

Francis and His Use of Scribes: A Puzzle to be Solved

Carlo Paolazzi

“Gli Scritti tra Francesco e I suoi scrivani: un nodo da sciogliere”

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

Among the images indelibly left on our memory from reading the *Fioretti*, the one that begins the well-known allegory on perfect joy stands out. There we are told:

As Saint Francis was once going with Brother Leo from Perugia to Saint Mary of the Angels in wintertime, and the very great cold stung him sharply, he called Brother Leo, who was walking in front and said to him: “Brother Leo, if it should happen that the Lesser Brothers in every land should give great example of holiness and give good edification, nonetheless *write and note carefully* that perfect joy is not in that.” ... This way of talking...lasted a good two miles.¹

Romantic realism has accustomed modern readers to judge stories from the past by the criterion of historical plausibility. Thus they might be puzzled and wonder how Brother Leo, while he and Francis were walking along “soaked with rain, frozen from the cold and covered with mud,” could have physically carried out the repeated command to “*write and note carefully* that perfect joy is not in that” (“*Scribe, scribe bene et nota diligenter, quia non est ibi perfecta letitia,*” according to the *Deeds of Blessed Francis*, immediate

¹*I Fioretti di san Francesco*, chap. VIII, notes by B. Bughetti (new ed. by R. Pratesi, Florence 1958), 51-52 [FA:ED III, 579-80].

source of the *Fioretti*). The reasons for the partial and obvious implausibility became clear in 1927, when Father Benvenuto Bughetti published a version of the “true joy” narrative from a Florentine manuscript. A much leaner and more realistic version, it comes from the testimony of Brother Leo of Assisi. From it we learn that Brother Leo was already at Saint Mary of the Angels when Francis asked him to write, and the journey from Perugia to Saint Mary’s is merely a supposition in the allegory: “Then what is true joy? I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night.”² It is an imaginary event, which the *Deeds* and the *Fioretti*, within the limits of the journey that introduces the story, decided to turn into a factual description.

In any case, certain facts widely shared by scholars emerge from the texts cited. First of all, the word *scribere* [to write] used by Brother Francis actually became in many cases *facere scribi* [to have written down]. This is confirmed by the *Testament*, which is very reliable: “And I had this written down [*feci scribi*] simply and in a few words” (15). Or, “as the Lord has given me to speak and write [*dicere et scribere*] the Rule and these words” (39), which should be taken to mean “to dictate and have written down.” Secondly, the command “Write, Brother Leo,” must have occurred factually and frequently in the daily rapport between Francis and Leo since, of all the companions, Leo was the closest to Brother Francis, and we have solid documentary proof of his scribal abilities.³ With regard to the third indisputable fact, the gradual disparity between the “true joy” accounts and what must have been Francis’s actual dictation, we would certainly know more if we also had the text as taken down from dictation by Brother Leo. But even then we would not have definitely solved all the problems of Brother Francis the writer. For decades, a very large and authoritative critical tradition has been saying that, in the transition from Francis’s actual dictation to the definitive texts written down and approved by his first scribes, there may be interventions by modifying agents, significant enough to make the saint’s authentic word, at least in part, unattainable.

²B. Bughetti, “Analecta de S. Francisco Assisiensi saeculo XIV ante medium collecta (e codice Florentino C.9.2878,” *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 20 (1927) 107.

³An excellent documentary portrait of Brother Leo the scribe occupies the second part of the study “Frater Franciscus et frater Leo Assisienses,” prepared by A. Bartoli Langeli for the Brepols “Autographa Medii Aevi” (my thanks to the author for allowing me to read it in advance).

Facts and Hypotheses about Francis's Dictation

Our survey can begin with Father Kajetan Esser's 1949 study of Francis's *Testament*. The text was definitely written from dictation, but "the question still needs to be explained as to whether Francis dictated the Testament in Latin or in the vernacular language of the time." Here is Esser's response: "Given the saint's limited knowledge of the Latin language, I do not believe we can think in terms of immediate dictation in Latin. Most likely Francis dictated the Testament in the vernacular, and for this reason it was translated very hastily by the brother scribe during the dictation. That is why it contains mistakes...such as: *dedit mihi de fratribus, laborent de laboritio* and the like."⁴ Almost thirty years of studies of the *Opuscula* have in no way modified this opinion of Esser; in fact, they have led him to gradually extend it to the other *Writings*, as is finally evident in the *prolegomena* to the 1976 critical edition,⁵ where Francis's limited knowledge of Latin is reasserted, with the related hypothesis that "he dictated in the vernacular of the time." But more serious in their philological implications are other statements on the same page, where it is said that in some cases Francis "did not dictate the definitive expression, but only the ideas, which the brother [the scribe] was then supposed to put in written form." Thus the difference in linguistic and stylistic quality of the Latin writings "is explained by the fact that Francis did not always and everywhere use the same secretary, and that these brothers' knowledge of the Latin language was not always the same."⁶

Father Esser's hypotheses about modifying agents intervening between Francis's spoken dictation and the text committed to paper by his scribes has had a large following among scholars. But already in 1977 the Latinist Nino Scivoletto distanced himself from those who "slavishly follow" the critical positions just cited. He spoke ironically of the scribes' blanket authority to intervene editorially, so that in the end the saint was pictured "as a kind of new Socrates dictating his thoughts to a group of Platos, sometimes unprepared, sometimes highly experienced in matters of style."⁷

⁴K. Esser, *Il Testamento di san Francesco d'Assisi* (Milan 1978) 83-84; 1st ed., idem, *Das Testament des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi* (Münster in W. 1949).

