that this interest in the *Fonti*, which the readers have wanted to express over a period of just a few months since their publication, is the best sign of

¹*Fonti francescane. Scritti e biografie di san Francesco d'Assisi. Cronache e altre testimonianze del primo secolo francescano. Scritti e biografie di santa Chiara.* 2 vols. Assisi, Movimento Francescano, 1977.

²Vincent Flint, “Proibito parlare dell’Ordine della Penitenza prima del 1289?” *L'Italia francescana* 52 (1977) 389ff.; idem, “Manca un indice delle citazioni scritturali,” *ibid.* 53 (1978) 7ff.

³Vincent Flint, “Le antiche fonti storiche della riforma cappuccina,” *L'Italia francescana* 52, (1977) 391ff.

⁴See *L'Italia francescana* 52 (1977) 486ff.

approval of the project, sponsored by the Franciscan families of Italy. The work was planned and promoted in common, even though the actual implementation is due primarily to the steadfastness and courage of Fr. Ernesto Caroli, secretary of the committee of the provincial ministers of the Franciscan families of Italy.

Actually, the idea of providing the corpus of early Franciscan sources in the vernacular is not new. The Spanish edition had already appeared, reaching its fifth edition in 1951,⁵ as well as the English⁶ and the French.⁷ But we can say with full confidence and impartiality that our Italian version, even though it arrived last, surpasses them all for the abundance of texts gathered, for its very ample introductions, synoptic tables, indexes (persons, places and subjects, the latter being a full 271 pages long), as well as for its uncluttered and elegant layout.

The Treatise on the Miracles

Rather than dwelling on the individual texts collected in the *Fonti* and giving a critical judgment of some of the features (such as the faithfulness of the translation or the explanatory notes, which here and there leave something to be desired), we prefer to call the reader's attention to one particular source, the *Treatise on the Miracles*, which remained unedited until 1899 and almost completely neglected in the above-mentioned modern-language editions.⁸

The translation of the entire work into Italian responds to an unbiased judgment of its real value for knowledge of Saint Francis and the early Franciscan movement, and is an act of trust in the reader's intelligence. But rather than going into a critical examination of the *Treatise*,⁹ we will

⁵*San Francisco de Asis. Sus escritos. Las Florecillas. Biografías del santo por Celano, san Buenaventura y los Tres Compañeros. Espejo de Perfección.* 5 ed. Madrid 1951.

⁶St. Francis of Assisi, *Writings and early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis.* Chicago, 1972. [See now *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* 3 vols. New York-London-Manila 1999].

⁷Saint François d'Assise, *Documents, écrits et premières biographies.* Paris, 1968.

⁸The Spanish edition omits it completely; the English edition reproduces only 12 paragraphs (out of a total of 198); in the French edition, only the title is given for most of the paragraphs. – The Latin text of the *Treatise* was edited for the first time by F. Van Ortroy, *Analecta Bollandiana* 18 (1899) 113-74; then by Eduardus Alenconiensis, *Sancti Francisci Assisiensis Vita et Miracula, additis opusculis liturgicis auctore Fr. Thoma de Celano*, Rome 1906, 341-432; and finally in *Analecta Franciscana* X, Ad Claras Aquas (Florence) 1926-41, 269-331.

⁹An excellent study on this was published by M. Bihl, "Disquisitiones

stick to pointing out a few features that stand out in Celano's schematic account. In fact, from a historical point of view, the significance of the *Treatise* goes well beyond the mere intention to edify, as stated by Brother Thomas in the conclusion:

The boundless piety of Christ the Lord has confirmed as true what has been written and published about his saint and our father, through the signs which accompanied them. Thus it truly seems absurd to submit to human judgment what has been approved by divine miracle. I, a humble son of the same father, humbly beg everyone to receive them kindly, and to hear them reverently.¹⁰

In short, for Thomas of Celano the miracles are the signs by which God has authenticated Francis's holiness, and along with it the extraordinary deeds that mark his life, the first of which is the stigmata. For this reason, even in the conclusion, the hagiographer is arguing against those who deny that unheard-of wonder, which earned Francis the name *alter Christus*.

