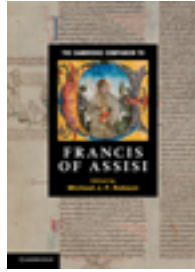


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Part I

Francis of Assisi

I Francis and the Franciscan movement (1181/2–1226)

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HISTORIOGRAPHY AND HERMENEUTICS

Francis of Assisi is one of the most popular and attractive saints of Christian history. And yet therein lies the challenge for those attempting to authentically understand him and the movement which gathered around him. In popular and scholarly treatments Francis and his spiritual achievement are often understood in isolation from the historical conditions and realities which gave rise to the man and the movement he inspired. Such works concentrate instead either on his heroic and saintly virtues of simplicity, humility and poverty or on his fate as an isolated victim of manipulative clerics intent on using his movement to advance their own ecclesial agenda. In either case concentration is fixed upon the man to the exclusion of the multi-faceted movement.

The reason for this is not simply our genuine fascination with *il poverello*. It is also closely tied to the fact that our understanding of him has either been drawn largely from the hagiographical sources of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, which viewed him through the lens of his canonisation as a saint in 1228; or, alternatively, from the personal reminiscences of his companions which reflected the polemical struggles raging within the order over its identity and its fidelity to the intentions of the founder. In either case, when the reader becomes focused too exclusively on the person and holiness of Francis, then the movement which he founded is eclipsed as inconsequential to our understanding of the achievement of this remarkable man. But to understand Francis without his movement is to understand very little of the historical figure. For it is, ultimately and precisely, the interaction of Francis with his brothers and sisters in those early formative years that gave rise to the unique charism which constitutes the Franciscan phenomenon. The focus of this essay is to present Francis

within the context of the movement which gathered around him and the historical circumstances which gave rise to both.

The validity of this broader, more integrative optic depends, moreover, upon the sources which one privileges as more appropriate for conveying the historical origins of Francis and his movement. Following the path blazed during the last decades of the twentieth century most notably by David Flood, it is our contention that any such survey needs to give priority to two sources in particular: the *Early Rule* (1208–1221), and the *Testament* of Francis, dictated a few days prior to his passing.¹ These sources frame the early Franciscan story, being the first and last documents encompassing the life and charism of Francis and his brothers. His other writings can then be reliably used to fill out the historical frame culled from these two fundamental sources. And the content of the vignettes and testimonies found within the hagiographical and polemical literature that emerges over the course of the next century can then be accepted and used as historical to the degree that it complements the historical picture already established by these privileged sources.

THE ORIGINS OF FRANCIS AND HIS MOVEMENT (1198–1210)

Born in 1181/2 to Pietro di Bernardone, a fairly prosperous merchant, and Pica, a woman of uncertain provenance, Francis was a member of the middle class of merchants which was in the ascendancy in the small but ancient town of Assisi. His appearance on the scene of history occurred simultaneously with the tumultuous events which gave rise to the birth of the free commune of Assisi. Assisi and its powerful neighbour were located in the duchy of Spoleto and were swept up into the struggle over competing claims of sovereignty that was raging during the last quarter of the twelfth century.² In his bid to reassert its claim over the cities of the duchy, in 1173 Emperor Frederick I had named Christian of Mainz as duke of Spoleto and count of Assisi: his personal representative in the region. He was replaced the following year by Conrad of Urslingen, who built the Rocca Maggiore above Assisi. In 1198, taking advantage of a power vacuum created by the sudden death of the German Emperor, Henry VI, and the minority of his son, Frederick-Roger, the middle class of Assisi rose up to overthrow both of their overlords, attacking the Rocca Maggiore, ejecting Conrad from the city and plundering the urban properties of the nobility, thus forcing them into exile. These merchants began to assert their authority out in

