The events linked with doomsday and the end of the world are not popular at all in our culture. Few people believe that the world will, in fact, come to an end, and that there will be a complete destruction of the universe. Since such ideas are closely linked to what Scripture states, especially in the eschatological texts and in particular way in the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse), people are bound to associate such beliefs of the end of time with an outmoded and naïve way of looking at reality, when we are living in an era of great scientific and technological achievements.

It is, however, a well-known fact that certain man-made decisions are exerting a negative influence on creation and that science and technology are not so perfect as to guarantee a paradise on earth that can last forever. The recent episode of the Boeing 737 Max plane that crashed in Africa, as well as the similar crash involving Indonesia’s Lion Air, has been shown to have occurred because of a technical hitch. The New York Times revealed that “as the pilots of the doomed Boeing jets in Ethiopia and Indonesia fought to control their planes, they lacked two notable safety features in their cockpits. For Boeing and other aircraft manufacturers, the practice of charging to upgrade a standard plane can be lucrative. Top airlines around the world must pay handsomely to have the jets they order fitted with customized add-ons […] Investigators are looking at whether a new software system added to avoid stalls in Boeing’s 737 Max series may have been partly to blame” (www.nytimes.com [retrieved 22/03/2019]).

This detail, if true, raises many eyebrows and poses a lot of questions. We are smart enough to rely on highly specialised instruments, but where has human ability to have a final say in control gone? Are we going to end up in an age of robots who will control humankind?

What about climate change and the disastrous effects it is generating in the eco-system of the planet? Can we still continue to deny that something close to doomsday is behind the door? Are we still adamant that the exploitation of the world’s resources is not pushing the world to its limits? Politicians and economists are painting a rosy picture of a bright future and accusing environmentalists of producing lies. Who is really to blame for this fake news on what is happening?

What about the problem of millions of immigrants swarming from poverty-stricken countries to the opulent countries of the west? Is it true that this problem will eventually stop? Is the world population exploding in such a way that we have reached saturation point? Can the world continue to feed its inhabitants? What will happen in a nuclear war? Is it not true that we are
capable of wiping out ourselves from the face of the earth in a matter of seconds?

In the last decades of the 13th century, Franciscan thinkers were following the doctrine of a prophet, Joachim of Fiore (died 1202), who predicted a new age of the Holy Spirit, when the carnal Church would be wiped out to make way for a spiritual Church and a new creation. Great Franciscan thinkers like Peter John Olivi (1248-1298), in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, wrote that the time of the Antichrist was approaching and we were nearing the end of the world. They also came up with specific dates, like 1260 or 1300. In the case of Olivi, he ventured to state that the beast of the Apocalypse with the mysterious number 666 referred to Islam, since Islam started to invade other cultures in 643 and it would last for 666 years, thus arriving at 1299. These prophecies were an attempt to read the signs of the times within the mediaeval setting. They obviously seem anachronistic and illogical, but indeed, a thorough reading of the apocalyptic vision of Olivi sheds light on the mediaeval frame of mind.

Christianity formed the mediaeval man to think that the universe is the creation of God, and that whatever theories might be advocated for its origins, it will come to an end and be transformed. The battle against Averroism by such Franciscan thinkers as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, rested on the notion that it is not true that creation is eternal and that there is no free will. These Franciscans had the courage to speak out against a system that was promoting practical atheism.

We are not very different from mediaeval humankind, even though we think that we have solved the problem of the origin of the universe with the big-bang theory. We can never rely totally on our technological advancement and forget that God does exist and that He created everything to be a sign of His providence and not to be a robot. Our choices are speaking out for themselves. If we want to continue living in a world that we can dominate according to our whims, we are in for big trouble. It will be creation itself that will rise against a Godless humanity, by making us taste a good potion of our own poison.

Franciscan life has much to offer in the way of respecting humankind within the context of creation. That is the Christian vision. It is not a vision that goes against technological innovation or economic progress, as is sometimes thought. It is a vision that goes against a world of robots that is doomed to be self-destructive, and might even end before God Himself wills it to do so.

Noel Muscat ofm
The incarnation of the Word of the Father in the womb of the Virgin Mary is one of the central mysteries in Franciscan contemplation. The One who is the way, the truth and the life, is given to us in his sharing in our human nature and flesh, in our history, so that - through the operation of the Holy Spirit - we can become in him children who recognise fully our identity in the Father.

Mary is, to all effects, the Mother of the Incarnate Word since in her womb he was conceived and came to light. The mystery of the paternity of Joseph, on the other hand, becomes evident in a silence that pervades all the Gospels, and which seems to be interrupted only by the words that Mary addresses when she gently chides Jesus: “My son, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you” (Lk 2:48).

In this present study we will occupy ourselves with this unique fatherhood, delving deeply in a particular way in the reflection of the Franciscan authors between the 13th and the 15th centuries, when the devotion to the carpenter of Nazareth began to develop. We shall try to underline the specifically Franciscan modality of proposing the figure of Joseph in relation to the mystery of the Incarnation. We shall start with two very short texts of Francis of Assisi, confronting them with what is possible to glean from the episode of the Christmas celebration of Greccio as presented in the Sources, in order to underline, if it is possible to do so, the presence of Joseph the father in relation to the mystery of the Incarnate Word, particularly an object of meditation of Saint Francis, in such a way that it constitutes a spiritual legacy to the brothers of the Order.

Reading the writings of Francis of Assisi we gather not only the continual presence of God - an observation which might seem to be taken for granted - but an absolutely prevalent way of referring to God as “Father”.

From the overwhelming experience of the paternity of God, the Saint elaborates his Christological vision, which is markedly centred upon the mystery of the Incarnation. The following two brief texts are an evident example:

“The most high Father made known from heaven through His holy angel Gabriel this Word of the Father - so worthy, so holy and glorious - in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb He received the flesh of our humanity and frailty.”

“All-powerful, most holy, Almighty and supreme God, Holy and just Father, Lord King of heaven and earth we thank You for Yourself, for through Your holy will and through Your only Son with the Holy Spirit You have created everything spiritual and corporeal and, after making us in Your own image and likeness, You placed us in paradise. […] We thank You for as through Your Son You created us, so through Your holy love with which You loved us You brought about His birth as true God and true man by the glorious, ever-virgin, most blessed, holy Mary.”

A first consideration we can make on these two texts, but which can be extended to all the writings of Francis, regards the icon of the Incar-
nation that he had in front of his eyes, in which the central image is that of the Virgin and Child.

In the writings of Francis, as well as in the biographies, the references to maternity as a way of describing a relationship are common. In the Later Rule there is a powerful experience of maternity which the Saint imposed upon the family of his brothers in order to express their familiarity:

“Wherever the brothers may be and meet one another, let them show that they are members of the same family. Let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brothers according to the Spirit!”

The memory of madonna Pica must have always surfaced in his mind: although we do not find any hint in his writings, from the biographies we generally have an idea of a tender and understanding woman towards such a special son.

We cannot exclude that it was also from these memories that the Saint draw his motivation for a particular sensibility towards the mothers of the brothers, which he considered to be the mothers of all the brothers. On the other hand we notice a silence on human fatherhood in general, maybe to be placed in relation to the renunciation of his earthly father, which he made in front of the bishop of Assisi, in order to proclaim that he would only have as his father the Father in heaven.

Such an attitude emerges in the same organisation of the Order, where there is an element of great novelty - with respect to the conception of an essentially hierarchical religious life then prevalent - namely, the refusal of the term abbas and the adoption, instead, of the expression custodes to indicate those who preside over the fraternity.

Referring to this last aspect, P. Payan comes out with the hypothesis of an eventual, hidden reference to the role of Joseph, as custodian and servant of the Virgin and the Child.

If we try, therefore, to draw a first conclusion, we can gather, in the orientation of the way of life assumed by Francis for himself and for his brothers, on one part an explicit paternity, that of God, an essential reference to all and to each and every one of the journey of faithfulness to the Gospel, and on the other hand, an implicit paternity, which has to become a reality and render itself manifest in reciprocal relations, through the service and the custody - which are typically paternal traits - exercised with maternal modalities towards one another. Within this complementarity the roles of the fratres can be such as to make them grow into a familia.

Payan again suggests an interpretation whereby we are led to the intuition of implicit paternity through the famous episode of Christmas of Grecio. Two are the principal Sources that refer to this episode: the Vita prima of Celano, 30, and the Legenda maior of Saint Bonaventure 10,7. Both episodes describe a rather essential scene: a donkey, an ox, some straw, no representation of the Virgin and of Joseph. A witness affirmed that he saw in the crib a sleeping child, and Francis who took him in his arms to wake him up.

In Thomas of Celano, where the narration is simpler, there is an evident Eucharistic reference: Francis takes the child in his arms in order to wake him up and becomes the figure of the priest who transforms the host into the body of Christ. In Bonaventure the narration insists more on the image of Francis with the child in his arms, who, for Payan, could be understood, at a first glance, as evoking the Virgin who holds the Child. However, the Bonaventurian image rather designates pater Franciscus, and makes us think of the paternal function of Joseph. This is the image that Giotto represented in the upper basilica of Assisi.

Payan does not hesitate to affirm that, in that precise moment, it seems as if Francis became Joseph. He concludes that “all happened in fact as if the Franciscans, after the refusal of the father on earth symbolised by the action of their founder, found once more their paternal role in the person of Joseph.” In this way they assumed in a particular manner the humility and willingness to serve, and these are qualities which are strongly requested first of all to the Franciscan minister, but also to each and every brother when he relates to his other brothers. The putative fatherhood of the carpenter of Nazareth, besides, frees by its own nature every temptation to claim a possession over the Son, and thus excludes all forms of paternal power, and it furthermore underlines that true paternity is that of God.

What we can surely affirm lies at the basis of the doctrinal movement regarding Saint Joseph, which was then developed by the disciples of the Saint after his death, starting from the 13th century. As we have already underlined, it should be considered as referring to the devotion of Francis towards the mystery of the Incarnation and humanity of Christ.
From Saint Francis to the Franciscans: general guidelines on the origins of Franciscan teachings on Saint Joseph

Although this aspect has often been overlooked by the first historians of the cult of Saint Joseph, the contribution of the Franciscans has been essential to its development and spreading, since for the first time they introduced, in a way which is distinct from the discussions regarding Mary’s virginity, the reflection on the earthly father of Jesus in their preaching, and later on, in the liturgy.