The Sources of the Treatise

Leaving aside the fact of miracles in themselves, which by nature is beyond history, a historian cannot help but wonder how Brother Thomas came to know about them. In other words, what sources did he have available for writing his *Treatise*? Of its 198 paragraphs, 54 have been borrowed from the *First Life*, nine from the *Second Life* and one from the *Legend for Use in the Choir*, all by Celano himself. That makes 65 paragraphs in all, about one third of the entire *Treatise*. So, its principal source is the author himself, who draws from his own earlier works. Moreover, the dependence is not only thematic but also literary for, except for a few variants, the accounts are reproduced verbatim.

As far as the material in the other 133 paragraphs is concerned, we think we can say that Celano draws from various sources: from a Register, unknown to us, in which the miracles that took place at the saint's tomb in Assisi were recorded, and perhaps also those attested to by people who came to the tomb to fulfill a vow for graces received. Others he could have learned about from the stories of brothers returning from distant places such as Greece, Spain and France. But he must have learned about a large number

celanenses," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 21 (1928), 20-61 and 161-205.

¹⁰*Fonti francescane* 825, n. 198. From now on we will refer, in the text, to the number of the individual paragraphs, which the reader can check either in the *Fonti*, or in *Analecta Franciscana*. [For the new English edition, used in this translation, see FA:ED III, 399-468.]

of these miracles while passing through or staying in the places where they had taken place. This explains why, in the *Treatise*, the overwhelming majority of the miracles recorded take place in central Italy, especially in Umbria, Tuscany, the Marches, Lazio and in the Abruzzo. Numerous miracles also took place in Campania, Puglia and Sicily, and this, we believe, because of the tendency of people from the south to travel up the peninsula to escape their isolation and also to visit the more famous places, first of all Rome and Assisi.

As can be seen, for lack of documentary proof, we must resort to inductive reasoning. This seems to us not only legitimate but even obvious, since very few miracles in the *Treatise* are recorded as taking place outside of Italy or in northern Italy. The account of those mentioned is very general, which is just what happens when things are passed by word of mouth through several people.

On the other hand, the record of the miracles was not committed exclusively to notarized documents, or to the account told by the recipients or by the brothers. Celano himself, perhaps unintentionally, shows us another medium for spreading the miracles attributed to Saint Francis: "A noblewoman named Rogata, from the diocese of Sora, had suffered from hemorrhages for twenty-three years. One day she heard a boy singing in Roman dialect a song about the miracles that God had worked in those days through blessed Francis" (n. 148). As a youth, the Poverello had sung the deeds of the knights of the round table. Now, the minstrels were beginning to sing of the miracles God was working through his intercession. What a pity that none of these songs has come down to us!

New Biographical Data on Saint Francis

Among the miracles recorded in the *Treatise* are many worked by the saint while he was still alive. The majority of these, though not all, are found in the *First* and *Second Lives*. Sometimes, however, other details are added or completely new episodes are reported. For example, there is the one about the cattle in the province of Rieti that were freed from the plague after being sprinkled with the water that had been used to bathe Francis's hands and feet (n. 18). Also new is the account of the larks, which, "in the evening when Saint Francis passed from this world to Christ, when it was already twilight of nightfall, gathered above the roof of the house, where they circled about noisily for a long while" (n. 32). But, leaving aside other deeds that show the saint's miraculous power and humanity, we absolutely must mention the account, so vivid and touching, of the unexpected arrival of Jacoba dei Settesoli at the bed of the dying Francis (nn. 37-39), and the dramatic appeal of the peasant in Cori: "Help me, Saint Francis! Think of all

my service and devotion to you. I carried you on my donkey; I kissed your holy hands and feet. I was always devoted to you, always gracious, and, as you see, I am dying of the torture of this harsh suffering" (n. 159). The instantaneous healing worked by the saint with the sign of the *Tau* takes a back seat to the historical information that emerges from the account. Francis passed through Cori in the last years of his life (in order to travel he needed a mount), probably after his body had been marked by the stigmata. The insistence on kissing his hands and feet does not seem accidental.

