



No. 147: JANUARY – MARCH 2024



Journal of Franciscan Culture
Issued by the Franciscan Friars (OFM) Malta



Quarterly journal of
Franciscan culture published
since April 1986.

Founders:
John Abela ofm
Raymond Camilleri ofm

Available at:
<http://www.franciscanstudies.com>

All original material is
Copyright © TAU Franciscan
Communications 2022

Contents

- Editorial
- La Verna: The Site of the Stigmata of Saint Francis
- La Verna as the Inspiration of the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* of Saint Bonaventure
- A Relic of the Blood of St. Francis in *Ta' Ġiežu* Church in Rabat
- Sant' Angelo di Panzo

147

Editorial

LA VERNA 1224 - 2024

The upcoming centenary celebrations for 2024 concern the event which occurred on Mount La Verna in September 1224, when Francis of Assisi received the stigmata of the Passion of Jesus during a contemplative experience in which he beheld a Crucified Seraph. The significance of the event is not only historical, but above all existential for the Franciscan family. The aim of the centenary celebrations during the period 2023-2026 is that of facing the reality of our Franciscan calling in the light of the message that these experiences of Francis of Assisi convey to us. To know the historical accounts from the Franciscan Sources is important, but it is also important to be able to contextualise them. What is the meaning of the stigmata of St. Francis? Why did he never speak about this mystical experience except to a select few? What do we mean when we consider Francis as a true image, an icon, of Christ Crucified? During this year let us try to understand the deep significance of Francis' suffering as an experience of transfiguration. It is this experience that our world so badly needs. In the midst of wars and bloodshed which have tainted our world and which know no signs of abating, we are continually being challenged to respond with a witness of hope and of a new beginning. We can achieve this not so much by being evident or powerful, but by being like Francis, who expressed the wisdom of the cross in the folly of his love of Christ poor and crucified, present in the lepers and outcasts of all times.

Noel Muscat OFM

LA VERNA: THE SITE OF THE STIGMATA OF SAINT FRANCIS

David Gagrčić OFM

Between 1223 and 1224 three significant and spiritually decisive events took place in the life of St. Francis: the Pope's approval of the Rule on 29 November 1223; then, the celebration of Christmas at Greccio and the creation of the live Nativity Scene together with the population of the town in December 1223; and in September 1224, the experience of contemplation and stigmatization, on Mount La Verna. In just a few months, the interior life and the discipleship of the Poverello experienced profound stages, a sudden maturation.

800 years after these events, Francis of Assisi continues to offer us Franciscans, but also to men and women of our time, his fruitful and universal (Catholic) spiritual message.

La Verna

During the first decades of the 13th century, on the Tuscan Apennines, northeast of Arezzo (Italy), in the heart of the Casentino forest, at an altitude of about 1200 meters, the construction of one of the first and most famous Franciscan hermit settlements began.

It all started from the meeting of Francis of Assisi with Orlando (or Rolando) Catani (or Cattaneo or of Catenaia), feudal lord of Chiusi in Casentino, on the occasion of a knightly investiture that took place near San Leo, in the Montefeltro area. The nobleman, after listening to the saint's sermon, made friends with him and finally

decided to donate to him and his friars the La Verna mountain, a solitary mountain, a suitable place for the prayer and retreat for Brother Francis and his friars, always in search of hermitages and places of this kind. In fact, from the moment of his conversion, until the end of his life, Francis lived his experience of seeking God and announcing penance, with very frequent stays in particularly solitary places: the Carceri (cells) on Mount Subasio, Poggio Bustone, La Foresta and Fontecolombo in the Rieti Valley, Sarteano, the Sacro Speco of Narni (Sacred Cave of Saint Francis in Narni), Montecasale (Hermitage of Montecasale), the Isola Maggiore on Lake Trasimeno, etc... Eremitism thus constituted a fundamental dimension of his life. Let it suffice to say that Francis lived 5 Lents in a year (200 days out of 365).

The Sanctuary, which stands on the rock embraced by the the Casentino forest, is one among the most beautiful, precisely because of its location. And it is one of the most important specifically because it is closely linked to the life of St. Francis.

Dante, the great poet, considered the "father" of the Italian language, expresses his admiration for the Poverello by writing the famous tercet of *Paradiso*: "there, on the naked crag between the Arno / and Tiber, he received the final seal / from Christ; and this, his limbs bore for two years"¹ - and tells its story of the *Last Seal* evidently referring to the stigmata received. A destination for prayer and recollection, the hermitage, the cradle of many reforms

David Gagrčić is Vicar of the Franciscan fraternity of La Verna. Talk delivered in Malta 14 Feb 2024.

¹ DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Paradiso*, Canto XI, 106-108 (FAED III, 885).

of the Franciscan Order, over the centuries, also became a symbol of political and religious power (a strong link with the city of Florence, which exercised its influence over the hermitage as *ius patronatus*), with an important social role (refuge for shepherds and wayfarers, a place of care for many, given the presence of the ancient pharmacy), a place where nature and spirituality find their balance and where the beauty of uncontaminated places embraces faith, history and culture.

After Francis's departure, the friars had tried to keep alive the memory of his passage and had slowly transformed the ancient huts of branches, into chapels and churches, initially decorated according to the style of the time, with fresco paintings. With the humidity and the significant temperature range, the fresco technique at La Verna did not hold up, therefore, in these buildings, even today, one can admire the largest collection of *robbiane* (17 pieces): beautiful works of glazed ceramic art depicting scenes from the life of Christ and Mary, with saints. A true "Bible of the poor", useful as an ornament but above all a silent and powerful catechesis for believers.

The complex today includes the small Church of Saint Mary of the Angels commissioned by Francis himself, the corridor and the Chapel of the Sacred Stigmata and the Basilica dedicated to Saint Mary of the Assumption. And then there are the various accommodations for the pilgrims (Foresterie), and the various cloisters, as well as various chapels and small hermitages scattered in the woods.

Stigmata

What are "Stigmata"? They are the signs of Christ's passion that appeared in the body of Saint Francis on La Verna, around the feast of the Most Holy Cross (14 September) 1224 and always kept hidden by him, except from a few close friends, for two years. Many did not learn of it until the time of his death, in 1226, when his body

was placed, as he himself had determined, naked on the bare ground.

Etymologically, the word "Stigmata" has its origin in a Greek word (*Stygmata*), has remained so in Latin, and therefore in most modern languages. In the Greek language, it referred to the mark that was stamped with flaming iron on cattle, or even on slaves, or even as a painful prick whose mark remains on the body.

In St. Paul, the term is used in the Letter to the Galatians where we read: "I bear in my body the *stigmata* of the Lord Jesus" (Gal 6:17). The term refers to "signs", but it is not very clear what Paul means by this expression. Perhaps he is referring to signs of beatings suffered from his adversaries, or, according to another ancient tradition, he would have borne in his body the wounds that Jesus himself bore in his body and which were seen after his deposition from the cross: the wounds caused by nails in his hands and feet and the wound in his side, provoked by the spear blow of the Roman soldier.

A brief "Journey" into the Franciscan sources

After St. Paul, the term "stigmata" does not seem to have been officially used until the promulgation, in 1226, of the encyclical letter of Brother Elias, Minister General, to the friars of the Order, in which the death of St. Francis is announced and a partial description of the event and phenomenon of the stigmata is offered:

"And now, after telling you these things, I announce to you a great joy and the news of a miracle. Such a sign that has never been heard of from the dawn of time except in the Son of God, who is Christ the Lord. Not long before his death, our brother and father appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds which are truly the marks of Christ. His hands and feet had, as it were, the openings of the nails and were pierced front and back revealing the scars and showing the nails' blackness. His side,

moreover, seemed opened by a lance and often emitted blood.”²

A description, that of Brother Elias, which differs significantly from the one adopted by Thomas of Celano in 1228 in *The Life of Saint Francis*. The latter also offers much more biographical elements. If for Brother Elias the stigmata are *holes* or *scars*, for Thomas of Celano, on the other hand, they are fleshy and bloody protuberances turning outward in the form of the nails. Thomas also offers the temporal context (*Two years before he died*) and geographical (*La Verna*) of the event. The difference between the two stories might seem minimal and trivial, but in reality, it is not. Elias’ narrative places Francis in a kind of direct identification with the person of Christ, while Thomas in recounting the event continues to maintain a “respectful distance between the image and the model.”³

Brother Leo, a friend and companion of Francis, who was present at La Verna in 1224 and was a direct witness of the event, left two testimonies: the first, written in his own hand on a piece of parchment given to him by Francis on which he had written with his own hand *The Praises of God*, and then *A Blessing for Brother Leo* (the so-called *Chartula*, preserved in Assisi in the sacristy of the Sacro Convento, Leo’s note): “Two years before his death, the blessed Francis spent forty days on Mount LaVerna from the Feast of the Assumption of the holy Virgin Mary until the September Feast of Saint Michael, in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and the blessed Michael the Archangel. And the Lord’s hand was upon him. After the vision and message of the Seraph and the impression of Christ’s stigmata upon his body, he composed these praises written on

the other side of this page and wrote them in his own hand, thanking God for the kindness bestowed on him.”⁴

The second, the indirect source, reported by Thomas of Eccleston, refers to the Chronicle of an English friar who is said to have met Brother Leo and collected his testimony. The latter immediately appears more elaborate than that of Thomas of Celano and even that of the notes on the *Chartula*, in which it is simply said that “the Lord’s hand was upon him” quoting the book of Ezekiel.⁵ The Chronicle of the English friar⁶ always evokes an angelic figure (the seraph and not a crucified man under the appearance of a seraph!) who physically interacts with Francis and marks him harshly, initially leaving him with a feeling of fright.

