INTERPRETING FRANCIS AND CLARE OF ASSISI
FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT
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The Founder as *alter Christus*: Communal Identities among the Order of Friars Minor and Order of Preachers in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Anne Holloway and Anna Welch

In their communal religious lives and spiritualities, the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of Preachers constructed and experienced very different understandings of the figure of the founder. It would be reductive to speak of ‘spirituality’ in the singular for either Order, neither possessed a unified spiritual character. This diversity is most obvious in the case of the Friars Minor: the divisions which caused fractures in the Order throughout the thirteenth century were formally acknowledged in the fourteenth century, when the Order split into the Spiritual and Conventual groups. Even these two labels fail to express the multiplicity of spiritualities evoked in the texts and images produced by the Order of Friars Minor in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is perhaps more helpful to understand both the Friars Minor and the Order of Preachers as communities which, like all other social
groupings, negotiated complex hierarchies of identities, on both the individual and communal levels. While acknowledging the multiplicity and complexity of the groups we are studying, the aim of this chapter is to explore a limited number of these identities crafted around the figures of the founders, Francis (1181/1182-1226) and Dominic (1170-1221/22). Through a comparison of textual representations of these understandings (predominantly on texts from the early centuries of the two Orders), this chapter will explore some of the different ways in which these two groups constructed the founder’s image(s), and reflect on how such constructions were used in the maintenance of their communal identities. Major texts considered include Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria’s The Deeds of the Blessed Francis and his Companions (1328-37), Jordan of Saxony’s Libellus de principis ordinis praedicatorum (c. 1234) and Bonaventure’s Legenda Maior (1263).

Juxtapositions of Francis and Dominic are familiar – these mendicant leaders have long been contrasted and cast as rivals. Comparisons dwell not only on the obvious parallels between these two leaders of the mendicant movement’s major Orders, but also highlight the striking differences in their personalities and in the manner they were presented by their Orders. Francis’s charismatic spirituality and enigmatic personality have long been observed as central to his Order’s character and its internal divisions, while Dominic is often characterised as conservative and scholarly, even dull – a man whose individual personality did not dominate the Order to which he belonged, despite his role in its founding. In later periods Dominic is presented as the supreme Inquisitor sitting in judgement.

Francis is widely recognised as the alter Christus, primarily because he was the first person in history to exhibit miraculous stigmata (the wounds of Christ’s crucifixion). While alive, Francis appears to have been extremely private about the wounds, never deliberately exposing them to others’ view. In death, the stigmata became iconographically one of the defining features of his spirituality and a symbolic vehicle to promote his Order’s distinctive Christocentric, evangelical identity. Dominic was similarly evoked by his Order as an alter Christus, though Dominic’s identification with Christ focused on preaching not suffering. We turn now to key texts which explore how these two models of alter Christus, suffering and preaching, were developed by the earliest communities of Friars Preacher and Minor.