⁵See K. Esser, *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi. Neue textkritische Edition* (Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, Grottaferrata-Rome 1976; cited from the restored 1989 ed. of E. Grau).

⁶K. Esser, *Gli Scritti di s. Francesco d'Assisi. Nuova edizione critica e versione italiana* (Padua: Messaggero, 1982) 75. For the benefit of Italian readers, I am drawing on the critical parts of this version.

⁷N. Scivoletto, "Problemi di lingua e di stile degli Scritti di Francesco d'Assisi," in *Francesco d'Assisi e francescanesimo dal 1216 al 1226* (Atti del IV Convegno

Going over the critical Franciscan literature of recent decades, we get the distinct impression that few have heeded the distinguished Latinist's appeals for caution. On the other hand, the number of those who have accepted in various forms Father Esser's reductive theses has grown in a manner inversely proportional to the almost complete lack of systematic studies or documentary and textual evidence that might prove, or attempt to prove, the assumption. A few citations, merely by way of example, must suffice. In the introduction to the splendid volume devoted to the *Writings* of Francis of Assisi in the series *Sources chrétiennes*, Thadée Matura strongly emphasized that "a simple careful reading leads to the conviction that we are hearing, through each writing, a unique voice." But the hypothesis that the *Testament* is a literal Latin translation of an Umbrian dictation leads him to say that "we would not be far from asserting the same thing for most of the *Letters* and even for a good part of the *Rules*."⁸ Individual scholars then applied Father Esser's critical hypotheses in various ways, speaking of the probable intervention of "specialists" to help in the prayers,⁹ or in differentiating the linguistic and stylistic registers,¹⁰ or even in editing the letters, as Giovanni Miccoli has recently suggested,¹¹ though he is convinced of the paradigmatic centrality and essential authenticity of the *Writings* for knowledge of the historical Francis.

But all the assumptions about the active role of the scribes—who have been promoted almost to the role of co-authors—have definitely converged, thanks to the work of Stanislao da Campagnola, in the two most important anthologies of Franciscan texts published in Italy in recent decades. These assumptions take the form of a hypothesis in the *Fonti francescane*,¹² which came out in 1977 shortly after Esser's edition of the *Opuscula*, and are more definite—and more pessimistic about the overall reliability of Francis's *Writings*—in the *Fontes Franciscani*, published in 1995.

Internazionale, Assisi, 15-17 October 1976; Società Internazionale di studi francescani, Assisi 1977) 107, n. 5.

⁸François d'Assise, *Écrits*, texte latin de l'édition K. Esser, introduction, traduction, notes et index par Th. Desbonnets, Th. Matura, J.F. Godet, D. Vorreux (Éditions du Cerf – Éditions Franciscaines, Paris 1981) 56.

⁹See R. Manselli, *S. Francesco d'Assisi* (Bulzoni, Rome 1980) 310.

¹⁰See E. Menestó, "Gli scritti di Francesco d'Assisi," *Frate Francesco d'Assisi* (Atti del XXI Convegno Internazionale, Assisi, 14-16 October 1993; Centro Italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto 1994) 167.

¹¹See G. Miccoli, "Gli Scritti di Francesco," in M.P. Alberzoni...R. Rusconi, *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francescana* (Einaudi, Turin 1997) 42-43 [English trans. *Greyfriars Review* 15:2 (2001) 135-70].

¹²See Stanislao da Campagnola, "Introduzione a Scritti di Francesco d'Assisi," in *Fonti Francescane* (Movimento Francescano, Assisi 1977) 48-55.

There the author of the preface summarizes and repeats the thinking of Esser on Francis's limited knowledge of Latin and his relations with his scribes:

We can also trust that in his dictations he preferred to use the vernacular of the time, which was notably closer to Latin than present-day Italian. It may also be that, in them, he did not always provide the definitive expressions but only the ideas, which the secretary could have organized and put in writing.¹³

A half century after Father Esser's study of the *Testament*, the question of the relations between Francis and his scribes is still stuck at the starting point.

I confess I have always regarded with some confusion these hypotheses that were never developed into theses for lack of probatory arguments. The gap has gradually widened, and a comprehensive and longer study of the *Writings* of Francis has uncovered "an extraordinarily unified and coherent view of reality and life, always rooted in the Word of God, but also anxious to express itself with correctness and precision."¹⁴ On the other hand, careful examination of key points in Francis's language—such as a study of the pair *cor mundum* and *mens pura*—enabled me to sense in the *Writings* of Francis "a mental and stylistic-lexical rigor...that is truly astonishing."¹⁵

Obviously, impressions based on reading and incomplete studies are not enough to challenge the dominant idea, which says that the *Writings* are a kind of fabric woven by two or more hands, in which the conceptual warp and a first thread of the woof come from Francis and are then completed and refined by the intervention of scribes and collaborators. If the vast manuscript tradition of the *Opuscula* had preserved for us even a single draft from the hand of Francis (but were there ever any?) or at least one primary dictated text that we could compare with a version that was certainly reviewed and corrected by others, many of our questions would be

¹³Stanislaio da Campagnola, "Introduzione a Francisci Assisiensis Opuscula," *Fontes Franciscani* (Ed. Porziuncola, Assisi – S. Maria degli Angeli 1995) 5-6. Unless otherwise noted, the biographical texts are cited from this anthology as a matter of practicality.

