

The Impact of Francis of Assisi on the 13th Century

- The Development of His Image and the Change of the Franciscan Order -

Tadaaki KANZAKI

Born in 1182 as a son of wealthy cloth-merchant Bernardone and Pica, Francis of Assisi was in his youth a cheerful but naive romantic, fond of the French romances of chivalry, dreaming to become knight, but only an ordinary young man to be found anywhere. However, when he died in 1226, he was surrounded by thousands of the admirers and followers of his natal town who watched him dying lest other peoples might robbed them of the precious relics, that is, him. He was, and even today remains one of the most popular saints in the world.

Many may have his own image of Francis¹⁾, but in modern days these images are, I think, tender and pacific. Francis of Assisi, one may imagine him as a nature mystic who preached to birds, and lauded the sun as brother²⁾. Or, other may think him as an author of the Prayer of Peace, although falsely attributed to him, which even the war-thirsty politicians cited in their speeches. But from the late thirteenth century on, the image of Francis had an another aspect. He was identified with an eschatological figure, and called as 'Angelus sexti sigilli or Angel of the sixth seal' in the Apocalypse. Of Francis, how did the medieval men embrace this image? Naturally the problem 'imaginary' is difficult to answer. My purpose in this paper is first to roughly sketch the development of the structure of the franciscan brotherhood, and then to attempt to correlate it with the change of the image of Francis.

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Shortly after his conversion, Francis abandoned the earthly pleasures

which he had loved very much in former days, and disdained the money, ran away from the world. He was regarded by people of Assisi as mad, and 'those who knew him, saw him reappearing, compared his actual state with his past deeds, began to insult him, to call him an insane, and to throw stones and mud at him³⁾'. Things went against him at first. But one by one, he won his supporters who were struck by his austerity and humility and followed his example.

By 1210's, his followers were becoming known under the name of 'the Lesser Poor', as Burchard of Ursperg said, 'who traveled completely barefoot both summer and winter and accepted neither money nor anything else except food for the day or sometimes a needed garment which someone might give them of his own volition, for they asked nothing of anyone⁴⁾'. Their way of life was becoming, Jack of Vitry wrote, 'hold in high esteem by the pope and the cardinals. They did not concern themselves with the temporal things, but on the contrary, with fervent desire and with vehement engagement, every day they never tired of pulling away from worldly vanity the souls that were in peril of shipwreck, and to attract them to join in their company. By the Divine Grace, they have already borne great fruits of which many profitted, so that one who had listened them, in his turn, invited others, "Come and look with your eyes"⁵⁾'.

When in ca.1209 Francis and his companions went to Rome to ask the papal approbation of their way of life, their number was twelve. Unfortunately their names were not all known, but judged from the description of 'the First Legend of St. Francis' of Thomas of Celano, they were also a wealthy merchant or noble, but all of laity. Of the first companions, only Sylvester was priest, but at that time it is probable that he had not yet joined them. Their movement was preponderantly laic.

The message of Francis was simple. He advocated the literal observance of the Evangils, abandoned all his possession and exhorted people to escape from the world and to make penitence of their own sin. He wanted only to

realize in his own life the precepts of Christ as he understood literally. What was important to him was not exegesis or learning, which inevitably resulted in having something material, especially books, but the prayer and penitence was his unique intention. The simpler was his inspiration, the deeper was its impact in that wealth-orientating society. Men loved and venerated him passionately, and found in his life an instrument of sanctifying themselves and the society. Certainly some might think his attempt as absurd, or not within the limits of human beings. Or, his proposal itself might be practicable only to small group of zelants, and inapplicable to a mass. He and his companions, however, fascinated and attracted many, both men and women, rich and poor, simple and learned, to follow their examples.

But, as described in Jack of Vitry's above-mentioned letter, attracting by its virtues and examples, this tiny brotherhood swelled up dramatically already in his lifetime, and in 1260 it counted 17,500 friars at the lowest estimate⁶⁾. That was too rapid an expansion to be coherent as simple brotherhood of penitents. In this process, it swallowed up many diverse elements. Not only the simple and illiterate, but also the clerks and learned joined in this nascent confraternity. Among them, there were some notables, as Jack of Vitry mentioned, 'recently also frate Nicholas, comprovincial of the Pope holy and devote man, had abandoned the Curia Romana and retired among them. But because he was very much necessary to the Pope, he was called back by His Holiness⁷⁾'.

