

## EARLY FRANCISCAN ART AND LITERATURE.<sup>1</sup>

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IN that delightful collection of stories known as *The Little Flowers of S. Francis*, there is an account of how the saint described to Brother Leo where, and in what circumstances, he expected to find Perfect Joy. It was not in popularity and fame, nor yet in ability to preach and to heal, but rather in accepting with patience and complete humility every kind of insult and persecution. Unfortunately S. Francis, like others who have set out in search of Perfect Joy, had little chance of finding it. It is true that in the early days of his conversion, when he was unknown and misunderstood, he sometimes received the sort of treatment which his soul desired. He was beaten and imprisoned by his father ; he was thrown in the snow by robbers ; he was mocked and insulted on his first evangelistic journey. But in the latter part of his life, instead of blows and sneers he received nothing but praise and honour ; he was greeted everywhere with the wildest enthusiasm ; he was known all over Italy as 'the saint'. There was not a man who would have lifted a finger against him. This was not at all his idea of Perfect Joy ! No wonder his last years were sad !

The popularity which S. Francis attained in his life has lasted through the seven centuries which separate his time from ours, and there is no doubt that he holds a warm place in our affections to-day. Endless books and pamphlets, Christmas cards, statuettes and medallions flood the bookstalls ; more and more churches are dedicated to him ; his name is a household word. There is a positive 'cult' of S. Francis to-day which is not always very healthy. Some of it has about as much in common with the S. Francis of Rivo Torto and Greccio as the pale-faced figure of our stained-glass windows has to do with the Christ of the Galilean hills.

<sup>1</sup> An elaboration of the lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 14th of April, 1943.

We are always tempted to make the great figures of the past fit into a mould of our own designing. Sabatier tried very hard to make S. Francis a liberal Protestant; others have set up what is no more than a plaster figure looking ashamed and uncomfortable in a blaze of candle-light. I am not going to attempt in this paper to give any portrait of S. Francis. What I want to do is to show what men thought of him during the first hundred years after his death, when memories were still vivid and when the Order which had gathered around him was struggling to find a pattern of living which would satisfy the demands of authority and yet preserve the originality and *élan* of S. Francis himself.

S. Francis died on 3rd October, 1226, at the age of 44. He had been ailing for some years and it was known that he could not live much longer. But when he died the Order was faced with many most urgent problems and difficulties.

It would not be true to say that there were two *parties* at this time, but there were certainly two *policies*. There were those who wanted the friars to be what S. Francis and his first disciples had been—homeless vagrants, working in the fields, begging in the streets, constantly assailed by cold and hunger and nakedness, men who were seeking what a great Christian of our own times called “the most fascinating ideal I ever imagined, to become entirely careless of your own soul or body in looking after the welfare of others”. But there were also those who realised that there must be organisation and control among so large a company of men, and whose ambition was to turn the immense spiritual power which S. Francis had generated to practical use for the Kingdom of God. The most prominent among those who wished to pursue the former policy were some of S. Francis’ most intimate friends, men like Leo, Giles and Masseo. The leaders of the latter policy were Brother Elias and Cardinal Ugolino who later became Pope as Gregory IX.

At the death of the saint in 1226 the men who wanted organisation and progress were in power, and soon their influence made itself felt. Elias was clear that whatever else happened S. Francis should not be forgotten. He was a saint, a very great saint, for

he had been honoured with marks of special divine favour ; and it was as the great Saint of Assisi that Francis should be remembered. The Poverello must become the object of men's devotion, and his memory must be preserved in whatever way would be most impressive. To begin with, there must be two things, a shrine and an official life ; and Elias and Ugolino set out to produce them.

Elias, who was a native of the hamlet of Beviglie, three miles from Assisi, never had any doubt that Assisi must be the home of the great shrine. In June 1227 he resigned his position as Minister-General in order to devote himself to the task which lay before him. By March of the following year he had secured a site and had collected enough money to start building what he was determined should become one of the most famous churches in the world. And we must admit that he succeeded in his ambitions, even though it may seem to us, as it has seemed to many, a strange way of preserving the memory of the humble servant of Poverty.

In July, Gregory IX came to Assisi where he did three things. On the 16th he performed the necessary rites for the canonisation of S. Francis ; on the 17th he laid the foundation-stone of the new church ; on the 18th (or thereabouts) he interviewed one of the friars, Thomas of Celano, and invited him to write the official Life of the Saint.