¹⁴C. Paolazzi, *Lettura degli Scritti di Francesco d'Assisi* (Milan: Edizioni O.R., 1992²) 11.

¹⁵C. Paolazzi, "Francesco d'Assisi e la contemplazione 'con la mente e con il cuore,'" *Antonio Rosmini filosofo del cuore? "Philosophia" e "theologia cordis" nella cultura occidentale* (Atti de Convegno, Rovereto, 6-7-8 October 1993; Brescia: Morcelliana, 1995) 193.

answered. But we have been denied such documentary grace, and so we will have to venture forth on other paths.

Dictated Texts Compared to the Autographs

The problem to be solved is to distinguish, within the fabric or text of the *Writings*, between what is from Francis and what may be from other hands (it is this second point that must be proven, let us not forget!) Important information can come from comparing the texts in which Francis worked alone—the autographs (the La Verna *Chartula*, now at the Sacro Convento in Assisi; the *Letter to Brother Leo*, kept in Spoleto)—with those that were not only handwritten by others, but for which various forms of collaboration by others is more or less likely, as the scholars amply cited earlier say. For a long time the autographs have done a disservice to the controversial portrait of Francis the author. Esser's 1976 edition presents a text that bristles not only with vernacularisms and obvious spelling mistakes, but also with serious grammatical errors. Such things seem to justify the widespread belief that Francis's linguistic ability was limited, if not unequal to the task. But in recent years new paleographic studies, especially the very careful examinations by Attilio Bartoli Langeli, have eliminated the worst errors in grammar from the *Letter to Brother Leo* (not *in hoc verba* but *in hoc verbo*; not *et si dopo oportet*, but *et non oportet*; not *sequi vestigiam*, but *sequi vestigia*), restoring the brief note's general meaning as well.¹⁶ In the Assisi *Chartula*, especially in the *Praises of God*, the acclamation *tu es omnia divitia nostra asuficientiam*, caused a problem. According to Father Esser, "the *omnia* inserted between the lines belongs to the category of Francis's 'falsum latinum.'" ¹⁷ But an easy editorial emendation had already been suggested for some time: add a comma after *omnia* (*Tu es omnia*, "You are all"). The effect, after decades, is the re-emergence from Francis's pen of the passionate invocation "Deus meus et *omnia*," an invocation he repeated for a whole night in the house of Bernard of Assisi.¹⁸

So we can agree with Bartoli Langeli, whose rigorous knowledge of the autographs allowed him to conclude, cautiously, that Francis "could get by in Latin somewhat better than is usually thought."¹⁹ In light of this basic

¹⁶See A. Bartoli Langeli, "Gli scritti da Francesco. L'autografia di un 'illitteratus,'" *Frate Francesco d'Assisi* (Atti del XXI Convegno...) 135-48.

¹⁷See Esser, *Gli Scritti...*, 165.

¹⁸See Paolazzi, *Lettura degli Scritti...*, 65 (the invocation is in *The Deeds of Blessed Francis*, I).

¹⁹Bartoli Langeli, *Gli scritti da Francesco...*, 158-59. R. Rusconi speaks of "an above-average knowledge of the Latin language, derived from familiarity with the Bible and the liturgy," *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 49 (Istituto della

discovery, the hypothesis of dictation in the vernacular definitely loses ground, along with the requirement, proclaimed and stated in every shape and form, that in the act of writing Francis have at his disposal, depending on circumstances, experts in liturgy and Scripture, law and rhetoric, and even people to extensively edit or drastically revise his clumsy attempts at writing, since he was “an unlettered man.” It is on this last point, that of necessary corrections, that the autograph texts duly transcribed provide an interesting area for checking. Systematic correction of the vernacularisms and minor spelling or grammatical mistakes present in the autographs would certainly cause them to lose their aura as sources of information about Francis’s knowledge of writing, but in no way would it affect the quality and depth of their meaning, as any reader can discover through personal examination.

That said, we need to recognize that, in other respects, the question of Francis’s relations with his scribes and collaborators continues to remain open. The autographs make up barely 2% of the corpus of the *Writings* and provide corresponding areas for comparison only with the prayers and shorter letters. More importantly, Francis’s major texts contain such a variety of ideas, vocabulary, compositional and stylistic features as to require additional proof that they belong completely to Francis. In short, it is not a question of excluding the various forms of collaboration mentioned by the sources²⁰ and indirectly confirmed by the spelling errors in the autographs, but of determining whether such collaboration has in any way distorted Francis’s language and ideas.

Brother Francis’s Evangelical “*Usus Loquendi*”

Here is the new proposal. There actually exists a delicate external tool we can try to insert into the fabric of the *Writings* to test their authenticity. It consists of that body of information, from the strange to the amazing, which the biographical sources reveal concerning the *usus loquendi et scribendi* according to the holy Gospel, as practiced every day by the saint

Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome 1997) 672.