Although the expansion of the brotherhood was welcomed, as suggests the prophecy of fishes which Francis received in his desperate efforts to win the ears of indifferent people, it proved to Francis and his first companions to be bitter at once. In this prophecy, Francis was promised that God should increase them into great people. But 'in the end it will happen as it would be to the fisherman, who casts a net in sea or in lake, and draws it full of fishes. Having displayed all fishes in his small boat, tired of such a great number, he selects the biggers and finers, and aban-

done the others in sea⁸⁾'. It might foretell the coming dissension. Even in his life time, already there were signs that the great and growing number of his followers were not of one mind regarding the fulfilment of their calling. What measure of unity there was depended on their common loyalty and devotion to Francis, and on the inspiration of his example⁹⁾.

Francis had a great religious charisma, but unlike a Dominic, lacked in organizing talent, and knew almost nothing of law. It is supposed that his first 'Rule', which he wanted to get approved by Pope Innocent III, was a mere collection of the passages of the Bible¹⁰⁾, and the so-called 'Regula Prima' had not sufficient clauses to regulate on their religious routine. So that it would be replaced by the 'Regula Bullata or Authorized Rule' which incorporated many suggestions of Pope Gregory IX. And in order to manage the ever growing brotherhood, it was inevitable to rely on those who had enough knowledge of administration and law. Soon they occupied the important place in the brotherhood, and with them brought many elements that were alien to the franciscan way of life; for example, the tendency to the monasticism, the clericalization of the brotherhood, and the use of money. It might be inevitable to attenuate the original ideal and to make the brotherhood into the religious Order, in order to accommodate to the age and society. But it was when Francis' agony began. Already during his absence in the Near East for converting the Muslims to the Christianity in 1220, the vicars, who had been charged to administer the brotherhood, set up fixed residences in the towns, or one official established 'studium' of fine proportions, thus at once contravening Francis's teaching on the subjects of learning, the owning of property and the uses of houses not in accordance with the standard of poverty¹¹⁾. And later officials attempted to check unnecessary journeys and forbade the brothers to travel any distance without the 'litteris obedientialibus¹²⁾'. In comparison with Burchard of Ursperg's description, the itinerant preaching in origin was gradually suppressed by the officials as irregular and dangerous.

After Francis' death, and especially after the fall of Minister General Elias who was also layman and the champion of the laity in the brotherhood, the tendency to decrease the role of the laity in the franciscans was accelerated. Francis had emphasized that the prayers of simple laymen might save more souls than the sermons of the learned, but on the contrary, Haymo, fourth Minister General of the franciscans, thought the Order had little need of them¹³⁾. Clerics despised the laity because they were ignorant of Latin and because they could not administer the sacraments. They were, in their judgement, useless persons who could bring no profit to the Order¹⁴⁾. In 1242, the Minister General imposed an entirely new regulations disqualifying laymen from holding office¹⁵⁾. And recruitment of laymen into the Order practically ceased and those that were admitted were relegated to the background, to perform menial tasks as servants of other brethren. Even the number of these was restricted, and most of the rough work came to be done by outside labour¹⁶⁾. They changed the structure of the Order drastically.

One might judge them as 'traitors' of the ideal of Francis, or think that they entered into the Order because of their thirst for power or comfortable life. In fact, they highly appreciated the franciscan ideal, found in them means of the renewal offered them by the Divine Grace. But they saw the movement with their own eyes and with their own culture, and in the light of a tradition which had been consolidated and offered by the doctrine, by the spirituality, by law and by the pastoral activity of the ecclesiastic institutions¹⁷⁾. Even if fascinated by the new religiosity, everyone had his own past and background difficult to deny.

Little by little, in the bosom of the brotherhood, there grew a germ of scission. One part of frairs, that was called 'community', 'accepted the relaxations of the strict observance of the Rule, in order to make the Order a flexible instrument in service of the universal Church and of Papacy'. Other part, the so-called 'Spirituals', 'thought, on the contrary, that the franciscans could realize an important task in the Church, only adhering

strictly to the genuine ideals of their founder, especially in regard to the ideal of the poverty¹⁸⁾.