The church went on apace. Money poured in from all over Europe, for the fame of S. Francis had spread far and wide. Receptacles were put out for the contributions of those who came to see how the building progressed, and there is a well-known story of Brother Leo finding an alabaster vase set out for the gifts of the faithful and being so angry that he smashed it to pieces and was afterwards severely chastised by order of Elias. So vast were the sums contributed that Elias was able to build an upper and a lower church and a whole range of conventual buildings which aroused the scorn of another early disciple, Brother Giles. There is a story that when Giles was being shown round the convent he remarked drily : " All you want now is a few women. If you've given up poverty, why not give up chastity as well ? "

By the early summer of 1230 the Lower Church was completed ; and in May the body of the saint was taken from the Church of S. Giorgio, where it had lain for three and a half years, and was buried deep in the rock under the high altar of the new church.

Meanwhile Thomas of Celano had been busy collecting material for his Life of the Saint. He was not himself one of the most intimate of S. Francis' friends, having joined the Order only in 1215, and having spent a number of years in Germany. In order, therefore, to collect his material for the Life which he was to write he would need to travel about the country, interviewing those who had known the saint, and writing down the evidence which they gave. Some time in 1229 Celano must have arrived in Assisi with a fairly large bundle of notes which he had collected and out of which he was to compose the biography which he had been asked to write.

The book which he wrote is generally known as the *Vita Prima* or *I Celano*. When we read it we see that the author has been faithful to the trust which was laid upon him. It is essentially the life of a saint. Many of the incidents have a slight suggestion of the supernatural about them, and there is a long section at the end of the book devoted entirely to conventional miracle stories. The S. Francis who shines out of these pages is a gracious and charming person, the recipient of God's special favour, the beloved apostle whose footprints people knelt to kiss. But we look in vain for the little tramp whom Innocent III told to go and lie with the pigs, or for the penitent so intoxicated with humility that he insisted upon one of the brothers dragging him naked with a rope round his neck through the streets of Assisi.

Such is the *Vita Prima*. Knowing what we know from other sources we can see its deficiencies. It is conventional, stereotyped, artificial. Celano's style strikes us as pompous and heavy ; his moral aphorisms are sententious and his quotations overdone. In fact there is rather too much Celano and not enough Francis ; and we cannot help wishing that Celano had printed his sources as he took them down from the friars' lips without the embellishments which rob the narrative of the simplicity and *naïveté* which we feel that all Franciscan literature should possess. But, of

course, the dossier of first-hand evidence, which Celano collected during the autumn and winter of 1228-29, has long since disappeared. Once the *Vita Prima* was completed the notes upon which it was based had served their purpose and were either destroyed or discarded; and I am not aware that any scholar has ever bothered his head about them.

Yet I believe we have, in the document known as the *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, or *Legend of the Three Companions*, something which brings us very near to the original sources upon which Celano based his *Vita Prima*. Over the composition of this *Legenda* there has been much discussion; but it has always been taken for granted that it was written many years after Celano published the *Vita Prima*, and that the numerous passages which bear an almost literal parallel to the words of Celano are in fact quotations from his work. A very close comparison of those parallel passages, however, has driven me to the conclusion that the *Legenda Trium Sociorum* represents an earlier tradition even than the *Vita Prima*, and that it may, in fact, be very close to the original sources upon which Celano worked.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, then we have here a document of the very highest importance, for it takes us back behind even the first biography of the saint. The *Legenda* is short, for it is probably only a fragment, but it gives us a most vivid account of the youth and conversion of S. Francis and of the early years of his apostolate. It is fresh and simple and spontaneous, for it has not felt the restraining hand of those who wished to mould the memory of the saint according to their own ideas. In fact, although in its present form it was written many years after the death of the saint, it seems to have its roots in the first, glowing reminiscences of those who had been his most intimate friends. Compared with this, Celano's narrative seems heavy and lifeless. The humble, little, poor man of Assisi has become the great saint at whose shrine kings and popes would worship. This was exactly what Elias and Ugolino wanted. The magnificent church at Assisi was designed to emphasise the sanctity of Francis Bernardone; the Official Life must obviously do the same. By the October of 1230, four

<sup>1</sup> The whole argument for this will be found in my *Sources for the Life of S. Francis*, pp. 68-76.

years after Francis' death, a shrine had been built and a suitable Life had been written. Francis' place among the immortals was well assured.

I want now to show how the memory of S. Francis was being preserved in art. But first I must say a word about early painting. In 1897 a little book was published called "*The Authentic Portraiture of S. Francis of Assisi*". We know, from a description by Thomas of Celano, pretty well what S. Francis looked like; and with this in mind the author of this book set out to find a true likeness of the saint among early paintings. His task seems to me to have been a hopeless one. Portrait-painting as we know it was an art which was not understood in the thirteenth century. Like much modern painting early art was deeply symbolic. A man was painted not as he actually looked but in order to represent some ideal or some aspect of his character. In early paintings Francis is austere, hieratic, conventional. The cheeks are hollow, the eyes sunken, the face marred by mortification and discipline, while the expression is indescribably stern. Gradually, however, the idea of S. Francis changed to the seraphic father, so that by the time of Giotto we get the picture of the kindly old gentleman with a grey beard. Neither of these types makes any attempt to reproduce the actual physical appearance of S. Francis, but each is symbolic of something in his character which the artist was anxious to express.