Francis as founder and alter Christus

The Deeds of the Blessed Francis and his Companions (hereafter DBF) was mainly composed by the Friar Minor Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria between 1328 and 1337, in the Marche region of central Italy. Scholars argue it draws on earlier textual sources such as Thomas of Celano’s vitae of Francis, Angelo Clareno’s writings, in addition to localised oral traditions of Francis. Chapter 65 of the DBF, ‘The Miracle of the Stigmata of St Francis: What happened in a Convent of the Friars Preacher’, describes an incident involving a disbelieving Friar Preacher who, while ‘staying in a convent beyond the Alps’, in the refectory of which was a picture of Saint Francis with the sacred stigmata, ‘was incited by his lack of belief and his ill will’ to secretly scratch off the stigmata from the image. By the next day, the stigmata had reappeared on the fresco. The Friar Preacher angrily scratched off the reappearing stigmata a total of three times over three days, on the last occasion gouging the very stone from the wall on which the image was painted. A grim shock awaited him, ‘as soon as he finished his gouging, blood began to flow, and with the blood violently spurt ing forth, it began to stain with blood the brother’s hands, face and tunic’. Understandably, the brother fell down in a dead faint. His fellow brothers tried to stop up the holes with bandages, but to no avail. The brothers, fearing that that laity would see it and as a result they would have to endure scandal and scorn… devoutly thought that they should have recourse to Saint Francis. All the brothers, including the Prior, then stripped and whipped themselves before the image of Francis, begging him to forgive the unhappy brother and to stop the flow of blood from the wounded image. Immediately, their prayer was answered – ‘the blood flowed no more and the stigmata of the saint remained in all its beauty to be venerated by all’. The repentant Friar Preacher then made a pilgrimage to sites associated with Francis. We are told that he would burst into devout tears whenever he came across any place or object associated with Francis. The DBF relates that ‘he also spoke about these miracles before many Lesser Brothers
at La Verna and Assisi, but only in the absence of his associates, lest perhaps he bring opprobrium on his own Order. By the merits of Saint Francis, this brother became so friendly with Francis's brothers that ... he venerated them with all the affection of brotherly love. 12

A similar story appears in a 1343 copy of the Avignon Compilation, though it features some important differences to the DBF version: the brother is simply 'of another religion' rather than specifically a Friar Preacher, and the bleeding image is healed through the personal intervention of the Pope rather than the penitence and prayer of the community. Perhaps the most important difference in the Avignon version is that as a result of the incident, the author's claim that the Pope (Benedict XII, 1334–42) instituted a liturgical feast in honour of the stigmata. While there is debate among scholars about the circumstances around the introduction of this feast, it is generally agreed that it was established at the Chapter of Cahors in 1337, the liturgical texts being established at the 1340 Chapter of Assisi. Armstrong, Hellmann and Short argue the Avignon version of the tale is more concerned with establishing the legitimacy of the Feast of the Stigmata than with representing relationships between mendicant Orders. 13 While further study of this story is warranted, only that from the DBF will be considered here, due to constraints of space.

On one level, the meaning of the episode is clear enough: through his disbelief in the legitimacy of visual representation of Francis's stigmata, the Friar Preacher attacks not only the fresco – implicitly, he attacks Francis's Order itself. Only through petitioning Francis himself can the brother reverse the misfortune that has engulfed his community. In the story, Francis is the agent of divine power, akin to the crucified Christ Himself. The stigmatised Francis stands not only as an alter Christus, he is also portrayed as the emblem of his Order's way of life, which has a validity that even the Friar Preachers must and do acknowledge. Written by a Friar Minor, this story could be understood as both an attack on a rival mendicant Order and an obvious attempt to establish the veracity of the stigmata. Yet the narrative reveals much more than mere competitiveness between the groups. The most revealing aspect of the episode is that despite its evident concern with the identity of the founder, Francis himself is not present: it is an image of Francis which represents his (and implicitly, the Order's) identity.

More than any other founder, Francis's identity was positioned by his Order as definitive of its its communal identity: to be a Franciscan was to imitate Francis, as he imitated Christ. Yet it was not precisely Francis whom they imitated, but rather competing images of him – images which were subject to evolution and manipulation. This image, which became the basis of Franciscan communal identity, was inherently problematic, ironically because of their founder's attractive charisma: his spiritual identity was perhaps too unique and his conception of the Order's mission too demanding to be emulated or even agreed upon. Even Francis's earliest companions could not agree on his intentions for the Order, as we learn from the fate of Elias. Brother Elias, though chosen by Francis to lead the Order, is cast as the Judas of Francis's Christ. Elias failed to convince the majority of friars of his loyalty to Francis's ideals and was deposed as Minister General twice in the decade following Francis's death in 1226.

