CHAPTER 6

Franciscan School Networks, c. 1450–1650
A Provisional Sketch

Between the second half of the fifteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century, the Franciscan school network underwent significant changes. When the Conventual school network had reached its most developed medieval stage in the later fifteenth century, study houses came into being in the vicariates of the emerging Observantes sub vicariis. By 1517, these Observants gained control over the Franciscan studium generale in Paris and officially became the dominant faction within the Franciscan order. The Conventuals not only had to come to grips with the loss of Paris, but also with the changing relationships between many of its other studia generalia and the local universities, which threatened established Conventual study paths towards higher theology degrees.

From the 1520s onwards, both the Conventuals and the Observants were confronted by the appearance and rapid growth of a new Franciscan offshoot, the order of Capuchin friars, which was quickly forced to make the education of its own friars more of a priority than had initially been intended. Moreover, radical changes in Europe’s political and religious landscape, stemming from the impact of Lutheranism and Calvinism, King Henry VIII’s breach with Rome, as well as the less radical ‘nationalist’ Catholic religious policies of France and Spain, had a tremendous impact on the ways in which the various order branches could deploy their students or maintain their study houses (and other friaries).

These sixteenth-century developments elicited a variety of responses, and also forced the Franciscan order family to adopt elements of the Counter-Reformation program formulated by the Council of Trent. Between the later sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century, the latter brought about additional transformations within the organization of studies among the Conventuals, the Observants (including the more ‘radical’ offshoots in the Observant family), and the Capuchins. The answers and solutions provided by the various order branches were not all the same, and they partly reflect differences in religious and intellectual identity.

This essay, which tries to chart these developments, is no more than an outline: an attempt to improve upon the overly concise and perhaps unhelpful remarks on the post-medieval period in my previous book on Franciscan education. It builds in part on the work of the Observant Franciscan scholar

The ‘Conventual’ Franciscan School Network in the Fifteenth Century

By the later fifteenth century, the Conventual school network was highly stratified and well-organized. Most Conventual friaries had convent lectors, who provided continual education and instruction in moral theological themes to adult clerical friars, and nearly all the provinces had a substantial number of grammar schools, custodial and/or provincial studia artium, studia philosophiae and studia theologiae, to train professed clerical friars. Beyond those, the order had an impressive number of studia generalia, to which a number and in several cases all Franciscan order provinces could send promising students to receive a so-called lectorate training: a three year theology course to prepare