Joseph is finally considered in himself and not exclusively in his role of defending and taking care of the honour of the Virgin and of giving a true appearance of being a father to Christ. In the 13th century Joseph became a model of life and a concrete answer to the proper spiritual needs in a specific historical context:

“Franciscan preaching, with its specific traits of warmth, simplicity, interpreting the concrete needs of the humbler members of the population, could influence popular piety, and orientate it towards the contemplation of the most earthly and daily aspects of the infancy of Christ. The personages of the crib revealed the likeness of the common people, and made these persons feel to be one with these familiar faces of the signs of poverty and suffering. In this picture, alongside the figures of the Child and the Virgin, they discovered the humble figure of Joseph. The exaltation of poverty brought the followers of Francis to see in the carpenter of Nazareth an exemplary figure. Thus, in the Sermon of the Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord Saint Bonaventure lists, among the reasons why the Virgin was given as bride to the “poor and rustic Joseph” his poverty. By recognising in the humble condition of Joseph a title of merit, the Franciscans distanced themselves from those, like the Dominican Jacopo da Varazze, in the Golden Legend, who preferred to underline his royal lineage.”

The disciples of Francis of Assisi, therefore, understood the needs of the new populations of the towns, and they gave an impulse for the flowering of confraternities, associations of artisans and workers, in such a way that “in the link with the Franciscan family we can see some proto-humanistic values that were the first blossoming of a re-evaluation of Saint Joseph.”

We can follow the development of this devotion along two lines of thought, according to which the figure of Joseph is elaborated particularly between the 13th and 14th centuries, in a crucial moment for the Order, when it had to face the question of its own official integration in the Church during the animated poverty controversy.

The moderate line of thought, namely that of the great theologians of the Community of the Order, from Bonaventure to Duns Scotus, considered Joseph above all within the context of a Marian devotion, as the one who guarantees the virginal condition of Mary in the moment of the Incarnation. On the other hand, the movement of the Spirituals, whose most significant representatives were Peter John Olivi and Ubertino da Casale, defended a major radicality, by accentuating the figure of Joseph as a model to follow. In general - as we shall see later on, analysing the single authors - we can affirm that the originality of the Franciscans expresses itself in the attribution to Joseph of a holiness founded on his closeness to the Virgin and Child as the servant of the mystery of the Incarnation.

A particular and interesting contribution on the part of the Franciscans regards the discussion on the marriage between Mary and Joseph, “a classical question during the 12th century, departing from the controversy between theologians and jurists regarding the essence of marriage.”

Within this context the following tautological question was not inopportune: was the marriage of the Virgin also the marriage of Joseph? In other words, was Joseph only a functional and passive agent with respect to his spouse? Did his decision and consent determine - on an equal footing with that of Mary - the nature of that most singular marriage pact?

In Mary the marriage was the fulfilment of a divine decree: Christ had to be born of a Virgin, bride of a man from the house of David. Consequently, even for Joseph marriage was the carrying out of a divine decree: he was predestined to be the spouse of Mary, Mother of Jesus.

The fact of the marriage between Joseph and Mary, was finally a truth that cannot be rejected and that no theologian can ever put in doubt: the difficulty concerned the fact of determining the nature and in evaluating the compatible nature with the common opinion that Mary had already made a vow of virginity. Thus, the Virgin could have married Joseph, without the fear of not respecting her first vow, since she was “divinely” informed that Joseph would respect her virginity.
Within the context of this discussion, the Franciscans developed a line of thought which was already present in Peter Lombard, according to which the marriage consent does not consist in the copula carnalis (carnal union). It is Duns Scotus who underlines this aspect in a significant way, by giving a juridical more than a theological interpretation. As a background, he considered the question, which was so delicate and important for the Franciscans, regarding poverty. He makes use of the juridical concepts of dominium and usus, as they had been defined by Nicholas III in the Bulla Exiit qui seminat (1279), where he wanted to clarify the difficulties presented in the Rule regarding the rejection of property. He specified that the friars minor had the permission to make use of things, but the property pertained to the Apostolic See.

Duns Scotus affirms that marriage determines a reciprocal power on the bodies of the spouses, but that it does not necessarily entail a carnal act. Joseph possessed dominion over the body of the Virgin, but he did not make use of this same dominion.

Certainly, regarding this solution we can say that here we have an application of a mediaeval line of thought which considered the social and cultural context in which the marriage between Mary and Joseph took place. In any case, the sentence of Duns Scotus, although not being agreed upon in our times, represents a progress in the theology on Saint Joseph, who is presented as an eminently relational man, who is fully in agreement with the divine project and as such was active in assuming the role for which God had predestined him in the mystery of the Incarnation: Joseph had all the right to be father of Christ and spouse of the Mother of God.

Another aspect relative to which we can find a peculiarly Franciscan interpretation, regards the sign of the humanity of Joseph and an effective anthropological recovery - which is also expressed in a pastoral dimension - of the image of the Saint. It regards the interpretation of his eventual suspicions and fears in the face of the unexpected pregnancy of Mary (cf. Mt 1:18-21).

Regarding the hesitations of Joseph, the Franciscans generally speak of three interpretative possibilities. According to some, who refer especially to Augustine and Justine, Joseph had no knowledge of the mystery that would take place in the Virgin, and when he realised that she was pregnant, he had decided to separate himself from her since he suspected that she had committed adultery. Other authors, instead, regard that Joseph had a certain knowledge of the mystery, and place emphasis on his reverential fear, when he took the decision to secretly divorce his wife, since he felt compelled to do so out of a sense of humility and unworthiness in his relationship with her and with the Child of whom he was to become a father. Other scholars then are of the opinion that, although Joseph did not have any knowledge regarding the divine maternity of Mary, he held her with such a great degree of esteem for her holiness, that he decided to send her away secretly in order to suspend any judgment in merit.

The different and alternative readings proposed give us the idea of the clear nature of Franciscan reflection on the spouse of the Virgin. Whichever of these theses is held as plausible, the Minors did not consider the difficulty of Joseph as an embarrassing situation: rather, they considered it as an opportunity to meditate once again on the event in a pastoral perspective, by offering a more realistic and credible vision according to which the passage of Joseph’s doubts constitutes a significant step in the interior progress of his evangelical journey.

The Spiritual Peter John Olivi, on whom we shall return later on, seems to interpret such an event within the eschatological perspective of the vision of Joachim of Fiore, and he summarises the three theses we referred to above in a journey of maturation which Joseph the man did in front of the Gospel, and which developed through the moments of suspicion, humility and interior suffering.

Within the context of this synthetic and general panorama on the Franciscan approach to the figure of Joseph of Nazareth, it is useful to make at least a very short reference to the liturgical aspect of the devotion to the Saint. As witness to its importance we find the traditional belief, even though it has never been demonstrated directly, that it was during the General Chapter of Assisi in 1399, that the cult of Saint Joseph was official assumed by the Order.

At that time the only other Order that had instituted the feast of Saint Joseph with the obligation to celebrate it by all its members was the Order of the Servites of Mary, on 1 May 1324. In the course of time the cult of Sant Joseph came to have a greater development, particularly among the Observants, and it was a Franciscan Pope, the Conventual Sixtus IV, who in 1479 introduced the
feast of 19 March in the Roman Breviary and Missal, even though he limited its celebration to Rome alone. There is no doubt that the Franciscans, along the centuries, have accomplished their own part in the development and spreading - through theological reflection and preaching - of the presence of Saint Joseph in the Church.

What model, therefore, did Saint Joseph incarnate from the origins of the Franciscans? In general, in the light of what we have discovered up till now, we can affirm that Joseph is the exemplary man for his devotion and dedication to Christ and to the Virgin in relation to the three virtues which the Minors cherished in a special way: poverty, humility and obedience. We will now try to answer this question by stopping to consider some authors, and by choosing especially in them those contributions that can suggest a Franciscan vision of the peculiar role which Joseph effectively assumed within the mystery of the Incarnation: namely that of being father of the Son of God.

The fatherhood of Joseph as a locus theologicus

A quick and summary reading of the contributions of some mediaeval authors regarding our theme places in relevance how they were dominated by the preoccupation to define the nature of the marriage between Mary and Joseph: such a question becomes essential in the same definition of the fatherhood of Joseph.

In this case more than in others it expresses itself in relation: in relation to a Virgin and in relation to the Son of God. In this context we encounter the discussions on whether Joseph was true in his virginity and on the legitimate nature of his fatherhood. At the basis of the whole question lies the relation of Joseph with God: a holiness and a justice that are presupposed, a holiness and justice which are the consequence of his union with God’s plan.

Franciscan authors, as we shall see, take two factors into consideration: that which proposes the carpenter of Nazareth as a perfect father and that which exalts his humility. The levels of discussion are also two: one is strictly theological, while the other concerns preaching and presents some original and stimulating aspects regarding the human face of an earthly father of Christ, characterised also by affective and “devotional” tones, which must have given a notable contribution to the diffusion of the cult of the Saint.

It is interesting to note how the words chosen by Matthew to define substantially how Mary and Joseph related to Jesus, and how they related to one another, uncover the specific nature of their relation with God. In other words: where do Mary and Joseph meet the Lord? Which is the locus theologicus in which their vocation matures? The question might seem superficial: in fact, without any doubt, they both found God, their Lord, in the person of Jesus, in the modality of their unique closeness to him in the history of humanity. But to what extent were they conscious of this?

For Mary the locus theologicus was her own womb, where the Word of which she declared herself to be the handmaid, and then mother, became flesh. Mary cherished in herself a mystery which was not hers, but in which she entered and became part by listening and meditating in the hidden recesses of her own person. Joseph was invited by the angel to take Mary with him as his wife, and to accept all that was to be accomplished in her, and to give a Name to the Child.

In his reflection regarding the motives that would justify a virginal marriage between Mary and Joseph, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (†1274) asks why it was precisely Joseph who was chosen to be the spouse of the mother of the Lord.17

Regarding this matter he gives three explanations, of which the last one is the most original and interesting. First of all, Joseph would have been chosen since he was a member of the family of descendants of David, and it was this family that had to give the genealogy of Christ. Secondly, Joseph was chosen because his election was due to his faithfulness: Joseph, a chaste and just man, was equipped to be the inseparable companion of the Virgin. Lastly, Joseph would have been chosen because of his poverty.18 This argument is certainly in line with Franciscan spirituality: Christ came to confound the proud hearted, and he did not want to be called son of a king, but the son of a carpenter, and therefore to have a poor father.