The same thing applies to the backgrounds of the pictures. When Giotto depicted the incident of Francis renouncing the world he painted the most fantastic houses which bore no resemblance whatever to the grey streets of Assisi. The reason for this is that the houses represent the world upon which Francis was turning his back, the world of luxury and gaiety, of wealth and comfort and splendour. Many old houses in Assisi are built with outside staircases, but they are made of simple blocks of stone. In this fresco there is a house with an outside staircase of white marble which would have done credit to the Cosmati. Or again, early paintings of La Verna nearly always include at least part of a large and handsome church. But La Verna in S. Francis' time was a rocky and desolate mountain top. Why

then the church? Clearly because La Verna was regarded as a holy place, and the only way in which the artists could represent this was by adding a church.

But we must return to our point : which was to see how the legend of S. Francis began to be expressed in art. The earliest painting of the saint is a full-length figure on the walls of the Sacro Speco at Subiaco. It is almost certain that this was painted in 1228, two years after the death of S. Francis and nearly seventy years before Giotto began his work in the Upper Church. This is a most interesting picture. The first thing which strikes one is the extreme naturalness of it. It is the portrait not of some great saint, but of a simple friar. Francis is portrayed in the habit of the Order with the hood drawn over his head. In his left hand he holds a scroll on which are inscribed the words "*Pax huic domui*", the greeting which he taught his disciples to use. But the most interesting point about this picture is that there is no halo and no sign of the stigmata, while at the top stand the words 'FR. FR̄CISCV', i.e. *Frater Franciscus* not *Sanctus*.<sup>1</sup> Some have thought that these exceptional details prove that the picture was painted during Francis' lifetime and before the reception of the stigmata in 1224. But the external evidence strongly supports the date 1228.

Somewhat similar in style and feeling is a strange painting at Greccio showing S. Francis in profile, weeping.<sup>2</sup> There is a tradition that this was painted by the saint's Roman friend, the lady Giacomina de' Settesoli, who brought him marzipan on his death-bed ; but there is no real authority for this. Yet this portrait gives every appearance of belonging to a very early date, perhaps within a few years of the painting at Subiaco.

Yet another very early sketch of S. Francis is to be found in a manuscript in the Cambridge University Library. The book is a collection of excerpts from the works of Alexander Neckam and dates from the early part of the thirteenth century. Into it has been inserted a leaf which has nothing whatever to do with

<sup>1</sup> There is a good reproduction in the English translation of Jørgensen's *St. Francis of Assisi* (1912), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced as the frontispiece to Canon Rawnsley's edition of the *Sacrum Commercium : the Converse of Francis and his Sons with Holy Poverty*, Temple Classics, 1904.

the remainder of the work. On one side of this folio is a drawing of S. Francis and a companion. The saint, as in the portrait at Subiaco, is hooded, tonsured and bearded but is adorned with no halo. His hands and feet show the marks of the stigmata, and he carries a book.<sup>1</sup>

All these three portraits have a certain affinity which becomes most obvious when we compare them with later works. In each, Francis is the humble, little, poor man of God. No attempt is made to represent him as a great saint or a notable ascetic. Each artist has been content to portray a simple friar such as anyone might have met on the roads of almost any European country at that time. In fact these three pictures all belong to the very early days before Elias and his party had got to work on the cult of the saint. There was as yet no shrine and no official life ; men were content to think of S. Francis as they had known him, in his simplicity and humility.

A few years later the official attitude to the memory of S. Francis had changed a good deal. Whereas the emphasis had, at first, been upon his poverty and humility, it was now rapidly being transferred to his asceticism and to his power of working miracles. Celano had written of the mortification which the early friars imposed upon themselves, for this was what men expected of an obvious saint. He had also devoted many pages of his book to a whole catalogue of miracles of healing, which also formed an indispensable attribute of any true saint. All this had been emphasised in the *Vita Prima* and was quite in accord with what Elias and Ugolino desired. Moreover, it soon began to find expression in art.