the countryside over the lands of the nobility. In November 1202 one such raid onto lands near Collestrada owned by the Ghislieri clan was, however, ambushed by allies of this noble family, resulting in a crushing military defeat of the merchant class and the return of part of the nobility to the city. This turn of events is reflected in a Charter of Peace signed in the public square in November 1203 between representatives of both classes. In it, power in Assisi was now entrusted to an uneasy coalition of members of both classes. Hence, the movement towards the full independence of Assisi was temporarily blunted. By November 1210, however, the situation had once again shifted, for this date marks the signing of a new agreement between the two primary classes in Assisi, for the first time referred to as the *maiores* (the greater ones) and the *minores* (the lesser ones) of Assisi: each group pledged loyalty to and co-operation with each other for the sake of 'the glory and prosperity of Assisi'. This charter of independence created the free commune of Assisi and marked the end of internal strife within the town.³ It was significant for two further reasons. First, members of the class of merchants could now definitively purchase their freedom from the *maiores* for a price. And secondly, citizenship was defined by the amount of wealth that one possessed. One was *maior* or *minor* depending on one's demonstrable wealth; and wealth became the distinguishing criterion for citizenship. Entirely missing from the charter was any mention of approximately three-quarters of the population: the peasant class of workers. Such individuals and their families were, by definition, non-citizens – one might even say non-persons – virtually invisible to the powers that governed Assisi: those whom Francis would soon identify as 'the poor, the weak, the sick, the lepers, those who sit and beg on the side of the road' (RNB, 9, 1–2).

It was into this tumultuous political and socio-economic upheaval that Francesco di Bernardone was born. At the time of the great revolt of 1198 he would have been 17 years of age: certainly conscious of – if not a participant in – those momentous events. He took part in the raid at Collestrada, resulting in his capture and imprisonment for perhaps as much as one year in Perugia (until he could be ransomed by his father). But the isolation and hardship of prison began to temper this impetuous and ambitious young man. Nevertheless, released from captivity he quickly hired himself out as a mercenary on a new military expedition, setting out for Apulia in the company of Walter of Brienne. A day's journey out, however, near Spoleto, something began to disturb his conscience. The official hagiographer of the order, Thomas of Celano, tells us that God appeared to Francis in a dream

and asked him, 'Which was it better to serve: the master or the servant?' The next morning Francis abandoned his quest and returned home, much in disgrace but also inwardly in turmoil.

These and other events are the seeds of what can be called the conversion of Francis: the period of time when this young man began to turn his life in a radically different direction, with wholly different values and priorities. This complex and hidden process of inner transformation came to be distilled in his own mind into one key moment: his chance encounter with a leper. This was the moment that prompted a complete reversal of his manner of valuing what was important and righteous and what, by contrast, was either unimportant or sinful. His heart had already been prepared from the time of Collestrada; now this one event came to symbolise the moment when God put him on a completely different path.

The hagiographical accounts tell us that Francis encountered Christ within these lepers. And this is true. But it is also crucial to point out that Francis also encountered and *saw*, perhaps for the first time in his life, suffering human beings, cast aside by the city of his birth and left in such misery and isolation.⁴ Through the workings of grace, Francis now came to discover the cardinal insight of his life: that all men and women are brothers and sisters, one to another, created equal in dignity and worth by the same Creator God. This is Francis's discovery of the universal fraternity of all creatures and, most importantly, the sacredness of the human person. Moreover, everything that ruptures the bonds of this sacred fraternity willed by God for human life is what Francis means by 'sin'. And to understand what he means by sin is to grasp what he means when he tells us that from that point forward, he began to 'do penance'. And this sheds light on the content of his penitential preaching in the world.⁵

Historians postulate that this famous encounter might possibly have occurred in the spring of 1206. His way of life began to take concrete shape as he found habitations in remote areas outside Assisi at ramshackle churches like San Damiano and Santa Maria degli Angeli. And yet it was only in early 1208 that Francis began to attract a few companions from his native town. These men – people like Bernard of Quintavalle, Peter Catania and Giles – were drawn to his way of life primarily from the upper and middle classes. Some certainly were intent on becoming downwardly mobile: consciously choosing to live among, as and for the poor and miserable of Assisi. Others, perhaps more simply, saw in this radical way of life a truly Christ-like manner of living. Such men became his followers as well as fellow travellers on

the road of this renewed Christian life, taking their message of respect, peace and repentance to others. After some time and with experiences both positive and negative, they began to consciously think out and then put down in writing what God was calling them to be and to do in the world: the general outlines of their *forma vitae* (form of life).

The far-ranging scope of these preaching missions beyond the confines of Assisi and the Spoleto valley is probably what prompted these brothers in the spring of 1209 to seek approval for their way of life from Innocent III in Rome. This event signals a watershed in the history of the Franciscan movement. For not only was their *propositum vitae* (proposal of life) approved by the pope, who also authorised them to spread their message of penance in the form of moral preaching, but their oral approval – since, as itinerant hermits, Rome did not have a specific formulary to offer them – gave them official legitimacy and thereby opened the door for a sudden and more rapid influx of followers increasingly from beyond the Umbrian valley.

