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5 Voluntary simplicity: the attitude of Francis towards learning in the early biographies

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The historical question of whether or not Francis approved of the pursuit of learning by the clerical Franciscans is a tough one in view of the scarcity of the evidence, and Bert Roest in Chapter 10 here offers an answer to this question. A medieval Franciscan who asked the same question had much less material in his hands for an answer than we do now. In the Middle Ages, with the exception of the *Rule* and the *Testament*, the writings of Francis remained inaccessible to the great majority of the friars who joined the order in places remote from Italy and who never had the chance to meet Francis or any of his early companions. If a clerical friar's conscience was burdened by a suspicion that his enthusiasm for the pursuit of booklearning was in conflict with the saintly founder's intentions, he could find no help in the *Rule* or the *Testament*. Francis did not approve of a quest for learning by illiterate friars, but he remained silent about the pursuit of learning by clerical friars. He did, however, prohibit the appropriation of things (which included books, with the exception of a breviary), but this ban ceased to be an obstacle to studying after the papal permission given to friars in 1230 to use things, including books. Francis's *Testament* was not helpful on the subject of learning either. Therein he admonished friars to respect theologians, but this hardly meant that he wished to see his brothers become theologians. One can safely assume that until the publication of Thomas of Celano's *Second Life* in 1247, most friars knew little about whether Francis was predisposed to approve of the clerical friars' enthusiasm for study.

By 1247 the order was already vastly different from what it had been when Francis died in 1226. Perhaps the biggest transformation was in the sphere of learning and its integration into the order's vocation. This transformation initially started with the entry into the order of learned men, who were quickly promoted to ministerial positions. This came rather naturally because the ministerial

positions necessitated some knowledge of theology.¹ Once the learned friars took the ministerial positions, they thought it a good idea to promote learning within the order by way of showing a conscious effort to recruit learned men and by trying to give an education to the friars. This effort manifested itself in the introduction of the office of lector, whose main responsibility was to train the friars in theology. The first lectors were appointed by 1228, and by the 1240s the order had in place the backbone of an educational organisation where the intellectually most gifted friars from every province were trained in theology at the Franciscan school in Paris in order to fulfil the office of lector.²

All ministers general of the order elected after 1240 were friars educated in the Parisian studium and often bachelors or doctors of theology. Ministers provincial and custodians also came to be selected increasingly from among the learned, as more learned men were available by the 1240s. This was at once indicative and supportive of an emerging culture within the order, which saw learning and education as the necessary features of an 'ideal' Franciscan and which undermined the position of the illiterate lay brothers, who were not represented at the administrative level any more.³ Illiterate or poorly educated brothers were increasingly alienated and officially not wanted. The ambition of the administration to enrol educated men became explicit in a statute formulated around 1239–42, where the legislating chapter decreed that only men who taught in the universities or important towns and boroughs were to be recruited into the order.⁴ The intake of laymen was limited to only those whose social status was exemplary. This marked a distinct change from the early days in the order's recruitment strategy.

Some friars saw the integration of learning into the Franciscan vocation by way of systematic education as dangerous. We become aware of this concern in the texts written on Francis, and there in particular in the representations of his attitude towards learning and books. In this study, I shall consider the major hagiographical texts written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: Thomas of Celano's *Second Life*; the writings of Leo, Rufino and Angelo; Bonaventure's *Major Life*; the *Mirror of Perfection*; and the *Deeds of Blessed Francis of Assisi and his Companions*. The analysis of the way Francis's attitude towards learning and books was depicted in these texts reveals both the presence of different viewpoints in the order and also change over time, which was the consequence of the transformation that the order was experiencing.

THOMAS OF CELANO'S 'SECOND LIFE'

Although in his *First Life* of Francis, written around 1228, Thomas of Celano had made no reference to Francis's ideas with regard to the keeping of books and the pursuit of theological studies, his *Second Life* did incorporate a few chapters on this subject. This is not surprising since, whereas in 1228 the educational enterprise was in its infancy, by 1247 the pursuit of learning had not only been substantially integrated into the clerical Franciscan vocation, but the administrative positions in the order were being filled almost exclusively by the learned friars. Learning was increasingly defining the kind of institution Franciscans were becoming.