I have said that by 1230 Francis' place among the immortals was well assured, partly by the building of the great basilica at Assisi, partly by the appearance of Celano's work. Five years later Bonaventura Berlinghieri painted a portrait of S. Francis which is now at Pescia, near Lucca. This is typical of a number of paintings of the saint from about this period and is of special interest in that, besides the figure of the saint himself, certain

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in *Franciscan History and Legend in English Medieval Art*, edited by A. G. Little for the British Society of Franciscan Studies, chapter iv, plate 7.



scenes from his life are also depicted. Francis stands in the centre, tall, ascetic, indescribably austere and forbidding. At once we feel that we are introduced to a figure totally different from the simple friar of the early sketches, and a figure which repels rather than attracts.<sup>1</sup> On each side are portrayed three scenes from the saint's life. Here again the choice of subjects shows that the artist was of the same school as Elias and Ugolino. Out of all the dramatic incidents in the *Vita Prima* which he might have selected, he chose, for his six scenes, S. Francis receiving the stigmata, the sermon to the birds, and no less than four miracles of healing which might have come out of any standard work of hagiography. Thus, except for the story of Francis preaching to the birds (which seems to have caught and held the popular imagination from earliest times to the present day), the artist has confined himself to a portrayal of the miraculous rather than of the dramatic in the life of the saint.

Probably in the following year, 1236, Giunta Pisano, who had been employed by Elias to decorate the Lower Church at Assisi, painted a panel similar to that of Berlinghieri. The saint in the centre is rather more human than the conventional figure of the previous work; but the drawn face, sunken eyes and hollow cheeks emphasise the ascetic element in his character. To left and right of this central figure are four scenes; but whereas Berlinghieri had included at least one incident which would appeal to those who revered the humanity of the saint, Giunta Pisano confines himself entirely to miracle stories, the same four which are painted in the earlier work.

Thus during this decade of the 1230's it is pretty clear that men were being taught to think of S. Francis as a wonder-worker and an ascetic. Celano had partly helped to create this impression, and the artists emphasised it even further. It suited Elias and the men in power, for this was exactly what they intended. It might be true that, as Gregory the Great had said, "miracles do not make holiness but only show it"; but at least it was necessary that every true saint should shine forth as a worker of

<sup>1</sup> There is a reproduction in the volume of essays, edited by Walter Seton in 1926, entitled *S. Francis : Essays in Commemoration*, p. 8.

miracles. The art and literature of this period did their best to show that Francis was worthy to be numbered with the saints.

About the year 1240 a distinct change came over the Order of S. Francis. In 1239 Elias, who had returned to power in 1232, was deposed, partly on the grounds that he had not been faithful to the vows of poverty, but mainly because the brethren could not endure his autocratic and overbearing manner. The friars were unhappy. The new church at Assisi was no doubt very fine, and Celano had obviously done a good piece of work in writing his Life of S. Francis ; but there was something about S. Francis' character that seemed to be missing. Of course it was grand to think of the miracles which had been wrought both during his life and at his tomb ; but there were other things about him which ought to be commemorated. And the years were slipping by. The number of those who had known him personally was getting less. Soon the opportunity of drawing upon their memories would be lost for ever.

Such was the situation in the 'forties ; and fortunately the friars realised it in time. In 1244, at the General Chapter held at Genoa, an invitation was sent out to all who had known the saint to send in their reminiscences so that out of them a new Life could be written.

In response to this appeal three of S. Francis' most intimate friends—Leo, Angelo and Rufino—met together at the little hermitage of Greccio and determined to send in a collection of stories. For over a year they worked at it—a wonderful year in which they must have felt as if they were back with their master, living again through those amazing adventures of faith under his inspiring leadership. They were not concerned with miracles so much as with the day-to-day events. They wanted to bring out S. Francis' *character* rather than his *powers*—his charity and consideration, his intuition, his courage, his faith, his devotion, his simplicity, his love of God and man. No doubt other friars sent in their reminiscences, but there was nothing to compare with this document of the three friends at Greccio. Where is it now ? Alas, it has vanished ; and we can only try to piece it together out of other and later legends in which parts of it are

embedded. I can imagine few things more thrilling than to hear that the original manuscript of Leo, Angelo and Rufino had been rediscovered ; but I fear there is not much hope. The most precious of all Franciscan documents remains a mystery ; and we are left with the intriguing puzzle of trying to fit bits of it together from other works.

The task is not so hopeless as might, at first sight, appear. In order to understand ancient methods of biography one must realise that authors were content to copy, often word for word, whole passages from some earlier source without any word of acknowledgment. We are accustomed to this in comparing the work of S. Matthew and S. Luke with that of S. Mark. The same principles may be applied to the Franciscan sources.

