

# FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND BONAVENTURE'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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The way in which Bonaventure of Bagnoregio presents the figure of Saint Francis in the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci* is strongly enigmatic.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, Bonaventure knew very well the biographical sources of the life of Francis, particularly those by Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer. He also sought to meet personally with those companions of the Saint who were still alive in 1260. However, we cannot affirm that Bonaventure intended to outline a faithful historical picture of Saint Francis in the way we would understand this expression today. In a few words we can reduce the enigma of Francis as presented by Bonaventure to the following questions: What is the true figure of Saint Francis which Bonaventure intends to portray? Better still, was he the Francis of history, the Francis as the first companions knew him, or the Francis-myth that the Order of Friars Minor, after two generations of brothers, wanted to know? It is not easy to answer these questions, even if so many scholars have tried to find an acceptable solution, by stating that Bonaventure was an able diplomat who knew who to keep united in the same ideal an Order which was already showing evident signs of division on the ideological and practical levels.

Bonaventure's image of Saint Francis had already been created by the history of the origins of the Order of Friars Minor, but it needed to be reformulated because of new situations which were emerging. We could say that the hermeneutics of the evangelical ideal of Francis cannot be closed into any historical or ideological framework. It is a revelation which always needs to be rediscovered in the light of history. What Bonaventure was trying to realize was a theology of history, which served him as the golden background for the icon of Francis which he intended to paint.<sup>2</sup> Against all contemporary tendencies which try to separate the history of our civilisation from its religious and sacred connotations, we know that the civilisation in the Middle Ages thought of history as a sacred history, as an event of salvation, as a *medium* which has its origins from the Christ-event and finds its realization in the apotheosis of all creation in

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Miccoli, «Bonaventura e Francesco», in *S. Bonaventura Francescano. XIV Convegno del Centro di Studi sulla Spiritualità Medievale*, Todi 1974, 47-73; E. Randolph Daniel, «St. Bonaventure A Faithful Disciple of Saint Francis? A Reexamination of the Question», in *S. Bonaventura 1274-1974. Volumen Commemorativeum Anni Septies Centenarii a Morte S. Bonaventurae Doctoris Seraphici*, cura et studio Commissionis Internationalis Bonaventuriana Grottaferrata (Roma) 1974, Vol. II, 170-187; Jacques Dalarun, *La Malavventura di Francesco d'Assisi*, Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana (Fonti e Ricerche, 10), Milano 1996, 151-175; Fernando Uribe, *Introducción a las Hagiografías de San Francisco y Santa Clara de Asís (siglos XIII y XIV)*, Murcia 1999, 223-261; Fernando Uribe, *Francesco di Bonaventura. Lettura della «Legenda Maior»*, Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The classical study regarding the theology of history of St. Bonaventure is that of Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, translated by Z. Hayes, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1971, (2a edizione 1989). For the eschatological dimension of St. Francis, cfr. pp. 31-38; E. Randolph Daniel, «St. Bonaventure: Defender of Franciscan Eschatology», in *S. Bonaventura 1274-1974*, Vol. IV, 793-806.

Christ. To deny these Christian roots of our history is to deny the fact that we have a history which goes far beyond our own preoccupations regarding a technologically advanced world and which projects itself towards a future without due regard to the memory of the Christian past which has moulded it.

We would like to understand the icon of Francis<sup>3</sup> which Bonaventure wanted to paint departing from his concept of a theology based upon a sacred history, which is the history of salvation. Bonaventure wanted to present Saint Francis who had already been universally known as a stigmatized saint, but he also tried to explain that the same Francis was also a great founder of a *novus ordo* (new religious Order). For these reasons it was necessary for Bonaventure to make ample use of theological terms which are more adapted to a mystical work which is rationally elaborated. At the same time, we could not speak about a founder without creating an internal structure in the presentation of this icon. If Bonaventure's Francis is a work of art, he is so not only on the basis of the criterion of intrinsic beauty, but also on the basis of his ability to transmit a message, to be understood, to become a holy friar, while at the same time remaining a friar of flesh and blood, in the same way that Christ incarnate and glorified had been of flesh and blood.