The first section that bears on the subject of learning is entitled 'On the Saint's Understanding of the Sacred Scripture and the Virtue of his Words' (2 Cel., 102–6). In the first chapter of this section Thomas of Celano represents Francis as a man with a deep understanding of Scripture, although he had made no study to acquire such learning (2 Cel., 102). His knowledge and understanding of Scripture were gifts from God. Francis used to read the sacred texts and was keen on writing from memory what he learned by reading. But he held no high regard for scholastic learning where the reading went far beyond Scripture: 'He used to say that this was a fruitful way of learning and reading, and not to wander through a thousand treatises' (2 Cel., 102). It is worth noting that among the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century texts on Francis, the contents of this chapter in the *Second Life* are cited only by Bonaventure (*LM*, 11:1). Next, Thomas gives an account of how a Dominican doctor of theology asked Francis to expound to him a passage from the Bible.⁵ Francis at first refuses, on the grounds that he is ignorant, but upon the Dominican's insistence he explains the passage. The doctor of theology is impressed by his answer and says to the saint's companions that the theology of Francis is sublime, whereas his own learning crawls on its belly. This depiction of Francis as a 'learned' man was to become a strong influence on Bonaventure and his understanding of the importance of the study of theology for the Franciscan vocation.⁶

The section in the *Second Life* where Thomas discusses Francis's views with regard to the place of learning in the Franciscan vocation is entitled 'Holy Simplicity' (2 Cel., 189–95). In the first chapter, we learn that simplicity is to be content with God alone and to despise everything else. It is not to know or speak evil. It is to choose to do rather than to learn or to teach. This last sentence gives the first clue as

to Thomas's position on Francis's understanding of the friars' vocation: learning or teaching are activities inferior to setting an example by deeds. It is reminiscent of Francis's preference for preaching by example over preaching by words.

The holy simplicity was what the most holy father demanded in both learned and lay brothers. He believed it not to be contrary to wisdom, but rather its true sister, although those who are poor in learning would have it more readily and put it into use more willingly.

(2 Cel., 189)

Here, then, Thomas construes a direct link between a friar's state of learning and his tendency to simplicity. Those who are poor in learning are more likely to have holy simplicity. A question flashes in the reader's mind as to what solid basis there is for the idealisation of the uneducated lay brothers as those more likely to be content with God. As if to pre-empt the question, in the next chapter Thomas narrates the story of John the Simple.⁷

John, a most simple man, is a farmer. His profession and Thomas's expression '*simplicissimus*' leave little doubt that he is an uneducated, most probably an illiterate, man. He leaves his plough and asks Francis if he may join his brotherhood. Once John takes the habit, he starts imitating Francis quite literally in everything, almost to the degree of ridicule. He coughs when Francis coughs and spits when the saint spits. When Francis asks him why he behaves this way, his reply is simple but wise: 'Everything you do' he says, 'I promised to do. It is dangerous for me to omit anything' (2 Cel., 190). This simple reply is an allegory of the Franciscan vocation. If the friars were to imitate Christ, then a literal and wholesale imitation, where they did not deliberate about which aspects of Christ's life to imitate and how to imitate, was the only guarantee of success. Francis rejoices at this answer and, when John dies, Francis remembers him as St John. According to Rosalind Brooke's study, this tale was in the corpus of the Leonine text that was sent to Thomas of Celano. It is therefore quite likely that Thomas extracted the story from that source. What is interesting, however, is that Thomas adds a final conclusion to the story, which is not in the Leonine version:

Note that it is typical of holy simplicity to live by the norms of the elder and always to rely on the example and teaching of the saints. Who will allow human wisdom to follow him now reigning in

heaven, with as much care as holy simplicity conformed herself to him on earth! What more can I say? She followed the saint in life and went before the saint to Life.

(2 Cel., 190)

Having thus made a point about the higher potential of the simple friars in achieving sanctity, Thomas then moves on to explain what a learned brother should do to achieve the same end. The answer is rather simple: the learned brothers must imitate the simple brothers. This is the idea in the section that follows:

He [Francis] once presented a moral parable, containing no little instruction. 'Imagine', he said, 'a general chapter of all the religious in the Church. Because the literate are present along with those who are unlettered, the learned, as well as those who, without learning, have learned how to please God, a sermon is assigned to one of the wise and another to one of the simple. The wise man, because he is wise, thinks to himself: 'This is not the place to show off my learning, since it is full of understanding scholars. And it would not be proper to make myself stand out for originality, making subtle points to men who are even more subtle. Speaking simply would be more fruitful.'