In 1243, it was reported that Crescentius of Iesi, the Minister of the March of Ancona, had had trouble in his province from a group of brethren who refused to respect the official authority in the Order. These rebels had the impudence to claim the guidance of the Holy Spirit as an excuse for their insubordination. They wore a distinctive dress, cutting their cloak unsuitably short, and esteemed themselves godlier than their fellows¹⁹⁾. They preferred the strict observance of the Rule and the guidance of the Holy Spirit through it to the institutionalized Order.

But still worse, Crescentius of Iesi, elected as Minister General in 1244, calculated to induce the Pope to relax still further the modified interpretation of the Rule, allowed by Gregort IX in the bull Quo elongati. Innocent IV responded with the bull Ordinem vesterum, which while it may or may not have satisfied all the hopes of its promoters, went beyond Quo elongati in several important details; for example, the recourse to the 'spiritual friends' not only for the urgent necessities, but also for the comforts and convenience²⁰⁾. Some brothers grieved deeply over the state of the Order and the relaxations that took it over further from its original perfection, and appealed to Pope Innocent IV. But The Pope took side with their opponents to authorize them to punish the zelants²¹⁾.

After Crescentius, the Gereralate of John of Parma (1247-57) was welcomed both by the officials who elected his as Minister General, and by zelants who revered and loved him. But the gradual insertion and establishment of the franciscan Order into the universities and the pastoral structure, and the problem of burial and hearing of confessions²²⁾ provoked the serious reactions among the secular clergy. Besides, although John of Parma was a saintly, generous and ever cheerful, he was suspected of Joachimism which prophesied the rise of new religious orders destined to convert the whole world and to asher in the 'Ecclesia Spiritualis'. Joachim's vision of the

History evidently questioned the concept of the Church as a perfect society already realized in this world, which was a base of the theocratic system, and it could be used to relatively the role of the hierarchy and of the institutional structure²³⁾. John of Parma was forced to resign. That was the state of affairs in which Bonaventure was elected as the Minister General.

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During seventeen years of his Generalate, Bonaventure had to face several problems difficult to solve. He had to advocate and defend the franciscan Order from the outsiders whose attacks against their ideal became increasingly more bitter. Bonaventure had to proceed against John of Parma for joachimist heresy²⁴⁾. It was not an enviable role for anyone to judge his friend and master and benefactor who nominated him as successor. But in order to extirpate the suspect of heresy from the Order, it was an inevitable step. In addition, the franciscans had also other vulnerable points to outside attacks; for example, the vow of absolute poverty, the increasing mission of the pastoral care, the problem of learning and education. Whence came the conflicts with the parochial clergy over burials and hearing of confessions; quarrels with the secular masters of University of Paris over the ideal of the franciscan poverty and the nomination for the professors of theology²⁵⁾.

But no less important was his works within the Order. Shortly after elected as Minister General, he dispatched his first message to all the ministers and guardians (responsibles of convents), in which he enumerated the present abuses; relaxation of the observance, scandalous vagabondage, exaction of alms by force, and so on²⁶⁾. He was deeply conscious of the situation. The problem of interpreting the Rule was more serious. Certainly, the gap between the 'Community' and the 'spirituals' was not so deep as later. But there were signs of crisis. Bonaventure had to face them, to keep the unity

of the Order and to found the new solid base for the Order.

About the Rule, while he insisted on the discipline and regular observance Bonaventure interpreted it more loosely than the companions of Francis, because he was obliged to take count of the evolution that had led the Order to the present situation²⁷⁾. Concerning the study and science, Bonaventure, who was Doctor of theology, admired them, gave them an important role, and encouraged them. Francis had not appreciated it well, but after half a century the study and science took root deeply in the Order²⁸⁾. The lines which Bonaventure took in guiding these affairs were, in short, rather conservative, and confirmed after the fact.