Let these references suffice to underscore the value of the *Treatise* as a biographical document for the earthly life of Francis.

Saint Francis as an Object of Devotion

Another aspect, also biographical though less-expected, can be seen in the different ways the saint manifests himself or is imagined by the faithful who pray to him. This presupposed knowledge that may have been personal, or, in most cases described in the *Treatise*, have come from an announcement, a painting, or reputation.

Even when they take place during sleep, the saint's miraculous interventions are very often preceded by a manifestation or apparition. Sometimes, this is a directive or a command given by his voice; in other cases, there is a faceless apparition, but it even happens that he presents himself with strictly personal features. To a brother tormented by doubt about the reality of the stigmata, Francis shows his pierced hands, and even wants him to remove the mud from his feet to examine the place of the nails (n. 10). The saint heals the wounds of a devotee in Castile, the victim of an assault, by touching them with his stigmata (nn. 11, 12, 13). Sometimes he appears dressed in white and wearing a cord around his waist (nn. 50, 51, 181), accompanied by one or more brothers, sometimes with lighted candles (nn. 105, 106), on a beautiful throne (n. 152), accompanied by the Virgin and the apostles (n. 158), under the appearance of a young brother (n. 166).

If we want to examine the individual cases, we could verify that the concreteness of the vision corresponds to how well those who had been helped knew the saint. Thus, in Naples, to Brother Roberto, who was blind and dying, Francis appears in the company of Saint Anthony, Brother Agostino of Assisi, who was minister of Terra di Lavoro, and Brother Giacomo of Assisi.

But in general, based on Celano's descriptions, it is impossible to detect the physical features perceived by those who saw the saint in a dream. They speak of the cord, white garments, a retinue of brothers and saints, accompanied by candles, a beautiful throne, and, in one case, of the saint

with a little lamb in his arms (n. 59). All these things suggest a saint in glory, not the bodily image of Francis. And this is more than evident, since they were appealing to him as a saint, as he was being preached by his reputation and by the propaganda of the brothers. Even granting that Celano had wanted and been able to tell us more about the physical features perceived in those visions, it would have been very hard for the recipients to be more concrete, since the object of their devotion was not the flesh-and-blood historical Francis, but the saint crowned in glory.

It is also interesting to note what it was that drove the devotees to turn to Saint Francis and, at least in some cases, the reasons they give for why they were heard. This can help us understand the mental picture that had been created of the new saint, and why they felt he was so close to them in their needs.

One woman turns to him because she hears a minstrel singing about his miracles (n. 148); another places a book in which these miracles are told on the diseased area (n. 193). The peasant from Cori practically blackmails him over the fact that he had carried him on his donkey when he was alive (n. 159). At Capua the people beg him to save the boy who fell into the waters of the Volturno because his father and grandfather were busy building a church in his honor (n. 44). But these are exceptional cases. Ordinarily, people turn to the saint simply because they are in need and are confident of being heard, and this on the part of the one afflicted, the parents, a solicitous and pious wife, a daughter, people of deep faith and sensitive to the sufferings of others.

The miracles requested are as varied and numerous as the sorrowful litany of ills and human needs. Contrary to what we might think, the saintly protagonist of the *Treatise* does not specialize in spiritual miracles. He is invoked as a physician against physical ills of every kind: blindness, tumors, fistulas, ruptures, painful and embarrassing hemorrhages, leprosy, dropsy, paralysis, epilepsy, deafness, madness, mortal wounds. He hears the cry of the drowned, the shipwrecked, prisoners, those who have been mutilated, those who are victims of a fatal accident. He is a saint to turn to in every need: a priest places his full barn under the saint's protection in order to get rid of weevils; the lord of a castle entrusts to him his lands, in order to keep away a plague of locusts; a shepherd, whose ox broke its leg and could not be brought back to the barn from the field, asks him to protect it against the wolves; a housewife begs him to put back together the pieces of a bowl that had broken, in order to avoid her husband's anger; a peasant begs him to reattach the broken blade of his plow. In short, Francis, the *alter Christus*, is in people's minds the saint of daily life, always close to those caught in the straits of everyday living.

