Ipsi tamen conservabant sanctitatem eius cum continua oratione die noctuque et continuo silentio [They nurtured its holiness with continuous prayer day and night, and continuous silence].

These words from the *Compilatio Assisiensis* refer to an aspect of early Franciscan life that easily gets forgotten by historians carried away by the astounding development of the Franciscan order as a major pastoral taskforce in the Church and a strong player in the late medieval landscape of higher education. The Franciscan order was indeed heavily involved in these matters. Yet from the outset it was also an order with a strong contemplative streak, and with a spirituality imbued by the spirit of prayer.

To emphasize this aspect of the Minorite vocation, the present essay intends to chart how, in the course of the medieval period, prayer continued to be an intrinsic element in Franciscan works of religious instruction. It shows that, through these works of religious instruction, which built both on early Franciscan religious experimentation and on older monastic traditions, Franciscan educators were able to inform novices, professed friars and interested fellow travelers about the properties and techniques of prayer, and its proper performance in relation to other relevant activities within their chosen form of religious life.

**PRAYER IN THE EARLY FRANCISCAN MOVEMENT**

Medieval *vitae* devoted to Francis and his early companions reveal that they only opted for the pastoral route after long deliberation. During their return journey from Rome in 1209, where Francis and his small group had obtained papal approval for their *forma vitae* from

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Innocent III, the young fraternity discussed whether it should embrace the contemplative eremitical life, or instead pursue its apostolic mission. It was the latter option that won out, as this was a life for others. Nevertheless, Francis continued to be afflicted by doubts concerning this choice, which he was unable to resolve for himself. If we can believe the hagiographical sources, Francis was so troubled by indecision, that he sent friars to Sylvester and to Clare of Assisi, both of whom were renowned for the quality of their contemplative life, to ask for their prayer and for a response from God. Their answer, so the story goes, was unanimous: it was God’s will that Francis went out to preach.

Momentous as this choice may have been for the order’s future, indeed for medieval society at large, it did not by any means imply the abandonment of contemplation and prayer. In fact, it would seem that the early friars were very successful in encapsulating these activities as constitutive and restorative elements in their religious vocation.

According to Jacques de Vitry’s testimony, dating from 1216, the friars visited villages and houses in the daytime to preach penance, to return in the evening to lonely places for prayer and contemplation. Ten years later, in 1226, when Francis was asked to describe his ideal friary; he described a modest compound, closed off by a ditch and a hedge. Within this compound, he envisaged small dwellings of earth and wood, as well as a few cells where brothers could pray and work undisturbed, away from useless chatter. In the midst of these simple dwellings and cells he pictured a simple church, where the friars could gather for Mass and for the celebration of the Divine Office.

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3 IC 35, FAED 1, p. 214; Fontes, pp. 309–310.