For Bonaventure, Joseph is moreover a model of dedication to Jesus and Mary, so much so that in a sermon, which he preached to the friars Minor of Paris around 1270, on the occasion of the vigil of Epiphany, meditating upon Mt 2:21, Bonaventure invites his listeners to imitate Joseph, whom he qualifies as blessed, when during the return from
Egypt he took the Child and his mother and entered the land of Israel.

With reference to the same context, the Meditations on the life of Christ of the Pseudo-Bonaventure (end of the 13th century) define Joseph as a saint.

This writing constitutes a notable example of the new Franciscan spirituality centred upon the contemplation of the life of Christ, and assigns to the carpenter of Nazareth a primary role, by underlining the sphere of the daily life and the more material aspects of the life of Jesus. Joseph appears to be an elderly man, wise and patient: in particular, during the moment of labour of the Virgin he is described in all his loving care towards the Mother and the Child, which he embraces in his arms, in an attitude of delicate closeness.

It is surprising to note the characteristic presentation of Joseph in all the episodes that concern the insertion of Jesus in society: Joseph remains nearly in a shadow, so much so that Mary - against all Hebrew customs - is the one who performs the circumcision of Jesus. This role, which apparently seems to be marginal, carries with it the weight of Franciscan reflections on humility, poverty, service: it is precisely these virtues, more than the fatherhood in itself, that are placed in the limelight. “If the role of Joseph as a servant is widely given value, his status as father is nearly left in silence.”

In the Franciscan theological panorama, the reflection of the Spirituals gives a significant meaning to theological discussion on Saint Joseph, especially in the personalities of Peter John Olivi and Ubertino da Casale.

Peter John Olivi (†1298) is one of the first western authors who, in his Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, has composed, by keeping in mind the patristic sources as well as the writings of contemporary mediaeval authors, a dozen theological questions which all directly concern Saint Joseph, and thus he contributes in a relevant manner to the reflection on the Saint.

In general, his doctrine faces three main problems: 1) the theological questions regarding the marriage of Mary and Joseph; 2) the suspicions of Joseph and the virginal maternity of Mary; 3) the role and the dignity of Joseph in his relations with Mary, with the divine Child and with the universal Church. This last aspect is the most interesting within the theme of our analysis, especially where Olivi speaks about the sublime vocation of Joseph by departing from the tenth question, namely: for which motive did the Angel appear to Joseph always during his dreams? (Quare Angelus Joseph semper in somnis apparuit?).

Olivi answers to this question by underlining that the veneration which Saint Joseph enjoys by right is based not principally on his personal holiness, but rather on his vocation and on his role in the mystery of the Incarnation. He was intimately united to the Mother of the God-Man and of the Redeemer, with ties of a special familiarity and unity. The relations between Joseph and Christ, moreover, were those of a father in relation to his son in all its aspects, except for generation as such: “It is a fact that he was not only called and publicly acclaimed as being his father, but it is also necessary to hold that the holy man, publicly, in relation to that Word, used to live with the attitude and with the actions, with care and with authority, just as a father would do in relation to his son. Likewise, Christ, in his regards, was like a son in relation to his father.”

Olivi enjoys himself to describe with affective tones the intimacy not only between Joseph and Jesus, but also between Joseph and his spouse, and brings out the traits of a spouse and a father full of care and always vigilant, poor and itinerant with the Child and his Mother, in such a way that he reminds us of the expression Sicut advenae et peregrini (as strangers and pilgrims) that Francis indicates to his friars as the modality to live in the world, Sicut decet sanctam paupertatem (as is befitting to holy poverty).

“Bring to mind, therefore, how much faith and respect, how much purity of mind and of body, in the daily living together, with such an assiduous, immediate and singular manner, in the conversation and the caring look at the Virgin who kept watch, who slept, who ate close to him, in a tiny hovel or in a shack, or during the journey, or as a pilgrim in the same road together with him! And then, bring to mind the faith and the respect he needed to take care of and to consider with respect in a dignified manner the infantile members of Christ and all his nakedness and needs, and lastly, when Jesus became an adult, all his words and his works. […] Who can express how he, as a father, held in his arms Christ and spoke to him as a father, to that same Christ who from a tiny child would become an adult? Who can express how he could instil and imprint in him inexpressible sentiments and joys which regarded his own person, and all
this together with the external cooperation with the grace of Christ, who would behold him with a filial look and with sentiments and embraces?”

Peter Olivi underlines that, in Joseph, the dignity of fatherhood and marriage reaches its climax (fuit consummata), since the fact that he was a spouse and father has its origin and its end in God, and passes through an absolutely unique relationship with Christ and with the Virgin. It is therefore, a locus theologicus, in which Joseph is chosen and from which flows the response to his vocation. In this way Joseph becomes an instrument of the manifestation of God in the fullness of Christ.

Thanks to the commitment that God entrusts to Joseph, the Messiah can come into the world in ordered and honest manner (ordinate et honeste). In virtue of his role of spouse of Mary, head of the holy family, educator of the Incarnate Word, Joseph becomes a necessary complementary person in the divine plan.

The disciple of Peter Olivi, namely Ubertino da Casale (†1329c.), in his famous work Arbor vitae crucifxae Iesu (1305) dedicates intense pages to the figure of Joseph, with the typically affective tones of the current of the Spirituals and with a particular attention to three fundamental arguments: the virginity, the marriage and, that which is most interesting to us, the fatherhood in its theological, psychological and ascetical aspects.

The fatherhood of Joseph is undoubtedly unique and singular: Ubertino strongly affirms that is the fruit of divine election and a special grace of the Holy Spirit (ex speciali munere gratiae), it is a gift that the carpenter of Nazareth received precisely in marriage and which is superior to the legal bond established by an act of adoption:

“In fact, if according to human laws approved by God, a stranger can be adopted as a son, a fortiori the Son of God given to Joseph in the Virgin, his most holy bride, should rightly be called his son, in virtue of the sacrament of a virginal marriage.”

This fatherhood, besides, can be understood in an analogous relationship with that of God the Father, as a freely-given gift of the love of the Father to Joseph, which in this vocation has received all the necessary charisms to carry it out to perfection:

“Whenever divine grace chooses somebody for a certain state, it endows that person with all the charisms that endow with abundance that same state, and thus you may effectively conclude that the perfection of all virtues was concentrated in Joseph to the highest degree.”

If the relationship with Mary in Ubertino’s writings appears to be circumscribed in a purely spiritual dimension, the Franciscan author also likes to stop to describe - with the most human traits - the intimacy between father and son, which becomes a binding force of exterior and interior graces:

“How many sweet kisses did Jesus receive from him [Joseph]! With how much sweetness could he listen to the little Child stammer the word ‘daddy’ and with how much joy could he hold him in a tender embrace! Think also about how much compassion would he hold the little Jesus in his lap during the long journeys, whenever the little boy would be tired with walking even though he was now growing up.”

This closeness of Joseph as a father in relation to the Incarnate Word, in the reflection of Ubertino da Casale, assumes a soteriological meaning. “Joseph concludes the Old Testament since he possesses in his own body all that God had promised to the patriarchs.” Moreover, “he is more than the son of Jacob who gave corporal bread to the Egyptians, since with so much care he nurtures all with the bread of heaven, who gives eternal life. In heaven Joseph continues to do so by interceding for us and imploring at the same time that Mary would welcome us as her children.”

At the end of his meditation, Ubertino addresses Joseph with trust in this prayer: “Remember us, blessed Joseph, and through the intercession of your prayer give us always this bread. But also pray for us to your bride the most blessed Virgin, and grant us that, in spite of our unworthiness, she will adopt us as her beloved children.”

It is interesting to stop on two requests that this prayer makes to Joseph, since they are strictly connected to his particular fatherhood: this fatherhood is exercised not only in relation to the Son of God, but also in relation with us. Ubertino asks Joseph to give us “bread”. This is one of the central motives of the prayer that Jesus himself has taught us to address to God the Father. In this way it seems that the analogy of divine fatherhood, to which we have already referred, is again underlined in its mediating function: through the hands of Joseph, the same hands that welcomed and nourished the Incarnate Word of God, the Father offers to all humanity in an incessant way “the true bread of life coming down from heaven” (Cf. Jn 6:32).

In a secondary way, Joseph is invoked as mediator in front of the Virgin Mary his bride: he who is
her spouse in order to become a father, can ask her to welcome us as her children; in us, therefore, she repeats that divine maternity that has generated the Divine in her womb. In virtue of the Son, we are presented by Mary and Joseph to the heavenly Father, and thus we become children in the Son, since we become participants in the same Holy Family. It was not only necessary for Christ to have a father in order to enter into the world, but even for us it is necessary to have a father in order to become members of the family of God (Cf. Eph 2:19).

The space that Joseph occupies in the economy of salvation according to the Franciscan theological reflection, evidences how the exercise of fatherhood which is proper to him is well ordered for the good of all the Church, and how it proposes itself, in his personal experience as well as in our relation with him, as an effective *locus theologicus*.30

**Joseph preached by Franciscans: the fatherhood of the good and faithful servant**

After having considered some aspects of the Franciscan theological approach to the figure of Joseph, we shall now try to gather, as an example, in some texts of Bernardine of Siena and Bernardine of Feltre, how preaching - a speech addressed to a wider audience and with different aims - proposes the fatherhood of the carpenter of Nazareth, and underlines its value as an educational and catechetical method. Chronologically, with respect to the authors that we have examined till now, we refer to the 15th century. This period marks a moment of transition within the Order, since it was the time which saw the definitive affirmation of the Observance and its great role in the pastoral field.31

A significant contribution to the development of Christian piety regarding Saint Joseph was offered by Bernardine of Siena (†1444), who conserved, transcribed and preached the teachings of Peter John Olivi and Ubertino da Casale, and re-elaborated them in a personal manner.32

Like Ubertino, Bernardine holds that God, when he predestined Joseph to a particular grace, conferred upon him all the necessary charisms to confirm him in the mission entrusted to him, and this was strictly linked to the mystery of the Incarnate Word: the mission of Joseph was that of being held to be the father (*pater putativus*) of Christ and spouse of Mary, custodian and nourisher of the Son of the Father and of the bride of the Holy Spirit.