²⁰With regard to the bit of information that Brother Caesar of Speyer was charged by Francis to “adorn” the *Earlier Rule* with words from the Gospel (see *Chronica fratris Iordani*, ed. H. Boehmer, Paris 1908, 15), I agree completely with the conclusions of A. Gattucci, who says that the “secretary-scribe” so identified himself with the requirements of the “author” that the final text gives the impression “that it was not two authors, but only one, at work in drafting the writings” (“Cesario da Spira,” *I compagni di Francesco e la prima generazione minoritica*. Atti del XIX Convegno Internazionale; Centro Italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo, Spoleto 1992, 142).

of Assisi. I will take from the *Mirror of Perfection* an episode that is also present in the *Assisi Compilation* and elsewhere, which happened while Francis was lying sick in the bishop's palace in Assisi shortly before his death:

During those days, a doctor from the city of Arezzo, named Good John, who was very familiar to blessed Francis, came to visit him in the bishop's palace. Blessed Francis asked him saying: "How does my illness of dropsy seem to you, Brother John?" He did not want to call him by his proper name because he never addressed anyone called 'Good', out of reverence for the Lord, who said: *No one is good but God alone* (Lk 18:19). Likewise, he did not want to call anyone 'father' or 'master,' nor write them in letters, out of reverence for the Lord, who said: *Call no one on earth your father nor be called masters*, etc. (2MP 122).

If the information on Francis's observance of the Gospel in speech and writing is to be trustworthy, certain things are necessary. Scholars have judged these to be useful in the tangled thicket of the hagiographic sources, in order to distinguish things that are probably historical from possible hagiographic amplifications.

First of all, in the plan of the episode narrated, the information that Francis avoids giving anyone titles "out of reverence" for the Lord's command is a kind of internal gloss. It is a passing clarification in the context of the narrator's real concern, which is to describe Francis's candor, his courage in facing death without trembling, but instead crying out with great joy: "Welcome, my Sister Death!" Indeed, the information flows through the pen of those who are compiling the memoirs without in any way disturbing their mental and lexical norms of judgment.²¹ This is shown by the answers of the doctor, who says in reply to Francis's first question, "Brother, by the grace of God it will be well with you," but when Francis insists, he changes both response and register: "*Father* [thus in all the hagiographic texts], according to our assessment your illness is incurable" (2MP 122).

The violation of Francis's linguistic rules, to be attributed to the hagiographers, brings out by contrast a second requirement for our episode to be historically trustworthy. The essential authenticity of Francis's *Writings* is manifested primarily in their ability to document an experience

²¹The need to understand the "mental parameters" typical of biographers and chroniclers, and the consequent "mechanisms for re-expressing" the facts narrated, is insisted upon by L. Pellegrini, "La prima 'fraternitas' francescana," *Frate Francesco d'Assisi* (Atti del XXI Convegno...) 41-42.

and logic radically different from that of the world (Giovanni Miccoli has insisted on this with regard to the *Testament* and *True and Perfect Joy*).²² If this is true, then we will have to agree with Grado Giovanni Merlo when he writes:

The ideas and the behavior, and even the words attributed to Saint Francis in the biographies, can be referred to Brother Francis when a light can be seen from them, a spark of that “other logic” and of his simple and direct way of expressing himself. And it can be seen there in all the concreteness of each human event.²³

Here we have the second guarantee of authenticity. In the episode narrated, the “other logic” is manifested in the literal observance of the Gospel, even in daily speech, the concrete ease with which the one who is called “the Brother” changes the personal description of his friend the doctor.

We needed to pause to examine the trustworthiness of this page from the *Mirror*, which attributes to Francis a homogeneous series of linguistic practices explicitly based on the Gospel. If this is confirmed by the use of *good*, *father* and *master* in the *Writings*, it can become a first and precious confirmation that these closely reflect Francis’s dictation, not only in the “warp” of ideas, but also in the humbler and concrete “woof” of the words. The critical implications for the problem of his relationship with scribes and collaborators are immediate. This is the working hypothesis to be tested, using the statistical data from the careful word-counts in Francis’s *Opuscula*, which Jean-François Godet and Georges Mailleux, using Esser’s recent edition, made available to scholars in 1976 in the *Corpus des Sources Franciscaines* of the Catholic University of Louvain.²⁴

Good and Master: Attributing to God What Belongs to God Alone

Our survey begins with the first information from the early biographies. According to them, Brother Francis “never addressed anyone called ‘Good’, out of reverence for the Lord, who said: *No one is good but God alone*” (2MP 122). In the list of the 32 occurrences of the word *good* provided

²²See G. Miccoli, “La proposta cristiana di Francesco d’Assisi,” in his *Francesco d’Assisi. Realtà e memoria di un’esperienza cristiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991) 41–72; [English trans. *Greyfriars Review* 3:2 (1989) 127–72].

²³G. G. Merlo, *Intorno a frate Francesco. Quattro studi* (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, 1993) 84.

²⁴See J. F. Godet – G. Mailleux, *Opuscula sancti Francisci. Scripta sanctae Clarae. Concordance, Index, Listes de fréquence, Tables comparatives* (Publications du CETEDOC – Louvain: Université de Louvain, 1976).

by the CETEDOC concordances (a list that includes the comparative *better* and one occurrence of the superlative *best* in gospel citations), the adjective is predicated of God ten times: five times in the form *who alone is good*, an obvious variant of the cited saying of Jesus, which was deeply rooted in Francis's heart; three times it refers to Christ the *Good Shepherd*, and the other two times it is associated with the praise of God *for he is good*. Then we find 15 places where *good* is attributed to good works or inner dispositions, with repeated biblical borrowings, from *good works* to the gospel phrase of *good will*. There is a single case in which the *Writings* seem to violate the evangelical prohibition to call anyone *good* except God. It is in the title of Admonition XX, "The Good and the Vain Religious." But the violation is only apparent, because the title is the work of editors, whose lexical registers evidently differ from Francis's, which are based strictly on the Gospel.

