Toward a Resolution of the Franciscan Question: From the Perspective of History

Michael F. Cusato OFM

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separating Celano and his confreres from the Francis portrayed in the *Umbrian Legend*. Surely this “prayed Francis” is much further beyond the grasp of the brothers than the spiritual man, who contemplates Christ and preaches the Gospel, proposed by Bonaventure. As early as 1235, Celano ignored the majority of Francis’s life in favor of a passionate narrative of the stigmata joined to miracle accounts foreshadowing the resurrection. Just as it would be more difficult for Christians to imitate Christ in their daily lives if they only had the passion and resurrection accounts to read, so too, a hagiographical account of Francis devoid of a life narrative hardly seems to offer a holy man to be imitated, but rather a canonized saint to be admired from this side of eternity.

I would conclude my comments here with a heartfelt thank you to Professor Dalarun for the groundbreaking research evident in his latest monograph, and for the incredible stimulus it provides to all those interested in the story and heritage of the Poor Man from Assisi.

Timothy J. Johnson
*Flagler College*

**TOWARD A RESOLUTION OF THE FRANCISCAN QUESTION: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORY**

Like a skilled craftsman, our distinguished author, after having studied the codicological issues related to the extant copies of the *Umbrian Legend*; after having examined the place of the legend within the hagiographical and liturgical traditions of early Franciscanism, [he] then turned to position the text within the flow of thirteenth-century Franciscan history. Such positioning has two goals: first, to discover whether the *Umbrian Legend* could shed some new light on our understanding of that history and, second, whether it might help resolve in some way the famous and vexing Franciscan Question. This is the substance of the fifth chapter of the monumental volume of Jacques Dalarun under discussion this evening.
He begins by laying out, on the basis of the codicological and hagiographical evidence, a spectrum of dates within which the **Umbrian Legend** could possibly have been written.

As an historian of scrupulous honesty, he gives us the widest possible range of dates within which the **Legend** could conceivably have been written, namely: between 1235 and 1253: the first date (1235) represents the drafting of the **Legend** of Julian of Speyer (from which it borrows); and the second date (1253) is that of the redaction of the **Treatise on the Miracles of** Thomas of Celano (which has borrowed from it). Within that spectrum, however (and for good reason), our author posits an even narrower range of years for our text: between 1237 and 1244. With the possible exception of the dyspeptic Franciscan erudite, Michael Bihl, who argued, against the position of the Conventual Giuseppe Abate, for a dating between 1253-1260 [a position followed by the editors of **Franciscan of Assisi: Early Documents**, since it has been, until now, the prevailing opinion], this new spectrum of dates (1237-1244) seems, on the basis of this study, not only judicious but quite sound. But can we get any closer and on what basis?

In the next part of the chapter, our author sets out three scenarios, three hypotheses, three possible points within this spectrum of dates, when, he contends, our elusive text could creditably have been written. Indeed, in a brilliant **tour de force** of hypothetical historical reconstruction, he presents to his readers a plausible case for all three and challenges us to examine each argument and, much like in the pedagogy of Abélard, come to our own conclusions. This evening, I will lay out the three scenarios in abbreviated form, after which I will make a few comments of my own about the strength or weaknesses of the three scenarios from the perspective of Franciscan history.

Before we begin, however, we should keep in mind a couple of things which will be important as we weigh the relative strength of each scenario. First, the **Umbrian Legend** consists of a short narrative section followed by a compilation of miracle stories which confirms the divine inspiration guiding both the founder and his movement. Second,
although the *Umbrian Legend* does not add anything new to our knowledge of Francis, it does have four emphases that distinguish it from other literary efforts of the time: (1) it begins with a striking restatement of the event of the stigmatization of Francis and a vivid description of the wounds; (2) it is marked by unusually laudatory remarks concerning Brother Elias of Cortona; (3) it includes a brief mention of the translation of the remains of Francis in 1230; and (4) it singles out by name Brothers Leo and Angelo as the companions dearest to the saint (whereas in 1 Celano all the companions were praised but remained unnamed). And a third datum will be the interpretation given to three enigmatic words found scratched out at the end of the version of the text found in the Assisi codex 338, namely: *Generalis minister n<oste>r* – “our minister general.” Has the minister general commissioned the text, ordered its dissemination, non-dissemination or even destruction of the text? And to which general do these words refer? Fascinating questions whose answers depend on where one locates the *Umbrian Legend* in history.