As a result of the appeal issued in 1244 a fairly large number of documents, of various lengths and many degrees of importance, was sent in. Once again, Celano was invited to write the official Life of S. Francis ; but several other writers had access to his sources and used large portions of them in their works. Much the most important of those who saw the original documents was an unknown writer who appears to have visited Assisi in 1311 and to have been allowed to work in the library of the Sacro Convento and at S. Damiano. Unlike Celano, who had a passion for style, often robbing a narrative of its spontaneity in order to improve its diction, this unknown scribe has probably copied out whole sheets from the documents upon which he was working without altering a single word. His manuscript was for long forgotten, and indeed lost ; but it was brought to light by Father Delorme who discovered it at Perugia and published a transcription in 1922. Also of great interest is a manuscript known as S. Isidore No. 1/73 at Rome, which Father Lemmens published in 1901-2, and which contains two little tracts, the *Verba S. Francisci* and the *Intentio Regulae*, both of which appear to have belonged to the Leo-papers, if, indeed, they are not much earlier. Mention should also be made of a fourteenth-century manuscript which Dr. Little acquired in 1910 and printed in the first volume of the *Collectanea Franciscana* in 1914. From these three sources it is possible, by careful verbal comparisons,

to arrive at something which, at any rate, contains much, if not all, of the original writings of Leo, Angelo and Rufino.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps here I should say a word about that much-disputed document known as the *Speculum Perfectionis*. Sabatier, misled by a scribal error in one of the manuscripts which he studied, maintained that this was the earliest of all Franciscan sources, earlier even than Celano's *Vita Prima*. But here he was clearly wrong. Actually this work was composed in 1318, and, like the Perugian compilation, was very largely based upon the Leo-papers at Assisi. Thus, though Sabatier was wrong in attributing the *Speculum* to the year 1227, he was entirely right in maintaining that it emanated from the circle of Francis' most intimate friends.

Out of the mass of material sent in in response to the appeal of the Chapter General, Celano was again invited to write an official Life of S. Francis. We must imagine him, during the autumn and winter of 1246-47, working through the documents which had been sent in, choosing what he wanted and rejecting what was worthless or trivial or redundant. The whole appearance of this Second Life shows that Celano had a totally different purpose in his mind from what he had had in 1228. Then he had been commissioned by the Pope to produce a book which would put the sanctity of Francis beyond doubt. This time he was invited by the friars themselves to write a book which would help to keep alive the memory of the saint as it remained in the minds of those who had lived with him. Consequently, instead of trying to compile a "life" of S. Francis, he arranges his book under various headings, such as his poverty, his prayers, his preaching, his joy, his humility, his simplicity, and so on, choosing stories to illustrate each aspect of his nature. Like the three friends, Celano was concerned with the *character* of S. Francis rather than with his *powers*. Consequently there is scarcely a single incident which is "miraculous" in the narrower sense of the word. It was only some years later that Celano consented, possibly at the request of those who were

<sup>1</sup> Once again I must refer the reader to my *Sources for the Life of S. Francis* for the full argument and for a conjectural synopsis of the original *Scripta Leonis et Sociorum Eius*.

disappointed in the *Vita Secunda*, to write a *Tractatus de Miraculis*, a collection of the miracle stories which were never included in the *Vita*.

I think it is clear from this that, during the years between the fall of Elias in 1239 and the appointment of Bonaventura as Minister-General in 1255, men's thoughts about S. Francis had changed a good deal. At first they thought of him as the worker of miracles, the object of the kind of reverence and devotion which Elias intended should be his. Against this the friars reacted, feeling that such a portrait of S. Francis was incomplete. They wanted now to know about his everyday life, they wanted to preserve whatever was known of his amazing humility and simplicity. They wanted to think of his renunciation, of his early struggles, of the way in which he won the confidence of the Pope, of his originality.

Now let us examine the art of this same period. We have two paintings, both of which almost certainly belong to these years. One is at Florence, in the Church of Santa Croce, and is planned much on the lines of the earlier portraits.<sup>1</sup> In the centre is the figure of S. Francis, still somewhat conventional and austere, and around him are depicted no less than twenty scenes from his life. When we compare the subjects which this artist has selected with those chosen by Berlinghieri and the painter of the panel at Assisi we see a most striking contrast. Whereas in the earlier paintings the emphasis was upon the miraculous rather than upon the dramatic, in this panel the miracle stories form only a very small part of the whole, being placed at the very end of the series. The artist has, in fact, set out to portray a succession of scenes from the life of S. Francis, designed to illustrate just those characteristics which the friars now wanted to remember. He begins with the incident of Francis being released from prison by his mother, then follows his renunciation before the Bishop of Assisi, his acceptance of an old cloak from one of the Bishop's servants, his attendance at Mass in the little chapel of the Portiuncula when the Gospel for the day gave him his marching orders, his appearance before Innocent III, the

<sup>1</sup> There is a reproduction in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 1926, plate iv.

Christmas crib at Greccio, his sermon to the birds and before the Soldan, his compassionate feeling for some sheep whom he saw among a herd of goats, his rescue of two lambs destined for the slaughterer, his humility in making one of the friars drag him naked through the streets of Assisi, his stigmatisation, his appearance at the Chapter of Arles, his service of the lepers and his death. Only the last five scenes are devoted to miracles performed after his death. Thus, compared with earlier paintings the emphasis has shifted from the miraculous to the dramatic, from the powers of the saint to his personality.