The six cases in which Francis uses the comparative *better* deserve separate consideration. It is never used to describe God, since God is good; indeed, he is by nature the infinite good (51 occurrences overall, most of them referring to God), and the mere fact of comparing him to his creatures by describing him as *better* would diminish his greatness. We even get the impression that Francis, in love with God *who alone is good*, harbored a not-so-secret dislike for the pretentious comparative *better*, which in five cases is explicitly subordinated to the simple *good*. Admonition III twice exhorts the subject, out of "loving obedience," to give up the "*better things*" he "sees" or thinks he sees, and Admonition XIX declares "blessed" the one who does not consider himself *better* when he is praised. The *Letter to a Minister* even invites the recipient to love his brothers just as they are, without wishing "that they be *better Christians*." An even worse fate awaits money, a tool of the devil, who "wants to blind those who desire it or consider it *better than stones*" (ER VIII, 4). The enlightened and liberating advice to Brother Leo intervenes to save the poor comparative from universal and irrevocable condemnation: "In whatever way it seems *better* to you to please the Lord God and to follow his footprint and poverty, do it..." (LtL 3). When he is urging someone to advance in the love and following of Christ, even the comparative of *good* can honorably re-enter Francis's vocabulary.

It is a bit strange to observe that the second title forbidden to humans and reserved to Christ, *master*, had been used by a certain ruler who asked Jesus: "*Good master*, what shall I do to possess everlasting life?" (Lk 18:19). We already know Jesus' comment on the adjective *good*. Francis could have read what he said about *master* in a page from Matthew, which was certainly an occasion for prolonged meditation on his part: "As for you, do not wish to be called rabbi, *for you have one master*, and all of you are brothers. [...] *Do not call yourselves masters, for you have but one master*, Christ

(Mt 23: 8, 10). This time, Francis's remark on the use of the term becomes a bit hasty, for the simple reason that, of the five occurrences of *master*, two are in the citation in the *Earlier Rule* XXII, where the two verses from Matthew are combined into one, in accord with a practice that is frequent in the *Writings* (“Do not call yourselves masters [teachers]; you have but one Master[Teacher] in heaven [Christ]” – XXII, 35). A third occurrence figures in the parallel passage in a fragment of another version of the same Rule (“Do not call yourselves masters...”). The other two—as we shall also see in other cases—cover the term's two extreme and opposite semantic poles: the divine wisdom of the Master invoked by Mary (“pray for us...at the side of your most holy beloved Son, our Lord and Master [Teacher] – OfP, Antiphon), and the poor human wisdom of all the “Masters of Paris,” whose entrance into the Order en masse “is not true joy” (TPJ 4). As regards the verbal trustworthiness of Brother Leonard's account, which is based on memory, some reservations are probably justified. But in any case, the bitter disillusionment visible in the list of those things that are not “true joy” empties even the term *masters* of its supposed authority, betraying a subtle parody in its use by reaffirming the gospel command even as it seems to violate it. Christ alone is the *master*. Indeed, as Francis likes to say, refuting those who claim that he pays little attention to this subject, Christ alone is the “true wisdom of the Father” (2LtF 67). And since the Gospel does not prohibit *wisdom*, the twenty occurrences of the term introduce into the *Writings* a continuous contrast between the *divine and spiritual wisdom of the Father*, and the vain and useless *wisdom of this world*. The evangelical imprint on the vocabulary of the *Writings* is also measured by the Francis's differentiated use of similar terms.

“Call no one on earth your Father” (Mt 23:9)

The newly-converted Francis made the first resounding citation and existential application of this command of Jesus before the bishop of Assisi, when he returned money and clothes to his earthly father, declaring before all those present: “From now on *I will say* freely: ‘Our Father who art in heaven,’ and not, ‘My father, Pietro di Bernardone.’” (2C 12; see also L3C 20). In the account of Celano, Francis's “from now on *I will say*” maintains the force of Matthew's *call*, behind which stands the language and theology of Scripture, in which ‘word’ and ‘deeds,’ ‘to say’ and ‘to do’ are often simultaneous: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). As André Vauchez has so clearly written, Francis's evangelical literalism arises from the conviction “that the spiritual sense resides in the very letter of the sacred text, the sole guarantee of the authenticity of the spirit that inspires

its practice.”²⁵ Thus the statement that he will say “Our Father” implies a twofold and complementary commitment: a way of living in which he entrusts himself to the providential love of the Father in heaven, and a way of speaking that expresses the exclusive nature of that relationship.

From the standpoint of the way of speaking in the *Writings*, the count is quickly made: of the 104 occurrences of the term *father*, exactly 100 refer to God, while the other four are in gospel passages where the disciple is asked to be detached from earthly fatherhood. The command, “Do not call anyone on earth your Father” (Mt 23:9) occurs twice in the different versions of the *Earlier Rule* (1Frg I, 20; ER XXII, 34). And in the first chapter of the same text two other passages figure (“If anyone wishes to come to me *and does not hate father and mother...*”; “Everyone who *has left father or mother...*”). Here the earthly father is mentioned only to reaffirm the evangelical duty of detachment. Once again, the apparent violation coincides with Christ’s words that sanction the norm.