After Francis's death, there was concern among the Friars Minor to find not only the authentic Francis, but also an authentic Francis upon whom all could agree. Official calls from successive Ministers General throughout the mid-thirteenth century for the friars' personal memories of Francis resulted in texts such as The Legend of the Three Companions (1241–47) and The Assisi Compilation (1244–60), which circulated alongside the official vitae of Thomas of Celano. Various different images of Francis emerge in these texts: the humble nature-loving poveryello, the fiery radical preacher, the favoured papal servant and supporter of the institutionalised Church, and perhaps most importantly the stigmatised alter Christus. It is unsurprising that the stigmatic wounds came to define Francis, yet this most confronting of identities was not without its unbelievers, as the story from the DBF indicates. 14 By the time Bonaventure of Bagnoregio was elected Minister General in 1257, multiple stories and images of Francis co-existed in uneasy competition, reflecting the tension between the various factions within the Order which would later formally separate. Bonaventure replaced the deposed John of Parma (1247–57), whose sympathy for the proto-Spiritualist Joachite faction of the Order proved to be his undoing. John had been elected following the deposition of Crescentius of Iesi (1244–47), an opponent of the proto-Spiritualist cause. This series of depositions and elections illustrates...
well the complex internal politics of the Order in the mid-thirteenth century, and the environment in which Bonaventure was charged with re-writing the life of Francis (at the 1260 Chapter of Narbonne). This text, the *Legenda Maior* (herein *LM*), was approved by the 1263 Chapter of Pisa. During these years, Bonaventure became both the defender of his Order to its external critics at the University of Paris (where he held the Franciscan chair during the mendicant controversy), and the man entrusted with the task of unifying the fragmented Order itself. In the *LM*, he fashioned a Francis who could be all things to all people: a visionary whose prophetic mission was fulfilled when he received the stigmatic wounds and became the *alter Christus*, a model of perfect devotion to the Passion, the devotional heart of Christian spirituality. For Bonaventure, Francis could be both the simple *pooreello* and the eschatological ‘other Angel ascending from the rising of the sun’ (Rv 7, 2). Deriving identity from this image of Francis, the Order too could conceive of a dual mission – to be evangelical and visionary, yet also a bastion of stability for the established Church and participate actively in its intellectual tradition. It could be argued that Bonaventure’s portrait of Francis was an attempt to emulate the Order of Preachers’ attitude to its founder – wherein Dominic was the Order’s model rather than its sole founder – preserving Francis’s unique spiritual attributes in broad brushstrokes, so as to allow for multiple interpretations of Franciscan spirituality to co-exist harmoniously. These different interpretations of Francis were perhaps too deeply held by the 1260s to be easily relinquished: Bonaventure was sympathetic to all factions within the Order, but his *Life of Francis* did not succeed in unifying them, as the subsequent split and proliferation of texts about Francis shows.

Following the publication of Bonaventure’s work, an instruction was given for all other lives of the founder to be destroyed. As Jacques Dalarun has pointed out, this directive was not actually issued until the Chapter of Paris in 1266 – some three years after Bonaventure presented the *LM* to the Order. This decision to delete all previous images of the founder in order to formulate a single, unifying understanding of Francis reveals anxiety within the Order about its process of constructing and maintaining a communal identity: the contested figure of Francis, as represented in visual and written sources, had given rise to an unmanageable number of possible identities for the Friars Minor.

As Dalarun also indicated, such conscious crafting of the image of the founder was not undertaken by the Order of Preachers. Although the Friar Preachers continued to write new lives of Dominic throughout the thirteenth century, there was no suggestion from within the Order that these works would literally replace earlier *vita*e. Indeed, Simon Tugwell argues they remained dependent upon Jordan of Saxony’s *Libellus de principiis ordinis praedicatorum* of c. 1234. The model of the founder upon which the Friar Preachers’ reliance depended on an entirely different concept of the individual and the representation of that individual.