From this vantage point, we can see an unexpected continuity and harmony between the deeds and miracles worked by Francis, whether during his life or after his death. He continues to be "human," even after he is glorified. The people experienced him in that way, because that is how he was presented by the stories of those who had known him and by the preaching of the brothers, who were dedicated body and soul to making their founder known.

In Celano's account, most of the miracles are explicitly geared toward devotion to Saint Francis: pilgrimage to his tomb in Assisi, help in constructing and visiting the churches that were being built in his honor almost everywhere, celebration of his feast, observance of the vigil in preparation for it, belief in the reality of the stigmata and the miracles attributed to him.

The Saint Francis of the *Treatise* is invoked not only for every kind of need, but also by all, without distinction of order or social status. Among his devotees we find clerics, brothers, physicians, judges, soldiers, knights, artisans, peasants, beggars, ladies and ordinary women, women who were sinners, sailors, old men and children, in situations that are sometimes bizarre and more often hopeless. It is a whole suffering humanity in all its variety, united in its love for Saint Francis, under whose mantle it finds joy again, which breaks forth clear and shining when the grip of evil miraculously lets go.

Scenes from Everyday Life

Many paragraphs in the *Treatise* present lively scenes from everyday life, an everydayness that is almost always painful, yet colorful and very often filled with goodness. From these scenes there re-emerges a world that is old and yet always current, as are the feelings and needs that accompany people's life. We will mention just a few of them.

In Rome, a child who is barely seven years old, upset because his mother shut him up in the house instead of taking him with her to church for the sermon, threw himself out the window and was restored to life through Brother Rao's prayers to Saint Francis (n. 42). In Sicily, a young man is crushed by the poorly-supported stones of the grape press (n. 47). In Pofi, the priest Tommaso falls into the channel and is pinned by the water current against the blades of the mill (n. 50). In Ancona, a girl at the point of death is miraculously cured. When her parents offer her some chicken, she replies that she cannot eat it because it is Lent and Saint Francis, whom she says she can see dressed in white, is telling her not to. But he is telling her to

give the black tunic, prepared for her funeral, to a poor woman in prison (n. 52).

In Rete, in the diocese of Cosenza, two students get into a fight and one of them is knifed in the stomach, out of which pours undigested food (and perhaps wine). The brothers get him to forgive the man who wounded him, then pray for him to Saint Francis, who heals him (n. 65). In Arpino, a mother in distress hoists onto her head the cradle containing her paralyzed daughter and carries her to the church of Saint Francis in Vicalvi (n. 72). In Poggibonsi, parents obtain the cure of their daughter Ubertina, who suffers from falling sickness, by vowing to fast on the vigil of Saint Francis and give food to the poor on the day of his feast (n. 74). In Massa Trabaria, a knight imprisons a poor fellow who owes him a debt and who pleads in vain to be set free for love of Saint Francis. The saint comes to his aid and breaks the poor fellow's chains, which he brings to hang in the church in Assisi (n. 89). In Arezzo, another prisoner, Alberto, miraculously gets out of prison after giving his meal, on the vigil of Saint Francis, to a poor man who was languishing there with him (n. 91).

In the warlike city of Tivoli, the unlucky wife of a judge was desperate because she had given her husband six children, but no boys. After a year of separation, she prayed to Saint Francis and bore twin boys, Francesco and Biagio (n. 99). In Città della Pieve, a good-hearted man had taken in a young man who was a deaf-mute and rejected by all. The youth was completely healed after his foster father vowed to Saint Francis that he would always keep him and treat him as a son (n. 125). In the county of Parma, a poor man had a son born with a twisted foot. While the upset man was unswaddling the foot to try to turn it around, he found that it had returned to its position by itself (n. 157).

Some of the accounts, despite the anguish and suffering they reveal, resemble *fioretti*:

In the district of Narni there was a boy whose leg was bent back so severely that he could not walk at all without the aid of two canes. He had been burdened with that affliction since his infancy; he had no idea who his father and mother were; and had become a beggar. This boy was completely freed from his affliction... (n. 161).