The rigor of Francis’s vocabulary in this case also becomes evident from a comparison with the *Writings* of Clare, for which the CETEDOC concordances give a count along with that from the *Opuscula* of Francis. Of the 42 occurrences of the word *father*, only 13 refer to the heavenly Father, while the other 29, with minor variations, cluster around *our father Francis*, who certainly would not have been pleased with such an important title when he was alive. The comparison, let us be clear, does not imply judgments of merit. Otherwise we would have to disqualify the entire Franciscan hagiographic corpus, starting with the biographies of Celano, where the pair *father Francis* enjoys a huge majority, statistically speaking, whether over earthly fathers or the heavenly Father.

Offering an apparent challenge to the information, confirmed by the *Writings*, that Francis “did not want to call anyone ‘father’ or ‘master,’ nor write them in letters,” is a page in Celano’s *First Life*. There we are told that one day Francis went to Pope Honorius III and asked him “to appoint the lord Hugolino, bishop of Ostia, as *father* and lord for him and his brothers.” At the same time it adds that Francis *wrote* to the bishop of Ostia in these words: “To the Most Reverend Father, Lord Hugolino, Bishop of the Whole World” (1C 100). Here the title *father* openly conflicts with what we have just been saying. However, in his *Second Life* Celano modifies Francis’s request: “For this reason, my lord, I beg your holiness to give us the lord of Ostia as *pope*” (2C 25), a variant found in the *Legend of the Three Companions*. According to it, Francis proposed asking “that one of the

²⁵A. Vauchez, “François d’Assise entre littéralisme évangélique et renouveau spirituel,” *Frate Francesco d’Assisi* (Atti del XXI Convegno...) 193.

cardinals of the Roman Church be a sort of *pope* of his Order" (L3C 63, 1), and then in fact asks Pope Honorius "to give us the Lord of Ostia as *pope*" (L3C 65, 3). The inquisitive and informed Jordan of Giano also confirms this: "You have given me many *popes*. Give me one to whom I may speak when I have need; one who will hear and decide my problems and those of my Order in your place."²⁶ So there is no doubt: Celano's self-correction and his agreement with other testimonies assure us that Francis did not ask Honorius III for a *father* for his Order but for a *pope*, that is, someone to exercise the functions of the Pope. In the same way, on another occasion he would call Brother Anthony *bishop*, because as preacher and lector he was called to exercise episcopal functions.

With regard to the title *father* used by Francis in letters to Cardinal Hugolino, as we read in both the *Anonymous of Perugia* ("...and when he would write to him, he would say: 'To the venerable *father* in Christ, Bishop of the entire world'" [AP 45]) and the *Legend of the Three Companions* ("For he wrote to him in this manner: 'To the venerable *father* of the whole world in Christ...'" [L3C 67, 3]), the information is much less reliable than it seems at first glance. On this point, the *Legend of the Three Companions* certainly depends on the *Anonymous of Perugia*,²⁷ and the latter in turn would seem to depend on the parallel passage in Celano's *First Life*.²⁸ And so this would be the only (and unreliable) testimony to the violation of a gospel norm in speaking and writing, which Francis followed strictly in all the writings that have come down to us.

Mine: Do Not Call Anything Your Own

Our investigation thus far of the three words *good*, *master* and *father*, which occur 141 times in all in the *Writings*, is already indicative. But it can be extended to other words to which, according to the biographers, Francis applied his own rules for use drawn from the Gospel. We know the episode, narrated in Celano's *Second Life* and parallel sources, that took place in a hermitage where a brother "to whom Francis was very close" had a cell built for him a short distance away, suitable for prayer:

One day, when he had come out of *his* [note the infraction] cell, a certain brother went to see it, and afterwards came to the place where blessed

²⁶"Chronica fratris Iordani a Iano," in *AF* I (Ex Typ. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, Ad Claras Aquas-Quaracchi 1885) 5.

²⁷See the "Table of Sources" in Th. Desbonnets, "La 'Legenda trium sociorum'. Édition critique," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 57 (1974) 84.

²⁸See L. di Fonzo "L'Anonimo Perugino tra le fonti francescane del sec. XIII. Rapporti letterari e testo critico," *Miscellanea Francescana* 72 (1972), 188.

Francis was. Upon seeing him blessed Francis said to him "Where are you coming from, brother?" He told him: "I am coming from *your* cell." "Because you said this is *mine*," blessed Francis said, "someone else will stay there from now on: I will not."

We who were with him often heard him repeat the passage: (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58) Foxes have dens and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. [...] And so, after his example, he did not want to have a house or cell called his own, nor did he ever have one built (2MP 9).

This attitude, based on the example of the Lord Jesus, is part of the ethic of non-appropriation, which led Francis not only not to consider any spiritual good his own, but also not to appropriate *and not to call any material good his own*, as is apparent from the episode just cited. Explicit confirmation of this latter attitude comes again from the *Writings*, which contain 225 occurrences of the possessive *my* (including the nine times in the *Canticle*). About three quarters of these are in biblical citations (with expressions like *my God* and *my Father* heading the list), while the 57 occurrences that are from Francis stress the primacy of fraternity (*my brothers* occurs 25 times), and the rest refer to actions, feelings and characteristics of the person or of fraternal relations.