So, rearranging some of the data, in Brother Leo’s version, Francis is presented as a sort of *prophet* who God would purify by means of an angel (seraph) and would do so in a painful and at the same time consoling way (promises on the future of the friars and the Order).

This very brief examination of some of the sources (there are also many others!) makes us understand the complexity of the sources/versions concerning the event of the stigmata and also the different look that the various hagiographers have adopted in evaluating such a unique and singular experience. Last but not the least, it must be taken into account that every hagiographer (or iconographer) responds to a basic idea that he wants to convey and on the basis of that he uses the data in his possession. The differences, however, should not be exaggerated because, after all, the message conveyed is essentially the same: the wounds on Francis’ body *corresponded* to those of the crucified.

² *Encyclical Letter of Brother Elias* (FAED II, 490). [A Letter on the Passing of Francis attributed to Elias of Assisi].

³ A. VAUCHEZ, *Francis of Assisi. The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, translated by M. F. CUSATO, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2012, 218.

⁴ *The Praises of God and the Blessing (The Parchment Given to Brother Leo on La Verna) (1224)*, (FAED I, 108).

⁵ Ezk 3:22-23.

⁶ FF 2519 (The Chronicle of Thomas of Eccleston).

It cannot be denied that, among the new characteristics of Francis' holiness that have attracted the attention of hagiographers and artists/iconographers, are obviously the stigmata, which in classical iconography have become, following his death, his peculiar attributes. In reality, La Verna's message does not focus so much on stigmatization, to be understood as a simple miracle, but on the path of *Christiformity* that, here at La Verna, Francis brought to completion, starting from his experience before the Crucifix of San Damiano. In *The Legend of the Three Companions*, after the conversation with the Crucifix at San Damiano, it is said that:

"From that hour, therefore, his heart was wounded and it melted when remembering the Lord's passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart. This was brilliantly shown afterwards in the renewal of those wounds that were miraculously impressed on and most clearly revealed in his body."⁷

In the words of Thomas of Celano: "the sign is hidden, but the thing signified is eloquent."⁸ Significantly, the friars who were the custodians of the Hermitage of La Verna in the 1400s, in the chapel of the stigmata, did not want to represent the stigmatization of Francis but the crucifixion of Jesus, the true model of Christian life.

St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, in his work *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* written at La Verna around 1259, only 33 years after the death of St. Francis and 35 after his experience on La Verna, writes: "...he who looks... at him suspended upon the Cross... makes *the Passover*, that is the transit, together with Him..."⁹ Commenting on this

famous Bonaventurian verse, Benedict XVI writes:

"This is the heart of the experience of La Verna, of the experience that the *Poverello* of Assisi made here. On this Holy Mountain, St. Francis lived within himself the profound unity *sequela, imitatio* and *conformatio Christi*. And this is how he says to us that it is not enough to call oneself Christian to be Christian, nor even to seek to do good deeds. It is necessary to conform oneself to Jesus with a slow, gradual transformation of one's being into the image of the Lord, so that by Divine Grace, every member of His Body, which is the Church, may show the necessary likeness with the Head, Christ the Lord".¹⁰

So what exactly happened to La Verna in September 1224?

It is difficult to say with historical precision, because **Francis never spoke of the stigmata in his writings and forbade the rare people who might have seen them to speak of them**, perhaps to guard the secret. It was only after his death that several friars and lay people, including Brother Elias, were able to contemplate them in his body. To understand with what scrupulousness and conviction he kept the stigmata hidden, even from his dearest companions, we quote a passage from *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* or *Memoriale* or 2Cel: "One time a companion saw the marks on his feet, and said to him: 'What is this, good brother?' But he replied: 'Mind your own business!'"¹¹ This severe expression is striking: "Mind your own business!" This can certainly be linked to what Thomas of Celano says about Francis in the *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*: "He strove to hide the *good things* of

⁷ L3C 14 (FAED II, 76).

⁸ Trans. by A. Vauchez. 2C 203 (FAED II, 377).

⁹ BONAVENTURE OF BAGNOREGIO, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VII, 2. Also see BONAVENTURE OF BAGNOREGIO, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, VII, 2, Christian Classic Ethreal Library, Michigan 2002, 26.

¹⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Visit to the Shrine of La Verna*. Address of his holiness Pope Benedict XVI, Sunday, 13 May 2012 in:

<https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120513_la-verna.html>. accessed on 20-01-2024. (In fact, this speech was published but was never delivered in person by the Pontiff at La Verna because due to bad weather he was unable to reach the Shrine that day).

¹¹ 2C 135 (FAED II, 335).

the Lord in the secrecy of his heart, not wanting to display for his own glory what could be the cause of ruin.”¹²

The event of the stigmatization, which the various hagiographers tell us took place on the Mount La Verna, two years before his death, that is, in 1224, around the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14 September) is therefore confirmed and adhered to by many sources of truthfulness, but more than in the light of the data of history, it is to be understood in the light of faith in Christ which, in turn, is based on the interior action wrought by revelation.

From this point of view, the analogy with what the Gospels tell about the Resurrection of Christ is evident. There are no historical witnesses to the occurrence and the only thing that can possibly be ascertained is the presence of the Risen One who shows the disciples the wounds on his hands, feet and side.

But in both cases the truthfulness of what happened, and even more so for us who do not have the possibility of direct contact with the witnesses of the alleged events, finds its foundation in faith, which is the human response of adherence to the action of God who reveals himself or, to put it in simpler terms, is the *fruit of an encounter with God*.

In this sense, the category that qualifies the experience of faith is that of encounter. There is no faith without encounter. And since divine revelation comes to us primarily in the form of words transmitted, it is possible to say that only when these same words bring about an interior change in us do we prepare ourselves to embark on a journey of faith. What we are told is credible because by those same words we feel scrutinized and known, accompanied and supported. We can see ourselves reflected in them and experience truth to the extent that we perceive them as indispensable inner nourishment.

The historical investigation is therefore important but not necessary and conclusive

to give an affirmative or rejection of what happened.

It is not possible to read the stigmata except in the light of the life of Christ

Anyone, as long as they do not deliberately put an obstacle in your way, can experience a love that transforms, leaving the signs of his passage: love, if it is authentic, asks for your life, makes you go through an experience of death, and returns it to you regenerated. It is, to put it in biblical terms: an *Easter*, a transition/passage.

What we instinctively reject is dispossession, emptying, acceptance of one's own condition of powerlessness, the acknowledgment of failure. In a word: *dying to ourselves*.

I am, I want, and I can, are those categorical imperatives that, more or less consciously, prevent us from embracing and following a fruitful path of faith and change.

In all this, and thus in the experience of stigmatization, the central point from which to start is not so much the human story of Francis but the human story of Jesus.

As we pointed out earlier, opportunely, and with reason, in the chapel of the stigmatization of La Verna the friars did not have the stigmatization of Francis represented, but the Crucifixion of Christ. It is not simply a question of a correct theological interpretation, but above all of the acceptance of Francis' own perspective, the condition in which he wished to place his entire experience of faith: in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth.

One last clarification. If the peculiarity of St. Francis' experience of life and faith consists, as is mostly recognized today, in the *sequela Christi*, the crucifixion of Jesus is not the only horizon on which to measure his life of faith. His model is therefore the whole life of Christ, following whom he places himself, making his sentiments his

¹² 2C 133 (FAED II, 333).

own, imitating his gestures, repeating his words. The contemplation of the crucifixion and Easter are therefore the culmination of a long and intricate journey of discipleship that Francis experienced in his life of faith.