Regarding the marriage between Joseph and Mary, without entering into the discussions prevalent during his times, Bernardine underlines the reality of the virginal marriage, of the spiritual link which “unites in this manner the souls of Joseph and Mary in such a way as to make them constitute a *unitas summa*, one whole person, thus founding the relation between Joseph and Jesus Christ.”33

The explication of this particular paternity goes back to Peter Olivi: it is understood to be a spiritual relationship, derived from the spiritual marriage and recognised by the same Virgin, in the episode of the finding of Jesus in the Temple, where she publicly calls Joseph as the “father” of Christ. The essential foundations of such a relationship were the spiritual marriage and the divine freedom.

In order to have an idea of the devotion of Bernardine of Siena towards Saint Joseph, we can read a text of the sermon, composed between 1440 and 1444, *De S. Joseph sponso B. Virginis*.34 The greatness of Joseph is presented in relation to the Scripture: he is the one who participates, through election and through grace, and he is a fundamental actor of the history of salvation.

“Good and faithful servant, enter into the joys of your Lord” (Mt 25:23). The general rule of all singular graces, which God communicates to a reasonable creature is the following: that, when divine goodness chooses someone to a high office or to a sublime state, it gives that person all those charisms that are necessary and opportune for that elected person and its mission, and which abundantly endow that same person. This clearly appears in the Fathers of the Old Testament […] It also appears in the New Testament […] The same thing, above all other cases, has been verified in Saint Joseph, who was considered to be the father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the true spouse of the Queen of the earth and the Lady of the Angels. To him the Eternal Father entrusted with the duty of faithfully nurturing and being the custodian of his principal treasures: his Son and his bride; he carried out this office with the maximum faithfulness. That is why God, regarding this duty, says of him: ‘Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.’ In these words, we find: Good servant; faithful servant (through grace); and finally enter into the joy of your Lord (through glory). In the first is expressed the nobility of generation; in the
second the graciousness of conversation: in the third the sublimity of glorification.\textsuperscript{35}

What kind of reaction could these words arouse in the listeners of Saint Bernardine? In Joseph he offers a way of holiness that can be lived.

In the case of the virginal father of Jesus, besides, the entry into the joy of the Lord is an expression of the faith of Saint Bernardine regarding Joseph’s corporal assumption: one can believe, although one cannot affirm this with certainty, that Jesus would have rewarded his earthly father with the same privilege that was reserved to his Mother, and that in paradise the Holy Family was reunited in glory and in love.\textsuperscript{36}

It is in his relationship with his bride\textsuperscript{37} and in that with his Son that Joseph realises his vocation fully and in conformity with God’s plan. We could say that this same relation has given to the man - introducing and integrating it in the society of human relations - the humanity of Jesus, Word of God.

Another Bernardine, who was also an Observant Franciscan, blessed Bernardino Tomitano of Feltre (†1494), founder of the Monti di Pietà, often treats of Saint Joseph in his preaching,\textsuperscript{38} particularly in the Lenten sermons, given that the feast of the Saint, which had already been fixed on 19 March, always falls within the cycle of Lent. The key to reading his sermons is Franciscan Christocentrism, which finds its greatest master in John Duns Scotus.\textsuperscript{39}

The Capuchin Carlo Varischi da Milano has the merit to have published, in 1964, the unedited writings of blessed Bernardino of Feltre, in the edition of the Observant Minor Bernardino Bulgarno da Brescia. These are texts of great interest, both regarding the mixture of Latin and Italian in the region of Veneto, as well as in their vigorous ascetical-mystical afflatus.

Here we shall briefly present two texts of two sermons, both without a title. The first one was destined for popular preaching, since it is written in the language of the vulgus. It is centred upon the excellency of Saint Joseph in general. The second sermon has the traits of a theological treatise, and gives importance to the merits of Joseph. In both sermons we shall try to underline the characteristic note of the fatherhood of the carpenter of Nazareth in the peculiarity of his relationship with Jesus, the Incarnate Word.

Bernardino considers that, in Scripture, we meet with four men having the name of Joseph, all of whom were admirably adorned with the four cardinal virtues: “The first one was the patriarch Joseph, personified by prudence, since he was a most prudent interpreter of dreams (Gen 47) and he prefigures Christ, because he was sold. The second one was Joseph, brother of the Lord, who is called Just (Acts 1:23) and is personified by justice and followed Christ. The third one was Joseph of Arimathea, who is personified by fortitude, since he courageously entered in front of Pilate (Jn 19:38) and buried Christ. The fourth is Joseph, spouse of the Virgin, who is personified by temperance, since he imitated Christ and his Mother in his conduct.”\textsuperscript{40}

The Christocentrism of Bernardino is evident in the orientation of all virtues to Christ. In Saint Joseph, it is expressed particularly in the imitation not only of the Incarnate Word but also of Mary: before being a father and a spouse, the carpenter of Nazareth was also a disciple and in this disposition to faithfulness and to service, God the Father found the matter from which he could take out a nobler form, by choosing this man to such a high office to which no one had been chosen before.\textsuperscript{41} God endowed Joseph - as Ubertino and Bernardine of Siena had already stated - with all the necessary qualities to carry out such a commitment.

God entrusted Mary to the hands of Joseph, and made him worthy also to receive his Son.\textsuperscript{42} If the Virgin was full of all perfection, it is certain that her spouse was also perfect since: “It is sufficient that they be called coniuges, (under the same yoke). When two animals are tied to one another under the same yoke, if one of them precedes the other, they cannot walk well. If the other one remains behind, it is even worse. If one goes one way and the other one another, the same thing happens. It is necessary that they walk as a pair […] If one has to marry a person who is equal and the blessed Virgin was full of all perfection […] this is a sign that even Joseph was perfect to the highest degree: to him was conferred so much grace that he could be similar to his spouse, who was perfect to the highest degree.”\textsuperscript{43}

The excellent qualities with which Joseph was endowed can therefore be understood in his relationship with Christ:

“If we want to speak about theological virtues and first of all about faith, I affirm that the faith of Joseph was superior to the faith of all others. In fact, Joseph believed regarding Christ, before the same Christ was born, and he believed all that
he had to accept after he was instructed by the angel. He had such a great hope that it was greater than that of all the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, etc., since if they had hope in Christ as their lord, Joseph had hope in Christ as his son. He also possessed the highest degree of charity: in fact, who could love Christ more than Joseph? 

In this relationship of devotion to the Son of God, even before taking care of him, Joseph expressed his holiness which was none other than the perfection of his relationship with Christ and his Mother. In the second sermon that we take into consideration, Bernardino da Feltre asserts that “Saint Joseph had such a thorough knowledge of Christ that no one among the saints, except the blessed Virgin, could ever have had.”

The carpenter of Nazareth, therefore, had such a unique familiarity with Christ that we can safely assert that no one else had, except the Virgin who carried him in her womb, and no one else could delve deep into his mystery than him, with all the external and internal senses, since he participated fully in the life of that Child who came to redeem the world:

“O most holy Joseph, when you saw that Jesus was born, what did you do? What did you feel when you saw the angels, the shepherds and the magi adore him? O my soul, what do you think of this most happy saint? Do you not believe that sometimes Jesus as a Child would look with his eyes towards Joseph, would stretch his tiny arms towards him, as if he wanted to be embraced on the breast and among the arms of Joseph? Oh, I feel breathless to say these words! If the evangelist John, while he reclined his head on the bosom of the Lord, had such a deep knowledge of the same Lord, more than all the other apostles could have had, what do you think regarding Joseph? It was not Joseph, but Christ who reclined his head on the bosom of Joseph.

The tones of intimacy, affectivity, and the simple daily life that God willed to experience, are the nucleus of the Franciscan preaching regarding the figure of Joseph. They bring out to light the relationship between the dimensions of marriage and fatherhood, as the theological place of the full realisation of the plan of the Father. At the same time, they point to an affective journey of sanctification in faithfulness, service and the conscious willingness to be at the service of the Child and his Mother.

Conclusion

With this analysis we have tried to offer a general panoramic picture on the Franciscan reflection on Saint Joseph, and we have examined some details of the theological thought and the preaching within the Order from its origins to the 15th century. The question that has accompanied the development of our work has been the following: does there exist a typically Franciscan modality of interpretation and assumption of the figure of Joseph of Nazareth as a reference to the journey of faith and of evangelical life?

Having considered some authors who were friars Minor, we have tried to understand how, for the followers of Francis of Assisi, Joseph becomes a model of faithfulness, humility, poverty and obedience. The fatherhood that he humbly exercised in relation to the Son of God was not only the occasion of his service to the Most High, but also an excellent locus theologicus that confirms, once more, Franciscan Christocentrism. If in Jesus we have the fullness of his encounter with the Father, more so is this brought about in Joseph, because of the extraordinary level of intimacy with Jesus which he enjoyed. In his poverty, just as in the poverty of Mary, is realised the kenosis of the Word, who through the work of the Holy Spirit becomes a Child, who needs a mother and a father worthy of Him, who can welcome him, nourish him, defend him, educate him and teach him how to walk in this world.

The greatest underlining element regarding Joseph is that of a man living in relation to others. The saint was, in fact, precisely this: namely, he who lived in a direct and profound relationship with the Lord - he who expressed himself in obedience, in “minority”, in welcoming the Lord’s project and being faithful to the same Lord. At the same time, Joseph built relationships with others, and founded such relationships on his closeness towards charity which characterised his life, all oriented towards God.

NOTES

1 Cf. T. MATURA, Francesco, un altro volto. Il messaggio dei suoi scritti, Milan 2001, 69-70: “In all the writings of Francis, the term ‘Father’ is used 92 times, besides the mentioning of the ‘Our Father’ (8 times); with the exception of three texts, in which Francis speaks of his
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earthly father, this attribute is always given to God. We underline a particular detail, that has important theological consequences: 26 times, especially in the Office of the Passion, the word ‘Father’ is placed on the mouth of Jesus; it is Jesus who addresses the Father or who speaks about the Father.”