There was also a little girl in Gubbio; her hands and all her limbs were so crippled that for over a year she was totally unable to use them... Her nurse brought her to the tomb of the blessed father Francis to seek the favor of a cure. After she had been there for eight days, on the last day all her limbs were restored to their proper functions... (n. 165).

There was another boy from Montenero lying for several days in front of the doors of the church where the body of Saint Francis rested. He could not walk or sit up... One day he got into the church and touched the tomb of the blessed father Francis. When he came back outside, he was completely cured (n. 166).

In another case, a very painful situation, thanks to the saint's intervention, ends in the playfully humorous manner of a novella. An eighty-year old woman, because of the death of her daughter, was left with an infant son, who was not yet weaned. The poor woman did not know where to turn to feed the child:

As the boy grew weaker and faded, the compassionate grandmother was dying with him. The old woman went about through streets and houses and no one could escape her cries. One night she put her withered breast in the boy's mouth to alleviate his squalling, and tearfully begged for the help and advice of blessed Francis...and straightaway her eighty-year old breasts filled with milk... Many came to see; among them was the count of that province, who had to admit from experience what he doubted about the rumor. When the count arrived and was investigating everything that happened, the wrinkled old woman squirted a stream of milk on him, and chased him away with this sprinkling.

But people also turned to Saint Francis in cases that were less dramatic and more ordinary, like the farmer from Amiterno who, three years after the theft of one of his draft animals, could not resign himself to the loss. The saint told him in a dream to go look for it in Scopieto (not Spoleto, as we read in the critical edition¹¹ and thus in our *Fonti*), where he found it and easily got it back (n. 184).

Following the *Treatise*, we could go on at length recalling people of every class who had recourse to Saint Francis for the more common situations in the ordinary routine of daily life. They are news items that deserved mention only because of the saint's miraculous intervention. Yet they let us see, as in a transparency, an entire human, social, economic and religious world, in a way that sheds more light than the truest page of history. Seen thus, the *Treatise* is a historical source that is extremely valuable for a knowledge of the conditions of the people, especially in central Italy, between 1220 and 1250, when the political-religious scene was

¹¹*Analecta Franciscana*, 326; Bihl, art.cit., in *Archivum* 29, reads *Scopletum* instead of *Spoletum*. The trip from Amiterno to Spoleto would have been too long, and it is unlikely that a stolen animal would end up so far away and be looked for there.

dominated by the contrasting great figures of the emperor Frederick II and Popes Gregory IX and Innocent IV.

Evidence of Franciscan Presence

But the chief reason why the *Treatise* found a place in the *Fonti* must be seen, we believe, in the fact that, besides witnessing to the spread of devotion to Saint Francis, it provides valuable information—for the crucial years between about 1230 and 1250—about the presence of brothers and Franciscan houses in many places. In this regard, a careful and attentive re-reading of the *Treatise* can provide extremely interesting answers. About one hundred places are mentioned in it and, obviously, these are closely connected with the Franciscan movement. They are either places where miracles attributed to Saint Francis take place, or where the brothers are visiting, or where a house is located, perhaps still under construction. About eight of these places are in central and southern Italy; the others are in foreign places, specifically in so-called Romania or the Latin Kingdom of the East, in France and in Spain. Almost completely absent are other European countries such as Germany, Hungary and England, where Franciscanism was nevertheless flourishing. Northern Italy, from La Verna northward, is also absent, with the single exception of the city of Parma.

But it is not our intention to give a detailed list of all these places, because this has already been done very accurately by Father Bihl in the article cited.¹² Instead we shall cite just a few passages from the *Treatise* that can help us identify and date some of the early Franciscan establishments.

In Capua, sometime after 1228, a church was built in honor of Saint Francis, who was already canonized since the people pray for the safety of the boy swept away by the waters of the Volturno, saying: "Saint Francis, return the boy to his father and grandfather: they are sweating in your service!" (n. 44). This is certainly the second house, which was erected inside the city, since Brother Agostino of Assisi, minister of Terra di Lavoro, had died in the first house in 1226, at the very moment the soul of Saint Francis was rising to heaven.¹³

In Tolentino, too, we see the moment the brothers are moving, almost certainly abandoning their primitive hermitage in order to establish themselves within the city walls. If an item in Wadding is true,¹⁴ this would

¹²M. Bihl, *Disquisitiones*, 25-33.