In this regard, I quote an interesting reflection by Br. Cesare Vaiani, taken from an article he wrote some time ago in which he commented on the nature of the *Considerations on the stigmata*:

“The acute reflection of the biographers/theologians of the previous century, of Thomas of Celano in a rhapsodic manner and of Bonaventure in a systematic form, had laid the foundations for a formidable theological deepening of the meaning of the stigmata through the theme of conformity, which can certainly be considered the central theme of Christian spirituality. To recognize the stigmata as the supreme sign of conformity means to return to the good essence of the Christian life, which proposes to every believer in Christ to conform to him, to follow in his footsteps, to make him one’s own model of life.”¹³

The Inner and Outer Condition of Francis when he climbs Mount La Verna: The Struggle

When Francis climbed Mount La Verna in 1224 to live a Lent (not liturgical) in honour of St. Michael the Archangel, followed by a few companions, he suffered from a precarious and highly trying physical, psychological and spiritual condition. *The Mirror of Perfection* has expressed it through the mouth of the Saint as follows: “If the brothers knew how many trials and how great are the afflictions the demons cause me, there would not be one of them who would not be moved to piety and compassion for me.”¹⁴

In addition to this narrative, it is known that, especially in the last years of his life, he was tormented by spiritual and physical trials (malaria and near-blindness).

At the same time, he lived in a condition of marginalization and rejection on the part of his own fraternity. From the summer of 1220 he wrote, in fact, the Rule in various versions which, however, were rejected by the friars, and the definitive version that he composed at Fonte Colombo in 1223 evidently suffered from a ‘domestication’ marked by the intervention of the Roman Curia.

Evidently frustrated and subjected to very strong inner pressures, he retired into the woods followed by a few companions, the most faithful, including Brother Leo. No more and no less can we speak of an experience of failure and loneliness. In prayer, he was seeking for a response from the Lord that did not seem to come.

Prostrate in pain, *The Mirror of Perfection*¹⁵ tells us that for two years he lived inwardly a ‘very serious temptation,’ and it is not out of place to believe that it could consist in abandoning everything. Francis lived the experience of the cross, abandonment by God (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”): it is not out of place to say that he experienced a real crisis of faith, his ‘dark night of the soul’.

After his death, the friars certainly reflected on this painful phase of his life, on the great temptation and on his stigmatization. Between legend and history, the *De Conformitate* by Bartolomeo da Pisa, a text written between 1380 and 1385, and the *Considerations on the stigmata* by an anonymous author at the end of the fourteenth century, tell of the attempt pursued by the devil to throw him off the precipice near the place where he will then receive the stigmatization. How to read this episode? The only thing that seems plausible to say is that in September

¹³ This study is the result of a report at a conference on the *Fioretti (Little Flowers)* of Saint Francis and also appears in: P. BARTESAGHI (ed.), *I Fioretti*. Atti del V Convegno di Pozzuolo Martesana (11 October

2014), Associazione Cardinal Peregrusso, Ancora, Milan 2015, 37-96.

¹⁴ 2MP 99 (FAED III, 346).

¹⁵ 2MP 99 (FAED III, 346).

1224 Francis at La Verna played the decisive battle of his faith and his existence and what he put at stake was his own life: naked in front of a silent God.

Biblically, we would be faced with one of those passages commonly defined as 'borderline tales' including, for example, Jacob's fight with the Angel at the river Jabbok. A battle that lasted all night that will see Jacob himself victorious but that will leave the indelible marks of the battle in his body.

Francis either loses everything in this struggle with God or, if he wins, he will have to change his name, go out of himself, acquire a new identity, wade across the river, abandon his land and his past. He somehow completes the path of conversion mentioned in *The Legend of the Three Companions*, when he says: "From that very hour he began to consider himself of little value."¹⁶ We are faced with the inner and outer dynamics of a journey of faith that has reached its extreme point. The signs of this struggle will remain, however, visible or invisible, real or imagined.

One may or may not believe in stigmatization as a fact that concerns the body, but all those who set out on the path that pursues the way of the cross, of self-sacrifice for the good of others, know well that they will carry in their interiority, and invisibly and inevitably also in their own body, the signs and wounds that loving entails, giving one's life, desiring to be reciprocated, and accepting not to be reciprocated.

If what we fear is that we will be hurt, we will try not to love. It is possible to structure infinite systems of self-defence against pain and trial, hiding ourselves in the most imaginative and elaborate ways, communicating ourselves to others except

under the conditions imposed by us. Those who love manifest their fragility and consciously expose themselves to rejection and the possibility of contempt. Those who love voluntarily decide to give their lives. This is the decisive discerning factor for understanding what it really means to love.

But love, in order to be complete, waits patiently and painfully, bound to a cross, suspended between heaven and earth, for an answer. Only the experience of deprivation of love opens the heart to the gift: "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."¹⁷

Bibliography

- Liviana BORTOLUSSI, *Le stimate di San Francesco nei dibattiti del '900*, EDB 2013.
- Andr  VAUCHEZ, *San Francesco d'Assisi*, ed. Einaudi 2010.
- Franco CARDINI, *Francesco d'Assisi*, ed. Mondadori 1989.
- *Fonti francescane*, III edizione rivista e aggiornata, EFR 2011.
- Chiara FRUGONI, *Vita di un uomo: Francesco d'Assisi*, ed. Einaudi 1995.
- *Discorso del Santo Padre Benedetto XVI*, Domenica 13 maggio 2012
https://www.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/it/speeches/2012/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120513_la-verna.html
- Rino BARTOLINI, *Stimate di San Francesco*. "Il Processo",
[https://www.academia.edu/107736180/Stimate di s Francesco dAssisi](https://www.academia.edu/107736180/Stimate_di_s_Francesco_dAssisi)

¹⁶ L3C 8 (FAED II, 72).

¹⁷ Jn 12:24.

LA VERNA AS THE INSPIRATION OF THE *ITINERARIUM MENTIS IN DEUM* OF SAINT BONAVENTURE

Noel Muscat OFM

Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio was elected Minister General of the Order of friars Minor on 2 February 1257 during the Chapter of Aracoeli in Rome. His choice hardly fell upon the capitulars themselves. Indeed, the majority of the brothers gathered for the chapter were sad to see his predecessor, Giovanni Buralli da Parma, resign from Minister General. He had been elected in 1247 and had been a holy and virtuous brother, visiting the Provinces of the Order on foot, and leading a very simple and humble style of life.¹ Unfortunately he had been accused of showing sympathy to the ideals of the Spiritual brothers of the Order, who were advocating the eschatological theories of Joachim of Fiore and applying them to the prophetic figure of Francis of Assisi and his Order, often in contrast to the institutional framework of the Church. For these reasons Pope Alexander IV decided that it would be best for Giovanni da Parma to offer his resignation. However, he also asked him publicly to propose who he deemed would be the best candidate to succeed him. Giovanni indicated that he knew of no other brother who was as wise and prudent in the

art of government as Brother Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, who at the time was *magister regens* of the Franciscan school in Paris.²

News of the election reached Bonaventure some weeks later. He had never dreamt about being Minister General and had to face the new responsibility with courage and determination. On 23 April 1257 he sent a circular letter to the entire Order,³ outlining his policies and indicating various faults of the brothers that were bringing the Order into disrepute even among the faithful. From the onset Bonaventure showed himself to be a capable man of government. At the same time, however, he did not plan to create enemies within the Order itself, and although having taken the decision to isolate Giovanni da Parma in the hermitage of Greccio, he also tried to mitigate the influence of the Spirituels not by condemning them, but by indicating the genuine way in which they could look at the prophetic calling of Francis and his Order without necessarily exasperating the Roman Church.

¹ R.B. BROOKE, *Early Franciscan Government. Elias to Bonaventure*, Cambridge University Press 1959, 255-256.

² G.G. MERLO, *In The Name of Saint Francis. History of the Friars Minor and Franciscanism until the Early Sixteenth Century*, Franciscan Institute Publications, St. Bonaventure University, NY 2009, 200-202.

³ DOCTORIS SERAPHICI S. BONAVENTURAE, *Episola I*, in *Opera Omnia*, Collegium S. Bonaventurae, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) 1898, Vol. VIII, 467-468. English translation: ST. BONAVENTURE, *First Encyclical Letter*, in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*. Vol. V: *Writings Concerning the Franciscan Order*. Introduction and Translation D. MONTI, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1994, 58-62.

Bonaventure's plan was that of saving the Order from internal strife and divisions. Whether he ultimately succeeded or not is a question of debate to this very day, since after the end of his generalate the Order entered into another phase of tension and division. However, as long as he was Minister General, Bonaventure prudently steered the Order into calmer waters. The majority of the brothers, those forming the so-called *communitas Ordinis*, or community of the Order, were cooperative. The Spirituals were less so, but even then they could not say that Bonaventure was adamantly against their ideals. Indeed, Bonaventure planned to present a new image of Saint Francis in such a way as to make the founder acceptable to both parties, portraying him as a prophet and mystic, but also as a faithful obedient servant of the Roman Church and as a staunch defender of the Order's role in being a bulwark of defence of doctrine in learning and pastoral activity entrusted to it by the highest authority of the Church, often in competition with the friars Preachers who also had large convents and schools of theology in the University towns of Europe.