2 EpFid II, 4 (FAED I, 46).
3 RegNB 23, 1.3 (FAED I, 81-82).
4 RegB 6, 7-8 (FAED I, 103).
5 Cf. 2C 1.
6 Cf. the episode in which Francis gives the New Testament to the mother of one of the brothers, since she did not have anything to live with; cf. AC 93; 2C 9.
7 P. PAYAN, Joseph. Une image de la paternité dans l’Occident médiéval, Paris 2006, 75.
8 PAYAN, 73ss.
9 PAYAN, 75.
10 “The dependence on mariology has led to two hurdles, which the theological writings on Joseph could not always avoid: namely, the founding of the entire doctrinal edifice on the prerogative of ‘Mary’s husband’ and the attribution to Joseph of the privileges of the Virgin, not excluding the immaculate conception and the corporal resurrection. This identification of Joseph with mariology risks to disorientate the more fundamental perspective, namely the Christological one, and thus to veil the originality of the vocation and of the charism of the saint.” S. DE FIORES, Giuseppe, in S. DE FIORES - S. MEO (ed.), Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia, Cisnello Balsamo 1986, 647.
11 A. DORDONI, Per la storia della devozione a san Giuseppe: indicazioni di metodo e linee di ricerca, AcRel(M) 1 (1996) 331-332.
12 Ibidem.
13 DE FIORES-MEO, Giuseppe, 642.
14 PAYAN, Joseph, 81ff. Cf. also, for a more precise description of the question, J.R. SANABRIA, San José en Duns Scoto y sus discípulos, in San Giuseppe nei primi quindici secoli della Chiesa, Roma 1971, 320ff. Cf. in particular p. 326: “Toda la dificultad, en la cuestión del matrimonio de los padres de Cristo, está en compaginar el matrimonio con el voto de virgindad: in hoc non statt difficultas quaestionis, sed in isto quomodo verum matrimonia statum copiose decorant, efficaciter concludes, quod omnia virtutum perfectio in Ioseph altissime adunatur.”
15 Such was the approach of Wadding: cf. B. BURKEY, The Feast of Saint Joseph: a Franciscan Bequest, in San Giuseppe nei primi quindici secoli, 649-651.
16 “What effect the Chapter’s decree had remains a mystery. Father Gauthier has examined many manuscript copies of Franciscan liturgical books in libraries all over Europe. And for the period from 1399 up till well past the middle of the 15th century, he has found no original mention of the Feast of St. Joseph in any of the calendars”; ivi, 651.
18 Poverty as the motivation of the marriage between Mary and Joseph is typically an argument of Bonaventure.
19 PAYAN, 107.
20 A. EMMEN, Pierre de Jean Oliv. Sa doctrine et son influence, in CJos 14 (1966) 209-270. The quaestiones to which he refers are given in pages 210-211.
21 PETRUS IOANNIS OLIVI, Postilla super Matthaeum, cap. 1: Quaestiones selectae de Sancto Joseph, X, 40, in EMMEN, Pierre de Jean Olivi, 268: “Si enim comparas ipsum ad Virginem, de qua nulli est dubium quod est super omnem puram creaturam, ipse habebit, respectu eius, statum ineffabili dignitatis sive auctoritatis ac unitatis et familiaritatis. [...] Cogita igitur quid est dictum quod Virgo, Christi Mater, vero ac pleno sensu se habebat ad istum sicut ad virum suum, sibi divinitatis traditum et confirmatum. Cognita etiam quantum est hoc, quod ille se habebat ad eam, quam sciebat certissimmue esset matrem Christi, tamquam ad suam veram coniugem, super cuius speciali assumptione et cura Dei praecipita habebat.”
22 Ibidem: “constat quod non solum publice vocatur et reputatur est pater eius, sed etiam tenere oporet quod sanctus vir publice se habebat ad eum verbo, actu et gestu, et cura et imperio, sicut pater ad filium. Et consolihet Christus ad ipsum sicut filius ad proprium patrem suum.”
23 Cf. Test 24.
24 EMMEN, Pierre de Jean Olivi, 268-269: “Cogita igitur quanta fides ac reverentia, quantoque puritas mentis et carnis, et affectus ac sensus, erat semper necessaria ipsi Ioseph, in assiduo et immediatissimo et secretissimo convivio, colloquio et aspectu [Filii] Virginis vigilant, dormientes, comediterns circa ipsum, in uno parvo turugio sive cella, aut in eadem via simil iteranetis et peregrinantis cum illo! Et iterum, quanta fides ac reverentia indigebat ad semper dignes tranquilla et contienza Christi infatilia membri et omnes suas nuditates et necessitates; et tandem, cum fuit adulter, omnis eis verba et opera. [...] Quis dicere quod ipsi tenenti Christum in brachis tamquam pater, et confabulantes cum ipso ut pater, Christus, sive infans, sive adulter, non ingeret et imprimeret ineffabiles sensus ac iucudiosacem de semetipso, et hoc cooperante exterius Christi gratia cum filiali aspectu, afflatu et amplius!”
25 P. MARTINEZ, La josefología de Ubertino de Casale, in San Giuseppe nei primi quindici secoli, 339ff.
26 Ibidem: “Si enim secundum leges humanas approbatas a Deo potest extraneus adoptari in filium, multo magis Dei Filius datus Ioseph in su sacratissima coniugie Virgine sub virginis matrimonio sacrament debet meritio eius filius appellari.”
27 Ibidem: “quod quando divina gratia aliquem elegit ad aliquem statum, omnia charismata illi tribuit, quae illum statum copiose decoravit, efficacer concluded, quod omnium virtutum perfectione in Ioseph altissimae adunatur.”
28 Ibidem: “O quam dulcia oscula ab ipso recepti! O quantula dulcedine audiebat balbutientem parvulum se patrem et familiaritatis. [...] Cogita igitur quid est dictum quod quando divina gratia aliquem electam ad aliquem statum, omnia charismata illi tribuit, quae illum statum copiose decoravit, efficaciter concluded, quod omnium virtutum perfectione in Ioseph altissimae adunatur.”
30 Cf. MARTINEZ, La josefología de Ubertino, 350.
32 Cf. P. MARTINEZ, Teología josefina en la predicación
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Regarding the communion between Mary and Joseph the following annotations by Bernardine are very touching: “Since the virgin knew how intimate was the matrimonial unity in the spirit and in love, and knew moreover that Joseph had been given to her by the Holy Spirit as spouse and faithful custodian of her pure virginity, and since he took part with Her in the love of charity and in the reverent care of the most divine Son of God, I am convinced that She loved in a most sincere manner Saint Joseph with all the affections of her heart.” “After having reflected upon all that which could be reasonably thought by a devout and prudent mind, regarding Saint Joseph and the blessed Virgin, I will not dare to deny that Mary loved Joseph more than all the other creatures, indeed, above all other creatures, after the blessed fruit of her womb Jesus. I am speaking, however, of a social love; since, with regards to the love of charity, She loved most those who are best before God.”

CAROLI, Mistici Francescani. Sec. XV, 665 and 672.


39 Cf. CAROLI, Mistici Francescani. Sec. XV, 843.

40 MARTÍNEZ, Dos sermones ineditos, 78: “Primus fuit Ioseph patriarcha et significatur pro prudentia, quia fuit prudentissimus explorator omnium, Gen. 47, et figurat Christus, quia fuit venditus. Secundus fuit Ioseph, frater Domini, qui cognominatus est Iustus, Actuum primo, 23, et significatur pro iustitia et secutus est Christum. Tertius Ioseph ab Arimathia et significatur pro fortitudine, unde audacter ingressus est ad Pilatum, Iohn, 19,38 et sepelivit Christum. Quartus est Ioseph sponsus Virginis et significatur pro temperantia, et imitatus est Christum et matrem eius in regimine.”

41 Ivi, 82-83: “ubi reperitur materia melius disposita, ibi introducitur nobilior forma.” “Deus elegit istum hominem ad officium tale, ad quod nullus hominum fuit electus. Signum est quod erat talis naturae bonae et sanctae et sufficientis, quam nullus habuit.”

42 Ivi, 85-86: “Quod Deus dedit Mariam in manibus Ioseph. O vere gloriosus sanctus, quantum fuit dignificatus, cui dedit Deus Mariam et filium.”

43 Ivi, 86: “Si aliqua debet nubere pari et beata Virgo fuit plena omni perfectione [...] signum est quod etiam Ioseph fuit perfectissimus, cui collata fuit tanta gratia, ut possit esse similis coniugi suae perfectissimae.”

44 Ivi, 87: “Si volumus loqui de virtutibus theologicos et primo de fide, dico quod fides Ioseph superavit fidem omnium, nam Ioseph creditid de Christo antequam nascetur, edoctus ab angelo, omnia credenda. Habuit spem in Christo, ut eorum domino, sed Ioseph habuit spem in Christo, ut in filio. Habuit etiam charitatem supremam: quis enim potuit amare Christum quantum Ioseph?”

45 Ivi, 101: “Sanctus Ioseph habuit cognitionem de Christo, quae amanda sunt eis, excepta beata Virgine, creditur habuisse.”

Saint Francis’ visit to Damietta and his encounter with al-Malik al-Kamil

The episode of the arrival of Saint Francis in Egypt in 1219 has already been the object of profound study by historians in the past and present. It marks an initiative that was original in its unfolding and in the effect that it left upon the Christian presence in the Holy Land. Although it regards more the history of the Franciscan Order in its beginnings, it nevertheless has been documented by contemporary sources coming from the pen of chroniclers of the Fifth Crusade, who were not familiar with the new religious family founded by Francis. Therefore, their testimonies are precious, even though they were written with the aim of recording the military expeditions of the Crusaders and only speak marginally about the encounter of Francis with al-Kamil.

The visit of Francis of Assisi in the East in 1219, marks an important chronological moment in Franciscan history. It was a turning-point in the expansion of Franciscan presence in the lands of Outremer. One cannot deny the legendary elements that have invaded this episode in later documents, thus making it difficult to arrive at conclusions that are truly definite. However, a look at the earliest documentation gives a clear idea of the historical nucleus of what remains a question open to discussion among contemporary scholars of Franciscan history.

A look at the sources for this episode necessitates a brief presentation of the various possibilities of interpretation of the event. Our aim is principally that of re-proposing the efforts of a pioneer in Franciscan studies, namely Girolamo Golubovich OFM (1865-1941), in the first volume of the series Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell’Oriente Francescano, published in 1906. The volume covers the period of the beginnings of the Franciscan Order, namely from 1215, and continues until the end of the 13th century, giving particular attention to the phenomenon of Franciscan presence in the Levant. Such an approach can be possible with the expert help of two other lay historians of the early Franciscan movement, namely Paul Sabatier and Arnaldo Fortini.