Besides other activities as Minister General, not mentioned here²⁹⁾, Bonaventure attempted to give the new logical structure to the constitutions which had been issued in his predecessors' Generalates, since the franciscans had frequently changed them to cope with the evolution of the Order. He presented his travail to the General Chapter at Narbonne in 1250. He and the General Chapter conferred the validity of law to these constitutions, and ordered to destroy the statutes of the precedent Minister Generals. They also deliberately ordered not to disclose their decisions lest the outsiders should know them. People was still divided on the legitimacy of such or such usages, on how to realize Francis' ideals. The purpose of this legislation was to suppress what could provoke the discordance, and to keep the unity of the Order³⁰⁾.

It was also in the same motive that in 1260 Bonaventure was commissioned by the Chapter of Narbonne to compose a new legend of Francis from the sources already existing. As the contrast between the original life of Francis which was described in the early legends such as Thomas of Celano's and which the zealots venerated as ideal, and the actual state of the Order became apparently sharper, it was urgent to calm the tension. At the General Chapter held at Pise in 1263, he could present the new biography of St. Francis which would be called 'Legenda Major'. Consequently the General

Chapter held at Paris in 1266 ordered to destroy all the 'Legendae' anterior to that of Bonaventure. Like in all other activities as Minister General, Bonaventure had in that redaction the same intention, that is to propose, for the history of the Order, the new criterions of valuation and different schemata of judgement from current ones, and subtly and deliberately to mutate the points of reference, the essential premises, both spiritual and ideological, of the friars and of the Order. Reformulating a biography of Francis adapted to the present situation of the Order, and taking away, as much as possible, what seemed contrary to it, Bonaventure sought to eliminate at least partially the ideal points of reference of the dissents and scissions. The leadership of the Order felt the urgent necessity of offer to the brothers a model, that is Francis, less contrary to the new situation and to the already taken lines of the Order³¹⁾.

The model which Bonaventure proposed has, according to Giovanni Miccoli, two fundamental ideas. It emphasized, on one hand, all the peaceful aspects of Francis' figure, which might approve that his example should be, above all, of ascesis and of mortification. Every friar must follow his example as nearer as possible, but it would be absolutely impossible for human beings to repete perfectly his example and special experiences. He intended to obscure a series of the facts and deeds of Francis, and to eliminate the sensitive points which could provoke the bitter internal conflicts³²⁾.

But on the other hand he did not confine himself to the simplification and attenuation of episodes and events of the life of Francis. What he proposed was the analogy between the development of the Church and the history of the Order, and between Christ and Francis. Bonaventure wrote to a masters who had criticised the Order, 'that the brothers were in the beginning simple and illiterate.... I confess before God that it is this which made me most greatly esteem the life of St Francis, because it is similar to the beginning and perfection of the Church, which first began with simple fishermen and afterwards advanced to the most illustrious and learned doctors. Thus

you will see in the Order of the blessed Francis that God shows that it was not contrived through human prudence but through Christ; and because the works of Christ do not fail but increase, this was shown to be the work of God when wise men did not disdain to descend to the company of simple folk³³⁾. From this viewpoint, even the changes does not resulted in a sign of betrayal, but the prove in part by the constant assistance of God. The history of the Order was regarded under the sign of the providential Will of God³⁴⁾.

Bonaventure knew well the difficulties in which the Order was situated. He intended to mask and to modify the deeds and events of the life of Francis. On the contrary, some first companions of Francis and friars clung to the teaching of Francis, refused to reinterpret it, and assumed the responsibility of continuing the message of Francis. What the biographer of Francis tried was indeed to eliminate this continuity, and to adjust the model to the present exigency³⁵⁾, and attempted to move away from action to words and ideas³⁶⁾. In order to give a foudation adequate to the new situation, in an aspect, it can be said that he 'betrayed' to the ideal of Francis

For this reason, and in addition by his involvement in the condemnation of John of Parma, although saintly and austere, Bonaventure would have been regarded as half-guilty by some frairs, as the vision of a brother in the chapter 48 of the Fioretti indicates. In this vision, Bonaventure is described that he drank only part of the cup filled with the spirit of life, which Francis had offered to him, and then assaulted John of Parma, intent on wounding him³⁷⁾. To some zealot franciscans, Bonaventure could be unfavorable person who distorted the teaching of Francis by recomposing the official biography of Francis.