This is brought out even more strikingly in the other painting which may be regarded as belonging to this period. This is at Siena and again follows the design of a central figure surrounded by a number of small scenes.<sup>1</sup> The figure of the saint is unattractive, partly owing to bad restoration, but the scenes are fascinating. There are only eight, but they are all concerned with significant moments in S. Francis' life. First comes his renunciation before the Bishop of Assisi, then his devotions before the crucifix in S. Damiano, then the dream of Innocent III about the fall of the Lateran, then the sermon to the birds. On the other side are painted the vision of the chariot of fire, the stigmata, the Christmas crib at Greccio, and the death of S. Francis. In this series, therefore, the purely miraculous has been excluded altogether.

This brings us to the third period, from about 1260 to the end of the century. The dominating figure during these years is that of Bonaventura. Bonaventura was elected as Minister-General in 1255 at the early age of 36. He was the most remarkable of the second generation of Franciscans. He was only five years old when S. Francis died, but he had been attracted to the Friars Minor by the obvious vitality and freedom of the Order. Bonaventura was by nature a scholar, and his ideal was to unite the discipline and poverty of the friars with the spirit of enquiry which animated the Schools. His spiritual and actual home was Paris and its lecture rooms, not the forests of La Verna or the rocky caves of Fonte Colombo and the Carceri.

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 1926, plate vi.

His ideal was to forge an alliance between Poverty and Learning. It was a very lofty ideal and one which probably safeguarded the future of the Order in the difficult years through which it was passing. But it was not the ideal for which S. Francis had lived and died ; and we can understand Brother Giles' complaint : " Paris, Paris thou hast destroyed Assisi ! "

The memory of S. Francis was still worrying the friars. Celano's *First Life* was clearly inadequate now that so much new material had come to light ; the *Second Life* was more a character study than a biography. Moreover, the Order was at the time becoming more and more divided over the distracting problem of how far the intentions of S. Francis were to be rigidly observed. There were by now two definite parties—the " conventuals " who favoured relaxation, and the " spirituals " who wanted to return to the uncompromising standards of the early days. Some of the incidents in the life of S. Francis and some of the things which he had said were causing such controversy and distress that it was clear that a new Life ought to be written which would supersede all others. By this means the more embarrassing moments in the earlier legends would be forgotten and peace might be restored. The Chapter General of 1260 asked Bonaventura to undertake this responsible task. He accepted their invitation and published his *Legenda Maior* in 1263. In 1266 an order was passed saying that all previous manuscripts were to be destroyed. Fortunately a few escaped destruction, or much of the most precious Franciscan literature would have perished. But the intention was clear. Bonaventura had produced the standard Life of the saint and was henceforth to hold a complete monopoly.

When we examine Bonaventura's work we see how able it is. But we see also how inadequate. Homely little touches are suppressed ; Francis becomes less unconventional ; strange inexplicable traits in his character are passed over, and incidents which might appear undignified are omitted. The dirty, patched tunic of S. Francis is washed and ironed, and a saint is turned out worthy to take his place in even the most fastidious company. It is a very nice saint whom he produces ; but, unfortunately, it is not S. Francis.

The inadequacy of Bonaventura's Life of S. Francis was evident to the "spirituals" who treasured memories of the saint which had been handed down from his closest friends. It was to supplement Bonaventura's official Life that one of the friars, possibly James of Massa, made a collection of fifty stories about S. Francis which are among the most precious which we possess. They form the bulk of that lovely Franciscan treasure-house, the *Fioretti* or *Little Flowers of S. Francis*. The *Fioretti* is an Italian translation, made about 1335, of certain chapters from a collection known as the *Actus Beati Francisci* which is itself clearly based upon two earlier sources. Because of its fourteenth-century date it has been customary to treat the *Fioretti* as largely apocryphal; but since we can trace its parentage back almost to S. Francis' companions themselves it seems to me that it may have much greater historical value than has commonly been supposed. External evidence must necessarily count for a great deal, but internal evidence is by no means insignificant. And the internal evidence of the *Fioretti* points undoubtedly to an early date. The Francis of these stories is the Francis whom we have learnt to love in his own writings and in the earliest legends, and is far removed from the more conventional figure of Bonaventura. The atmosphere, too, is that of the early days when Poverty and Humility were still the absorbing interest of the friars, and when the gaiety and abandon of their great spiritual adventure had not been overshadowed and restrained by organisation and officialdom.