What had they taken to Rome for approval which now captivated people beyond Assisi with a more universal, Christian message of renewal so that they, too, would decide to radically alter their way of life and follow the vision of Francis and his brothers? That vision is contained in the Early *Rule* of the Friars Minor. Recent work on this important source suggests that the document is a text which began with a core vision or original statement of intention: the *propositum vitae* presented to Innocent III. Historians hypothesise that this core material was comprised of an introductory statement, much of chapter 1, part of chapter 7 and all of chapter 14. This material closely matches what Francis tells us in his *Testament*: namely, that he composed it ‘simply and with few words’, using ‘words of the holy Gospel ... and [inserting] a few other things necessary for a holy way of life’ (1 Cel., 32).

These three passages present a positive statement of intention announcing the brothers’ desire ‘to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ’. But what, exactly, did this mean in the real world? As the brothers attempted to live out these high ideals, experiencing privation, want and hunger while receiving the mockery and scorn of their fellow citizens, they were forced to define more fully for themselves what this evangelical life actually meant in practice. As a result, the original core material began to grow, develop and expand over time. These amplifications, admonitions and warnings represent discrete layers of material in chapters 7 to 9 that can be detected by careful analysis within the text of the Early *Rule* as we have it today.

The charism of the Franciscan movement – that which uniquely characterises its *forma vitae* and distinguishes it from other groups of similar inspiration – is to be found not simply in its original *propositum* but especially in the second and third layers of the *Rule*. For herein lies the specificity of their particular form of the evangelical life.

The content of these first chapters and their expansions deals primarily with three issues: work, money and alms, and dwellings. For the early brothers who had left behind the security of their families and previous livelihood, finding work of some kind was absolutely essential. They worked first and foremost to sustain themselves. Initially, all work that could be done ‘without danger to their souls’ was permissible. Many of them often found employment in local *leprosaria* or hospices. And yet, as they soon discovered, not all forms of work were consonant with their new way of life. Any work that involved them once again in the use of money was proscribed (RNB, 7). Nor would they even allow themselves to receive money as remuneration for their work. For money, though an increasingly common means of exchange in the urban centres of Italy, was viewed by the friars as a pernicious instrument used by the rich and powerful to exploit the poor at the workplace as well as in the market place. To use it or receive it was to legitimate it as a proper means of exchange among human beings.⁶

Nor were the friars to even be ‘in charge’ in those places where they worked and sometimes lived. This prohibition can only be understood in the light of its opposite value. For, while many would gladly serve as administrators within the *leprosaria* or infirmaries, few would choose to place themselves on their knees to bathe and care for the lepers so as to be the face of the compassionate Christ to those cast aside as repugnant or useless. But this was the special calling of these friars.

Nor would they claim any place as their own or defend it against anyone. Rather, they would regard all things and use all things as coming forth from the hand of God, intended for the use of all creatures and to be used on the basis of honest human need. It was left to human beings to determine how best to realise this. This positive ethic of the proper use of creation is the original and essential meaning of poverty according to the early Franciscans.

These radical values were all premised on the lessons learned by Francis in his encounter with lepers. This experience then became the formative bedrock of the early fraternity. Vowing to live beside their unfortunate brothers and sisters, the friars were intent on creating a kind of alternative society, built upon the Christian principles of love, respect and mercy, where no creature of God was to be neglected,

exploited or humiliated by the wilful attitudes or actions of others. These unfortunate ones were the true *minores* (the little ones) of their society. And the brothers pledged to live among them not only as fellow *minores*, but also as their brothers. They would, in short, be Friars Minor.

This radical posture then comes to be summarised in the opening lines of the ninth chapter of the Early *Rule*, which serves as a kind of encapsulation of minorite identity. Written to give encouragement to one another, perhaps in time of great difficulty and doubt about their vocation, they urge one another to persevere in the way of life God has called them to live:

And let all the brothers strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ; and let them remember that we should have nothing else in the whole world except, as the Apostle says, 'having food and sufficient clothing, with these we are content.' [1 Timothy 6: 8]. And let them rejoice when they find themselves among those of vile and despised condition, among the poor, the weak, the sick and lepers and those who beg by the wayside.