However some zealots looked him coldly, through the Legenda Maior, Bonaventure exerted a profound influence upon them. In its Prologus, he stated, 'therefore there is every reason to believe that it is he (that is Francis) who is designated under the image of an angel rising from the east with the

seal of the living God, in the prophecy by that other friend of the bridegroom, John the apostle and evangelist. When the sixth seal was broken, John says in the Apocalypse, "I saw a second Angel rising from the east with the seal of the living God"³⁸⁾. He identified Francis with the Angel of the Apocalypse in connection with the stigmata. Stigmata, he thought of them as the signal of God's approval of Francis, are the seal of the exterior and interior conformity of Francis to Christ Crucified³⁹⁾. Or in other places he called Francis as 'Alter Christus or Another Christ', or compared him with Elia or John the Baptist. Francis was not a mere man, but eschatological figure in whom God reveal the saving power of the Cross. He expounded this eschatological theme not only in the Legenda Maior, but also in other works, for example, in Collationes in hexaemeron⁴⁰⁾.

When he recomposed the Legenda of Francis by using the already existing sources, probably he could be motivated by the political considerations. But he was, above all, theologian, one of the greatest in the Middle Ages, never abandoned his frame of mind. His Legenda, therefore, should be understood in the light of the global theology of Bonaventure⁴¹⁾, and in an aspect the whole life of Francis is presented as a journey towards ecstatic vision of God in Christ Crucified⁴²⁾. He presented Francis as a figure in the myth, rather than as a historical person.

Although he condemned the Joachimism in the case of John of Parma, there one could find the echoes of them in him. Certainly his attitude towards Joachimism was ambivalent⁴³⁾. But it would seem that he accepted Joachim in as far as this was possible⁴⁴⁾. He saw Francis as a precursor of the new Order whom Joachim had prophesied, and accepted the periodisation of history of Joachim. This was an important contribution to the later development of the spiritual franciscanism. In the Fioletti with tone of spiritual franciscanism, Bonaventure was, as mentioned above, treated as half-guilty who wanted to distort the message of Francis. But not only the Joachimism, to which he had given a francescan outlook, but also his eschatological vision

of Francis as Angelus sexti sigilli was well accepted, and exerted a strong influence among them; for example, Peter Jean-Olieu, Ubertin of Casale, and Angelo Clareno⁴⁵). Although they were all learned and clerics who did not object to the clericalization of the Order, and who were opposed to the violent disturbance, they advocated the absolute poverty of Francis, and fought against the corruption of the Church, as vividly illustrated in Umberto Eco's 'Il nome della rosa'. They used, consciously or unconsciously, as their point of departure the image of Francis which had been handed down from Bonaventure.

Bonaventure certainly succeeded in appease the tension within the Order by his various activities; legislation, imposing discipline, reinterpretation of the Rule, composition of Legenda Maior, vast writing and so on. But at the same time he gave and spreaded a new grounds for the dissenters' claims, that is, Francis in the eschatological perspective. It is curious that the image of Francis as 'Another Christ', which had in origin an eschatological tendency, was used by the Pope Pius XI in an encyclical in order to set a good example of obedience to the Church.

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- 1) For example, see St. Francis: Essays in Commemorations, 1982, Maurice W. Sheehan, O.F.M.Cap.(ed.), The Franciscan Institute, New York, 1982.
- 2) Cf., Edward A. Armstrong, Saint Francis: Nature Mystic. The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend, University of California Press, 1973.
- 3) Thomas of Celano, Vita Prima S.Francisci Assisiensis (I Cel), (Quaracchi, 1926-7), 11.
- 4) Burchard of Ursperg, Chronicon; MGH Scriptores, XXIII, p.376.
- 5) Lettres de Jacques de Vitry (1160/70-1240), éveque de Saint-Jean-d'Acre. Edition critique (Jacques de Vitry), R.Huygens (ed.), Leiden, 1960,

pp.71-78.

6) Cf., Rosalind B. Brooke, Early Franciscan Government: Elias to Bonaventure, Cambridge 1959, p.283.

7) Jacques de Vitry, ibid.