The first scenario fixes the date of the redaction of the *Umbrian Legend* between 1237 and 1239: in other words, just prior to the deposition of Elias of Cortona at the General Chapter of Rome in 1239. The basis for this hypothesis is that the content of the *Legend*, most particularly its striking opening paragraphs on the stigmatization of Francis, could be read as a response by Thomas of Celano to doubts from within as well as from outside the Order about the reality of the stigmata. We should remember that the first narrative description of the event, after all, comes from none other than Celano himself. Doubts about the stigmata reflected doubts about what he conveyed in his narrative. Dalarun cites the papal bull of 5 April 1237, *Confessor Domini*, in which Gregory IX writes to all Christians testifying to the miracle of the stigmata and urging belief in their reality. Moreover, the day after, on 6 April, Gregory also sent out a bull in defense of the friars and their ministries. These two bulls were drawn up, according to our author, at the personal insistence of Elias who, apparently, had gone to the papal court to obtain these letters on matters he considered urgent to the Order: the di-
vine anointing of its founder and the protection of its ministries. Hence, the *Legend* gives the impression of being not only a defense of the reality of the stigmata of the founder but a defense, too, of his successor, Elias – a position consistent with Celano's praise of him in the *Vita prima* at a time when he was no longer even general. No such praise had been accorded in 1229 to the reigning general: John Parenti. Celano is depicted here as a strong partisan of Elias.

A second scenario would place the redaction of the *Legend* between the years 1241 and 1243, that is to say, within the generalate of Haymo of Faversham: the English cleric who had, more than any other, engineered the removal of Elias as general in 1239. Here, the text may possibly have been commissioned by the minister general himself in order to address a glaring lacuna in the Franciscan breviary, lacking appropriate readings for the feast of St. Francis itself. Or, alternately, the *Legend* may have been written at the initiative of Celano himself: at his own instigation and for his own reasons. In either case, our author claims, Thomas would have been reacting against the composition known as the *Anonymous of Perugia*: a text which purports to give us (as its title reads) “the beginning of the founding of the Order and deeds of those Lesser Brothers of Blessed Francis in religion”). But this seemingly innocent (or, as our author describes it: rustic) text is neither a chronicle nor a history; it is, according to our author, a polemical piece – and this, for two reasons. First, it presented an image of the early fraternity as group of companions with Francis more or less submerged within – one might even say subordinated to - the story of his own movement. This view of the Order – where the titular leader was subordinated to the larger group – was strangely similar to the aim of the democratic revolution led by Haymo at the General Chapter of 1239 which had reversed the centralization of power in the hands of the general which had been orchestrated by Elias during his second mandate. Indeed, Elias never makes an appearance in this text. This marginalization of the saintly founder and the presentation of the origins of the early fraternity as a process of human growth and development – rather than one under supernatural guidance – would have offended the hagiographer who
viewed – and had previously depicted – these events as divine manifestations of the grace of God. Similarly offensive: the Anonymous also appeared to dismiss the significance of the stigmata – an event of utmost importance in the mind of Thomas – dedicating a mere two lines of text to this profound mystery. Viewed in this way, the Umbrian Legend of Celano could have been written as a reply to the Anonymous – as well as to Haymo – insisting on the divine inspiration of Francis and his movement and presenting a ringing post-deposition defense of Elias, who is depicted in the Legend as the beloved disciple of the stigmatized Francis. As such, Haymo would certainly have rejected it for use within the breviarium franciscanum. And, whether originally commissioned by Haymo or at the initiative of Celano himself, the fact that it was not summarily destroyed might be evidence that the work may have been completed shortly after the death of the general in 1243 and thus serendipitously allowed to survive for a few more years.