Two years after his election as Minister General Bonaventure felt the need to retreat for a short period of time to reflect upon his role and upon the need of reform of the Order. He chose a very significant place to do so, namely Mount La Verna, in the Casentino mountains of Tuscany. It was in this hermitage that he reflected upon the unique event of 14 September 1224, when during the feast of the Exaltation of the

Cross or whereabouts, Francis of Assisi received on that mountain the vision of the Crucified Seraph who imprinted the stigmata of Christ on his body.

Francis had acquired Mount La Verna from Count Orlando of Chiusi way back on 8 May 1213, when during a festival of knights at the Castle of San Leo in Romagna, Francis and Brother Leo had encountered Count Orlando, who generously offered the brothers the use of a lonely and savage mountain above his castle in Chiusi, known as Monte della Verna.⁴ After having sent the brothers to inspect the place, Francis decided to spend a period of time there every year, from the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel (15 August to 29 September). It was during one of these periods of contemplation, two years before his death, that Francis received the stigmata.

Bonaventure seems to have meditated very deeply about this event during the quiet weeks he spent on the mountain in 1259. It seems that he needed to be alone in order to reflect upon a right course of action. He felt as if he were "a poor man in the desert." The result of his meditations was the production of one of the most famous and profound mystical treatises of all times, namely the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*,⁵ translated as *The Journey of the Soul into God*.⁶ This treatise was not written on La Verna, but it was conceived on the holy mountain and subsequently composed by Bonaventure after the end of his experience, which was, in so many ways, a mystical experience.

⁴ The story of the donation of Mount La Verna by Conte Orlando di Chiusi is found in chapter 9 of the *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum eius*, entitled "The Finding of Mount La Verna" (FAED III, 452), and also in the *First Consideration of the Holy Stigmata*. A full edition of the text is that of the *Delle Sacre Sante Istimate di Santo Francesco e delle loro Considerazioni*, which follow the text of the *Fioretti*, in *Fonti Francescane*, Terza Edizione, Edizioni Francescane, Padova 2011, marginal numbers 1897-1903.

⁵ DOCTORIS SERAPHICI S. BONAVENTURAE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, in *Opera Omnia*, Collegium S. Bonaventurae, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) 1891, Vol. V, 294-313.

⁶ BONAVENTURE, *The Soul's Journey into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis*, Translation and Introduction E. COUSINS, Paulist Press, New York 1978, 53-116. Here we follow the edition: SAINT BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, Introduction, Translation and Commentary PH. BOEHNER, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1998.

Thus we can say that La Verna was not the physical place where the *Itinerarium* was written, but it was certainly the place where it was conceived. The rugged loneliness of the woods on the mountain, with the biting cold winds of winter and the fresh summer breezes, with the frost and snow and mist that cover the mountain on many days of the year, provided the ideal spot for Bonaventure who would be able to behold the rugged beauty of the rocks and crevices and remember the wounds of Christ imprinted on the body of the Poverello of Assisi.

The experience of the retreat on La Verna of 1259 changed Bonaventure profoundly in his outlook on Franciscan life. He had been accustomed to live in the *magna domus studiorum*, the large convent of studies of Paris. His environment was that of the large lecture rooms, library, conventual setting and church, monastic prayer and silent reflection during long hours of reading and composing his notes and voluminous works. On La Verna Bonaventure had nothing of the sort, but only a poor hermitage where he could pray in the chapel of Saint Mary of the Angels and go to the place where Francis received the stigmata, or contemplate the *Sasso Spicco* in which he would feel as if he was in the abyss of the wounds of Christ or in the open rocks of Calvary. This was the setting that inspired him to reflect and pray, even before taking the pen in his hand to write down his experience in the splendid description of his *Itinerarium*.

The journey of the poor man in the desert

The *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* is a mystical treatise of seven chapters, introduced by a prologue. It is in the prologue that Bonaventure describes the

⁷ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, prolog., in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, Vol. II, Introduction and commentary PH. BOEHNER, Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1998, 31.

circumstances in which he composed this work:

Inspired by the example of our blessed father, Francis, I sought after this peace with yearning soul – sinner that I am and all unworthy, yet seventh successor as Minister to all the brethren in the place of the blessed father after his death. It happened that, thirty-three years after the death of the Saint, about the time of his passing, moved by a divine impulse, I withdrew to Mount La Verna as to a place of quiet, there to satisfy the yearning of my soul for peace. When I abode there, pondering on certain spiritual ascents to God, there occurred to me, among other things, that miracle which in this very place had happened to the blessed Francis – the vision he received of the winged seraph in the form of the Crucified.⁷

The Seraphic Doctor then goes on to explain the framework of his treatise, based upon the vision of the Crucified Seraph that imprinted the stigmata on Francis:

The six wings of the seraph can be rightly understood as signifying the six uplifting illuminations by which the soul is disposed, as by certain grades or steps, to pass over to peace through the ecstatic transports of Christian wisdom. The road to this peace is through nothing else than a most ardent love of the Crucified, the love which so transformed Paul into Christ when he was rapt to the third heaven that he declared: *With Christ I am nailed to the Cross. It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me* (Gal 2:20). And this love so absorbed the soul of Francis that his spirit shone through his flesh the last two years of his life, when he bore the most holy marks of the Passion in his body.⁸

On La Verna Bonaventure had the experience of mystical union with God through Jesus Christ and through creation. Indeed, the figure of the six-winged Seraph,

⁸ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, prolog., in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, Vol. II, 33.

which is the highest among the angelic hierarchy, at the centre of which Francis beheld the Crucified Jesus, is a kind of iconographic representation of cosmic redemption. It is the entire universe and creation that is partaking of the saving power of the Passion of Christ. The angelic hierarchy descends into cosmic creation on Mount La Verna and transforms it in the mystery of the stigmatisation of the body of the Poverello. Bonaventure enters into this kind of dynamic process of inner ecstatic transformation that leads him out of his human poverty to behold the uplifting power of the journey of his soul into God through and in creation, through and in the faculties of intelligence and free will, and through and in the mystery of God One and Triune.

The overall feeling of Bonaventure is that of being a poor man. The subtitle he gives to the *Itinerarium* is eloquent: *Incipit speculatio pauperis in deserto* (Here begins the speculation of the poor man in the desert).⁹

This speculation is a kind of mirroring of self in the radiant glory of Christ Crucified, as seen within the natural context of the desert of La Verna. Bonaventure is aware of the biblical importance of the desert as the place where man meets God face to face. It is there that he wanted to ascend in order to experience what Francis had felt when he beheld the image of Christ Crucified in the Seraph on La Verna. Although the natural environment of La Verna is very different from the deserts of the Bible, it is nevertheless a wilderness of rocks and lush vegetation in which the human person feels little and insignificant in front of the lofty glory of God. In the silence of contemplation, in the self-emptying of all human wisdom and intelligence, in the sensation of going up to high places, to the peak of glory on the top of the mountain, Bonaventure might have truly felt a poor man in need of

understanding reality. The poverty of Francis on La Verna is more than just a material expression of a lack of possessions. It is an existential way of being in the mystical embrace of the One who, though he was rich beyond all imagination, became poor for our sake (cfr. 2Cor 2:8). It is this existential poverty of the Crucified that Bonaventure mirrored in his heart and imagination during the long hours of contemplation on La Verna.

La Verna and the mystical experience of the Paschal mystery

The experience of St. Francis on La Verna was an experience of suffering and transfiguration. The physical setting of the mountain reminds us of both Calvary and Mount Tabor. The whole treatise is based upon a mystical journey that ascends to the heights of contemplation through the uplifting of the soul, symbolised by six stages culminating in the seventh stage of mystical union. Bonaventure often uses such an image, which is biblical, since it refers to the six days of creation and the seventh day of sabbatical rest. The *Itinerarium* is a journey taking the soul to this mystical peace at the end of the ascent through the six wings of the Seraph.