8) I Cel, 28; cf., G. Miccoli, 'Di alcuni passi di san Bonaventura sullo sviluppo dell'ordine francescano', in Studi Medievali XI(1970), p.386.

9) Cf., Brooke, ibid., p.108.

10) I Cel, 32.

11) Cf., Brooke, ibid., p.64.

12) Cf., ibid., p.216.

13) Cf., ibid., pp.195-209.

14) Cf., ibid., p.160.

15) Cf., ibid., p.243.

16) Cf., ibid., p.245.

17) Cf., G. Miccoli, 'Bonaventura e Francesco', in S.Bonaventura francescano (Todi 14-17 ottobre 1973), Todi 1974, p.70.

18) Cf., E. Pastzor, 'Gli spirituali di fronte a San Bonaventura', in S. Bonaventura francescano, p.178.

19) Cf., Brooke, ibid., p.248.

20) Cf., ibid., p.250; Gratien de Paris, Histoire de la fondation et de l'évolution de l'ordre des frères mineurs au XIII^e siècle, Paris 1926 (rep. Roma 1982), pp.193-199.

21) Cf., ibid., p.252.

22) Cf., Gratien de Paris, ibid., pp.200-221.

23) Cf., André Vauchez, 'Contestations et hérésies dans l'Eglise latine', in Histoire du Christianisme des origines à nos jours, tome VI; Un Temps d'épreuves(1274-1449), Michel Mollat du Jourdin and André Vauchez(eds.), Desclée-Fayard 1990, p.328.

24) Cf., Gratien de Paris, ibid., pp.244-46; pp.276-77.

25) Cf., ibid., pp.249-265.

- 26)Cf., Jacques G. Bougerol, Introduction à Saint Bonaventure, J.Vrin, Paris 1988, pp.255-59.
- 27)Cf., Gratien de Paris, ibid., pp.267-69.
- 29)Cf., ibid., pp.275-309.
- 31)Cf., Miccoli, 'Bonaventura e Francisco', pp.50-51.
- 32)Cf., ibid., p.55.
- 33)Cf., Brooke, ibid., pp.273-74.
- 34)Cf., Miccoli, 'Bonaventura e Francisco', pp.56-57.
- 35)Cf., Miccoli, ibid., pp.64-65.
- 36)Cf., Aviad M. Kleinberg, Prophets in their own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages, The University of Chicago Press 1992, pp.126-148.
- 37)Cf., Brooke, ibid., pp.271-72.
- 38)Legenda Maior, Prologus I, in Bonaventure, Opera, VIII.
- 39)Cf., Noel Muscat OFM, The Life of Saint Francis in the Light of Saint Bonaventure's Theology on the "Verbum Crucifixusum", Editrice Antonianum, Roma 1989, p.181.
- 40)Cf., David Burr, 'Franciscan Exegesis and Francis as Apocalyptic Figure', in Monks, Nuns, and Friars in Medieval Society, E. B. King, J. T. Schaefer and W. B. Wadley (eds.), The Press of the University of the South, Sewanee (Tennessee), 1989, p.51.
- 41)Cf., Muscat, ibid., p.171.
- 42)Cf., ibid., p.175.
- 43)Cf., M. Reeves, The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism, Oxford 1969.
- 44)Cf., Joseph Ratzinger, The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1971, p.181, n.37.
- 45)Cf., Willibroad-Christian Van Dijk, 'La représentation de Saint François d'Assise dans les écrits des spirituels', in Franciscans d'Occ; Les spirituels ca. 1280-1324 (Cahiers de Fanjeaux 10), Privat, Toulouse 1975.

pp.203-30; Edith Pásztor, 'L'immagine di Cristo negli Spirituali', in Chi erano gli spirituali (Assisi, 16-18 ottobre 1975), Assisi 1976, pp.107-124; Lydia von Auw, Angelo Clareno et les spirituels italiens, Roma 1979; Giulia Barone, 'L'œuvre eschatologique de Pierre Jean-Olieu et son influence; Un bilan historiographique', in Fin du monde et signes des temps; visionnaires et prophètes en France méridionale (fin XIII^e-début XV^e siècle) (Cahiers de Fanjeaux 27), Privat ,Toulouse 1992, pp.49-61.