The third scenario posits the creation of the Umbrian Legend in direct relationship to the call of Haymo’s successor, Crescentius of Jesi, at the General Chapter of Genoa in 1244 for the friars to gather together any information about Francis that they knew of, which would demonstrate the signa et prodigia (holiness and miracles) of their founder. At the same time, Thomas of Celano, the official hagiographer of the Order, was specifically mandated by the chapter to receive these materials and to work them into an additional vita of the founder. Dalarun, however, conjectures that Celano might first have actually responded to the general command, quickly drafting his own contribution about the saint – the Umbrian Legend – before receiving the famous packets of materials from the companions. But again, he would have written this short text in response to the Anonymous of Perugia and for essentially the same reasons. However, once he will have set himself to work on what would become the Memoriale (and eventually the Treatise on the Miracles), the Umbrian Legend would have appeared as but a skimpy sketch of things to come and would, therefore, have been forgotten about and dispensed with, if it were not for the fact
that a few copies had already reached the convents of Troia and Eremita.¹

These are the essential details of the three possible scenarios for the writing of the *Umbrian Legend* of Thomas of Celano presented by our colleague. Since our time this evening is brief, so too must my remarks be on this extraordinary and complex book.

I start with the second and third hypotheses first, spanning the years 1241-1244. In many respects, they are the most interesting and intriguing of the three; but, to my mind, they are also the most problematic. Let me make two points about the positioning of the Umbrian Legend within this span of years: (1) concerning the priority of the *Anonymous of Perugia*; and (2) about Celano as partisan protagonist in the politics of the Order.

First, both the second and third hypotheses pivot on the central role played in this period by the *Anonymous of Perugia*. Previously, Jacques and I have been almost alone in insisting that the content of the *Anonymous* has to be understood in the context of the tumultuous events of the Chapter of 1239 and in basic sympathy with its outcome. Indeed, only in this way can one understand the exceptional praise for Gregory IX (who had just deposed the minister general of the Order) and the depiction of preaching – increasingly a clerical prerogative – as the primary mission of the Friars Minor. However, in both of these hypotheses, our author posits that Celano in the *Umbrian Legend* was reacting to the dismissive approach taken by the author to the stigmata and to his almost-sociological portrayal of the beginnings of the early community, with its consequent diminishment of the role played by Francis. This, of course, would have been quite at variance with the portrayal of the divine inspiration of both founder and movement presented in the *Vita prima*. But this may be related more to literary aptitude rather than to intention or design. In other words: that the *Anonymous* presents a picture of the issue of leadership in the early fra-

¹ In truth, the narrative of the LO does not duplicate the testimony found in 2 Celano. If anything, it duplicates, even intensifies, what had already been presented in the *Vita prima*. Hence, the LO does not appear to me as a sketch of things to come, rather a forceful reiteration of things previously written.
ternity which, in some respects, echoes the decentralized approach to authority advocated by Haymo and the Northern Europeans, appears to me to be more coincidental than ideological; more in the eye of the contemporary observer than in the intentions of the author. For what the Anonymous gives us, in fact, in his own unpolished manner, is the way that authority did evolve within the early community: as a shared discernment among brothers of like-minded intention. Hence to view Thomas as countering the Anonymous and, through it, Haymo and his conception of Franciscan life, seems to me to be a bit overdrawn. The author of the Anonymous, a companion of Brother Giles, was not at all pained at the downfall of Elias; this is clear from the fact that he is never once mentioned in the narrative. But perhaps the reason has more to do with the perception of a change in the lifestyle and actions of the fallen general (which was the criticism of Elias from the companions) than with any notion of how authority was to be structured and exercised among the Minors. Finally, is it not indeed curious that, once the content of the Anonymous comes to be subsumed into the text of the Legend of the Three Companions, it virtually disappears from the scene as a text to be reckoned with or even remembered? Such a datum seems to weaken to some extent the force of our author’s contention about the pivotal role played by the Anonymous as the spur to the redaction of a whole series of new sources on Francis, the Umbrian Legend in the lead.