¹³T. Cerminara, "Il B. Agostino d'Assisi," *Studi francescani* 29 (1932) 208-19.

¹⁴L. Wadding, *Annales Minorum* IX, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) 1932, 224.

have happened during the pontificate of Innocent IV (1243-54), who is said to have issued a bull urging the faithful to help the brothers occupied in the construction of the friary. It is the classic moment of the insertion of the Lesser Brothers into the fabric of the city, and Celano's account lets us know that this phenomenon also exists in Tolentino, where some are protesting and Saint Francis comes to the defense of his brothers (n. 104).

We also find men helping the brothers in Lentini, where a worker is crushed by the huge stone for the altar (n. 57), in Gaeta where a beam crushes a carpenter (n. 59), and in Tarquinia, where a boy who is bringing food to his father and uncle, who have worked on casting the bell for the friary, is knocked over by a heavy door (n. 54).

With regard to this last place, the account provides details that help us date the event, at least approximately. When Celano was writing (between 1250 and 1253), the boy, who at the time of the accident was eight years old, had become "a learned man and an eloquent preacher" in the Franciscan Order. This leads us to conclude that he must have been about thirty years old at the time, and thus the accident must have happened around 1230.¹⁵

The fact that, already around that time, the Franciscans ordered the casting of "a bell of no small size" is cause for some surprise. This was happening about ten years before Brother Elias, in 1239, installed the melodious bells in the tower that crowns the basilica of Saint Francis.¹⁶ But, we know, bells are one of the most important symbols in the evolution of the Franciscan Order in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Finally, still with regard to the early Franciscan establishments, a last note. In Piglio, near Anagni, "a woman busily went about her work on the feast of Saint Francis. A noblewoman sternly rebuked her for this, since everyone should observe the feast out of divine reverence" (n. 103). But it seems almost impossible that the entire population of the town would celebrate the feast of Saint Francis unless the Franciscans were there with a church of their own in which the faithful could gather to honor the saint. It is an indication, not a proof, but it is solid enough to support the local

¹⁵For information about the successive dwellings of the Lesser Brothers in Tarquinia, see *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 7 (1914) 565.

¹⁶Gratien de Paris, *Histoire de la fondation et de l'évolution de l'Ordre des Frères Mineurs au XIII^e siècle*, Paris – Gembloux 1928, 142. – With regard to the Assisi bells Brother Salimbene de Adam (*Cronica*, Nuova edizione critica ed. G. Scalia, I, Bari 1966, 15) writes that the provincial ministers of the Order "bore the full expense of having a splendid great bell cast (and indeed five more like it) to be hung in the church of Saint Francis in Assisi. And I myself have heard them filling the whole valley with their delightfully sweet tones."

tradition, according to which the Lesser Brothers began to live near the hermitage of San Lorenzo since the days of Saint Francis, even though we have to wait until 1302 to find documentary proof that Blessed Andrea Conti of Anagni died there.¹⁷

Let us end this short note with a wish, which is for us a certainty: a leisurely re-reading of the early Franciscan sources will not only help us better appreciate the spirituality of Francis and his first followers *sub specie aeternitatis*, but it will also enable us to discover the dynamism of the Franciscan movement, its historical dimension, its presence in the civil, social and religious society of the thirteenth century. This discovery responds to a deeply felt need in our day. And our hope will not be disappointed, because Franciscanism—filled with spiritual power, ideas, people and events—was not a school of chosen souls hidden in an inaccessible fortress, but rather a movement which, from the beginning, was able to shake up, draw in and give direction to the complex and anxious medieval world, in which our own age must recognize itself in many ways, whether it wishes to or not.

¹⁷See M. D'Alatri, "Gli insediamenti francescani del Duecento nella custodia di Campagna," *Collectanea Franciscana* 47 (1977).