The appointed day dawns, the gathering of the saints gathers as one, thirsting to hear this sermon. The learned man comes forward dressed in sackcloth, with head sprinkled with ashes, and to the amazement of all, he spoke briefly, preaching more by his action. 'Great things have we promised', he said, 'greater things have been promised us; let us observe the former and yearn for the latter. Pleasure is short and punishment is eternal; suffering is slight and glory infinite. Many are called; few are chosen, all are repaid.' The hearts of the listeners were pierced, and they burst into tears, and revered this truly wise man as a saint.

(2 Cel., 191-2)

Here, then, are Francis's expectations of the learned brothers: they should embrace voluntary simplicity and imitate the simple brothers. It is not an arbitrary choice that the setting in which Thomas chooses to make his point is that of preaching. Preaching was used as the major justification for the necessity of the pursuit of learning in the order. Its first written articulation was after 1254, when the mendicant-secular conflicts started at Paris.⁸ However, this argument must have been expressed within the order long before in the provincial and general

chapters. We can safely assume that Thomas was aware of it. It seems that Thomas was not convinced by the argument that learning improved one's preaching, nor does he suggest that Francis would be pleased if the friars preached elaborate sermons. Rather, his tale is reminiscent of Francis's admonition in the *Rule* that sermons should be short and clear. The imagery of the Franciscan preacher in the tale is that of a penitent with sackcloth and ashes. It is first and foremost as a simple penitent and not as a subtle scholar that the learned friar preaches and impresses his audience.

The idea that the learned brothers should imitate the simple brothers in their life and preaching was not the only point that Thomas wished to convey with regard to Francis's intentions. He also warns that this is the only way to preserve unity and equality within the order, which drew friars from all classes of society. Moreover, there was absolutely no hierarchy set between these various classes of friar. To preserve this particular nature of the early brotherhood, it was necessary that the learned did not undermine the simple. However, this proved to be difficult. As mentioned before, the legislation made after the 1240s restricted the recruitment of uneducated men into the order, and the lay brothers were increasingly ousted from the selection process for the administrative offices. In the conclusion to the parable, Thomas is keen to remind his readers of the initial vision of Francis for the unity of the order:

The man of God would then explain the moral parable he told: 'Our religion is a very large gathering, like a general council gathered together from every part of the world under a single form of life. In it the learned can draw from the simple to their own advantage when they see the unlettered seeking the things of heaven with fiery vigour and those not taught by men knowing *spiritual things by the Spirit*. In it even the simple turn to their advantage what belongs to the learned, when they see outstanding men, who could live with great *honour* anywhere *in the world*, humble themselves to the same level as themselves. Here', he said, 'is where the beauty of this blessed family shines; a diverse beauty that gives great pleasure to the father of the family.'

(2 Cel., 191–2)

Perhaps the clearest expression of Francis's attitude towards learning is represented in the last chapter of the section on 'Holy Simplicity'. Here we learn that already in Francis's time some friars were too keen to seek learning instead of strengthening their virtues, and this upset Francis. By

using prophecy as a narrative technique, Thomas places in Francis's mouth contemporary criticisms with regard to the order's contemporary state:

'For', he said, 'a tribulation is approaching, when books, useful for nothing, shall be thrown out of windows and into the closets' . . . Besides, he could smell in the air that a time was coming, and not too far away, when he knew learning would be an occasion of ruin, while dedication to spiritual things would serve as a support to the spirit.

(2 Cel., 195)

Thomas feels the need to redeem the negative tone of the chapter by suggesting that the study of Scripture did not displease Francis; rather, the saint wished to divert the friars from a superfluous concern with learning. At the closing of the same chapter, the contemporary articulations within the order that linked the pursuit of learning to the preaching apostolate, and Thomas's disagreement with this, become clearer. Thomas narrates the story of a companion of Francis who was too much given to preaching. Francis appears to him in a vision, forbids him to do this and advises him to walk in simplicity.