Chapter 7 of the *Itinerarium* explains this journey in clear terms:

After our mind has beheld God outside itself through and in vestiges of Him, within itself through and in His image, and above itself through the divine similitudes shining upon us, and in the divine Light itself in so far as it is possible in our state as wayfarer and by the exercise of our minds, and when at length the soul has reached the sixth step, where it can behold in the first and highest Principle and in the Mediator of God and men, Jesus Christ, things the like of which cannot possibly be found among creatures, and which transcend all acuteness of the human

⁹ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, subtitle, in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, Vol. II, 39.

intellect – when the soul has done all this, it must still, in beholding these things, transcend and pass over, not only this visible world, but even itself. In this passing over, Christ is the way and the door; Christ is the ladder and the vehicle, being, as it were, the Mercy-Seat above the Ark of God and *the mystery which has been hidden from eternity* (Jn 14:6; Exod 25:20).¹⁰

The image of the Mercy-Seat on the Ark of the covenant is chosen by Bonaventure to indicate the mystery of Christ who passes over, makes the Passover, from this world to the Father, in the event of His passion on the cross and of His glorious resurrection. This is how Bonaventure continues to explain this mystical experience of passage from suffering to glory before showing how this experience transfigured Francis into the likeness of Christ crucified:

He who turns his full countenance toward this Mercy-Seat and with faith, hope, and love, devotion, admiration, joy, appreciation, praise and rejoicing, beholds Christ hanging on the Cross, such a one celebrates the Pasch, that is, the Passover, with Him. Thus, using the rod of the Cross, he may pass over the Red Sea, going from Egypt into the desert, where it is given to him to taste the hidden manna; he may rest with Christ in the tomb, as one dead to the outer world, but experiencing, nevertheless, as far as is possible in this present state as wayfarer, what was said on the Cross to the thief who was hanging there with Christ: *This day you shall be with me in Paradise* (Lk 23:43).¹¹

Such a description is strikingly vivid when one has seen with his own eyes not only Mount La Verna but also the sites of the Holy Land which are mentioned, namely the desert, the empty tomb of Christ, Calvary. The whole description is imbued with the spirit of pilgrimage into the holy places of our salvation, of which

La Verna becomes a representation not only on the physical level, but especially on the symbolic level of its deep significance as the place where Francis was transfigured to the image of Christ by experiencing the suffering of the passion and the glorious transfiguration of his body into the image of the Crucified Lord.

At this point of his meditation Bonaventure recalls what happened to Francis on La Verna. The event is not described in detail, as it would be later on in the *Legenda Maior*.¹² However, here we find a meditation on the true significance of the event of the stigmatisation in the geographical context of La Verna:

This also was shown to the Blessed Francis, when, in a transport of contemplation on the mountain height – where I pondered over the matter that is here written – there appeared to him the six-winged Seraph fastened to a cross, as I and many others have heard from the companion who was then with him in that very place. Here he passed over into God in a transport of contemplation. He is set forth as an example of perfect contemplation, just as previously he had been of action, like a second Jacob-Israel. And thus, through him, more by example than by word, God would invite all truly spiritual men to this passing over and this transport of soul.¹³

Bonaventure portrays Francis' experience on La Verna as a paschal journey through mystical contemplation of Christ Crucified. On La Verna Bonaventure had found the perfect setting for an experience of prayer and union with God on the example of Francis of Assisi and his brothers. Bonaventure mentions a companion who had given him valuable information on what happened on La Verna. The historical event of the stigmatisation becomes for Bonaventure a deep reflection on the Paschal mystery of

¹⁰ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, VII,1, in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, Vol. II, 97.

¹¹ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, VII,2, in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, Vol. II, 97.

¹² BONAVENTURE, *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, XIII,3 (FAED II, 632-633).

¹³ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, VII,3, in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, Vol. II, 99.

Christ, on Francis' participation in the suffering and glory of Jesus.

In the *Legenda Maior* Bonaventure explains this passage from suffering to glory as an experience of transfiguration on the part of Francis. He writes:

[Francis] marvelled exceedingly at the sight of so unfathomable a vision, knowing that the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the seraphic spirit. Eventually he understood from this, through the Lord revealing it, that Divine Providence had shown him a vision of this sort so that the friend of Christ might learn in advance that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the enkindling of his soul. As the vision was disappearing it left in his heart a marvellous fire and imprinted in his flesh a likeness of signs no less marvellous.¹⁴

When we read the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* we discover that La Verna became, for Bonaventure, the mountain of lofty contemplation, the mountain of transfiguration, the mountain of the crucifixion, of the body of St. Francis. On La Verna Bonaventure found inner peace, and understood the hidden depths of divine wisdom that surpasses all human understanding and scientific analysis.

Indeed, he concludes his mystical treatise with these emblematic expressions that echo in his contemplative spirit on the rugged heights of the Franciscan Calvary:

If you wish to know how these things may come about, ask grace, not learning; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligence in reading; the Bridegroom, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that wholly inflames and carries one into God through transporting unctions and consuming affections. God Himself is this fire, and *His furnace is in Jerusalem* (Is 31:9); and it is Christ who enkindles it in the white flame of His most burning Passion. [...] Let us then, die and enter into this darkness. Let us silence all our care, our desires, and our imaginings. With Christ crucified, let us pass *out of this world to the Father* (Jn 13:1).¹⁵

This is the inspiration that La Verna offered to the Seraphic Doctor when he retreated to its lonely heights to contemplate the mystery of Christ as revealed in the stigmata imprinted on the body of St. Francis on that early morning 800 years ago, when, *nel crudo sasso intra Tevere e Arno / da Cristo prese l'ultimo sigillo, / che le sue membra due anni portarno*.¹⁶

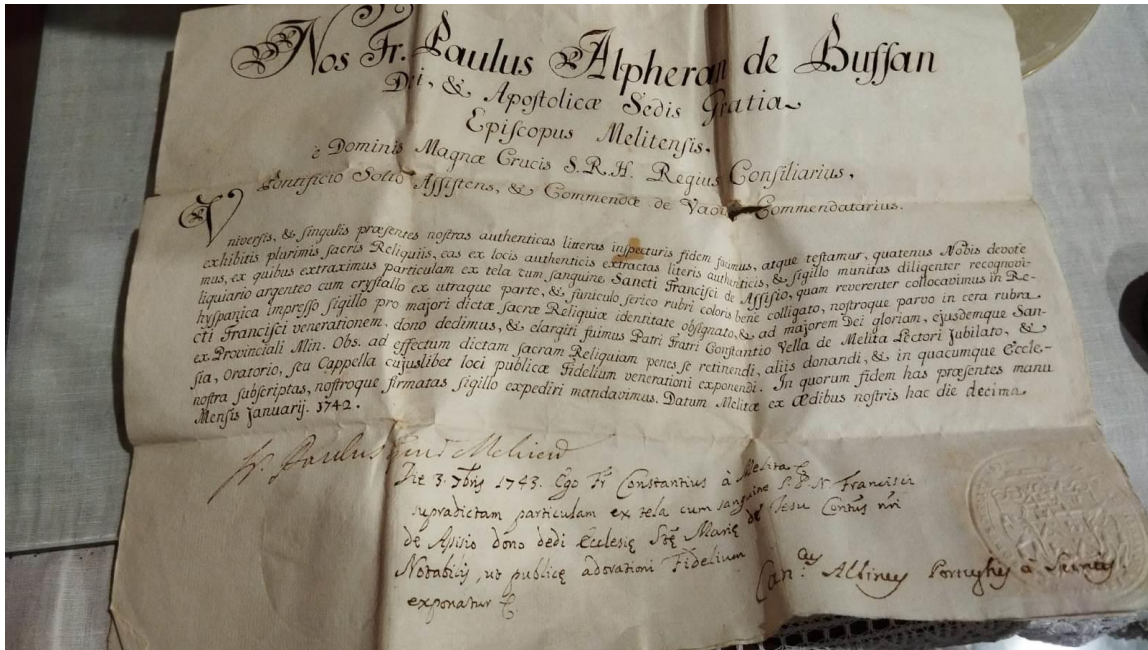
¹⁴ BONAVENTURE, *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, XIII,3 (FAED II, 632-633).

¹⁵ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, VII,6, in *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, Vol. II, 101.

¹⁶ DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Canto XI del Paradiso*, 106-108, in *Fonti Francescane* 2110 (EM Padova 2011).

A RELIC OF THE BLOOD OF ST. FRANCIS IN TA' ĠIEŻU CHURCH, RABAT

Noel Muscat OFM



The church of Santa Marija ta' Ġesù (Ta' Ġiezu) in Rabat, Malta, was originally built in 1500 in a late Gothic style, and is the first church of the Friars Minor in Malta, having been founded, together with the friary bearing the same name, by the Franciscan Observant family in 1494. The church boasts many ancient relics, among which it cherishes a relic of the blood of St. Francis, together with the authentic document signed by Bishop Paolo Alpheran de Bussan on 10 January 1742. The text of the document by this Bishop of Malta states: “We, Fra Paulus Alpheran de Bussan, with the Grace of God and of the Apostolic See Bishop of Malta, Lord Grand Cross and Royal Counsellor of His Majesty the King (of Two Sicilies), Assistant to the Pontifical Threshold and Commendatarius of the Commenda de Vaou[d?][s?].

