

A Short Note on the Autographs of Francis of Assisi

Jean-Baptiste Auberger, O.F.M.

“Note brève sur les écrits autographes de François d’Assise”

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

It is very hard to express my feelings the day I found myself in the presence of the autograph manuscripts of Saint Francis. By means of these little parchments, I was placed, as if by magic, in the presence of the founder of our Order. I had already felt a similar emotion when, for the first time, I held in my hands the Bible of Stephen Harding, one of the founders of Citeaux, in which can be found in the scratchings of the text all the exegetical corrections made by the abbot, relying on the research of St. Jerome in the fourth century based on the Hebrew, and on inquiries made to the Jewish rabbis in the twelfth century. Abbot Stephen himself explains this in a note from 1109 inserted in the Bible.

The Two Autographs

It was on the occasion of the international meeting of Franciscan novice masters that we were able to hold in our hands the precious case containing the little parchment (9.5 cm x 13 cm), the *chartula* written by Saint Francis for Brother Leo. On one side it has the *Praises of God* and on the other the famous *Blessing* taken from the Book of Numbers. The “little sheep” kept this parchment for a long time, folded, on himself, as the worn condition of the writing and document show.

Later, my feelings were just as deep in the presence of the bull of September 1220, addressed by Pope Honorius III to “Brother Francis and his priors” (sic) in virtue of the founder’s appointment by the highest

authority of the Church, asking him to establish a canonical novitiate for candidates. But it was in the presence of the short *Letter to Brother Leo* preserved in the cathedral of Spoleto that my feelings reached their peak. At the end of a long pilgrimage on foot, making my way through all of Tuscany and Umbria, I remember myself spending at least an hour in contemplation before the case that contains this precious and moving document.

Recent studies by graphologists and paleographers have enabled us to establish with near certainty that these really are autographs of Francis. This is the result of very careful comparisons between the two parchments starting with the Blessing, authenticated by its recipient, Leo himself, in a few lines written in red in his hand directly on the manuscript.

Using the comparative method, paleographers have shown that Francis's handwriting is of the same type as the notarial handwriting widespread in Umbria in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially around and in the urban centers. It is based on the Carolingian uncial (in other words, small letters). The handwriting is considered elementary because it is simple and without any special elaboration. It shows that Francis was *illiteratus* and *idiota*, as he likes to describe himself. But he had learned to read and write through a standard education for his status as merchant, as a layperson and not a cleric.

The Assisi Chartula

The Assisi *Chartula* is written on both sides. On the flesh side are the *Praises* and on the hair side the *Blessing*. The greater wear on the flesh side makes the praises very hard to read. From 1224 on, Leo carried this letter folded in a silk bag or in direct contact with his skin. It was a kind of talisman for driving away temptations, mentioned by early texts. He carried it 34-47 years, depending on the date when he surrendered it: either in 1257-58 at the same time as the breviary of Saint Francis given to Sister Benedicta, abbess of the Poor Clares in Assisi, perhaps along with the famous scrolls (according to Van Dijk); or else at his death in 1271. The two texts were not written at the same time, as shown by the letters, made with pens that are worn differently. The size of the letters, moreover, is not the same in both cases. Those of the blessing are about one-third larger, but in both cases they are similar. The blessing was "laid out" on the parchment already folded in four, carefully respecting the proportions.

From this it can be inferred that the *Praises* were composed before the *Blessing* and that, unlike the *Blessing*, they were not meant for Brother Leo, as he himself intimates in the rubricated text of the parchment: "After the vision and message of the seraph and the impression of Christ's stigmata

upon his body, he [Francis] composed these praises written on the other side of this page and wrote them in his own hand, thanking God for the kindness bestowed on him." Then, after the text of the blessing, we read: "The blessed Francis wrote this blessing for me with his own hand." And on the bottom of the parchment, after the drawing of the T: "In a similar way he made with his own hand this sign TAU together with a skull."

In the *Praises*, there is a big space between the lines and some spelling mistakes typical of Francis. We find these again in the Spoleto letter, corrected in the space between the lines above the places where the mistakes occur (for example, the *b* in *umilitas* added above the *u*). As Langeli says, it is as if the text had been written from memory with no external aid. A very great regularity can be observed in the dimensions and slant of the letters. The alignment, however, is uncertain with wide margins, except on the right side where we can observe the irregularity of the length of the lines, despite the words broken up at the end of one line and continued at the beginning of the next. There is no explanation for this unless we recall that Francis was nearly blind.

The Letter to Brother Leo

The *Letter to Brother Leo*, on the other hand, is written on a piece of parchment twice as long as it is wide (13 x 6 cm). It is very readable and regular except for the last four lines where the spaces between the lines are less regular and more uncertain, and where the letters are written with a different pen than the other lines. Do these correspond to a later addition? Francis writes: "And if you need and want to come to me for the sake of your soul or for some consolation, Leo, come." The question is worth asking, all the more so since the very organization of the ideas in the rest of the letter shows a certain clumsiness of style, a development of ideas that do not come pouring out smoothly. These last lines seem to repeat the invitation already given a few lines earlier: "If, afterwards, you need to come to me for counsel, I advise you thus...." Here again we find the same contaminations of the Latin by an emerging Italian as in the praises: *dopo*, *benedictione*, *tuo* along with *Francissco*, which is written with two *s*'s. Consequently the spelling is hesitant since an *b* has been added above *hoc*, just as was the case for *humilitas* in the *Praises*; a *d* above *ad me* in two places; *qocumque* for *quocumque*; a single *s* in *necessarium*. Besides this, there are also agreements in gender or declensions that do not conform to the usual Latin rules.

It is not necessary here to make a systematic list of all these irregularities in the two parchments. But they show very simply that Francis's "writing" is contaminated by his "speaking." Thus, we are

definitely in the presence of autographical documents whose author never studied the classics and as a result was more comfortable with words than with writing. To this we can add that the occasionally surprising divisions of words at the end of a line (for example *pa / upertatem*) are no doubt more the action of a man with poor eyesight than of someone who knows exactly the size of the parchment he has in front of him.

So, when all is said and done, these parchments, as precious as they are small, still produce in today's pilgrim-visitor, even one who may not be very sensitive, a lasting feeling that is not likely to lessen with time. I hope everyone will have the grace of experiencing it.