But the surprising thing to note is that, in the very long list, *my* is used for the possession of material things in only two cases, and these are situated on two completely opposite poles. The first is part of the bitter and realistic *exemplum* at the end of the *Letter to the Faithful*. It describes the death of an unrepentant sinner who is in not in the least concerned about making satisfaction with his goods for the sins of cheating committed during his lifetime. Instead, completely taken up with 'carnal' concerns for his relatives, "he says, thinking to himself: 'See, I place my soul and body, *all that is mine* in your hands'" (2LTF 74). These are tragically serious words, in which we seem to detect a blasphemous parody of the Jesus' words in Gethsemane ("Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" [Lk 23:46]).

Diametrically opposed to the position of the blind and unhappy man, who out of human self-interest gives away all his possessions yet ends up losing body and soul "in this brief world," there is the supreme act of love with which Christ gives not only his body and life for his brothers, but *even his garments*, the only material possession of him who had "no place to lay his head." In Psalm VI of the *Office of the Passion*, Francis, in accord with the liturgy of Holy Week, applies to his crucified Lord the words of Psalm 21: "They divided *my garments* among them, and they cast lots for *my tunic*" (OfP VI, 3). The message of Christ and his humble servant Francis on the

possession and use of the goods of creation is situated entirely within the decisive contrast between forms of appropriation, whether conspicuous or subtle, which lead to the loss of everything, and various forms of expropriation based on love, which lead to the possession of “that fountain-like goodness, which will be *all in all*” (2C 165).

Other Possessive Adjectives and Restoration-Praise

Such care in the use of language does not derive from a display of evangelical literalism, but rather from what André Vauchez has called “spiritual [i.e., in the Spirit] fidelity to the letter of the gospel text.”²⁹ This fidelity permeates Francis’s life and words, as shown again by the *Opuscula* and their use (in complete accord with that of *my*) of the other possessives (*your* singular, 110 times; *his*, 197; *our*, 155; *your* plural, 40; *his/their*, 110), for a total of 612 occurrences, none of which suggest that any material goods are called *his* by Francis or his brothers.

To prove that such a semantically directed use is fully deliberate, we need only note the few places where the text of the *Opuscula*, when not dealing with either Francis or the Lesser Brothers, uses possessives in the usual way. Thus the *Earlier Rule* prescribes that the candidate for the Order “sell all *his* belongings” (II, 4), and if he “cannot give away *his* belongings without difficulty...let him leave them behind” (II, 11). Likewise, the *Later Rule* orders the ministers to tell the postulants to “go and sell all *they have* and take care to give it to the poor” (II, 5). But for those who already belong to the Order, the *Testament* also repeats those verbal and lexical admonitions (“Let the brothers be careful not to receive in any way churches or poor dwellings or *anything else built for them* unless...” [Test 24; it does not say “*their* churches and dwellings”]), which occur en masse in the above-mentioned *exemplum* of the unrepentant sinner (to the “all that is *mine*” of v. 74 add “Put *your* affairs,” v. 72; “who places...*all he has* in such hands,” v. 75; “out of *your* wealth,” v. 78). We are led to believe that the strict command attached as a seal to the *Earlier Rule*, “let no one delete or add to what has been written in this life” (XXIV, 4) is only the highest and strongest expression of the religious care with which Francis was accustomed to commit to writing his thoughts, indeed, the thoughts of the Most High, “who *says* and does *every good thing*” (Adm VIII, 3) in his servants.

The citation of the pair *every good* reminds us of how often Brother Francis sang, in his life even before in his *Writings*: “You, Lord, are Supreme Good, the Eternal Good, from whom all good comes, without whom there is no good” (PrOF 2). It is not only material goods that belong

²⁹Vauchez, *François d'Assise...*, 197.

to the Lord and must be given back to to him (needless to say, in ways appropriate to each one's vocation), but also spiritual goods, for

Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong (CtC 2-3).

That is why, as I have had occasion to emphasize on several occasions, Francis reserves for *praise* and related terms the same treatment we have already documented for *good, master, father* and (in an opposite sense) the possessive *my*. Just as the pure of heart, who see God in all things, are prohibited from using *my* in the sense of possession, for that would be an undue appropriation, indeed an act of theft from God, so they are commanded to proclaim "yours are the praises," since in praise all things are finally give back to the Lord of all things.

The lexical form of the word *praise* and its derivatives, which occur a total of 65 times in the *Writings* and *without exception refer to God*, confirms once more how rigorously Francis reflects his thoughts in the faithful mirror of the words. Thus our survey of Francis's vocabulary, which began with an examination of the adjective *good* and the command that it be reserved to God alone, can provisionally come full circle with the term and theme of *praise*, through which is realized the liturgical event of returning all *good* to God who is *good*, the source of all goodness.

Conclusions on Francis and His Scribes: Solving the Puzzle

At the end of a long and involved study, it is legitimate to wonder to what extent the biographical and textual data produced as evidence can modify current critical positions on the relations between Francis and his scribes, and more specifically on the role of the latter in the fabric of Francis's *Writings*.