Second, surely one of the most invigorating aspects of this exceptional book is that the second and third hypotheses, if correct, bring the person of Thomas of Celano out from the shadows as a significant player in the shaping of Franciscan history in the first half of the thirteenth century. Typically treated as the official hagiographer of the Order writing on commission within the bounds of his craft, we now come to better appreciate the man behind the text, with his own views on Franciscan life. We have known this already to some extent from the Memoriale. But the positioning of Celano as a strong partisan of Elias, openly challenging the general who had run him out of town (in hypothesis two) or supportive of the failed efforts to bring Elias back as general in 1244 (in hypothesis three), while fascinating and even tantaliz-
ing, seems somewhat vitiated by another important datum. For Elias, since mid-to-late 1238, had become a strong supporter of Emperor Frederick II, who in March 1239 – two months before the general chapter of Rome – had been excommunicated by Gregory IX. Anyone found openly supporting him could likewise incur the same sentence, as did Elias and some of his supporters who physically joined Frederick in his camp at Pisa in 1240. To imagine Thomas of Celano as being strongly and openly supportive of Elias after these events in the early 1240s is one thing; but to still be honored as official hagiographer of the Order and entrusted with the delicate task of writing the *Memoriale* and *Tractatus* with such heavy baggage seems somewhat unlikely in my view. Indeed, although the fact that Elias does not receive any effusive praise from Thomas in the *Memoriale* has been interpreted as a sign of Celano’s political savvy, it might also be indicative that, by this time, his esteem for Elias had already waned – and precisely because of the tumult over the person and governance of Elias at the 1239 Chapter. Together, this is what makes the first hypothesis a more attractive option as the historical context for the writing of the *Umbrian Legend*.

I believe that our distinguished author is entirely correct to account for the unusual emphasis on the stigmata of Francis in the opening paragraphs of the *Umbrian Legend* by explaining it in reference to the bull of Gregory IX, *Confessor Domini*. In fact, three other bulls (not cited by our author) were drafted and sent by Gregory at roughly the same time to individuals and groups throughout Christendom on the very same subject of the stigmata. Clearly, Elias and Gregory had become concerned that too many Christians and religious – perhaps even within the Order itself – were expressing a corrosive skepticism about the authenticity of the stigmata. As noted earlier, for Celano, it had become the central reality confirming the unique holiness of the saint and, therefore, of the role to be played in the spiritual regeneration of the Church by the Order he founded.

The praise accorded to Brother Elias in this work has already been noted (four times explicitly, once implicitly); but the reasons for it have not. If our author is correct in dating
the *Umbrian Legend* between mid-1237 and mid-1239, the unusual praise of Elias could be explained by the fact that already by 1237 a movement was afoot, originating both in Germany as well as in France and in England and attested to separately in the chronicles of Jordan of Giano and Thomas of Eccleston to get rid of Elias. This testimony relates that friars in these regions had become not only disenchanted but angry with what they perceived to be the abuse of authority by the Italian general and were planning to remove him from power if they could get a chapter called. Indeed, a direct appeal had already been made to Elias by some of these friars but summarily rebuffed by him. Thomas, we assume, was living in or around Assisi at the time and would most likely have been privy to such murmurings. Whatever may have been his alleged faults, Thomas and Elias would have shared a similar appreciation of the sanctity of their founder as testified to in the gift of the stigmata. Moreover, Thomas was aware of the unique privilege Elias had had in seeing the side-wound of Francis in an intimate moment of caring for the saint and in disseminating news of this unheard-of miracle in his *Encyclical Letter*. On this matter, there was complete accord; and Elias, as propagator of this mystery – so central now to the identity of the founder and his Order – would merit a spirited defense in the *Umbrian Legend* now that he found himself under attack.

Nor should it be forgotten that in the *Vita prima*, Francis had been depicted by Celano in the account of Christmas at Greccio, as a deacon, dressed in the vestments of a deacon. The use of the word *levita* (rather than *deaconus*) was a deliberate choice on the part of Celano to subtly assert, in 1229, against the recent statements of Gregory IX, that the Friars Minor, following in the footsteps of their founder, were not an Order of priests but rather and more importantly assistants to the priests – levites in the post-exilic sense of the term. This ecclesial image was meant to attest that the Order could be – in fact, has been and was being – led by men who were not ordained priests but who could still, through their leadership, guide the Order of the stigmatized Francis in its work of spiritually revitalizing the Church. Elias stood in that same line of legitimate levitical lay leaders; when
challenged by some of the friar-clerics of northern Europe on these very grounds, Celano rose to defend him.