Golubovich presents a chronological table of the visit of Saint Francis in the East during the Fifth Crusade. I shall present his approach, together with the objections of more recent scholars of Franciscan history, but essentially his description remains fairly reliable.

The opening of the Franciscan Order to the missions “beyond the Alps” and “beyond the sea” goes back to 14th May 1217. This date marks the event known as the General Chapter of Pentecost, which was a general assembly of the ministri and custodes of the Order in Assisi, presided by Francis himself. This general assembly was celebrated every year on the solemnity of Pentecost, at least until 1223, the year when the Regula bullata was confirmed by Pope Honorius III. Later on, this General Chapter would be celebrated once every three years.

It was in this chapter that Francis sent his brothers to remote regions and instituted missionary fraternities in them. These fraternities would eventually form the first “provinces” of the Order. Among the mediaeval sources for the life of Saint Francis, we find this following description of the event in the Legenda trium sociorum (Legend of the three companions): “At Pentecost, all the brothers used to gather at the church of Saint Mary and discuss how they could better observe the Rule. They appointed brothers throughout the various provinces who would preach to the people, and assigned other brothers in their provinces.”
The same episode is narrated in more detailed manner by the *Chronicle* of Nicholas Glassberger and the *Chronicle of the XXIV Generals of the Order*, which indicate the exact year of this general chapter. During that Chapter a group of brothers volunteered to go to the mission of Outremer. Their leader, or minister, was elected in the person of Brother Elias of Cortona. The Province of Outremer, also known as the Province of Syria, or Provincia Terrae Promissionis, originally encompassed all the regions of the Middle East, including Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Antioch, Cyprus and Greece.

Although the Franciscan presence in the Holy Land goes back officially to 1217, the *Vita Prima* of brother Giles (Egidio) of Assisi states that this humble friar was the first brother who arrived in the Holy Land and visited the Tomb of Christ in Jerusalem in 1215.

On 9th May 1218, one year after the Pentecost Chapter in which brother Elias had been sent to the East, King Jean de Brienne, Duke Leopold of Austria and Wilhelm of Holland, left with the Crusader armies from Acre and landed near Damietta, on the Nile delta. They prepared to besiege the city of Damietta. In September the warrior-like Papal Legate Pelagius Galvan arrived in the Crusader camp. Al-Malik al-Mu'azzam Isa, sultan of Damascus and brother of al-Malik al-Kamil, came to the aid of his brother, and on his way destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, except for the Citadel of David and the Holy Sepulchre. By February 1219 the Fifth Crusade, which had camped on the western shore of the Nile, crossed over to the eastern side and began to attack Damietta.

It was during the Pentecost Chapter of 26th May 1219 that Francis decided to undertake the journey to the East. He departed from Ancona on 24th June, although other historians opt for Brindisi as being the more probable port from where the Crusaders would depart. The sea journey would normally pass through the Adriatic to the Straits of Otranto, and then hug the Greek coast close to Corfu, Cephalonia and the Peloponnese peninsula. The Crusader ships would then cross over to Crete (Candia) and travel east, south of Rhodes and the Anatolian peninsula, until they would arrive in Cyprus, which was the property of the Lusignan Kings. From there it would be fairly easy to cross over to the Lebanese coast and on to the Crusader port of Acre.

Arriving in Acre, Francis landed at the Pisan port, where he was welcomed by brother Elias. He must have spent some days in Acre, but soon continued on his way, presumably by sea, along the Palestinian coast down to Damietta. He was accompanied by a group of brothers, among whom we mention Brother Peter Catanio, or Cattani, who would later on become Francis’ vicar (29th September 1220 - 10th March 1221, when he died at the Portiuncula), and Brother Illuminato of Rieti. Francis must have arrived in Damietta at the end of July.

During the month of August, Francis witnessed the military preparations of the Crusaders. On 29th August 1219 they had decided to launch an attack on the Saracen forces of Damietta. Francis had an important role in this venture, since he tried to dissuade the Crusaders from attacking the city, foreseeing a tragic end. He was not heeded and the Crusader army suffered a humiliating defeat. The principal biographer of Saint Francis, brother Thomas of Celano, narrates the event in the *Memo riale in Desiderio Animae*, written in 1246-1247. It was this humiliating defeat that promoted the Crusader leaders to ask for a truce, which was established in the beginning of September with al-Malik al-Kamil. It was during this ceasefire period that Francis attempted to go personally to meet the Sultan of Egypt.

The witness of the Chroniclers of the Fifth Crusade

In the study of the sources relative to Francis’ encounter with al-Malik al-Kamil scholars normally distinguish between the early non-Franciscan sources coming from chroniclers of the Fifth Crusade, and the sources coming from the pen of Franciscan writers of the 13th and 14th centuries. The trend of these latter sources is that of adding legendary elements to their narration, with an explicit aim of promoting the ideal of martyrdom and the zeal for the conversion of the Saracens as the driving force behind Francis’ initiative. While it is true that Francis was also motivated by the Crusading spirit in his desire for martyrdom and in his willingness to preach Christ to the Muslim leader, the style he adopted was certainly very different...
from the usual belligerent attitude prevalent in the Christian ideals of his times. We shall start with a brief look at the non-Franciscan sources outlined by Golubovich.

The first witness of the presence of Francis in Damietta in 1219 is the bishop of Acre, Jacques de Vitry-sur-Seine (c.1160/70 - 1240). He left us with a detailed witness of the phenomenon of the origins of the friars Minor and also of the presence of Francis in Damietta. For our theme, the letter written in Damietta is particularly important. Jacques states that Francis went to the Saracen camp zelo fidei accensus, and especially that, multis diebus Saracenis verbum Domini praedicasset. According to Golubovich, this detail in the description shows that Francis did indeed preach Christ to al-Malik, and that he remained for many days in the Saracen camp.

In chapter 32 of the Historia Occidentalis, Jacques de Vitry describes Francis for the first time, and states that he met him personally in Damietta, and presents some more details regarding the visit of Francis to al-Malik al-Kamil, particularly the courage of the Saint in proclaiming that he was a Christian.

The other non-Franciscan sources studied by Golubovich include the chroniclers of the Fifth Crusade, namely chapter 37 of the Chronique d’Ernoul (1227-1229), the Liber de Acquisitione Terrae Sanctae by Bernard the Treasurer (1229-1230), and the Histoire de Éracles emperere et la conqueste de la terre d’outremer (1229-1231). The Chronicle of Ernouf is interesting because of the way it describes how Francis requested the permission of the Cardinal Legate Pelagius to be able to cross over to the Saracen camp, and the diplomatic response of the Cardinal who was obviously contrary to what he considered to be an act of pure folly:

“Now I am going to tell you about two clerics who were among the host at Damietta. They went before the Cardinal, saying that they wished to go to preach to the Sultan, but that they did not want to do this without his leave. The Cardinal told them that as far as he was concerned, they would go there neither with his blessing nor under his orders, for he would never want to give them permission to go to a place where they would only be killed [...] And thus they begged the Cardinal insistently. When he saw that they were firm in their resolve, he told them: ‘Sirs, I do not know what is in your hearts or in your thoughts, whether these be good or evil, but if you do go, see that your heart and your thoughts are always turned to the Lord God. They responded that they only wanted to go [to the Sultan] to accomplish a great good which they longed to carry to its conclusion. Then the cardinal said it was indeed good for them to go if they wished, but that they were not to let anyone think that he had sent them.”

The text of Bernard the Treasurer is very similar to what the Chronicle of Ernoul already states. Maybe the most interesting detail regards the attitude of the Sultan of Egypt who is described as “gentle of heart” and that “he listened kindly” to Francis and his companion, who we know was Brother Illuminato of Rieti.

The last text is very short, but highly significant. It is the quotation from the Anonymous History of the Emperor Eracles (1229-1231):

“That man, who began the Order of friars Minor - a brother called Brother Francis - who was later made a saint and officially raised to that dignity, so that we call him Saint Francis, came to the army at Damietta. He accomplished many good things and remained until the capture of the distressed. For that reason, he left there and stayed for a space of time in Syria, and from there he returned to his country.”

The most important detail for Golubovich regards the expression “he left there and stayed for a space of time in Syria.” Golubovich makes a special comment on these expressions in order to defend his thesis regarding a prolonged presence of Francis in the Levant.

NOTES


2 G. LIGATO, La Crociata a Damietta tra Legato Papale, profezie e strategie, in San Francesco e il Sultano, 427-476.

3 G. GOLUBOVICH, Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell’Oriente Francese, Tomo I (1215-1300), Quaracchi, Firenze, 1906.

4 P. SABATIER, Life of Saint Francis of Assisi, 223-238.


6 G. GOLUBOVICH, Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica, 1, 85-104. This section is entitled “Regesto Cronologico de’ fatti principali della vita e del viaggio di S. Francesco in Oriente, dell’assedio di Damietta.”


An English translation of this voluminous Chronicle: ARNALD OF SARRANT, Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals of the Order of Friars Minor, English translation by N. MUSCAT, TAU Franciscan Communications, Malta, 2010, 2 volumes.


10 F. SEDDA, Frate Elia e il Capitolo del 1217: una provincia d’Oltremare?; G. LIGATO, Acri al tempo di frate Elia da Cortona, unpublished papers presented during the Study Days held in the Monastery of Saint Saviour, Jerusalem, in October 2017. We do not know exactly where the first friary of the Franciscans in Acre was be found, at least at the very beginning when brother Elias arrived. We do know, however, that later on, the friars Minor had a church and convent in the quarter of Montmusard. This was a newly-built residential quarter, that grew in the beginning of the 13th century in the northern section of Acre, and was surrounded by its own fortifications. Cf. F. SEDDA, Crusader Art in the Holy Land. From the Third Crusade to the Fall of Acre (1187-1291), Cambridge University Press, 2005, 183.