As we have already noted, the hypothesis that Francis dictated in the Umbrian vernacular and his scribes translated into Latin definitely loses ground in the face of recent studies of the autographs, which show that Francis's linguistic abilities were better than they seemed from the earlier editions.³⁰ The vernacularisms are in no way the untranslated remnants of dictation in the vernacular; they are an integral part of Francis's spoken Latin (which still awaits a comprehensive study), a Latin far-removed from

³⁰Father Esser's theses are already weakened when Rusconi speaks of "dictation by Francis in the Umbrian vernacular and, at least in part, in Latin" ("Francesco d'Assisi, santo," 674).

the ordinary literary rules despite the strong biblical-liturgical component. Moreover, it is hard to understand why official and unofficial biographers, even though they recall Francis's youthful habit of speaking French, make no mention of his alleged dictation in the vernacular.

The active presence of collaborating scribes is said to be documented in Francis's *Writings* by the stylistic differences in *elocutio*, which, according to the rules of classical and medieval rhetoric, depends on the choice of words (*verba*) as well as their syntactic and stylistic connection (*constructio*).³¹ As regards vocabulary, the above survey shows through textually coherent and broadly indicative data that in the *Writings* there is a one-to-one correspondence between religious ideas and linguistic rules inspired by the Gospel. That scribes and collaborators were allowed liberties foreign to the author's ideas and dictation is thus ruled out.³² As regards syntax and rhetoric/style, it would be critical to verify concretely which formal aspects of the texts are truly superior, and in a clear manner, Francis's potential abilities. While he is universally praised for the structural and stylistic subtleties of the *Canticle*, he is regarded with suspicion when these things show up again in the Latin texts. For example, many of Francis's "elevated" pages (such as the *Earlier Rule* XXIII), when emptied of their lexical baggage and the expansions typical of his dictation, show a very simple syntactic structure ("*Holy Father...we thank you...for...you have created everything spiritual and corporal...*" See the analogous "We adore you, O Christ...because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world" [Test 5]). Attilio Bartoli Langeli has recently made some very penetrating observations about Francis's knowledge of the "formal mechanisms of the letter" and on "his keen, sensitive attention to the epistolary form."³³ In my humble opinion, a systematic study of the *Writings* of Francis from the viewpoint of the relationship between recurring conceptual nuclei, typical

³¹The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* distinguishes three figures (or levels) of style: "We call the first elevated, the second simple, and the third weak. The elevated consists of the powerful and embellished *connection of elevated words*" (IV, 8). A specific mention of this distinction is in the *Prologue* of Celano's *Second Life*: "We describe in a *plain* and *simple* way things that occur to us, wishing to accommodate those who are slower and, if possible, also to please the learned" (2C 2).

³²Francis's watchful attention and careful checking of the text are mentioned by Scivoletto, *Problemi di lingua...*, 111; M. Ferrari, "Gli scritti di san Francesco d'Assisi," in *Francesco d'Assisi nell'ottavo centenario della nascita* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1982) 34-35; Miccoli, *Gli Scritti...*, 43 (at least "for the writings he considered important").

³³I am borrowing from Chapter IV, "Le divine parole scritte," of the above-cited Bartoli Langeli, "Frater Franciscus et frater Leo Assisienses," whose publication we await.

lexical constellations and stylistic/grammatical forms, can only lead to a greater guarantee of authenticity, not only of thought content, but also of the elements of form.

But the real critical problem of the relations between Francis and his scribes is symbolized by the repeated hypothesis that, in preparing his *Writings*, Francis “did not dictate the definitive expression, but only the ideas, which the brother [the scribe] was then supposed to put in written form.”³⁴ It is on this crucial point that the results of the word-count presented above should be put to good use. From it we can infer that in Francis’s *Writings* the use of ten basic words (*good, master, father, my* with the corresponding series *your-his-our-their*, plus *praise*), for a total of 1043 occurrences, does not deviate once from those norms for speaking (and thus for writing) that Francis drew from the pages of the Gospels with such religious reverence. Anyone at all familiar with the analysis of the texts, will agree that such absolute lexical rigor, systematically confirmed by the numbers, can be imagined only in an author who possesses within himself unwaveringly clear ideas along with absolute control of the form that expresses them. How such coherence could arise from ideas that are only sketchy, that delegate to the minds and hands of others their translation into words and text, is a mystery that would need to be explained by those who still claim that certain hypotheses can be advanced.

We need only take a casual look at the first hagiographic literature to see how hard it would be, even for those spiritually closer to Francis, to enter into his demanding lexical archives. To the data from Clare and from the *Mirror* let us at least add Thomas of Celano’s words of farewell:

Now look at what I have done, most holy and blessed *father*, I have seen you through to the end with *fitting* and *worthy praises* (1C 118).

Behold, *our* blessed *father*, the efforts of our simple capacities have attempted to *praise your wondrous deeds to the best of our ability*, and to tell at least a few of the countless virtues of your holiness for *your glory* (2C 221).

And we could go on at length about the systematic violations of Francis’s evangelical and lexical rules.

We hope that others will be led to continue this investigation, which has already produced some first and substantial results. But if fair weather can be predicted from the dawn, perhaps the time has come to discard once and for all many old hypotheses on the relationship between

³⁴Esser, *Scritti...*, p. 75.

Francis and his scribes, for they cannot, it seems, withstand the test of the data furnished by the texts.