**Dominic as founder and as *alter Christus***

When compared to the Friars Minor, the absence of the figure of Dominic in the Order of Preachers’ conception of itself is immediately apparent. The ‘Miracle of the stigmata of Saint Francis’, happening as it does in a convent of Friar Preacher, only reveals further how those external to the Order perceived the fundamental lack of Dominic the founder as a presence within the Order of Preachers’ identity. Yet this perceived lack of Dominic the founder (that in the *DHF*, necessitated a convent of Friar Preachers to seek intervention for one of their own from Francis) did not in truth exist. Dominic did have a fundamental impact on his Order despite the very little autograph textual and visual material outside of papal bulls and letters.

In stark contrast to the Friars Minor’s continuous search for Francis through text and image, the first of Dominic’s *vita* was not written until Jordan of Saxony produced his *Libellus de principiis Ordinis Praedicatorum* (herein *Libellus*) in approximately 1234. Dominic died in 1221/22 and was canonised in 1236. The canonisation also generated the Lives by Peter of Ferrand, Constantine of Orvieto and that of Humbert of Romans. Many possibilities have been suggested for the apparent suppression of Dominic’s cult in the early years, from the Order of Preacher’s concern about the cult’s impact on its vow of poverty (due to material benefits accrued through such a cult), to its witness of the effect of St Francis on the Friars Minor and that Order’s ongoing struggle to define and unify its spirituality. The reigning view outside of Dominican studies is that, ‘Dominic was perhaps,
after all, rather a dull man, and that Jordan was therefore in some sense making the best of a bad job.  
Yet as Christopher Brooke and David Haseldine point out, Jordan of Saxony’s *Libellus* is not primarily a life of Dominic. It does contain a written account of Dominic’s life, arguably the one that set basic structure and story are for those that came after, filling out the details of Dominic’s life and childhood. The *Libellus*, however, was to be the story of the Order and the early brethren. In Jordan’s own words:

Many of the brethren have requested an account of the beginnings and institutions of this Order of Preachers, through which God’s plan has provided against the perils of these latter days, as well as a description of the first brethren of our Order, as to how they grew in number and became strengthened through grace.

Throughout the *Libellus*, the foundation of the Order is emphasised over the figure of Dominic, who is shown as the first member of the Order, working in cooperation with Bishop Diego and the other brethren, such as Brother Henry. Jordan portrays Dominic as a fellow friar who was special to the Order, but only because contemporary Preachers are living Dominic’s way, not because Dominic is the single most important relic and Life. In fact, Jordan has Dominic say on his deathbed that he would be more useful to them after his death than he had been during his lifetime. His final words are the epitome of the fellow brother, giving advice to ‘avoid keeping company with dubious women, particularly young women.’ What is most important in Jordan’s text is that ‘the venerable servant of Christ, Master Dominic’, the fellow brother, lived the simple life of a preacher within the Order of Preachers.

The submersion of Dominic’s personality in his Order provides one explanation for why (in the *DJP*) a Friar Preacher finds it necessary to venerate a rival founder. It is not sufficient, however: Dominic did play a significant role as an individual in later exempla from the Order. The explosion of vitae and the Order’s increasingly organised infrastructure during the 1240s and 50s were the result of more than competitiveness between the Friars Minor and the Friars Preacher, a change in attitude to poverty, or even the expansion of San Domenico (the church that was San Nicola). The proliferation of written material in the mid-thirteenth century occurred when the Order of Preachers were expanding exponentially and labouring under many new challenges, for example the struggle for autonomy and authority between the masters of the University of Paris and both mendicant Orders – the so-called Parisian controversy. The Preachers were also facing changing ideals within their role in the *inquisitio hereticæ praeviæ*, as well as a heavy involvement in Sicily and the Middle East. The Order’s depictions of Dominic consequently began to change, refashioned under these pressures. One trend was towards changing his role from that of fellow brother to that of intercessor in the after life.

Dominic in this role is predominantly depicted as a Christ-like figure of intercession between the Order and the afterlife. Beyond a simple substitution of Christ for Dominic, Dominic is used as an exemplum of all the virtues that were necessary for an Order of Preachers:

... the exceptional integrity of his character and the extraordinary energy of divine zeal which carried him along; these proved beyond all doubt he was a vessel of honour and grace, adorned with every kind of precious stone.