12 GOLUBOVICH, 92-93, quotes Mariano da Firenze, who states that Francis and his companions, on their way to Acre, stopped first in Candida (Creta), and he also quotes L. WADDING, Annales Minorum seu Trium Ordinum a S. Francisco Institutiorum, Tomus I, Romae, 1731, ad an. 1219, n. 57, p. 322 who states that Francis stopped in Cyprus and arrived in Acre in mid-July 1219: “Ancona itaque solventibus, brevi demum tempore navis applicat Cyprum, insulam Mediterranei maris notissimam.”

13 THOMAS OF CELANO, Memoriale in Desiderio Animae, 30, in Fontes Franciscani, 469-471: “Tempore quo Diamitam Christianorum exercitum obsidebat, aedaret sanctus Dei cum sociis suis: siquidem fervore martyrii mare transierant. Cum igitur ad diem belli nostri pararentur in pugnam, auditus hoc, sanctus vehementer indoluit. Dixitque socio suo: ‘Si tali die congressus fiant, ostendit mihi Dominus, non in prosperum cedere Christianis. Verum si hoc dixer, fatuus repetobatur; si tacuerro, conscientiam non evadam. Quid ergo tibi
Franciscan Culture


Jacques de Vitry-sur-Seine was born in France and studied in the University of Paris. In 1210 he became canon regular in Oignies in the diocese of Liège, where he was spiritual director of the Beguin Marie d'Oignies. He was a preacher of the Albigensian Crusade in 1211-1213. In 1216 he was chosen as Bishop of Acre, and travelled to Italy. He describes the Cathar heresy in Milan and the death of Innocent III in Perugia. He was consecrated bishop by Pope Honorius III and departed from Genoa to go to his See in Acre and thence proceed to join the Fifth Crusade in Damietta, where he stayed from 1218 to 1219. It was in Damietta that he personally encountered Saint Francis. In his Letters, written in Genoa (1216) and Damietta (1220) he describes the way of life of the friars Minor. In 1225 he returned to Europe and in 1229 Pope Gregory IX made him Cardinal Bishop of Frascati. He died in Rome around 1241 and was buried in Oignies. The Letters of Jacques de Vitry were published in a critical edition: Lettres de Jacques de Vitry (1160/1170-12140), ed. Critique par R.B.C. HUYGENS, Leiden, 1960.

JACQUES DE VITRY, De Ordine et praedicatione Fratrum Minorum, ex cap. 32 Historia Occidentalis, in GOLUBOVICH, Biblioteca I, 9-10: “Vidimus primum huius ordinis fundatorem et magistrum, cui tanquam summum Priori suo, omnes ali li obediunt, virum simplicem et illiteratum, dilectum Deo et hominibus, fratrem Francicum (sic) nominatum, ad tantum ebrietatis excessum et fervorem spiritus raptum suisse, quod cum ad exercitum Christianorum ante Damiatam in terra Aegypti devenisset, ad soldani Aegypti castra intrepidus et fidei clypeo communitas accessit. Quem cum in via Saraceni tenuissent: «Ego sum Christianus, inquit, ducite me ad Dominum vestrum.» Quem cum ante ipsum pertransissent, videns eum bestia crudelis, in aspectu viri Dei in mansuetudinem conversa, per dies aliquot ipsum sibi et suis Christi fidem praedicantem attentissime audivit. Tandem vero metuens ne aliqui de exercitu suo verborum eius efficacia ad Dominum conversi ad Christianorum exercitum pertransierint, cum omni reverentia et securitate ad nostrum castra reduci praecipet, dicens ei in fine: «Ora pro me, ut Deus legem illam et fidem, quae magis sibi placet, michi dignetur revelare.»”


FAED I, 609. The Estoire de Éracles empeure et la conqueste de la terre d’outreme, is an Old French anonymous continuation of the Chronicle of William of Tyre. Original text in GOLUBOVICH, Biblioteca I, 14.

GOLUBOVICH, Biblioteca I, 14: “A noi basta constatare, per il breve estratto che qui sotto riportiamo, che il traduttore e continuatore dell’Éstoire de Éracles scrisseva tra il 1229-31, e che la sua testimonianza quantunque concisa, è però di somma importanza, narrandoci egli circostanze particolari trascurate da tutti gli altri storici. Egli è il solo che ci dice espressamente che il Santo si fermò in Egitto «sino alla presa di Damiat», e che quindi, disgustato dalla mala vita de’ Crociati, se ne partì per la Siria, ove restò «per un pezzo di tempo» prima di ritornarsene in Italia.”
The Custody of the Holy Land has been blessed with the presence of many Maltese Franciscan missionaries during its 8 centuries of existence. The fact that Malta was on a direct course for missionaries crossing over to the Holy Land, especially since the times of the Order of Saint John, provided an occasion for Maltese friars to offer their services to the Custody. Among these friars we present the figure of a humble Franciscan lay brother, namely Fra Elija Grech, from information gathered in the Archives of the Custody of the Holy Land.

**Biography of Fra Elija Grech**

Elija Grech was born in Mellieha on 12 March 1865, son of Giovanni and Rosa Grima. On 19 October 1884 he entered as a Franciscan and began his Novitiate in the Maltese Franciscan Custody of Saint John the Baptist. On 19 October 1885 he made his first Profession, while he made his Solemn Profession on 18 December 1891, when he was already in the Holy Land. He did not show sufficient ability for the study of philosophy and theology, and therefore his superiors did not encourage him to receive the order of priesthood, and he remained all his life as a Franciscan lay brother.

On 17 June 1889 Fra Elija entered officially in the service of the Custody of the Holy Land. This meant that, although he remained a member of the Maltese Franciscan Custody of Saint John the Baptist (from 1914 the Maltese Franciscan Province of Saint Paul the Apostle), he entered under the obedience of the Father Custos of the Holy Land, with full rights and duties in the same Custody, as is the practice of all Franciscan missionaries who go to the Holy Land. From the documentation of a report sent by his community in Ain Karem, when he requested to be received for Solemn Profession, it appears that, as soon as he arrived in the Holy Land, Fra Elija was sent to the friary of San Giovanni in Montana in Ain Karem.

From a letter written to the Custos Fr. Giacomo Ghezzi da Castelmadama on 12 November 1890, we come to know that Fra Elija protested that, while he was still in the Maltese Franciscan Custody, where he lived in the convents of Santa Marija ta’ Ġesù in Rabat (Notabile) and Valletta, his superiors never wanted to welcome his request for Solemn Profession. He states that he had received some lessons for the state of lay brother by a secular priest who was entrusted for this task, since the lectors of the Maltese Custody did not want to welcome him to the lectures they delivered for the clerics, or students, who were preparing themselves for Holy Orders.

Another letter, written on 9 March 1891, is an official request by Fra Elija to be received for Solemn Profession in the Custody of the Holy Land. In the same letter, written always in the friary of Ain Karem, Fra Elija asked the Custos for permission to be able to go to Jerusalem to assist
at the liturgical celebrations of Holy Week in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. From the outset we note the great interest of Fra Elija in the difficult work of sacristan in the most important sanctuary of Christendom, as he later on showed by living for a total of 20 years serving the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre.

After doing Solemn Profession in 1891, Fra Elija continued to offer his service in the Holy Land for 63 years, especially as a sacristan in many sanctuaries. The first place in which he was sacristan was the Sanctuary of the Nativity of Saint John in Ain Karem, known as San Giovanni in Montana (1891-1894). From there he was sent to the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem (1895-1898). But the most important period of his service was that offered as an assistant sacristan and principal sacristan in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (1898-1914, and 1918-1926). In 1905-1906 he was sent for a brief period of service to the convent of Larnaca in Cyprus.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, since Fra Elija was officially a British citizen, the Ottoman Turks who ruled Palestine and were at war with the English, captured him as a prisoner and sent him to Damascus in Syria. After some time, they expelled him from the Turkish domains and he had to return to Malta, where he remained until the end of the war in 1918. In the meantime, Turkey had lost control of Palestine, and the region had become a British Mandate. Thus, Fra Elija could return to the Holy Land.

After his service in the Holy Sepulchre, Fra Elija was sent once again to the convent of Larnaca in Cyprus (1926-1931), and then to the Sanctuary of Saint John in Ain Karem (1934-1946), and finally to the convent of Ramleh (1946-1950).

Being a late octogenarian, Fra Elija’s health deteriorated, and he retired to Jerusalem, in the convent of Saint Saviour, where he died on 3 November 1951. He was buried in the Franciscan cemetery close to the garden of Gethsemane, since at that time East Jerusalem was part of Jordan and the Franciscan cemetery on Mount Zion was in an area taken over by Israel in 1948. His grave is marked by a simple cross, with his name engraved upon it, in the midst of many other similar graves. Fra Elija was 87 years old and he had been a Franciscan friar for 66 years (G. AQUILINA, Il-Frangiżkani Maltač, 635).

Although he was a lay brother, Fra Elija wrote a manuscript of 100 pages regarding the celebrations and the status quo rules observed in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. This manuscript is a tiny note-book, conserved in the Archives of the Custody of the Holy Land. It is a kind of vademecum for the sacristans of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, the fruit of the great experience of Fra Elija in his difficult and complicated job. It is entitled Per uso del Primo Sagrestano del Santissimo Sepolcro. Opera del Primo Sagrestano del Sepolcro Fra Elia Grech OFM, da Malta. Fra Elija was also present at the Holy Sepulchre during one of the most difficult moments of its history, when tensions between the Greek Orthodox monks and the Franciscans were at an all-time high, because of the Greek’s intransigence in claiming a tiny space of the courtyard in front of the Basilica to which they had no claims. Although the chronicles of the Custody do not mention Fra Elija explicitly in this event, we know that he was present in the Holy Sepulchre as assistant sacristan in 1901. We shall now recount what happened.