Closely linked with the pursuit of learning in the order is the subject of the keeping of books. In this respect, Francis's attitude towards the presence of books in the order is also indicative of his attitude towards learning. At the time of Francis, there was no question of any friar keeping and collecting books except a breviary. *Quo elongati* of 1230 had revised that by allowing the friars the use of books. In the last chapter on 'Holy Simplicity' mentioned above, Thomas recounts the story of a lay brother who asks Francis permission to have a Psalter and is offered ashes instead, a reminder of the penitential aspect of the Franciscan vocation. In an earlier section of the *Second Life*, whose major theme is poverty, Thomas tells us that Francis allowed the brothers to keep a few books but to use them only for edification and not to seek value in them for themselves. He is, however, displeased when a minister asks him whether some expensive books can be kept, but he allows the minister to do as he likes [2 Cel., 62]. While the enthusiasm for learning threatens the order's unity, the presence of books threatens the evangelical creed of poverty.

THE WRITINGS OF LEO AND OTHER COMPANIONS OF FRANCIS

The early companions of Francis presumably had the best information concerning Francis's intentions and the kind of brotherhood he

wished to form. Three of these companions, Leo, Rufino and Angelo, sent their memoirs of Francis to Thomas of Celano sometime between 1244 and 1246, which Thomas used while composing his second official biography of the saint. The original manuscript of these memoirs is no longer extant and can only be reconstructed through an analysis of the texts surviving in a number of late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts, and even then without any guarantee of re-creating the original work. These texts are primarily the *Legend of the Three Companions* and the *Assisi Compilation*. Rosalind Brooke, after a meticulous text-critical analysis, identified certain parts in these manuscripts as the original writings of Leo and the companions. She published these under the title of *Scripta Leonis*.⁹ The parts of these Leonine writings where the problem of learning and books are addressed come primarily from a separate tract inside the *Assisi Compilation* known as the *Intention of the Rule*, whose date of composition is not clear; neither is it known whether it was written before or after the *Second Life*.¹⁰

The *Intention of the Rule* covers essentially the problem of books and the pursuit of study, and bears substantial similarities to the last two chapters of Thomas of Celano's 'Holy Simplicity'. However, the Leonine text recounts these stories in greater detail and makes explicit references to Francis's discontent with the friars' enthusiasm for studying theology. The story of the minister wishing to keep expensive books is there, and, just as in Celano, the moral of the story is that expensive books are a violation of the solemn oath to observe the Gospel.¹¹

The lay brother who wishes to keep the Psalter becomes a novice in the Leonine version, and the companions essentially use this story to reflect on Francis's attitude towards study. Thereby, unlike Celano, who treats the subject of books in the section on poverty and that of learning under simplicity, the companions see the problem of books and learning as interlinked. This story is told in five chapters and has many details that are not in the *Second Life*.¹² The novice wants to procure Francis's permission 'particularly because he had heard that Francis did not want his brothers to be eager for learning and for books, but wanted, and preached to the friars, that they should strive to imitate the pure and holy simplicity, holy prayer and Lady Poverty, on which the early and saintly brothers had built'.¹³ Here too, just as in Celano, the major idea is that the learned brothers and those brothers who seek to be learned should instead follow the example of the simple friars, and try to convert and edify people, not so much by preaching but by prayer, living a simple life in evangelical poverty. They acknowledge Francis's respect for theologians, but the study of theology is simply not

in the Franciscan vocation. Friars Minor are supposed to save souls not through teaching or preaching based on study, but through simplicity and prayer. Once, when Francis was upset about the behaviour of some friars, he was consoled with these words from God:

I did not choose you as an educated and eloquent man over my family, but I chose you as a simple man, that both you and others might know that I will watch over my flock. I put you as a sign to them, that the works which I work in you they ought to perceive in you, and do them.¹⁴

This story is actually in Celano's *Second Life*, where Francis is referred to only as a 'simple man'.¹⁵ The particular emphasis on Francis's not being an educated and eloquent man implies that the companions set education and simplicity in clear contrast as opposites.

