PROJECT MUSE®

Toward a Resolution of the Franciscan Question: From the
Perspective of Franciscan Liturgical Practice

Timothy J. Johnson

Franciscan Studies, Volume 66, 2008, pp. 491-495 (Article)

Published by Franciscan Institute Publications

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.0.0021>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/257994>

his method and his respect for the texts and authors he studies. We are all greatly in his debt for opening up these Franciscan texts for us. Because of this book, we are able to get closer to figures like Celano, and John the disciple of Giles, and Julian of Speyer, and Ruffino, the probable author of the Legend of the Three Companions, and Thomas of Pavia and his *Dialogus*, and even to Bonaventure, and thus, are able to come to an understanding of the little poor man from Assisi in all his complexity and contradictions, for after all, the authors are merely relating their own experience of Francis! For all of this, and with hope for what is yet to come, from the heart, I thank you Jacques!

Michael W. Blastic, O.F.M.
The Franciscan Institute

**TOWARD A RESOLUTION OF THE FRANCISCAN QUESTION:
 FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FRANCISCAN LITURGICAL
 PRACTICE**

It is both a personal pleasure and professional honor for me to be here this evening and offer a response to Professor Dalarun's marvelous work on the *Umbrian Legend*. We first met some years ago when I was preparing to present a paper on Thomas of Celano's *Legend for Use in the Choir* at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, Michigan. As I approached the room where our session was being held, I saw Sr. Margaret Carney. She said, "Tim, I'd like you to meet Jacques Dalarun." All I could think was, "Oh, my God!" since my paper raised a question about Professor Dalarun's treatment of choir legends in his book *The Misadventure of Saint Francis*. Not only did Professor Dalarun listen attentively to my presentation, he also agreed to critique my paper in the months after our Kalamazoo encounter. Since our friendship began within the context of our mutual interest in choir legends, I am pleased indeed this evening to comment on Professor Dalarun's work on the *Umbrian Legend*.

The absence of a word or phrase in an otherwise complete text often intrigues scholars who wonder what words might have filled the blank on the page. Recent studies on Gnostic literature have focused on the Gospel of Philip, and a particular gap in the text provokes a disproportionate measure of interest and conjecture in undergraduate religion courses. At a certain point the text reads, "Jesus kissed Mary on her ____" (blank). Perhaps not nearly as titillating, but central to our concerns today, is the ____ (blank) that appears in the *ordinal* for liturgical worship written by the Minorite General, Haymo of Faversham. Intent on giving the Franciscan Order a proper order of worship, Haymo dedicated his generalate (1240-1244) to the systemization and codification of liturgical practice. Despite his obvious interest in worship within the Order, he neglected to prescribe a hagiographical legend for the Feast of Saint Francis. At the very point where a liturgical *vita* is to be named, there is a ____ (blank). Let me be clear about the significance of this ____ (blank). The Minister General, who endeavored to organize the entire liturgical life of his confreres, is unable to subscribe, or even suggest, a particular set of readings for the Feast of Saint Francis, the most significant feast day of the Order in terms of constructing internal identity and affirming ecclesial stature.

The ____ (blank) is not due to an absence of liturgical legends. Thomas of Celano's *Legend for Use in the Choir* was in circulation for over a decade. Other liturgical legends redacted from Celano's *First Life of Saint Francis* as well as Julian of Speyer's *Life of Saint Francis* were also available. Given the availability of texts, one could conclude that Haymo was not willing to present any of the existing choir legends to the community as a canonical text for liturgical use. Dissatisfaction with the choir hagiography persisted at least until 1254, since the General Chapter of Metz requested a new legend for liturgical usage because of the confusing array of legends in circulation. While the Lesser Brothers struggled with this issue, their fellow mendicants, the Preachers, also began work on a new liturgical *vita* of Saint Dominic requested at their chapter in 1254.

What the ____ (blank) in Haymo's ordinal and the Pisa legislation reveal is stunning. When it came time to worship on the day of their founder, the Minorite Order could not agree on a "prayed Francis" for the feast. This historical fact has not garnered attention from historians of Franciscan history because they focus on the major legends and prefer to draw their conclusions regarding Francis of Assisi and his heritage from these sources. One of the ironies of Franciscan studies is that historians have devoted their time and talent to the texts that were the least read by friars themselves and ignored the texts that the friars prayed and carried in their portable breviaries from the wild, western shores of Ireland to the distant steppes of Central Asia.

One of the many merits of Professor Jacques Dalarun's marvelous study is that he turns his formidable academic acumen to the various liturgical legends and takes them seriously. Why is this important? The answer is obvious if one takes into consideration the role of liturgy in the life of a religious community in the medieval period. Choir legends present a "prayed" image of the saint who is to be both contemplated and imitated. This is the nature of liturgical praxis, the "Do this in memory of me" that is repeated every day in the Eucharist celebration and extended throughout the day in the Liturgy of the Hours. The construction of Minorite identity, while clearly not limited to common prayer, was grounded in worship, and the image of Francis of Assisi presented in those intimate moments was integral to the construction of subjectivity among the brothers. Francis of Assisi's own devotion to the body and blood of Christ, together with an intense dedication to liturgical prayer, foregrounds the praxis of his followers.

If one is to take the choir legends seriously and consider the "prayed Francis" they present to the followers of the Poverello, a series of questions emerge in the wake of an attentive reading of Professor Dalarun's impressive monograph. It is important to note here that Professor Dalarun does not believe the *Umbrian Legend* was originally intended for choir use, but acknowledges that this is a fragile conclusion. One of the reasons he shies away from ascribing a preliminary liturgical end is the preponderance of miracles. I would ask him if

such an emphasis on miracles is not indeed the hallmark of Celano's earlier *Legend for Use in the Choir* and an increasingly necessary feature of Celano's entire hagiographical project given the demand of his fellow Franciscans for more miracle stories as Celano himself laments later?

If Celano did not compose the *Umbrian Legend* originally as a liturgical *vita*, his confreres evidently swiftly employed his text to this end. What emerges then from the redaction of the *Umbrian Legend* for choir is a "prayed Francis" noteworthy for his stigmata and miracles. As a consequence, the Francis that is contemplated and conceived as a paradigm for potential imitation is markedly different from the "prayed Francis" of the choir legend taken from Julian of Speyer, which ends with the stigmata, and Celano's earlier liturgical *vita*, which balances the life of Francis with the account of the stigmata, canonization, and posthumous miracles. This choir version of the *Umbrian Legend* is a link between the earlier focus of Celano, as it looks to the past emphasis on the miraculous tomb in the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi and toward the future perspective of Bonaventure, who will accentuate the stigmata.

The shift in the *Umbrian Legend* away from the life of Francis to a focus on his stigmata, canonization, and miracles as early as 1235 raises a question with regard to current historical interpretation of Franciscan sources. Giovanni Merlo, in his *Nel nome di san Francesco*, which the Franciscan Institute is translating, claims that Bonaventure's redaction of the source material creates "L'inimitabilità e l'irraggiungibilità di san Francesco." Repeated often enough, this belief that Bonaventure creates a Francis beyond reach, who is unable to be imitated by the brothers, has become something of a truism in certain circles.

Bracketing for a moment the textual fact that Bonaventure explicitly states the exact opposite in numerous sources, a question I would ask Professor Dalarun is if Celano himself is not to blame for any real or imagined separation of Francis from his confreres since the *Umbrian Legend* emphasizes Francis as a stigmatized miracle worker. Are there any stigmatized miracle workers among the friars in the audience gathered here this evening? If not, then there is clearly a gap

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 to, 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.