(RNB, 9, 1–2)

Their encouragement comes from remembering that the life they have promised to live is the very life Jesus himself had lived. But we now can appreciate that this famous descriptor for the life of Christ is actually much more than nice-sounding spiritual virtues: rather, they are deeply spiritual social postures. For the humility of Jesus is a life lived among the *minores* of society; the poverty of Christ is a life devoted to using creation on the basis of need, according to the intentions of its Creator, while ensuring that others are provided with the necessities of life as well. This is what constitutes the minorite charism.

THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MINORITE MOVEMENT (1210–19)

After the approval of the *propositum vitae* by Innocent III, the friars chose as their base of operations the restored church of Santa Maria degli Angeli. This tiny chapel would serve not only as a place of temporary residence in Assisi, but also as a point of sending forth and return from the preaching missions which the brothers embarked upon.

The legitimacy conferred upon this little group by the approval of their *propositum vitae* by Innocent III brought the minorite vision of Christian life to others who, for a variety of reasons, could not

physically join the brothers in this new venture. For in this period one must include the dramatic story of a noblewoman from Assisi, Clare, from the powerful Offreduccio family, who fled her family to live out the *forma vitae* as a *minor*. The preaching of Francis and his friars touched certain people of means such as Giovanni di Vellita and Orlando, count of Chiusi, to use their wealth and possessions in a more just manner, offering La Verna and Greccio for the use of the friars as places of quiet and prayer. Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli of the great Frangipani family of Rome was similarly moved to drop long-standing litigation with the papacy. That their preaching also had profound effects upon the poor is likewise narrated by Thomas of Celano (1 Cel., 58–71).

It was at this time that the preaching of Francis took on a dramatic new focus. During the summer of 1212, shortly after the news of the resounding Christian victory over Muslim forces at Las Navas de Tolosa in southern Spain, Francis and several companions decided to make their way across the Mediterranean to 'preach the Christian faith and penance to the Saracens' in the Holy Land. The formulation by Celano is interesting: their desire was not only to bring the Christian message, but also to bring the message of penance, that is, the core vision of the minorite movement concerning the universal fraternity of all creatures. This desire was thwarted by a violent storm which shipwrecked them off the coast of Dalmatia, forcing them to return to Italy. The following year, Francis attempted again to engage with the Muslim world, this time going west to Spain in the hopes of meeting the miramolin of Morocco. But illness forced him, once again, to return home.

An important event in the life of the fledgeling fraternity occurred at the fourth Lateran Council, which opened on 11 November 1215. Convened by Innocent III, it had three primary aims: the launching of a new crusade to retake the Holy Places in Jerusalem; the eradication of heresy – notably that of the Cathars with their denial of the validity of the Catholic sacraments, especially the Eucharist; and the reform of the Church in its structures and practices and the holiness of its members. There are at least two important achievements of the council which were to have a direct bearing upon the Franciscan movement.

One of the most important decrees issued by the council was canon 13, which ended Innocent III's recent policy of recognising new religious movements by ordering those without approved *Rule* to adopt one or amalgamate to an already existing order. The Franciscan fraternity did not have an officially approved *Rule*; their *propositum* had been orally approved without having received the papal seal. And yet

they not only continued to exist after the council, but also did not have to abandon their developing *Rule*. There is, however, little documentary evidence to help us understand how this might have occurred. One can conjecture that it was due in part to the intervention of friendly prelates, most probably Cardinal Hugolino dei Conti di Segni. But the only solid testimony is that the fraternity was approved ‘in consistory’, that is, outside the council’s plenary sessions during one of the curial gatherings (3 soc. 52). Had this not happened, the minorite experiment would have been brought to an abrupt end.

Francis was influenced by some of its reform currents, especially regarding the centrality of the Eucharist and the respect and care that ought to be accorded to its sacramentals.⁷ But what is unmistakable is that the third aim of the council had a dramatic impact upon him, for it confirmed the theme of conversion and penance. Indeed, Francis adopts as his own the very symbol used by Innocent to depict all three conciliar aims: the sign of the Tau. This image, drawn from the Book of Ezekiel (9: 4) in the shape of the Hebrew ‘X’, symbolises the passing-over by the avenging angel of those whose lives had remained faithful to the covenant and who bore the mark of the Tau on the lintels of their houses. In the Book of Revelation (14: 1), this same Hebrew letter ‘X’ becomes transformed in Greek into a ‘T’ which the elect bear upon on their foreheads. This evocative symbol now comes to be used by Francis virtually as his own signature, so deeply personal was the conviction that the authentic Christian must live a life renewed by the Gospel values of Jesus Christ, exemplified in his life-giving cross (‘T’). However, it is also crucial to point out that Francis never once associated this Tau cross – as did the pope and his council – with the Crusade. Indeed, it was *the* sign of the fifth Crusade placed upon the crusaders whose physical passing-over was believed to be blessed by God. Francis’s total silence on the matter is striking; he could not agree.⁸