The Leonine text also includes the prophecy about the future tribulations of the order that are narrated by Celano, but again with more intensity. The companions exhibit a remarkable knowledge of the breadth of justifications given by the brothers for the pursuit of learning, including (but not limited to) preaching, and none of these justifications convince them:

Many brothers on the grounds of edifying others would put aside their vocation, that is to say pure and holy simplicity, holy prayer and Lady Poverty, and it will happen with these friars that they will afterwards come to believe that they are more imbued with devotion and fired with the love of God through the understanding of Scripture, so that occasionally they will remain frozen within and as it were empty. . . He [Francis] used to say: 'There are many who put all their efforts and their care day and night into learning, casting aside their holy vocation and devout prayer, and when they preach to a group or to the people and then see that some are edified or turned to penitence, they are puffed up and congratulate themselves on the works and profit of another: for those whom they believe they have edified or converted to penitence by their words, God has edified and converted through the prayers of saintly brothers, though they do not know it themselves. It is God's will that they should not pay attention to it, lest they grow proud.'¹⁶

In the remaining three chapters of this section, there is no substantial difference between Thomas of Celano's ideas about Francis's attitude towards books and those of the companions. Francis tells the novice that once he was tempted to have books as well, but God through the

Bible gave him the message that only a true follower of the Gospel can attain true knowledge. The companions also make the point that the acquisition of books and learning lead to the feeling of superiority and consequently to a hierarchy in the order. In this version, Francis says to the novice: "After you have a Psalter, you will covet and demand a breviary; after you have a breviary, you will sit in a chair, like a great prelate telling your brother: 'Bring me my breviary.'"¹⁷ The story concludes with Francis refusing to give his permission to the novice, saying that the true vocation of a friar minor is not to have anything except a tunic, a cord and breeches.¹⁸

BONAVENTURE'S 'MAJOR LIFE'

In 1263, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, a doctor of theology trained and taught in Paris and the minister general of the order (1257–74), submitted a new legend of Francis to the general chapter of Pisa. His legend was based on the texts of Celano's *First* and *Second Life*, and on Julian of Speyer's *Life of Francis of Assisi*. Like Haymo of Faversham and John of Parma before him, Bonaventure too was an exemplary figure of the 'new Franciscan', a friar of erudition and high intellectual capacity, but genuinely devoted to the idea of the evangelical life. He did not hesitate to renounce the life of scholarship in order to take up the position of minister general, and most of his intellectual production during his ministry of the order was directed at defending the Franciscan life against the secular masters, and to inspire his brothers and other learned Christians to a mystical union with God.

It is not surprising that many of the negative sentiments present in the Celano and Leonine texts with regard to the compatibility of learning with the Franciscan vocation are absent from the *Major Life*. Bonaventure does not seem to be at all convinced that the study of theology is not part of the Franciscan vocation. On the contrary, he believes that studying would improve a friar's life and deeds, provided that it was carried out with virtue, and for virtue. He therefore does not shy away from treating Francis's attitude towards learning in his legend, probably to settle once and for all the rumours circulating in the order about study as something in conflict with the Franciscan vocation. We find this discussion at the beginning of the eleventh chapter, entitled 'Francis's Understanding of Sacred Scripture and His Spirit of Prophecy'.

He starts the chapter by quoting verbatim from Celano's *Second Life* the section on Francis's profound understanding of Scripture and how he read the sacred texts.¹⁹ However, he carefully leaves out the

advice of Francis about not wandering through a thousand texts, which was included in the *Second Life*. What follows this description of Francis is an explicit treatment of the saint's position on the friars' pursuit of theological studies:

Once, when the brothers asked him whether he was pleased that the literate men, who, by that time, had been received into the order, were aiming to study the Sacred Scripture, he replied: 'I am indeed pleased, as long as, after the example of Christ, of whom we read that he prayed more than he read, they do not neglect zeal for prayer, and as long as they study not to know what they should say but to practise what they have heard and, once they have put it into practice, propose it to others. I want my brothers', he said, 'to be Gospel disciples and so progress in knowledge of the truth that they increase in pure simplicity without separating the simplicity of the dove from the wisdom of the serpent.'

(*LM*, II:I)

The approach of Bonaventure to the issue of study is, then, decidedly different from the previous texts considered, and in fact this passage is not to be found in any other medieval work on Francis. Judging by the account given in the *Second Life* or the Leonine texts, it is difficult to imagine Francis as being pleased upon hearing that his brothers intended to study theology, even though the brothers had promised him to keep their zeal for prayer. Celano's and Leo's Francis would essentially be suspicious of the desire to pursue learning, since the perfect way to follow the evangelical life is to live the life of simple brothers, which, if done with complete devotion, will lead to a wisdom much higher than that which can be achieved through books. It is highly probable that while writing these lines Bonaventure had the letter of Francis to St Anthony in mind, where he had said that he was 'pleased' that Anthony taught sacred theology as long as the spirit of prayer and devotion was not extinguished. Apart from the section considered above, there is no other reference to Francis's attitude towards study and books in the *Major Life*. Bonaventure omits all the passages in Celano connected to Francis's attitude towards books, and Francis's prophecies with regard to learning being an occasion for ruin.²⁰