But the attack was also coming from another direction: from the side of the companions, disillusioned with not only with the personal excesses against poverty of the minister general but more importantly with his easy association with the maiores: the great and mighty of the world. This is the perspective of the Sacrum commercium, possibly written by Caesar of Speyer sometime between 1236 and late 1238, in which the basilica of San Francesco – whose construction had been overseen by Elias – was viewed as the symbol of the betrayal of the minoritas of the Order. But what is extraordinarily interesting is that, if true, how then to explain the fact that the Umbrian Legend singles out two of the companions – Leo and Angelo – for praise? An answer might be found in the fact that already by this time, some of the companions had begun distancing themselves from such forceful, public critiques of the new directions taken by the Order, like those leveled by Caesar and his followers. Celano, in this battle, seems to have sided with the general on this one. Indeed, when handed the veiled criticism of the basilica by the companions in the Assisi Compilation (who praise the Portiuncula not the basilica as the caput et mater ordinis), he veils it still more, rendering such criticism innocuous and harmless.

Ultimately, if the codicological evidence is not contradictory to it, the question of the Umbrian Legend must be answered by a demonstrable harmony between the content of the work and the historical context out of which it arose. As provocative and fascinating as the placement of the Legend as a reaction to events within the generalates of Haymo or Crescentius may be, it seems that the more consonant, if less dramatic, location might be within the last fateful years of the generalate of Elias. For the Umbrian Legend presents itself as a mini-, compressed and updated version of the same content of the last two years of Francis’s life as presented in the Vita prima with a clarion emphasis on the miracle of the stigmata, mirrored in numerous other posthumous miracles flowing from it, rather than as a new and bold statement reflective of drastically changed and alarming times. If that
lessens to some small extent the contribution it makes to the resolution of the Franciscan Question, it is surely not for any lack of erudition or historical acumen on the part of our author and his superb and probing work.

Michael F. Cusato, OFM
The Franciscan Institute

DE ST. BONAVENTURE À LA LÉGENDE OMBRIENNE
ET DE LA LÉGENDE OMBRIENNE À ST. BONAVENTURE

Être lu, être lu de la manière dont Giles Constable, Michael Blastic, Timothy Johnson et Michael Cusato viennent de me lire, avec autant de finesse intellectuelle que d’amicale bienveillance, est la plus belle récompense dont un auteur puisse rêver. De leur amitié, ils ont ainsi donné un merveilleux témoignage dont je les remercie de tout cœur; mais de leur mérite aussi. Car il est de temps de le dire: l’ouvrage dont il est question est un livre illisible, présentant la découverte d’une légende déjà connue, qui de toutes façons n’apporte rien de neuf sur François d’Assise!

Pourtant – à cause de cela peut-être – j’ai rarement écrit un livre en pensant autant à ses lecteurs potentiels. La Légende ombrienne a des allures de puzzle et d’énigme: puzzle, puisqu’il faut la reconstituer en agençant les fragments livrés par quatre témoins manuscrits dont aucun ne donne la même portion de texte que le voisin; énigme, car on ne sait rien de son auteur ou de sa date – et les mots qui devraient en éclairer les circonstances de rédaction ou de diffusion, grattés, se présentent comme un mystère supplémentaire: generalis minister noster… À l’image de la Légende dont il traite, ce livre s’offre donc à ses courageux lecteurs comme un jeu, un défi. Au moment où il devrait se clore par une ferme conclusion, il s’ouvre sur trois scénarios entre lesquels le lecteur est invité à choisir. Arrivé au point où je n’étais plus en mesure de trancher, j’ai en effet passé le relais à autrui. Giles Constable, Michael Blastic, Timothy Johnson et Michael