After the conclusion of the Lateran Council, the early Franciscan fraternity attempted – in accordance with canon 12 – to initiate more formal gatherings for its members in the form of an annual chapter. But with the continued growth in the numbers of men coming from all parts of Italy and with the ever-deepening conviction of the universal importance of the minorite vision of penance and poverty, Francis and his brothers came to believe that the time had come to take that message beyond Italy. The chapter of 1217 thus marks a critical turning-point in the life of the early community. Missions were sent to France, Spain, Germany and the Holy Land, and they were, for the most part, ill-prepared. The friars who were sent to Germany, without

benefit of the language and ignorant of conditions north of the Alps, found themselves harassed and brutalised as heretics, beating a quick retreat home.⁹ Of Elias of Cortona's mission to the Levant, we know little. Francis himself set out 'for France' but was impeded in Florence by Cardinal Hugolino from going any further, lest his fraternity be left without a shepherd and needing guidance in times of development. The French mission may have resumed the following year under the direction of Brother Pacifico, who led the group to Saint-Denis, on the outskirts of Paris.

In addition to the extension of the Franciscan mission as a result of this chapter, a second critical transition took place. For the sending of missions to these far-flung places obliged the friars to ensure that someone serve as organiser of the mission and spiritual leader of the group. The chapter, for the first time, was forced to create organisational structures of authority within the fraternity. These structures took the form of delineating various zones of action for these missions called 'provinces' and of designating certain individuals to serve as leaders of these roving bands of friars. This momentous change is captured in three chapters which were hammered out and eventually added to the text of the *Early Rule*: chapters 4 to 6.¹⁰

These chapters say very little about what these new leaders were to actually do. Their roles were twofold: provide the friars with a place to stay and occasionally visit them to encourage them and watch over their spiritual lives. The content of this Franciscan reflection on authority is more concerned with how to exercise authority among the friars. This is reflected in the very title which Francis gave to these new figures of authority in the fraternity. Drawing on two words (Matthew 20: 26–7), these friars are to be 'the ministers and servants':

Likewise, let all the brothers not have power or domination in this, especially among themselves. For just as the Lord says in the Gospel: 'The leaders of the people lord it over them and the great ones make their authority felt over them; it will not be thus among' the brothers. For whoever wishes to be the greater let him become their 'minister' and 'servant'. And let the one who is the greater among them become like the lesser.

(RNB, 5)

Such a passage reflects the keen awareness which the friars had of the manner in which power was often used and the deleterious effects such exercise had especially upon the weakest and most vulnerable in society. That knowledge would be used to good effect within the fraternity

now that they were being forced by circumstances to create their own structures of authority among themselves. The remedy for the tendency to dominate is to orientate the use of power towards service: the washing of feet, especially of those who have sinned or are having difficulty remaining faithful to the life they promised to live. Hence, each minister is a guardian whose special charge was to watch over and guard his brother from falling away. These passages represent some of the most eloquent passages in the early Franciscan corpus.

THE FLOWERING AND FRACTURING OF THE FRANCISCAN VISION (1219–21)

Two years later, the friars gathered once again in chapter in Assisi. The chapter of 1219 had similar, if not even more ambitious, intentions, for the primary achievement of this gathering was not only the sending-out of new missions to Hungary and southern France, it also set in motion a three-pronged effort to engage the Muslim world. Five brothers were sent to Coimbra for a missionary push into Muslim Seville, an expedition that would eventually take them to Morocco. Brother Giles was sent to Tunisia. And Francis himself was determined to go to the Holy Land and Egypt.

Some historians theorise, moreover, that Francis may have attempted to explain to the friars his rationale for going since it could lead to his death among the Muslims in the East. The trace of such a statement of intention – what David Flood calls ‘the *Testament* of 1219’ – may be found today embedded in the RNB, in the first four verses of chapter 22. The message to the friars was this: those who the Church and world claim are our enemies are, in fact, Francis claims, our friends. But Francis is not speaking about the sentiment of friendship; rather, the one who is deemed the enemy is, in fact, a brother or sister. And Francis desired to go and live out this vision among the Muslims, even if this evangelical witness might cost him his life. And if it did, eternal life would be his, since he would have been utterly faithful. His dramatic encounter with Sultan al-Malik-al-Kâmil is analysed by Steven J. McMichael in Chapter 8 below.