THE 'MIRROR OF PERFECTION'

The next major text on Francis is the *Mirror of Perfection*, which scholarly consensus dates to the early fourteenth century. The

anonymous author (or authors) of this text is quite critical of the state of the order at that time, and he seems to blame it partly on the integration of learning and study into the Franciscan vocation. Hence, all the passages originally in Celano that recount Francis's criticism with regard to learning and books reappear in the *Mirror of Perfection*.

The first part of the *Mirror of Perfection* is dedicated to poverty, and here we find the stories from the *Second Life* and the Leonine texts concerning the minister who wished to keep his expensive books and the novice who required a psalter. However, there are important differences in the way the author of the *Mirror of Perfection* tells these stories. To the minister who wishes to keep his expensive books Francis denies his permission, saying that this is against the order's creed of poverty (MP, 3). From here onwards, the author talks of a general conspiracy of all ministers against Francis's insistence on absolute poverty. We are told of the sinister plan of the ministers that has resulted in the removal from the *Rule* of the sentence 'take nothing for your journey', so that 'they were not obliged to observe the perfection of the Gospel' (MP, 3). The story of the novice asking for the psalter is essentially the same as the Leonine version. However, here the author feels the need to make the message clearer and interprets Francis's message 'As if he were saying: "One must not care about books and learning, but about virtuous deeds, because learning pumps up, but love edifies"' (MP, 4).

From the sixty-ninth chapter onwards, the author turns his attention more directly to Francis's attitude towards learning. The discussion starts with the citation of the prophecy in the *Second Life* and the *Intention of the Rule* about the future tribulations, when books will be thrown away and learning will be an occasion for ruin (MP, 69). This is followed by the section from the Leonine texts where Francis deems the learned brothers mistaken in assuming that they edify people through their preaching. However, the author of the *Mirror of Perfection* adds his own comment at the end of this episode:

But those who did not care for anything except to know and to show the way of salvation to others, and have done nothing on their own behalf, will stand naked and empty-handed before the judgement seat of Christ, bearing only the sheaves of confusion, shame and sorrow. Then the truth of holy humility and simplicity, of holy prayer and poverty, which is our vocation, will be exalted, glorified and proclaimed. Those inflated with the wind of learning betrayed this truth by their lives and by the vain sermons of their wisdom, by

proclaiming this truth to be falsehood and, as blind people, by persecuting cruelly those who walked in the truth. Then the error and falsehood of their opinions according to which they walked, which they preached as truth, and by which they have thrust many people into the pit of blindness, will end in grief, confusion and shame. And they with their murky opinions will be cast into exterior darkness with the spirits of darkness. Frequently blessed Francis, therefore, used to say about this passage: "The barren one has given birth to many children and the mother of many languishes." The barren one is the good, simple, humble, poor and looked-down-upon, the miserable and contemptible religious who by holy prayers and virtues continually edifies others and brings them to birth with sorrowful groans. He used to say this passage very often to the ministers and the other brothers, especially in a general chapter.

(MP, 72)

This passage not only offers a criticism of the learned brothers as those who misunderstood the Franciscan vocation, but also accuses them of persecuting the simple friars, who are considered to be the true followers of Francis. Its tone is angry, accusatory and vengeful. This rage fits with the historical context. In the preparations for the Council of Vienne in 1310–11, the pope had asked a group of friars to present their complaints in written form. The result was the texts of *Responsio*, *Rotulus* and *Declaratio*, which are believed to have been penned by Ubertino da Casale, who headed this dissident party.²¹ A good part of the complaints of Ubertino was about the corruption and abuses of the lectors, and the general ambition in the order to take positions of authority.²²

The penultimate sentence of the passage cited above is, in my opinion, the key to understanding why some brothers in the order thought an effort to become learned incompatible with the Franciscan vocation. In their view, Francis wanted his brothers to be lowly, despicable and miserable, and to achieve their own salvation and those of others by embracing joyfully this lowly life of penitence and prayer. Learning, however, inspires respect and enhances social value in the eyes of others, no matter how humble its pursuer tries to be. Francis himself in fact called on his brothers to respect theologians. It is precisely this respect and prestige that make learning incompatible with the friars' vocation. In fact, a common idea in the stories told so far, with the exception of Bonaventure's, is that many friars pursued learning precisely for the sake of that respect and prestige.