“To all persons and each one who receives this authentic letter written by us, we make known and testify that among the many holy Relics that we devoutly exhibit, and which are endowed with authentic letters and seals and are diligently recognised as such, we extract from these a small relic containing the blood of Saint Francis of Assisi, which we reverently placed in a silver reliquary with crystal glass on both sides, and enclosed in red silk, together with our Spanish seal impressed with wax in order to make sure to sign the identity of the said holy Relic, to the greater glory of God and to the veneration of the same Saint Francis, we are donating [this relic] with full generosity to Father Fra Costanzio Vella from Malta, a *Lector Jubilatus*, and ex-Provincial of the Minors Observants, to the effect that he keep this same holy Relic in order to donate it to others, and to place

it in any Church, Oratory or Chapel situated anywhere, for exposition and the veneration of the public Faithful. In faith we sign with our own hands this document, and endow it with our seal and we order it to be sent. Given in Malta from our own house on the 10th day of the Month of January 1742.

Fra Paulus Bishop of Malta.”

The same document contains a written rubric by Fr. Costanzio Vella:

“On 3 February 1743, I, Fr. Costanzio from Malta have given as a gift this same particle [relic] with the fabric containing the blood of Our Holy Father St. Francis to the Church of Santa Maria de Jesu and to the Friary of Notabile, to be exposed for public adoration of the Faithful.”

The document has the Bishop’s seal and the signature of Canon Albinus Portughes, Secretary.

Paul Alpheran de Bussan was born in Aix-en-Provence in 1686 of a noble family, of whom some were members of the Order of St. John. After his studies he came to Malta where his relative was conventual chaplain of the Order and in 1710 was ordained priest by Bishop Davide Cocco Palmeri. He himself became conventual chaplain of the Langue of Provence and on 8 March 1728 was appointed Bishop of Malta by Pope Benedict XIII. He built the Seminary in Mdina, nowadays the Cathedral Museum. He died on 20 April 1757 in Mdina and was buried in the Cathedral.

The figure of Fr. Costanzio Vella is one of the most famous among Maltese Observant Franciscans. He was born in Senglea on 24 July 1691, son of Salvatore and Maddalena. His baptismal name was Michele. He entered the Novitiate on 30 December 1707, and made his solemn profession on 30 December 1708. In 1712

he was ordained priest. For 23 years he was *lector* of Philosophy and Theology in the Franciscan *studia* of Rabat and Valletta. The general chapter of Milan in 1723 sent him as *lector* in the general *studium* of Modica in Sicily. He was Definitor and Provincial of the Province of Val di Noto e Malta, Sicily (1729) and was a famous preacher and orator in both Malta and Sicily. He was inspired by St. Leonard of Porto Maurizio, who was his contemporary, and dedicated his energies to popular missions and established the *Via Crucis* in the Rabat Franciscan church in 1727, the first of its kind in Malta. He also spread the devotion towards the infant Jesus brought to Malta by Fra Bonaventura Fava from Bethlehem and enshrined in the Valletta church. He enriched the Library of the Observant Franciscans, founded on 27 April 1681 by Fr. Filiberto Peylabere, with many new volumes, and commissioned the painting on the ceiling of the same Library, depicting the glory of the Franciscan school, with the Immaculate Conception, Sts. Francis, Anthony, Bonaventure, Blessed John Duns Scotus, all the Franciscan doctors and himself depicted holding an inscription (*imitari non pigeat quod celebrare delectat*), the work of the Maltese artist Ġann Nikol Buhagiar, aided by Francesco Zahra (1730). The general chapter of Valladolid chose him as *Vice Commissario di Curia*. He was Guardian in Valletta (1737, 1747) and Rabat (1750), Vicar Provincial, and co-visitor with Bishop Paolo Alpheran de Bussan (1744). He died in Rabat on 1 November 1759, when he was 72 years old.

[Information taken from Ġ. AQUILINA, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin (Ta’ Ġiežu) 1482c – 1965c*, Klabb Kotba Maltin, Malta 2011, 111-114, 596].

SANT'ANGELO DI PANZO

Noel Muscat OFM



Just 2 kilometres outside Assisi, at the foothills of Mount Subasio, directly under the hermitage of Le Carceri, in the midst of the woods along Via di San Benedetto, the road that climbs from Assisi to the historical remains of the Benedictine Abbey, lies the small hermitage of Sant'Angelo di Panzo. The buildings we see today, which have been restored to their original splendour in 2003 after the devastating effects of the earthquakes of

1997, remind us of an important place in the life of St. Clare of Assisi and her sister Agnes, who found refuge in this cloister at the beginning of their vocation before St. Francis transferred them to San Damiano in 1212.

Our paper regarding Sant'Angelo di Panzo takes into particular consideration a study presented by Valeria Danesi at the University La Sapienza of Rome in 2018.¹

¹ V. DANESI, *Il monastero di Sant'Angelo di Panzo presso Assisi. Un luogo di memoria di Santa Chiara*, in *In Corso d'Opera. Ricerche dei dottorandi in*

storia dell'arte della Sapienza, a cura di C. DI BELLO et alii, La Sapienza, Università di Roma 2018, 43-50 [www.academia.edu]. Other studies cited by the

The documents in the archives of the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, and studied by the famous Assisi historian Arnaldo Fortini, mention the name Panzo already during the 12th century.

In his *Nova Vita di S. Francesco*, Fortini describes the origins of this female monastery: “According to a legend still being told at the end of the seventeenth century, the monastery of Sant’Angelo di Panzo was named after Saint Michael the Archangel. Once two brothers lived in their castle there, strong and bold knights. But they hated each other bitterly because of a quarrel over the division of the paternal goods. After many plots and intrigues against each other, they reached the point of a fight to the death. Fratricidal blows were being already laid on in the large court, when suddenly the Archangel shone brightly before them. Terrified, they fell on their knees and listened to the words of the heavenly messenger, who obliged them to exchange a kiss of pardon. Afterwards he disappeared. The two knights, to memorialize the miraculous event, changed their castle into a monastery and named it for their angelic saviour. In the time of St. Clare a great painting over the altar depicted the event. It showed two knights kneeling and embracing one another, as directed by an angel dressed in white armour.”²

The Latin name *Pantius* is documented at least from 1106. Some scholars have stated that the name derives from *Sanctus Angelus Pacis*, the Holy Angel of Peace, referring obviously to St. Michael, but there is no proof of this assertion.

In a list of cottages in the Commune of Assisi in 1232 the territory of Panzo, at the

foothills of Mount Subasio, was incorporated in the lands of the *ballia Sancti Savini*, whereas in 1469 the same lands are mentioned as *ballia Panzi*.

The first mention of the church of Sant’Angelo di Panzo goes back to 1217, and is found in a list of churches depending on the Cathedral church of San Rufino in Assisi. The same church was enlarged in 1346, and in 1604 was rebuilt elsewhere by the counts of Panzo, the Bonacquisti family.

Saint Clare in Sant’Angelo di Panzo

Clare of Assisi came to Sant’Angelo di Panzo after two weeks she had spent with the Benedictine nuns of the monastery of San Paolo delle Abbadesse in Bastia Umbria, where Francis had sent her on the night of Palm Sunday, 28 March 1211 or 18 March 1212, when she came to San Damiano do take the habit of penance and consecrate her life to God.

“After she received the insignia of holy penance before the altar of the blessed Virgin and, as if before the throne of this Virgin, the humble servant was married to Christ, Saint Francis immediately led her to the church of San Paolo to remain there until the Most High would provide another place.”³

The Benedictine monastery of San Paolo delle Abbadesse used to stand where there is now a small chapel, 1 km. distant from Assisi, where the rivers Tescio and Chiascio meet in Bastia Umbra, or as it was known during the time of St. Francis, *Insula Romana*. The monastery was also known as *S. Paolo fontis Tiberini* (from the rivers which then flow into the Tiber) or *S. Paolo*

author on S. Angelo di Panzo: F. SANTUCCI, *S. Angelo di Panzo presso Assisi*, in *Atti Accademia Propeziana del Subasio*, VI, 13 (1986) 83-112; A. GROHMANN, *Per una tipologia degli insediamenti umani nel contado di Assisi*, in *Assisi al tempo di S. Francesco*. Atti del Convegno della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (Assisi 13-16 ottobre 1977), Assisi 1978, 230-231; M. SENSI, *Monasteri benedettini in Assisi. Insediamenti sul Subasio e abbazia di S. Pietro*, in *Aspetti di vita*

benedettina nella storia di Assisi. Atti del Convegno (Assisi 12-13 settembre 1980), Assisi 1981, 27-50.

² A. FORTINI, *Francis of Assisi*. Trans. H. MOAK, Crossroads Publishing Co., New York 1981, 346-347.