Once Francis and Illuminato had returned to Acre, they were presented with alarming news about recent events in Italy.¹¹ The two vicars he had left in temporary charge of the fraternity, Gregory of Naples and Matthew of Narni, had taken it upon themselves to change the fasting practices of the friars to be more in line with ‘real’ religious. Philip the Tall, Francis’s delegate to provide for the needs of the Clares,

was forced to seek letters of protection from the papacy to prevent unspecified interference in their lives. John Capella was rumoured to be starting a separate order (or perhaps just a confraternity of penitents?) comprised of the lepers of Assisi. There was considerable concern about the indiscriminate acceptance of untested candidates into this fraternity of itinerant preachers. Francis returned home with his brothers to confront and resolve these new problems.

By mid September he had made his way from Venice down to Viterbo, where the curia was then staying. After what must have been serious consultations, Honorius III issued the bull *Cum secundum consilium*, mandating a year of probation for all future aspirants to the fraternity. For it was the opinion of a growing number of ecclesiastics that the extraordinary freedom accorded to this supra-diocesan order of penitential preachers required more careful scrutiny and discipline. Faced with such criticism, Francis relented. It may also have been at this time that Francis was asked to receive the diaconate to help bring greater legitimacy to his authority as leader of the growing and diversifying community.¹²

Whatever the original purpose of calling an emergency gathering of the friars in Assisi at a time which would normally have been reserved for a local provincial chapter, the result was that, by its conclusion, Francis had resigned his position as 'minister and servant', turning over the reins of functional leadership to Peter Catania. Why would Francis have resigned at such a critical moment in the order's history, when it needed his leadership most? The posthumous sources give two reasons. Celano claims that he resigned due to illness. He had indeed returned from the East with malaria and other related ailments which would progressively worsen and lead to his death in 1226 (2 Cel., 143). The Companions tradition (CA, 11) claims that, while using illness as the ostensible reason for stepping aside, Francis had become profoundly disenchanted with the 'deviations' introduced by those friars who, having only recently entered the community, were unfamiliar with the social dynamics of the foundational period and who were attempting to steer it in the direction of more traditional forms of religious life. This conflict of visions between the original *forma vitae* and a form of life more aligned with apostolically inclined monastic communities erupted at this chapter. The famous account (CA, 18) of the confrontation between Francis, Hugolino and the clerics probably occurred here. Indeed, Jordan of Giano tells us that Francis preached to the friars on the text of Psalm 143 [144], using its opening line as his theme: 'Blessed be the Lord, my God, who trains my hands for battle,

my fingers for war.' The Psalm goes on to warn of those 'alien sons' who 'swear false promises'. Stunned by the clashing visions contending within the fraternity and overwhelmed by what he might have to do to bring the order back to its original way of life, Francis chose instead to resign as minister: perhaps the most bitter moment of his life and one which took him years to come to terms with (2 Cel., 158).

Francis still attempted to serve as a formative influence in the lives of the friars: offering himself as an exemplar of how to remain faithful to the *forma vitae* while beginning to write to the friars and others about the fundamentals of the minorite charism and its concrete ramifications for a renewed Christian life. His first effort was the *Letter to the Faithful* in its long version: a kind of *summa* of the call to penance sent to clergy, religious and laity, indeed 'everyone in the whole world'. A distilled version of this famous letter was crafted a little later and sent specifically to those penitents now coalescing into urban confraternities desiring to live the Christian life in accord with minorite values. For, similar to what he had done with the Clares in 1219, Hugolino had drawn up for them in 1221 a generic *Rule* of life which had no obvious connection to the Franciscan life. This short version of a growing Third Order was Francis's minorite word to the penitents.¹³

THE LAST YEARS AND FINAL ACTIVITIES OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1221–6)

Peter Catania was dead within six months of taking office. The chapter of 1221 replaced him with Elias of Cortona and launched a vigorous new mission to Germany. Francis now turned his attention to another pressing matter. The dreadful experiences recounted by Jordan of the missions in Germany (1217) and Hungary (1219) were largely exacerbated by the fact that the friars had no officially approved *Rule* to show authorities proving their legitimacy and orthodoxy. The papal bulls issued on their behalf in 1219 and 1220, while helpful, were apparently insufficient. More important, from the perspective of the curia, this non-approved *Rule* had ballooned from a general statement of intention in 1209 to a rambling collection of admonitions, exhortations, legislative rulings, prayers and an overabundance of scriptural quotations by 1221. What was needed was a streamlined, more juridically precise *Rule* which would merit official papal approval. Francis spent the better part of two years working with Hugolino and other curial officials to distil the essence of the

forma vitae into something more acceptable to Rome without violating the intentions of the Early *Rule*. The result was an entirely new *Rule* in the Roman Church.