In Dominic’s role as a preacher, his function as a vessel for grace can be most clearly seen. Most instances of Dominic’s preaching in the *Libellus* are against heretics, yet, as Marie-Humbert Vicaut notes, ‘he could not continue to be linked to a single diocese, to a province, to one sole problem.’ This broadening of the Order’s vocation is reflected in the fact that the *vitæ* contain few stories of Dominic’s anti-heretical work, and in the way those stories that remain were significantly redefined. For example, the *Vitæ Prætrinæ* (from the 1250s) includes only one story that mentions Dominic actively pursuing heretics. Dominic and a bishop were walking, barefoot to the place where they would preach against heresy, when they began to be uncertain whether they were on the right road. So they made inquiries of a man they thought was a Catholic, but was really a heretic in disguise.

He said, ‘I will be happy not only to show you the way, but also to lead you to the place.’ So he maliciously led them astray through a bushy area full of thorns and brambles, and their feet and legs were covered with blood. The man of God bore all this most patiently and burst out into praise of God, urging them all to praise God and be
patient. He said, 'My dear friends, hope in the Lord, since victory will be ours, since even now our sins are being washed away in blood.' Observing their wonderful and joyful patience, and touched by the good words of the man of God, the heretic confessed his poisonous deceit and renounced his heresy.37

Remnants such as these are woven into a very tightly articulated structure, each story being labelled with its edifying moral, each act or moral combining to reproduce the life of Christ, and the life of the preacher. This story of Dominic's interaction with the heretic in the Vitae is given to illustrate his 'joyful patience.'38 Important too is the idea of sympathy and loving encouragement. Dominic in his compassion is living a real Dominican ministry; the fact that he is doing so to rescue a heretic is secondary.

Dominic as an exemplar has been moulded to more than merely the fellow brother, but is instead the very exemplum of the virtues necessary to preachers. Perhaps more importantly though, during the 1250s and 1260s, the image of Dominic was also shaped to fit a preaching identity that the Order of Preachers had only recently begun to define formally.39 Thomas Aquinas in his Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem (written to defend the mendicants against the University of Paris's charges of heretical poverty, preaching and teaching), does not give an opinion on Dominic. Yet this silence is eloquent, because by defending the core virtues present in all the representations of Dominic, Thomas is depicting an identity and spirituality that is inextricably bound to the Order's preaching vocation. As he notes in his Summa, 'no religious life is superior ... what makes a form of religious life better is that its observances are more intelligently adapted to its purpose.'40 Thus we can see that the images of Dominic as vessel, simple preacher and intercessor resolve into a founder who represents a very different sort of alter Christus, one whose apostolic mission is to save humanity.

If Bonaventure could justify a Francis who became alter Christus through his stigmatic wounds, then the Order of Preachers, in the writings of Humbert and Gerard de Frachet, could depict a Dominic who was alter Christus in the sense of having been sent to earth to save mankind by preaching. Both these models of the alter Christus figure maintain the perfection of poverty and humility, but each recollect a different aspect of Christ's calling. Controversial as this was with at least one contemporary (William of Saint Amour was outraged that any group would 'lie' to the laity in that way), the first part of the Vitae Primatum includes repeated stories of the Order's foundation from the Blessed Virgin Mary through Dominic.41 Most notable is the prophecy included from Joachim of Fiore, that the preachers are in fact the heralds of the end of time, obtained through prayer by the Blessed Virgin Mary for the salvation of the human race [emphasis mine].42

Dominic was never constructed as just one type of founder, but whether he was the lived example of a preacher or the more abstract intercessor between the Order of Preachers and Christ himself, his task was to lead the Order, to preach, and to save souls. No matter how Dominic was exemplified, in the end each individual friar had to live the life of a Friar Preacher himself and find his own way. The raison d'être of Dominic's foundation of his Order was preaching. For this reason, in the story from the DBF a Dominican friar could venerate Francis and preach his word to a rival Order: he had not abandoned his own vocation as long as he followed in Dominic's footsteps, and saved souls through his preaching.