THE 'DEEDS' OF BLESSED FRANCIS AND HIS COMPANIONS

The *Deeds* is believed to have been written between 1328 and 1337 by Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio. It includes two stories that are relevant to our subject. First is the story of the two students from noble families who take the Franciscan habit after listening to the preaching of Francis in Bologna.²³ Francis tells them to embrace humility. Following Francis's advice, one of them, Brother Pellegrino, refuses to become a cleric and remains a lay brother, despite being an expert in canon law. In the story of Brother Pellegrino, we find a perfect example of the idea of voluntary simplicity. Having chosen this path, the ex-scholar achieves great sanctity, and in the words of Brother Bernard of Quintavalle he was 'one of the most perfect brothers of this world' [Deeds, 30].

In Sabatier's edition of the *Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions* chapter 61 is the most explicit about Francis's attitude towards studying among all the stories considered here. It is entitled 'That Study did not Please Francis'.²⁴ The minister provincial of Bologna, John of Stacia, orders the foundation of a school in the convent of Bologna without the permission of Francis. Francis learns of this from a messenger, comes to Bologna in a fury and scolds the minister, accusing him of attempting to destroy his order. A similar version of the story is also found in the *History of the Seven Tribulations of the Order of Friars Minor* by Angelo Clareno. Modern scholarship has rejected the authenticity of this passage, which is found only in some manuscripts.²⁵ However, insofar as this passage was produced by the medieval friars, if not the actual author of the *Deeds*, it still serves the discussion of this chapter.

CONCLUSION

All medieval texts on Francis, with the notable exception of Bonaventure's *Major Life*, seem to agree on the principle point that Francis did not approve of the 'desire to become learned'. The Franciscan vocation as it was understood by these authors involves a principle of voluntary simplicity that operates much like that of voluntary poverty. If voluntary poverty is the desire to be and to remain poor, voluntary simplicity is the desire to be and to remain simple. The meaning of simplicity here, materialized in the person of John the Simple, involves an unmistakable element of the absence of intellectual or scholarly activity. A 'simple life' in the Franciscan context is therefore a rigorous life of penitence and prayer, but systematic and regular study has no

place in it. The simple should want to remain simple and not desire to become learned, and the literate or the learned should not try to advance their learning by further study, and should live as if they were simple brothers, like the canon lawyer, Brother Pellegrino. Particularly significant is the idea that the simple life, not study, is the best way to acquire true knowledge of the Gospels. Bonaventure's legend of Francis stands in contrast to this tradition. He writes explicitly that the intention of the friars to pursue theological study pleased Francis. He does use the word simplicity, but in his case simplicity seems to have the meaning of 'humility'. It is clear that Bonaventure as a minister general would not have wished to promote the idea of a completely ignorant brother like John the Simple as the exemplary, saintly brother.

It is not possible to know how close this theory of voluntary simplicity, as distinct from humility and marked by an absence of a desire to study, corresponds to the actual will of Francis, but it is supported by the clause in the *Rule* that the illiterate brothers should not bother to learn letters. The letter of Francis to Anthony of Padua, the first unofficial lector in the order, is not an obstacle, since it does not mention the desire of brothers to learn from Anthony, but only the wish of Anthony to teach the friars. In any case, the inclusion of the passages concerning Francis's attitudes to books and learning in these biographies from 1240s onwards, and the increasingly argumentative tone with which the idea of voluntary simplicity is defended, are proof that the consequences of the integration of learning into the Franciscan vocation had some undesirable and perhaps unforeseen consequences. Among them the creation of a hierarchy and devaluation of the lay brothers seem to be the most unwelcome to some friars. As the historical text is at once a product and a fabricator of its own historical context, the presence of the passages discussed above tells us more about the contemporary state of the order and the discontents of its authors with that state than about the actual attitudes of Francis towards learning.