The incident of the attack of the Greek Orthodox monks on the Franciscan friars in the courtyard of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre (4 April 1901)

We are giving this information from the official chronicle of the Custody (Archivio CTS, Cronaca della Custodia di Terra Santa, compilata per ordine del Rmo. P. Ferdinando Diotallevi dal P. Eutimio Castellani, Cronologo [1888-1905], 629-675). At that time Fra Elija was an assistant sacristan at the Holy Sepulchre. The chronicle mentions another Maltese Franciscan who was present and was also wounded seriously during the disturbances. His name was Fra Celso (Ċels) Micallef, who is documented as being an “English” friar (since the Maltese were British citizens). He was born in Bormla on 11 March 1868, son of Luigi and Rosa Vassallo. His baptismal name was Paolo. He entered the Novitiate on 18 October 1893 and made his first Profession on 18 October 1894. Fra Ėlja had entered directly in the Custody of the Holy Land, where he had made his Solemn Profession on 19 October 1897. He was wounded at the Holy Sepulchre on 4 April 1901, and as a result he decided to return to Malta in 1903, where he joined the Maltese Custody on 21 July 1904. However, he returned again as a missionary to the Holy Land, where he is documented to having been in Alexandria (1911), Jerusalem (1913) and Bethlehem (1920-1922). He was a very capable
carpenter, and left some outstanding works, the most famous of which are the sculptured wood inner ceiling of the church of Santa Marija ta’ Ġesù in Valletta, and the choir stalls and other woodworks of the church of Saint Anthony in Gozo. Fra Ċels died on 20 March 1932 in Victoria, Gozo. He was 64 years old and had been a Franciscan for 38 years (G. AQUILINA, Il-Franġiskani Maltin, 629).

The incident involving the Franciscans in front of the Holy Sepulchre occurred on 4 April 1901, when Fr. Frediano Giannini was Custos. In order to understand what happened, we need to know the reality of the status quo that goes back to 1757 (confirmed by the Turkish Sultan Abdul Majid I in 1853). The proprietors of the Holy Sepulchre Basilica are Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land (Latin or Catholic), and the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

During these violent incidents were involved many Greek Orthodox monks and about 20 Franciscan friars of the Holy Land Custody, led by Fr. Prospero da Marennes, Custodial Vicar. The incident occurred in the courtyard in front of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, on the right hand side facing the main door, below the stairs leading to the Chapel of the Franks, which is adjacent to Calvary. This Chapel and the stairs belong to the Franciscans.

It is the right of the Latin (Franciscan) sacristan of the Holy Sepulchre to sweep these steps every day, including the lowest row of stone slabs touching the pavement of the courtyard. These slabs are also property of the Franciscans. Some days before the fateful 4 April 1901 the Franciscan sacristan protested with the Custos that one of the Greek Orthodox monks began to show resistance towards him while he was sweeping these stone slabs. Although the issue seems ridiculous, in the case of status quo rules governing the peaceful co-existence of Christian communities in the Holy Sepulchre (Jerusalem) and Bethlehem (Nativity), such details are of the utmost importance, since any tiny infringement of the status quo can lead to serious trouble.

According to the chronicler of the Custody, the whole question was raised by the Greek Orthodox Superior of the Holy Sepulchre, the monk Eutimios, who had already taken some initiatives of restoration without consulting the Latin and Armenian communities, and was also planning to restore the cistern under the courtyard in front of the Basilica. His action was an affront to the common ownership of the courtyard by the three communities. Eutimios at first responded to the protests of the Custos by diplomacy, but on 2 November 1901 he sent him a message stating clearly that the Greek monks would not tolerate the Franciscan sacristan sweeping the stone slabs beneath the steps leading to the Chapel of the Franks.

On 3 November, early in the morning, the Father secretary of the Custody, who has the right to celebrate Mass daily in the Chapel of the Franks, went down for the celebration, but was advised to remain with the brother sacristan after Mass while he was sweeping the steps and to report what would happen. With him the Custos also sent the “dragoman” (lay official of the Custody to defend the friars during processions and to play the role of interpreter with civil authorities). All of a sudden about 50 Greek monks (many of whom were lay people dressed as monks) appeared and began to offer resistance to the sacristan when he arrived at the bottom of the steps. The Turkish police intervened by ordering that nobody could sweep those stone slabs and sending everybody away. The Custos immediately protested at the affront to the right of the Latins, and wrote a letter to the French Consul, who defended the rights of the Latins (Catholics) in front of the Turkish Sultan in Constantinople. The Custos also informed the Turkish Governor of Jerusalem, and was told that he could set his mind at rest that the civil authorities would defend the Franciscans and their legitimate rights.

The following morning, 4 April 1901, the secretary again went down to celebrate Mass at the Chapel of the Franks, and remained there with the dragoman and the sacristan while the latter swept the steps. When he arrived at the stone slabs on the courtyard, about 10 Greek monks came out of the Basilica armed with brooms, together with their Vicar, and began to hinder the sacristan. At the same time various Greek Orthodox lay persons began to fill the courtyard of the Basilica, as if they had been summoned. Three guards were present, but they did not defend the Franciscan sacristan, and even shoved the dragoman while he was defending the sacristan on the contested stone slabs. Hearing what was happening the Custos sent his Custodial Vicar on the spot. In the meantime the police commissary and another three officials could not calm the situation and gave up.

Tension was rising. Some Franciscan friars who were praying in the Basilica heard the shouts and came out to see what was happening. Other Greek monks and lay persons continued to fill
the courtyard. The Custos contacted the French Consul and begged the Governor to go personally to intervene. In the meantime other Franciscans came down from the convent of Saint Saviour to defend their confreres in the courtyard.

At the sight of the friars gathered in the courtyard the Greek monks and lay persons (a good number dressed falsely as monks) retreated to the Greek church of Saint James on the opposite side of the courtyard. Many of them went up on the terraces around the courtyard and began to prepare stones and pieces of cloth soaked in paraffin oil and stuffed in glass bottles. The intention was that of wounding the friars in the courtyard. The Greek Orthodox Superior continued to insist on his presumed right, and even succeeded in convincing the Greek Patriarch.

The local authorities were alerted to try to calm down the situation. The Commander Aly Bey tried to convince the Greeks to let the Franciscans sweep their part of the courtyard, and told them that this was an order of the Governor. It was all in vain. A delegation of Greek monks went to the Governor to defend their position against the Franciscans. In the meantime about 20 Franciscans remained standing on the steps leading to the Chapel of the Franks, facing the insults of the monks and lay persons on the terraces all around them. The Greeks were boasting that they were soon to celebrate a victory.

The Custodial Vicar and the friars in front of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre were unarmed and waited patiently for the definitive answer of the Governor, since the French Consul had asked them to stay in their places and wait while he would try to avoid any tension leading to acts of violence. The Ottoman Turks in Palestine during the early years of the 20th century were gradually losing power, and their influence was waning. At about 10 in the morning the Commander Aly Bey was urgently called to go to the Holy Sepulchre. He arrived after half an hour and went to speak with the Greek Superior, trying to convince him to desist from the affront to the Franciscans. The French Consul sent a letter to the Custodial Vicar urging him and the friars to await patiently the resolution of the whole question.

When the executive manager of the French Consul was sent to the Custos, the latter recalled the Custodial Vicar from the courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre in order to organise a meeting. When this meeting started at about 3 pm, suddenly a friar who was with the others in the courtyard came in breathless in the Custos’ office, and informed those present that the Greeks had begun to attack the Franciscans in the courtyard and that many of them were wounded, some also seriously. The executive manager ran down to the Holy Sepulchre, while the big bell in the Greek’s bell-tower of the Basilica was tolling solemn notes, which seemed to be those of a funeral.

What happened was that, when the Greek monks and lay people noticed that the Custodial Vicar had been recalled from the courtyard, they decided to begin attacking the poor Franciscans. The Superior Eutimios went inside the Basilica and seemed to be directing the attack and encouraging the monks to take the opportunity.

The group of Franciscan friars remained calm in their places, enduring the insults and blows. Some were spitting upon them. The police were helpless in trying to calm the situation. At a certain moment the Greek Superior Eutimios came out of the Basilica and gave orders to attack the friars and drive them away from the stone slabs they were stubbornly defending. At the sound of the great bell of the Greeks, stones were hurled on to the defenceless friars. The chronicler describes the fate of the Latin sacristan of the Holy Sepulchre: “Il Sagrestano Latino del SSmo. Sepolcro, uscito dalla Basilica sul piazzale col cappuccio in testa e le mani dentro le maniche, per vedere di che si trattava, all’improvviso è circondato da sette greci già iniziati ai Sacri Ordini... Dal terrazzo gli si getta sul capo una grossa pietra; uno dei diaconi che gli si era messo di dietro la colpisce alla nuca con un bastone; gli altri moltiplicano i colpi e le ferite: quel poveretto cade a terra tramortito in lago di sangue, e i crudeli seguitano ancora a percuotelo” (Archivio CTS, Cronaca, 658-659).

The wounded friars were taken to the convent of Saint Saviour, where they were attended to by nurses and doctors. The chronicler gives us the list of the friars who were wounded: 1 French, 2 Germans, 5 Italians, 1 English (Fra Celso Micallef from Malta), 1 Spanish, 2 Russians, 1 Dutch, 2 Syrians. They were 15 friars in all.

We do not have any hint as to where Fra Elija Grech was during this incident. He must certainly have been inside the Basilica, and would become a witness of that fateful day when his brothers were brutally attacked for defending their rights in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. Thanks God, incidents such as this are things of the past, and the status quo is well respected by the communities resident in the Holy Sepulchre. But historical truth remains a witness to the enduring mission of the Maltese Franciscans who gave their generous service to the Custody of the Holy Places.
Saint Francis, armed only with humble faith

“For us it is a bit like coming back to this place to thank those who live here today. And I would say that that courage was particularly important because, thanks to that journey, Saint Francis understood that it was fundamental to have a different approach to the Muslim world; not violent clash but the approach that he passes on to us in the Rule ‘of not having quarrels, disputes, of being subjects and submits of every human creature for the love of God’, that is, to the service of everyone with a clear identity but also with respect for the identity of others. [...] Today was a very beautiful event because these children staged the meeting of St. Francis with the Sultan. Therefore, I hope that by staging it they have understood the value of that encounter and that they will become true peacemakers. [...] The first motivation is to express solidarity with the Coptic church of Egypt, which has been affected many times in recent years; they are truly giving the whole world a testimony of great martyrdom. Then there was the friendship with the Coptic church. In Jerusalem we have good relations with Bishop Antonio, with the Coptic community and I believe it is important to cultivate this type of relationship, also from an ecumenical point of view, to do everything we can to cultivate the way of unity by the path of friendship. [...] It is a very important statement for the future of relations between Christians and Muslims but also, I think, for the future of the world. I was struck by the availability of teachers, religious authorities and young people present: you could see Al Azhar seminarians and students who participated with great interest. This is something very positive, it means that we can talk about it and we can really build bridges.”
Cover picture:

Saint Francis in harmony with creation