With his exhausting – and perhaps frustrating – work on the *Rule* now complete and with its official promulgation in the bull, Francis began to increasingly withdraw into solitary places in the company of a few trusted companions in the Spoleto and Rieti valleys. These are the companions of later lore who cared for and prayed with him during his final painful years. One of the most famous episodes during this time was his memorable celebration of Christmas Eve at the hermitage in Greccio in which he attempted to bring to life, visually and palpably, the very concrete conditions of poverty and humility experienced by Jesus of Nazareth. Other than the experience among lepers, it represents the quintessential realisation of Francis's deeply incarnational spirituality and displays his unique genius for conveying the realities of faith to popular, uneducated audiences.

By the summer of 1224, storm clouds were gathering in Europe once again as a new military campaign was being organised against al-Malik-al-Kâmil in Egypt by Cardinal Pelagius with the support of Honorius III and now with the mighty forces of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II. Scheduled to be launched the following April, the venture portended further bloodshed in the Holy Land. Deeply distressed at this prospect and dismayed over recent developments within the order, Francis, accompanied by a group of chosen companions, decided to make his way to La Verna to make a 'Lent of St Michael': a forty-day fast from the feast of the Assumption (15 August) until 29 September. 'On or around the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross' (14 September), Francis experienced a kind of mystical transport, the content and meaning of which can only be conjectured. At the conclusion of this profound mystical experience, he was bearing what has come to be called the stigmata: marks resembling the five wounds of Christ, in his hands, feet and side. Much has been written about this crucial moment in the life of Francis; numerous artists have attempted to depict the language used by his biographers to describe this ineffable experience. So profound was his meditation upon the mystery of the cross of Christ that he became the object of his prayer: Christ Crucified.¹⁴

In the immediate aftermath, he wrote on a small piece of parchment a prayer in thanksgiving to God for the pain and consolation which had been given to him in this revelatory experience. These are the *Praises of God*: a prayer which some authors believe can be likened

to his own version of the *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of Allah*. He was praying in an Islamic mode. This prayer was written on the recto side of the famous *chartula*, later given to Brother Leo. According to this brother, Francis then turned the *chartula* over and, on its verso side, inscribed the Aaronic blessing from the Book of Numbers, a Tau cross, and a head with several oddly placed words under and through the shaft of the Tau. Recent scholarly opinion has grappled with the configuration and meaning of these elements. The key to the ensemble seems to be the enigmatic head. According to some, the head is actually a representation of the sultan, al-Malik-al-Kâmil, and the prayer of protection (Numbers 6: 24–7) is for the well-being of his beloved brother in Egypt. But more: Francis was also praying for the sultan's conversion, that he confess the cross, before it was too late and he would be lost in death for all eternity. Finally, Francis would have appended a clever little blessing for Leo himself who, after these events, had come to his father troubled in spirit. If accurate, the events on La Verna bring to its most profound intensification the minorite vision which had first been revealed to him and which he had lived out throughout the course of his life: namely, that all men and women are creatures of God, come from the same hand of a good and loving Creator, brothers and sisters one to another, and are on a journey back into the same God, and that each has a God-given responsibility to help the other along the way.¹⁵