Now let us turn again from literature to art. We saw that, in the reaction from the early, more stereotyped presentations of Francis the wonder-worker, the artists tended to concentrate more and more on the important events of his life rather than on the purely miraculous. This continued to the end of the century. The main difference is that the figure of S. Francis himself changes from the austere ascetic of the primitives to the infinitely more human, sometimes quite fatherly, figure of the Giotto frescoes.

The Upper Church at Assisi was finished about the time of Bonaventura, and the greatest artists of the day were invited to



contribute to the decoration of it. Among these was Cimabue, or whoever painted the lovely things that go by his name. Cimabue made no attempt to illustrate the life of S. Francis, but he has given us a portrait of the saint which brings out all the humility and tender simplicity which previous works, with the exception of the very earliest paintings, seem to lack. A few years later Giotto and his pupils set to work to adorn the great nave of the Upper Church of S. Francis with twenty-eight scenes from the life of the Poverello. "In Giotto's frescoes at Assisi", wrote Roger Fry, the Franciscan legend "acquired for the first time a treatment in which the desire for actuality was fully recognised. But actuality alone would not have satisfied Giotto's patrons; it was necessary that the events should be presented as scenes of everyday life, but it was also necessary that they should possess that quality of universal and eternal significance which distinguishes a myth from a mere historical event. It was even more necessary that they should be heroic than that they should be actual." Although I should be inclined to question Roger Fry's insistence that Giotto was doing something new (especially in view of the scenes in the Siena panel), yet there had, of course, been nothing to compare with this *tour-de-force* in the Upper Church.

Giotto took as his source the *Legenda Maior* of Bonaventura and it is clear that he kept closely to his text. Like his immediate predecessors he chose not the miracles of healing but the dramatic and significant events from the saint's life. Yet many of them are charged with an air of mystery. The first of the series depicts the story of the simpleton in Assisi who spread his cloak before the young Francis when he met him in the street as if he foresaw his future greatness; several of the subjects are concerned with dreams and visions; one shows S. Francis' prophetic powers, and one is miraculous—the spring of water which appeared in order to satisfy the thirsty peasant. At the same time Giotto has ignored altogether the accounts of miracles of healing, most of them performed at the tomb of S. Francis, which were so much sought after by earlier painters.

A few years later Giotto painted another series in S. Croce at Florence. A comparison of these with the frescoes at Assisi

is most interesting. The saint appears throughout as a much younger man ; and there is a grace and simplicity and an air of care-free abandonment to the divine will and purpose which the paintings at Assisi lack. I cannot help feeling that, between the year 1296, when he was planning the series at Assisi, and about 1320, when he set out to paint his frescoes at S. Croce, Giotto had learnt something about S. Francis which he did not find in the pages of Bonaventura. Might he perhaps have come across either the collection of stories which forms the main source of the *Fioretti* or the writings of Brother Leo ?

Besides these two series of frescoes designed to illustrate the life of S. Francis, Giotto also attempted a totally different kind of picture which might be called "allegorical". Such a treatment of the Franciscan story began as early as 1227, the year after the saint's death, in the writing of a little imaginative work known as the *Sacrum commercium*, or *Holy Converse of the Blessed Francis with Lady Poverty*. This is a document of remarkable charm telling how Francis sought out the poor, despised and hated Lady Poverty and made her his bride. Towards the year 1300 this work appears to have inspired not only the greatest painter of the day but also the greatest poet, Dante.

Immediately over the high altar in the Lower Church at Assisi Giotto painted four frescoes, three being allegories of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, and the fourth representing the glorification of S. Francis. The allegory of Poverty is the most important for our purpose. In the centre we see S. Francis and Lady Poverty, the latter barefooted, clothed in rags, and standing among thorns. Behind them stands Christ, who is joining their hands together in matrimony while Francis places a ring on the bride's finger. To right and left of this trio are groups of saints and angels ; and in each case the figure nearest the foreground is turning to observe some incident which forms an important part of the allegory. In the left-hand corner the artist has painted a youth offering his cloak to a beggar, thus symbolising renunciation, the first step towards poverty. In the opposite corner stands a group of three men, one of whom clutches a bag of gold, while another carries a hawk on his wrist. These clearly signify wealth and pleasure, the very opposites of

poverty. Meanwhile, in the middle foreground, immediately under the central figures, are two boys, one of whom is throwing stones at Lady Poverty, while the other appears to be thrusting the thorns against her naked feet. Thus is depicted the world's contempt for the poor. At the head of the picture are two flying angels, one of whom bears the cloak which the young man has given to the beggar, and the other a noble mansion, both of which are being offered to God whose hands are just visible in the clouds.

