CHAPTER 1

Francis of Assisi and the Pursuit of Learning

Introduction

The stunning transformation of the Franciscan order from a small band of laymen into a well-organized international order of educated preachers and theologians, with schools all over Europe, took place even more quickly than was acknowledged until recently. Ignoring suggestive insights by Hilarin Felder, who in 1904 published the first genuinely scholarly monograph on this issue, many historians writing on Franciscan education have argued that the question of studies was only addressed systematically under the minister general Bonaventure (1257–1273), and more in particular in the Narbonne Constitutions of 1260. According to this interpretation, the creation of a school network began in earnest under the Franciscan minister generals Albert of Pisa (1239) and Haymo of Faversham (1240–1243), to be brought to full fruition under Bonaventure.

As numerous Franciscan study houses can be traced back to the early 1220s, and Franciscan chronicles provide references to lectors and the exchange of students during the 1230s, it becomes plausible to assume that the creation of schools and provincial study houses for the training of lectors was well under way under the leadership of Elias, who governed the Franciscan order as a vicar between 1221–1226, and again as minister general between 1232–1239. This brings the problem of studies back to Francis's final years. Between his abdication as order leader in 1221 and his death in 1226, Franciscan schools and study houses started to appear in Italy, Spain, France, and England. Francis must have been well aware of that. All the more reason to revisit a central question among scholars looking for the authentic Franciscan ideals, namely what Francis thought about the place of learning and the pursuit of studies in the Franciscan way of life.

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2 For different perspectives, see Hilarin Felder, Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Studien im Franziskanerorden bis um die Mitte des 13. Jahrhunderts (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1904); Bogdan Fajdek, ‘Gli studi nell’Ordine dei Frati Minori secondo le Costituzioni di Narbona di
Francis as the Enemy of Science? Images from the Hagiographical Tradition

Discussions concerning Francis's views on learning have unfolded within the context of the so-called 'Franciscan Question', initiated by the publications of Paul Sabatier in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Sabatier perceived a huge dichotomy between the ideals of Francis the ‘poverello’ and the realities of an institutionalized and increasingly learned order of clerics. Looking for the authentic voice of Francis and the early brothers, Sabatier and like-minded scholars after him put much stock in a series of writings ascribed to the circle of Francis's early companions, such as the Anonymous of Perugia (Anonymus Perusinus), the Legend of the Three Companions (Legenda Trium Sociorum), the Assisi Compilation (known as the Compilatio Assisiensis and as the Legenda Perusina), the Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions (Actus beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius) and the Mirror of Perfection (Speculum Perfectionis). The discussions concerning the status of such texts, whose voices they represented, and how they could be put in a proper chronological order, have kept Franciscan scholars busy for more than a century.3

Some of these works seemingly provide first-hand testimony on Francis's qualms about the pursuit of learning, as Sabatier was keen to point out in his

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