Notes

- 1 RB, chapters 2 and 9. The ministers were to examine preachers and the new recruits.
- 2 See C. Cenci, 'De Fratrum Minorum Constitutionibus Praenarbonensibus', *AFH*, 83 (1990), 93. Also B. Roest, *A History of Franciscan Education (c.1210–1517)* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 8–9.
- 3 I discuss the emergence of a culture of learning in the order and its consequences in my forthcoming monograph tentatively entitled *The Rise of Learning in the Franciscan Order* (Ithaca, 2012).

- 4 Item, nullus recipiatur in ordine nostro nisi talis qui rexerit in artibus, vel qui [illeg.] . . . aut rexerit in medicina, in decretis aut legibus, aut sit sollempnizatus responsor in theologia, seu valde famosus predicator, seu multus celebris et approbatus advocatus, vel qui in famosis civitatibus vel castellis laudabiliter in gramatica rexerit, vel sit talis clericus vel laycus, de cuius ingressu esset valde celebris et famosa edificatio in populo et clero.
- C. Cenci, 'Fragmenta Priscarum Constitutionum Praenarbonensium', *AFH*, 96 (2003), 298.
- 5 2 Cel., 103.
- 6 Bonaventure used this image of 'Francis the Wise' precisely to argue why the friars should not try to imitate Francis in his learning but instead seek knowledge through teachers. E. Doyle, *The Disciple and the Master: St Bonaventure's Sermons on St Francis of Assisi* (Chicago, 1984), p. 64.
- 7 2 Cel., 190.
- 8 F. Delorme, 'Textes franciscaines (Lettre de S. Bonaventure Innominato Magistro)', *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, 1 (1951), 214; Anonymous, *Determinationes Quaestionum Circa Regulam Fratrum Minorum*, in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia* (Quaracchi, 1898), vol. VIII, pp. 337–74, at 339.
- 9 R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli Sociorum S. Francisci. The Writings of Leo, Rufino and Angelo, Companions of St Francis*, OMT (Oxford, 1970, corrected reprint, 1990).
- 10 On the textual history of the *Intention of the Rule*, see Brooke, *Scripta Leonis*, pp. 51–3.
- 11 CA, 102; R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, c. 69, pp. 207–9.
- 12 CA, 103–5; R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, cc. 70–4, pp. 208–17. See a discussion of these stories concerning the friar requesting the psalter in R. B. Brooke (ed.), *The Image of St Francis: Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 122–3. They are repeated also in Sabatier's edition of *Speculum Perfectionis: seu S. Franciscani Assisiensis legenda antiquissima auctore fratre Leone* (Paris, 1898), sections 150a–152.
- 13 CA, 103; R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, c. 70, pp. 210–11.
- 14 CA, 112; R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, c. 86, pp. 238–9 (Brooke's translation).
- 15 2 Cel., 158.
- 16 R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, c. 70–1, pp. 211–13 (Brooke's translation with my slight modifications). A similar argument about knowledge making proud is in c. 72.
- 17 CA, 104; R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, c. 73, pp. 214–17.
- 18 R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, c. 74, pp. 216–17.
- 19 *LM*, 11:1.
- 20 In his *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu*, written in 1305, Ubertino da Casale wrote that Bonaventure purposely omitted such stories since 'he did not wish to disgrace the brothers prematurely before those outside the Order'. R. B. Brooke (ed.), *Scripta Leonis*, p. 54.

- 21 Ubertino da Casale, *Responsio*, in 'Zur Vorgeschichte des Konzils von Vienne no. 4 Vorarbeiten zur Constitution Exivi de Paradiso vom 6. Mai 1312', ed. F. Ehrle, *Archiv für Litteratur- und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters*, 3 (1887), 51–89; *Rotulus*, 93–137; *Declaratio*, 162–95.
- 22 See for example, *Responsio*, 73–6 and *Rotulus*, 118, *ibid*.
- 23 *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions* by Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio (1328–77), c. 30, in *FAED*, vol. III, pp. 500–1.
- 24 P. Sabatier, *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum ejus* (Paris, 1902), cap. 61, p. 183.
- 25 See the introduction by Menestò in E. Menestò, S. Brufani, G. Cremascoli, E. Paoli, L. Pellegrini and S. da Campagnolo (eds.), *Fontes Franciscani, Medioevo Franciscano*, 2 (Assisi, 1995), pp. 2066, 2073.