³ *Legend of St. Clare* [LSC] 8,12, in *Clare of Assisi. The Lady. Early Documents*, [CAED] Edition and Translation R.G. ARMSTRONG, New City Press, New York 2006, 277.

del Chiagio. In 1055 it was given by the Longobard family of Adoino di Agino to the chapter of the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, and in 1198 Innocent III confirmed this possession of bishop Guido I of Assisi. Another papal document of 5 May 1201 placed this Benedictine female monastery under the direct jurisdiction of the Papal See, and endowed it with many privileges, including the right of asilum. This explains why Francis sent Clare to this monastery the very night she came to San Damiano, and why her family members tried in vain to take her out of that cloistered monastery. In the same Papal *Bulla*, which is conserved in the Archives of the monastery of Sant'Apollinare in Assisi, we come to know that the Abbess at the time was called Sibilia (or Vibilia), and that there was an interdict for whoever violated the sacrality and cloistered peace of the nuns: *nulli omnino hominum liceat prefatum monasterium temere perturbare* (no man whatsoever has any right to dare disturb the peace of the said monastery).

The Benedictine nuns remained in San Paolo delle Abbadesse until 1389, when they transferred to Assisi. Afterwards the monastery became a fortress and only the church survives to this very day. It was restored in 2004 and entrusted to the Benedictine nuns of Sant'Anna in Bastia Umbra. The area where the monastery stood is nowadays a cemetery.

We do not know how long Clare remained in the Benedictine monastery, but seemingly she transferred after just a few weeks to the new place chosen for her by St. Francis, namely the church of Sant'Angelo di Panzo.

During the Process of of St. Clare, held in November 1253 by Bishop Bartolomeo of Spoleto in the Monastery of San Damiano in Assisi, one of the witnesses was Sr. Beatrice, sister of St. Clare. She mentions the episodes relating to the early stages of the vocation of Sister Clare:

“Then Saint Francis gave her the tonsure before the altar in the church of the Virgin Mary, called the Portiuncula, and then sent her to the church of San Paolo de Abbadesse. When her relatives wanted to drag her out, Lady Clare grabbed the altar cloths and uncovered her head, showing them she was tonsured. In no way did she acquiesce, neither letting them take her from that place, nor remaining with them. Then Saint Francis, Brother Philip and Brother Bernard took her to the church of Sant'Angelo di Panzo, where she stayed for a little time, and then to the church of San Damiano where the Lord gave her more sisters for her direction.”⁴

We do not know the reason why Francis took Clare to Sant'Angelo after the few weeks she spent at San Paolo delle Abbadesse. One of the reasons could be that Clare did not feel at home in the Benedictine setting, since she wanted to follow the example of the apostolic life of Francis and the friars minor. Another reason might have been that she was harrassed by her family members. Clare seemingly needed a place of quiet and solitude where she would not be disturbed, where she could live her silent life of consecration to God with relative security from outside interference without necessarily being closed behind the bars of cloistered monastic life. We neither know that there was in Sant'Angelo di Panzo when Clare stayed there. There was the church, of course, but we are not sure whether in that place there was a monastic establishment or some other hermitage or house for *recluse*, or women who would consecrate their lives to God and prayer, and at the same time would not be bound by rigorous monastic discipline, thus being able to live in poverty and care for the sick and the poor. The *Beghine*, or Beguins, were such a kind of female religious family, but they were more present in places like Belgium, where Marie d'Oignies had

⁴ *Process of Canonization of St. Clare*, Twelfth Witness [Sr. Beatrice] (CAED, 183-184).

established such communities under the direction of Jacques de Vitry-sur-Seine.

The *Legenda S. Clarae Virginis* describes the period in which Clare lived in Sant'Angelo di Panzo:

“After a few days, she went to the church of San Angelo in Panzo, where her mind was not completely at peace, so that, at the advice of Saint Francis, she moved to San Damiano.”⁵

Why was Clare's mind not completely at peace in Sant'Angelo? We know that in that place she was joined by her sister Caterina, who took the name of Agnese [Agnes], and that her uncle Monaldo, who seems to have been in charge of the Offreduccio family, given that Favarone, Clare's father, was dead, tried in vain to take back the two sisters by force to their family palace in Assisi. The story is again narrated by the *Legenda S. Clarae Virginis*:

“The divine majesty answered without delay the exceptional [woman of] prayer and quickly gave her that first gift that she so eagerly sought and that was so greatly pleasing for God to present. Sixteen days after the conversion of Clare, Agnes, inspired by the divine spirit, ran to her sister, revealed the secret of her will, and told her that she wished to serve God completely. Embracing her with joy, [Clare] said: ‘I thank God, most sweet sister that He has heard my concern for you.’

A no less marvellous defence followed this conversion. For while the joyous sisters were clinging to the footprints of Christ in the church of San Angelo in Panzo and she who had heard more from the Lord was teaching her novice-sister, new attacks by relatives were quickly flaring up against the young maidens.

The next day, hearing that Agnes had gone off to Clare, twelve men, burning with anger and hiding outwardly their evil intent, ran to the place [and] pretended [to make] a peaceful entrance. Immediately they turned to Agnes, since they had long lost hope of Clare, and said: ‘Why have you come to

this place? Get ready to return immediately with us!’ When she responded that she did not want to leave her sister Clare, one of the knights in a fierce mood ran toward her and, without sparing blows and kicks, tried to drag her away by her hair, while the others pushed her and lifted her in their arms.

At this, as if she had been captured by lions and been torn from the hands of the Lord, the young maiden cried out: ‘Dear sister, help me! Do not let me be taken from Christ the Lord! While the violent robbers were dragging the young girl along the slope of the mountain, ripping her clothes and strewing the path with the hair [they had] torn out, Clare prostrated herself in prayer with tears, begged that her sister would be given constancy of mind and that the strength of humans would not be overcome by divine power.

Suddenly, in fact [Agnes'] body lying on the ground seemed so heavy that the men, many [as they were], exerted all their energy and were not able to carry her beyond a certain stream. Even others, running from their fields and vineyards, attempted to give them some help, but they could in no way lift that body from the earth. When they failed, they shrugged off the miracle by mocking: ‘She has been eating lead all night; no wonder she is so heavy!’ Then Lord Monaldus, her enraged uncle intended to strike her a lethal blow; [but] an awful pain suddenly struck the hand he had raised and for a long time the anguish of pain afflicted it.”⁶

The church of Sant'Angelo di Panzo

The church of Sant'Angelo di Panzo, where Clare spent a short period of time before transferring to San Damiano, is sometimes presented as having been a monastic establishment, and more precisely, another Benedictine monastery of nuns. It is true that Mount Subasio still preserves the remains of the famous Monastery of St. Benedict, which was fully

⁵ *Legend of Saint Clare* [LSC] 10 (CAED, 287).

⁶ LSC 24-26 (CAED, 303-3040).

functional during the time of St. Francis, so much so that it was there that Francis made recourse to the Abbot in order to be able to live at the Portiuncula chapel, which was a property of the Benedictines of the same monastery. There are various studies on the nature of Sant'Angelo di Panzo, and many point out to the fact that there might have been a kind of religious female community in that church, but that it was not necessarily a monastery of Benedictine nuns.⁷

Some scholars have come up with the possibility that, when Clare went to Sant'Angelo di Panzo, she found there not a community of Benedictine nuns, but rather a community of *mulieres religiosae*, namely, a group of consecrated women living together in a kind of contemplative life, but without necessarily being nuns in the canonical sense of the term.⁸

The famous Assisi historian, Arnaldo Fortini, gives us an expert presentation of what Sant'Angelo di Panzo actually was during the time of St. Clare. He writes:

“I have not found any earlier document that speaks of the church of San Angelo di Panzo except a 1217 list of church dependencies of the Cathedral. But there can be no doubt that this is the monastery in which Clare found refuge after her departure from San Paolo delle Abbadesse, and where later her sister Agnes also went.

The monastery appears in the acts of the Commune in an occurrence of 1232. [...] An act of 1233 speaks of donations made by the Commune *sororibus de Panço* [for the sisters at Panzo].

⁷ M. SENSI, *Incarcerate e penitenti a Foligno nella prima metà del Trecento*, in *I frati penitenti di San Francesco nella società del Due e Trecento*, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Roma 1977, 291-308; A. FORTINI, *New Information about Saint Clare of Assisi*, in *Greyfriars Review* 7 (1993) 27-69, specifically 55-63. Original Italian version: A. FORTINI, *Nuove Notizie intorno a S. Chiara di Assisi*, in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 46 (1953) 3-43.

⁸ V. DANESI, *Il monastero di Sant'Angelo di Panzo presso Assisi*, 44: A differenza di quanto detto dalla bibliografia locale, forte nel riportare la presenza di

Just when these sisters left the Benedictine Rule and took up the Rule of Cardinal Ugolino is not known exactly. But we know that the transfer had been made by 1238, because a Bull of Gregory IX of December 17, 1238 is addressed *abbatisse monasterii S. Angeli de Panzo, Ord. S. Damiani* [to the Abbess of the monastery of San Angelo de Panzo, of the Order of San Damiano]. [...]

