Chapter 10

The Shepherd and the Flock: An Approach to the Preacher’s Role in Some Franciscan Sermon Collections

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While writing the first Rule for his confrères, St Francis of Assisi adumbrated the virtues and qualities of the office of preaching in churches and public places. The existence of unauthorized preachers in the order required a firm response from the founder and his first companions.¹ To this end, chapter 17 of the Regula non bullata declared:

Let no brother preach contrary to the rite and practice of the Church or without the permission of his minister. Let the minister be careful of granting it without discernment to anyone. Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds. No minister or preacher may make a ministry of the brothers or the office of preaching his own, but, when he is told, let him set it aside without objection.²

In the first expression of a statutory provision for preaching, some of those characteristics shown by the order’s chronicles and, above all, by biographies on St Francis, are deduced.³ According to the principles laid down by the fourth Lateran council in 1215, a preacher could be removed from the officium and was required to act humbly.⁴ These signs are common in the conciliar canons

and in this chapter of the *Regula non bullata*. In fact, they both leave to the bishops the choice of preachers. As coadjutors of parish priests and bishops, these ordained friars would work for the parishes and dioceses by preaching, hearing confessions and assigning penances. To attain this goal, St Francis also envisaged what may be considered the model for sermons by his friars: chapter 21 of the *Regula non bullata* is an example of preaching, or rather of moral exhortation.\(^5\) In the same period, this advice is confirmed in the First Letter to the Guardians.\(^6\) Two years later, the *Regula bullata* significantly altered the preachers’ role and the content of their sermons. In chapter nine, in fact, the *officium praedicationis* was no longer a temporary commission, but a licence that could be revoked only in cases of serious misconduct on the part of the friar who exercised it inappropriately.\(^7\) In addition, it was no longer the preserve of the bishop alone to choose preachers; friars were to be examined and appointed to the office of preaching by the minister general. Prominent friars were selected to play particular roles in the life of the Church. The order was now ready to provide its own preachers for episcopal approval. Moreover, if the figure of the parish priest disappeared from the *Regula bullata*, the bishop still maintained his role, albeit a less central one, regarding the office of preaching. In fact, the *Rule* declared that friars must not preach in the diocese of any bishop who has denied them permission.\(^8\) The relationship with the episcopal authority was no longer constant and continuous, as the reports became more sporadic. The *Regula bullata* gave the bishop only the right of an occasional veto. Even the content of the friars’ sermons bears witness to the new status of the order. No longer comprised of simple priests and laymen, the order was recruiting more clerical students and therefore more and more men properly equipped to exercise the *officium praedicationis*. Such vocations were deemed suitable to proclaim the praises of the Lord (First Letter to the Guardians) or the penitential exhortation (*Earlier Rule*). Chapter 9 of the *Regula bullata* insisted that the friars’ language be well considered and chaste for the benefit and edification of the people ‘[…:] Friars were to announce vices and virtues, punishment and glory, with brevity.’ And this is precisely the kind of preaching that emerges from early Franciscan sermon collections, even if

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\(^6\) Francesco d’Assisi Scritti, 146–147.

\(^7\) Francesco d’Assisi Scritti, 332–335.

\(^8\) Francesco d’Assisi Scritti, 332–335: ‘Fratres non praedicent in episcopate alicuius episcopi, cum ab eo illis fuerit contradictum.’