Our aim in this paper is that of analyzing this icon of Francis presented by Bonaventure in the *Legenda Maior*, and particularly in the prologue, against the background of the *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) of the Seraphic Doctor. In fact, the intention of Bonaventure is that of presenting an icon of Francis who is stigmatized, and in a certain sense, to offer an image of the *conformitas* (conformity) between Christ and Francis which was then going to be fully expressed by the later Sources of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In this way we can understand how Francis is presented as a living and actual example of Bonaventure's theology of the cross, always within the context of a theological re-reading of the history of salvation.

During our presentation we shall refer to some of the works of Bonaventure which can enlighten our reflection.<sup>4</sup> We refer in particular to the synthetical theological

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<sup>3</sup> I use the word "icon" in the figurative sense in order to express the dialogical character of the figure of St. Francis as it is "written" by St. Bonaventure. In order to explain what I intend to say with this term, I will quote the following definition of the dialogical aspect of the icon, taken from Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, «Icône», in *Dizionario Enciclopedico del Medioevo*, Direzione di André Vauchez, Edizione Italiana di Claudio Leonardi, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1998, Vol. II, 922-924: «Non c'è identità di natura tra immagine e prototipo e tuttavia l'immagine è legata al suo modello dalla somiglianza; essa, avendo una funzione di mediazione, dà la possibilità all'uomo di entrare in comunione con il personaggio divino o sacro rappresentato e del quale assevera la presenza; essa trasmette l'energia divina, la grazia spirituale del prototipo».

<sup>4</sup> The Latin quotations of the works of Bonaventure are taken from the 10 volumes of the *Opera Omnia edita studio et cura PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura*, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) 1882-1902. The notes will indicate the volume and page numbers. Among the best studies of Bonaventure's Christology we note the following: Werner Hülsbusch, *Elemente einer Kreuzestheologie in den Spätschriften Bonaventuras*, Düsseldorf 1968, in particular pp. 225-232; Optatus Van Asseldonk, «François d'Assise, Imitateur du Christ Crucifié, Dieu-Homme, dans la Tradition Franciscaine et Capucine», in *Collectanea Franciscana* 52 (1982) 117-143 [for St. Bonaventura, cfr. pp. 127-131]; Luigi Giacometti, «È disceso agli Inferi». *Saggio Tematico sulla Soteriologia Bonaventuriana*, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 1990, in particular pp. 38-41;

vision of the *Breviloquium*, to the mystical-theological reflection of the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, to the historico-theological vision of *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*. In this last work the figure of Saint Francis, which had already been delineated by Bonaventure in the *Legenda Maior*, is projected anew in an eschatological light, but always against the backdrop of the cross as the point of encounter between heaven and earth, between mystery and revelation, between the Uncreated God (*Deus increatus*) and the Incarnate God (*Deus humanatus*), who marked in an indelible way the body and soul of the *Poverello* of Assisi.

### **The icon of the crucified Francis in the prologue and *corpus* of the *Legenda Maior***

The originality of Bonaventure, when he writes the life of Saint Francis, does not consist in the contents, but rather in the approach to the person of the Saint, seen as an icon of Christ crucified. This approach is clearly seen in the sequence of seven visions of the cross which lead Francis to become ever more conformed to the image of Christ crucified, up to the point where he identifies himself with Christ in the episode of the stigmata and in his *transitus* (death). The originality of the *Legenda Maior* is to be found in this dynamic, which makes his life a kind of mystical treatise centred on the Christ-like person of Francis. In this way of looking at things, we could indicate some elements which are common to the *Legenda Maior* and to the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*.

I would say, however, that the most original element in the work of Bonaventure is to be found in the prologue of the *Legenda Maior*, which I tend to describe as an icon of the crucified Francis. A look at the prologue can enlighten us to place the figure of Francis against the background of the *theologia crucis* which prevails in the writings of the Seraphic Doctor.