The other work which has much in common with the *Sacrum Commercium* is the *Paradiso*. That Dante had actually read the allegory I should think unlikely, for it does not appear to have had a very wide circulation during the thirteenth century. But there is certainly an affinity between the eleventh canto of the *Paradiso* and the symbolism of the *Sacrum Commercium*, an affinity which extends, beyond the general theme of Francis' search for Poverty and their subsequent espousal, to a number of ideas which are common to both. Each writer stresses the fact that, after the time of her union with Christ, Poverty, bereft of her husband, remained alone and an outcast, "despised, obscure and with none to welcome her". Each also, in referring to the love which existed between Christ and Lady Poverty, mentions the fact that she, and she alone, mounted the Cross with Him. Compare for instance, the words :

. . . dove Maria rimase giuso  
ella con Cristo salse in sulla croce  
(She, when Mary remained below, mounted the Cross with Christ)

with Francis' words to Poverty as recorded in the *Sacrum Commercium* :

Alone thou didst cleave to the King of Glory when all the chosen and beloved of Him fearfully deserted Him . . . and on the cross itself, when His body was bared, His arms stretched out, His hands and His feet pierced, alone with Him thou didst suffer.

It is clear, then, that by the end of the thirteenth century there were two moulds in which men's thoughts about S. Francis were shaping themselves. One was the factual and the other the allegorical. On one side, men were treasuring stories of his life, stories which had circulated among his followers, some of

which were perhaps apocryphal but many of which had been passed down from those who were most intimate with him and nearest to his inmost thoughts. On the other side men loved to dwell on the theme of Francis' search for the Lady Poverty, his wooing of her and her acceptance of his heart and hand. Both themes are represented in the art and literature of the period and each is given prominence in the frescoes of Giotto and in the stanzas of Dante.

Giotto's work was finished before 1330, and for a hundred years little attempt was made, so far as we know, to paint scenes from the life of S. Francis. Taddeo Gaddi, Lorenzetti, Simone Martini and Orcagna all put the saint into their pictures, but none of them attempted to illustrate his career. But just about a century after Giotto a Sienese painter called Sassetta painted an altar-piece consisting of nine panels, each of which depicts a scene from the life of S. Francis. These were until recently scattered; but in 1934 seven of them were acquired by the National Gallery in London. It is to be hoped that the other two will eventually find their way there in order that we may have an opportunity of seeing the polyptich as a whole.

These paintings are extraordinarily charming. They are perfectly natural, full of detail and rich in colour. Yet I cannot quite agree with Bernhard Berenson when he writes: "It is he, Stefano Sassetta, who has left us the most adequate rendering of the Franciscan soul that we possess in the entire range of painting". To my mind the S. Francis of these paintings is just a little "precious". Like the S. Francis of Andrea della Robbia he reminds me of the Franciscan cult of the Edwardian drawing-rooms and little books bound in soft leather. Personally I want my Francis to be a little more rugged, unkempt—yes, to be quite honest, a little more dirty! Thomas of Spalato, who heard him preach in 1222, wrote at the time that "his tunic was dirty, his person unprepossessing, and his face far from handsome", and Brother Masseo is said to have asked Francis: "Why doth all the world come after thee, and why is it that all men long to see thee, and to hear thee, and to obey thee? Thou art not a man comely of form, thou art not of much wisdom, thou art not noble of birth: whence comes it then that it is after

thee that the whole world doth run ? ” If Francis was really anything like the figure whom Sassetta depicts then Masseo’s question could never have been asked.

Sassetta painted this altar-piece in 1437. In 1452 Benozzo Gozzoli executed a series of twelve frescoes in the Church of S. Francis at Montefalco. Again, it is the outstanding events in the saint’s life which he chooses ; nor does he confine himself to those incidents which Giotto and other artists had already made famous. Benozzo is of peculiar interest to us because he appears either to have been a local man, or to have been in close contact with people who knew of traditions about S. Francis which had not been included in the written records. Visitors to Assisi will most likely have been shown the stable in which S. Francis is said to have been born, his mother having migrated there, upon divine guidance, just before his birth. But there is no mention of this tradition in any of the *legendae*. Where and when it arose I do not know ; but Benozzo’s first scene is of the birth of S. Francis in a stable. Again, in the seventh of this series of frescoes two scenes are depicted. One is of S. Francis preaching to the birds ; the other portrays the saint being offered a mitre, which he refuses to accept. There is no authority for this in the written records ; but clearly there was a local tradition that Francis was once offered a bishopric and refused it. One other point which is of interest in these paintings is Benozzo’s interest in natural scenery. The background of the fresco which I have just mentioned is an almost photographic reproduction of the view from Montefalco across the plain to Subasio with Assisi on its little spur and Spello lying some way to the south.

I have spoken of these two artists of the Quattrocento because their pictures are becoming well-known and because their contribution to the expression of the Franciscan legend in art is so important. But my main task has been to indicate what people thought about S. Francis during the first century after his death and to show how their ideas were expressed in art and literature.