The last days of Francis were difficult ones filled with physical pain and suffering. Despite this, he managed to compose one of his most exalted writings: the *Canticum of the Creatures*, a mystical hymn of praise written out of the depths of his own suffering to a gracious God who is praised through each creature living out its created purpose. The goal of all life was the praise of God in word and deed. Then, after first refusing but later accepting unsuccessful treatment for his eye ailment, he returned to Assisi and the Porziuncula, where his journey had first begun. He managed to compose several things for Clare and her sisters, including a *Last Will and Testament* in which he explicitly defined their pursuit of evangelical perfection as 'the most holy life and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ'. And, after dictating a final testament and admonition to his brothers to remain steadfast to the *forma vitae* which God had revealed to him and which he had handed on to them from the earliest time – even when told differently by others both inside and outside the order – Francis surrendered his spirit back to God from whom he had come forth and to whom he now returned to praise for ever.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel of Mark opens with the declamatory words: 'Here begins the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, son of God.' The formulation was meant to announce that the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth only represents the beginning of the good news of the revelation of God in Him. The Gospel continues in the life of His disciples striving to maintain fidelity to his words and teaching. Similarly, the charism of Francis and his brothers would continue in the life of the Franciscan family.¹⁶ However, the understanding of that charism, at least since the chapter of 1220, was no longer uniform among the friars. Already by the general chapter of 1230, significant controversies were beginning to arise over the precise understanding of the wording used in the definitive *Rule* and the intention of Francis. Indeed, the seeds of the future controversies over the observance of evangelical poverty were already sown in this famous chapter. Franciscan history from this point forward will for ever be marked by the unease and co-existence of these two, quite different, forms of Franciscan life and work: each challenging the other to remain faithful to the founding charism or to be open to the needs of the Church at any given time. For both aspects were, in some way, already present in the person of Francis.

Notes

- 1 D. Flood and T. Matura, *The Birth of a Movement: A Study of the First Rule of St Francis*, trans. P. Lachance and P. Schwartz (Chicago, 1975).
- 2 P. V. Riley, 'Francis' Assisi: Its Political and Social History, 1175–1225', *Franciscan Studies*, 34 (1974), 393–424.
- 3 L. A. Bartoli, 'La realtà sociale assisiana e il patto del 1210', *Assisi al tempo di san Francesco*, Società internazionale di studi francescani, 6 (Assisi, 1978), 271–336; Flood and Matura, *Birth of a Movement*.
- 4 R. Manselli, 'San Francesco dal dolore degli uomini al Cristo crocifisso', *Analecta T.O.R.*, 16 (1983), 191–210.
- 5 M. F. Cusato, 'To Do Penance/*Facere Penitentiam*', in Cusato, *The Early Franciscan Movement (1205–1239): History, Sources, and Hermeneutics*, Saggi, 14 (Spoleto, 2009) (orig. publ. in *The Cord*, 57.1 (2007), 3–24); G. Miccoli, 'The Christian Proposal of Francis of Assisi: A Problem of Interpretation', *Greyfriars Review*, 3.2 (1989), 127–72 (orig. publ. as 'La proposta cristiana di Francesco di Assisi', *Studi medievali*, 3rd series, 24 (1983), 17–83).
- 6 M. F. Cusato, 'The Early Franciscans and the Use of Money', in D. Mitchell (ed.), *Poverty and Prosperity: Franciscans and the Use of Money, Spirit and Life*, 14 (St Bonaventure, New York, forthcoming).

- 7 This is evident most particularly in the letters written by Francis after his return from the Holy Land (1220).
- 8 M. F. Cusato, 'The Tau', in Cusato, *Early Franciscan Movement*, pp. 69–80 (orig. publ. in *The Cord*, 57.3 (2007), 287–301).
- 9 On this mission see Jordan of Giano, c. 5. The chronology of the missions reported by Jordan in these chapters needs to be treated with great caution.
- 10 M. F. Cusato, 'Guardians and the Use of Power in the Early Franciscan Movement', in Cusato, *Early Franciscan Movement*, pp. 249–81.
- 11 The issues are enumerated in Jordan of Giano, cc. 11–13.
- 12 M. F. Cusato, 'Francis of Assisi, Deacon? An Examination of the Claims of the Earliest Franciscan Sources 1229–1235', in Cusato and G. Geltner (eds.), *Defenders and Critics of Franciscan Life: Essays in Honor of John V. Fleming, The Medieval Franciscans*, 6 (Leiden, 2009), pp. 9–39.
- 13 M. F. Cusato, 'The Letters to the Faithful', in Cusato, *Early Franciscan Movement*, pp. 153–207 (to be published in *Essays on the Early Franciscan Sources*, vol. 1, ed. M. Blastic, J. Hammond and W. Hellmann (St Bonaventure, forthcoming).
- 14 M. F. Cusato, 'Of Snakes and Angels: The Mystical Experience behind the Stigmatization Narrative of 1 Celano', in Cusato, *Early Franciscan Movement*, pp. 209–48 (orig. publ. in *The Stigmata of Francis of Assisi: New Studies, New Perspectives* (St Bonaventure, 2006), pp. 29–74).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Cf. 1 Cel. 37.