Conclusions

In the centuries following the death of Francis, the number of texts that continued to be written about him suggests a great diversity in ways in which he could be understood. Inevitably this flowering of possible interpretations exacerbated certain tensions already present in the Order. By the fourteenth century, multiple interpretations of Francis and his intentions for the Order resulted in a formal separation of the Spiritual and Conventional factions. As David Burr has argued, it would be anachronistic to speak of the Spiritual friars as a distinct group in the mid-thirteenth century - rather Burr suggests there were a variety of expressions of Franciscan spirituality which co-existed, however uneasily.43 The reason for the formal division of the Order cannot be reduced to a single cause, but Pope Gregory IX's 1230 papal bull Quo eligatur was a watershed moment in the Order's development. It is merely common sense to acknowledge that the way
of life which emerged among the first small group of friars could not be expected to work for the international organisation that the Order so quickly became: by the 1230s, it has been estimated that there were around 30,000 friars across Europe. Quo elongati dispensed the Order from considering Francis’s Testament, which emphasised the friars’ duty to avoid all commerce and property, to be legally binding. This pragmatic step may have facilitated the growth of influence of the Order in university and court spheres, but it also sowed the seeds of division. The Order sought to locate the image of its identity in the person of the founder, despite downplaying Francis’s wishes. Disagreements over the Order’s development continued to be played out through the plurality of images of Francis that the Order created through the mid-thirteenth century.

The comparison of the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of Preachers presented here suggests two different models of the role of the founder in religious community. The Order of Friars Preacher chose to portray Dominic as the first of many Friar Preachers and the ultimate model for his brethren, not a sole founder with a personal spiritual experience that could scarcely be imitated (as was the case with Francis). Dominic’s personal spiritual mission was presented in the texts in a controlled and largely uniform way, and served to illustrate that the proper activity for a Friar Preacher was preaching. The Order of Friars Minor’s collective identity was inextricably tied up with the personal spiritual charisma of Francis, a model which although attractive, proved to be inherently unstable. It relied upon a large community agreeing on one image of the founder, something which was patently impossible in the case of the dynamic and charismatic Francis. Ultimately, this model created conflicting understandings of what it meant to be a Franciscan. The story from the DBF highlights the way in which one image of Francis (in this case the stigmatised alter Christus) could be used to define and validate the contested identity of ‘Friar Minor’. In Ugolino’s story, the wounds visually define the identity of the Friars Minor because the stigmata define the founder. Francis provided the model for his Order’s style of life, however, his spiritual identity was not easily understood or imitated – no friar could expect to experience the stigmata, the dominant spiritual event associated with his founder. The Order’s rapid growth and influence brought with it increasingly divergent interpretations of the founder. Ultimately as we have seen, these competing images of Francis became a source of division rather than unity.

We could characterise the two understandings of the founder modelled by the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of Preachers as the cult of the charismatic individual and the cult of the preacher. The cult of Francis, rather than creating unity, became a source of division, as competing images of the saint sought dominance. Ironically the more fervently Order sought (and disputed) the ‘authentic’ Francis, the more elusive he became. In the end, competing images of the founder overpowered the founder himself; his wishes for the Order (as expressed in his Testament) were ignored. The story from the DBF confirms this irony: the image of Francis, not Francis himself, possesses totemic power over not only his own Order, but also over their fellow mendicants. The Order of Preachers, on the other hand, was able to construct a more inclusive form of communal identity by emphasising the individual’s preaching mission over the individual’s identity. For the repentant Friar Preacher in the story from the DBF, preaching about Francis did not challenge his identity as a Friar Preacher; whatever his subject matter, he was still modelling the preaching activity of Dominic. The different paths taken by these two Orders demonstrate not only the spiritual impact of the two saints, but also suggest just two of the many possible ways that communal identity could be constructed (and contested) within a mendicant milieu.