In the seventeenth century the old monastery of the *fovea Pancii* was given in feud to the Bonacquisti family of Assisi. In 1604 Duke Ferrante Buonacquisti rebuilt the little church, now half-destroyed, as attested to by the inscription still to be seen, ‘with the same stones as the very ancient, very famous Church of San Angelo di Panzo.’ In the 1700’s considerable ruins of the monastery still remained, from which could be deduced its ancient magnificence.”⁹

The complex of buildings of Sant'Angelo di Panzo as it presents itself today, particularly after the intense renovation works following upon the devastating earthquakes of 1997, has very little remains of what originally was the place during the time when Clare of Assisi stayed there, or even during the time when the female community joined the family of the Order of San Damiano.

I have a vivid memory of my personal visit to Sant'Angelo di Panzo many years ago, in 1985, when I was a student of Franciscan Spirituality in Rome. We were accompanied by Fr. Optatus Van Asseldonk OFMCap., whom I remember as

una preesistente monastero benedettino femminile, sembra più facile credere, e il termine *ecclesia* lo confermerebbe, che al suo arrivo Chiara si imbattè in un piccolo edificio isolato. Affascinante, anche se priva di conferme documentarie, è, infine, l'ipotesi avanzata da alcuni studiosi che hanno voluto leggere nelle architetture di Sant'Angelo il probabile rifugio per una comunità di *religiosae mulieres* penitenti che avrebbero potuto rappresentare un valido riferimento per quando predicato e voluto dalla santa.

⁹ A. FORTINI, *Nuove Notizie intorno a S. Chiara di Assisi*, 60-63.

a very dynamic and well-prepared Franciscan scholar. He had the courage to ring the bell of this private residence and we were cordially welcomed inside, having presented ourselves as a group of Franciscan scholars and students. The only remnants dating back maybe to the period we are considering were those on the ground floor,¹⁰ and I vividly remember an arched hall resembling a refectory or some other religious structure. The building nowadays is still privately owned, and last time I went I could only see it from the outside. A tiny bell tower still stands, as a sign that the place was originally a religious institution.

The theory that, during the time of St. Clare's visit, Sant'Angelo di Panzo could have housed a community of *mulieres religiosae* of the style of the Beguines remains captivating.

According to Maria Pia Alberzoni,¹¹ during the time that Clare followed the way of life of Francis and the brothers, there were already numerous female communities that were organising themselves differently from the official forms of traditional monasticism. In Flanders, in a special way, there were nuclei of *mulieres religiosae* that were living religious life outside the usual monastic Benedictine or Cistercian forms. They lived a life in community, worked with their hands and also begged for their living. The most famous among these women was Marie d'Oignies, whose family of Beguines acquired the approval of Honorius III after her death, through the kind services of Jacques de Vitry, who was her spiritual counsellor.

Other similar forms of *mulieres religiosae* were also present in central Italy, and some of them were even approved by Innocent III, even though they lived a kind

of religious life that was different from the official Benedictine model. A good example is that of the Umiliati, who after having been excommunicated by Lucius III (*Ad abolendam*) on 4 November 1184, were recognised as an Order in 1201, and who lived a kind of community life for both men and women.

Were such communities present in the *contado* of Assisi they would have provided some interesting features that responded to the needs of the times regarding new forms of religious expression. Clare of Assisi was obliged by Innocent III to accept the title of Abbess in 1215, but before that date she had never dreamt of placing her religious family in San Damiano under the umbrella of Benedictine monasticism. Indeed, this was to be her life-long struggle, even with Cardinal Ugo first and later on with other prelates, in order not to succumb to the monastic model which she had to accept in the Rules of Ugo and of Innocent IV, but to remain faithful to Francis' intuition of the *apostolica vivendi forma* and to the *Privilege of Poverty*.

One can say that Clare succeeded in being faithful to this model only in the case of San Damiano and in some other exceptional cases. However, her model of religious life might have resembled that of the *mulieres religiosae* of her time. The structure of the monastery was simple and had nothing to do with the fortress-like buildings of the Benedictine nunneries. The Damianites were living a life of extreme dependence upon alms and upon the work of their hands. Their closeness to the friars minor made them sensible to the needs of the poor and the lepers, just as the Beguines were doing in their hospices. Jacques de Vitry himself seems to speak of the community of San Damiano in these terms, when he writes¹² that the *fratres minores*

¹⁰ V. DANESI, *Il monastero di Sant'Angelo di Panzo presso Assisi*, 45: Nonostante, però, la leggibilità della struttura originaria sia profondamente compromessa, al piano terreno è ancora possibile scorgere alcune tracce legate a una fase medievale.

¹¹ M. P. ALBERZONI, *Chiara di Assisi e il francescanesimo femminile*, in *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francescana*, Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino 1997, 204-208.

¹² JACQUES DE VITRY, *Letter written in Genoa* (1216) (FAED I, 579-580).

and *sorores minores* “live according to the form of the primitive Church [...] The women dwell together near the cities in various hospices, accepting nothing, but living by the work of their hands.”

This description fits very well in the setting of San Damiano, but also in that of Sant’Angelo di Panzo. Maybe the true reason why Clare left the Benedictine monastery of San Paolo delle Abbadesse after two weeks was that she could not adapt to the Benedictine regime of strict monastic discipline, and preferred the form of life of other *mulieres religiosae*, who lived as *reclusae*, namely as cloistered women, but not in the canonical sense of monastic enclosure. Before 1300 one cannot speak of a canonical form of monastic papal enclosure as we know it today. Clare would have preferred the silent and simple life-style of Sant’Angelo, even though she could not stay there for long. Francis knew that she and her sister Agnes, together with the other young women who would join them, needed to express their charism in a more independent manner that would differ from that of the *mulieres religiosae*. That was how the community of San Damiano was born in 1212 as a new experience after that of Benedictine monasticism and the simplicity of the *reclusae*, and which adapted some elements of these forms to insert them in the novelty of the Gospel way of life of poverty and openness to the apostolic calling of the friars minor, who they accompanied in their hidden life of contemplative women. From the tiny *giardinetto* of San Damiano Clare would look down at the Portiuncula and understand the deep bond between her and the brothers who one day accompanied her in her first steps towards the monastery of San Paolo and the church of Sant’Angelo di Panzo.

Latin Abbreviations

Writings of St. Francis

CantAudPov	Canticle Audite Poverelle
CantSol	Canticum fratris Solis
LaudDei	Laudes Dei Altissimi
BenLeo	Benedictio fratri Leoni data
EpAnt	Epistola ad S. Antonium
EpClerI	Epistola ad Clericos
EpCust	Epistola ad Custodes
EpFid	Epistola ad Fideles
EpLeo	Epistola ad fratrem Leonem
EpMin	Epistola ad Ministrum
EpOrd	Epistola toti Ordini missa
EpRect	Epistola ad rectores
ExhLD	Exhortatio ad Laudem Dei
ExpPat	Expositio in Pater noster
FormViv	Forma vivendi S. Claræ
Fragm	Fragmenta alterius Regulæ
LaudHor	Laudes ad omnes horas
OffPass	Officium Passionis Domini
OrCruc	Oratio ante Crucifixum
RegB	Regula bullata
RegNB	Regula non bullata
RegEr	Regula pro eremotoriis
SalBVM	Salutatio Beatæ Mariæ Virg
SalVirt	Salutatio Virtutum
Test	Testamentum
UltVol	Ultima voluntas S. Claræ

Sources for the Life of St. Francis

FAED I	Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Saint
FAED II	Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Founder
FAED III	Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Prophet
1C	Celano, <i>Vita beati Francisci</i>
LCh	Celano, <i>Legenda ad usum chori</i>
VB	Celano, <i>Vita brevior S. Francisci</i>
2C	Celano, <i>Memoriale in desiderio anime</i>
3C	Celano, <i>Tractatus miraculorum</i>
LJS	Julian of Speyer, <i>Vita S. Francisci</i>
OR	<i>Officium Rhythmicum</i>
AP	<i>Anonymus Perusinus (De Inceptione)</i>
L3C	<i>Legenda trium sociorum</i>
CA	<i>Compilatio Assisiensis</i>
LMj	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Maior</i>
LMn	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Minor</i>
SPMaj	<i>Speculum Perfectionis</i> (Sabatier)
SPMin	<i>Speculum Perfectionis</i> (Lemmens)
ABF	<i>Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius</i>
Fior	<i>Fioretti di San Francesco</i>



Cover page: *La Verna: outer walls of the Chapel of the Stigmata*

