CHAPTER 3

Religious Life in the Franciscan School Network (13th Century)

The Franciscan order began as a religious movement with radical ideals of evangelical perfection, but transformed into a well-organized missionary and pastoral taskforce, active throughout Western Christendom and beyond (with missionary outposts reaching as far as China by the later thirteenth century). This was only possible thanks to the creation of a well-organized educational system that connected with the types of higher theological learning developed at the university of Paris and other large academic centers of learning.¹

The available information about the core curriculum at these higher centers of learning and about the Franciscan study houses aligned with them (such as the Franciscan studia generalia at Paris, Cambridge, Oxford), as well as the theological genres associated with dominant types of advanced theological education (Sentences commentaries, disputed and quodlibetal questions, theological summae and academic biblical commentaries) give the impression that theological education in Franciscan studia was of a highly technical nature. With a fundamentally Aristotelian logical and semantical toolkit, students learned to analyze important theological issues. This impression is strengthened when we look at the preparatory logical and philosophical textbooks used in the provincial studia to train prospective students for the order’s most prestigious studia generalia from the later thirteenth century onwards.²

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At the same time, clerical friars not selected for academic training but destined to spend their professional life as priests and confessors were exposed to down-to-earth handbooks of moral theology and formalist *casus conscientiae* texts that were not conducive to further their religious and evangelical convictions either.  

How did these formats of professional and academic education cohere with the order’s religious ideals and the spiritual life of its members? I do not wish to engage here in a discussion about the fundamental com- or incompatibility of learning with the Franciscan way of life – which is a much debated topic both during the medieval period and in recent scholarship – but to probe how the Franciscan formats of higher education were embedded in an ambiance of religious formation, and developed within superstructures implying and encouraging the ongoing spiritual development of Franciscan students and teachers.

I would like to recapitulate first of all very briefly the main aspects of the Franciscan educational system as it developed between the 1220s and the closing decades of the thirteenth century, and touch upon some particulars of Franciscan novice training and the spiritual formation of friars once their novitiate was over. Next, I will focus on the ways in which routines of Franciscan student life and the organization of studies at the Franciscan *studia generalia* encapsulated room for spiritual development. Finally, I will address the spiritual teachings in sermons specifically addressed to students and teachers, as well as some available metanarratives of religious learning developed by some of the most important academic teachers active at the Franciscan *studia generalia* within the chosen time period. I hope to show that the Franciscan students’ exposure to the technicalities of higher theological education did not necessarily impair their spiritual outlook as members of a religious order with very specific tenets of evangelical perfection.

**The Emergence of a Franciscan School Network**

Based on remarks in the chronicle of Salimbene of Parma, the pre-Narbonne constitutions unearthed by Cecare Cenci, and other dispersed narrative and archival sources, it can be inferred that a stratified system of theological education began to emerge within the Franciscan order from the early 1220s onwards, centered on a series of study houses of more than local importance. The first of

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