The prologue of the *Legenda Maior* is a vision of the revelation of Christ crucified in his servant Francis, within the context of a theology of history. Bonaventure speaks about the coming of Francis as a sign of the last days. We know that he is writing within the context of medieval eschatological expectations, which were the fruit of the writings of the Cistercian abbot Joachim of Fiore (c.1130-1202), whose disciples had created a hermeneutics of history which did not lack great fantasy and imagination. We know that among them there were also some Franciscans<sup>5</sup>. Bonaventure is writing in this

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Ambroise Nguyen Van Si, *La Théologie de l'Imitation du Christ d'après Saint Bonaventure*, Edizioni Antonianum, Roma 1991, in particular pp. 116-128; Z. Hayes, *The Hidden Center. Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure*, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY 1992; Z. Hayes, «Bonaventure», in *The History of Franciscan Theology*, edited by Kenan B. Osborne, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY 1994, 39-125; Ctirad Václav Pospisil, «La soteriologia di San Bonaventura nel periodo parigino della sua opera», in *Antonianum* 74 (1999) 661-683 [with bibliography]; Thomas Herbst, «The Passion as paradoxical exemplarism in Bonaventure's Commentary to the Gospel of John», in *Antonianum* 78 (2003) 209-248.

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1969; *Chi erano gli Spirituali*. Atti del III Convegno internazionale della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (Assisi, 16-18 ottobre 1975), Assisi 1976; Kevin Hughes, «Eschatological Union: The Mystical Dimension of History in Joachim of Fiore, Bonaventure, and Peter Oliviv», in *Collectanea Franciscana* 72 (2002) 105-143, and *Greyfriars Review* 16 (2002) 53-93.

troubled period, and exactly in the moment when many were believing that the age of the *ecclesia spiritualis* (spiritual Church), as an antithesis of the *ecclesia carnalis* (carnal Church), would start. It was believed to be a time when the definite victory over the antichrist would inaugurate a new era in the history of salvation, which would lead humanity to that quiet of eschatological contemplation of the end of times. The legacy of John of Parma, who though unconsciously motivated, was adhering to this historical-theological interpretation, had been cut off by his removal from the office of Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor in 1257. However, it had long-lasting effects. Bonaventure was conscious that he would never have managed to the friars who nurtured these beliefs, without presenting them with a gesture of benevolence in the representation of Francis who, in his own person, would encapsulate all their eschatological aspirations.

For this reason the prologue of the *Legenda Maior* presents the coming of Francis as the beginning of the last days. Francis is the harbinger of the *ecclesia spiritualis*, but this Church is understood as being the Church of all those who live in conformity to Christ, by embracing Lady Poverty as the spouse of the Master, who hung naked on a cross. With biblical terms which are well known, and which refer to the figures of Elijah and John the Baptist, Bonaventure presents Francis as the angel of true peace, as the light which gives witness to Christ, as the one who comes before the Lord to prepare his way in the desert of the highest poverty. The figure of Francis is presented as being full of a seraphic spirit, which would make of him a unique personage.<sup>6</sup> His life and his mission become a *sursumactio* (uplifting), which unites heaven and earth, and which from the *vestigium* (footprint) of creation ascends by grades of contemplation until it reaches union with God.

This apocalyptic vision of the figure of Saint Francis, taken from the image of the angel of the sixth seal, characterizes all the theological framework of the *Legenda Maior*.<sup>7</sup> Francis is presented in an eschatological light as the living representation of the glorified body of Christ who bears the signs of the passion. His mission was that of sealing with the biblical *Tau* those who had been called to live in poverty and penitence, while embracing the habit of evangelical penance. This is a living representation of the theology of Bonaventure regarding the *Verbum Incarnatum et Crucifixum* (Incarnate and Crucified Word). It is as if he is saying that Christ crucified and glorified was living again in the flesh of Saint Francis, who participates in the same mediation between fallen humanity and the Father, through the action of the Son. It is certainly not the case to

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<sup>6</sup> *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, XXII,22-23 (V, 440-441): «Tertius ordo est vacantium Deo secundum modum sursumactivum, scilicet ecstaticum seu excessivum. Et dicebat: Quis enim iste est? Iste est ordo seraphicus. De isto videtur fuisse Franciscus ... Et dicebat, quod illa apparitio Seraph beato Francisco, quae fuit expressiva et impressa, ostendebat, quod iste ordo illi respondere debeat, sed tamen pervenire ad hoc per tribulationes. Et in illa apparatione magna mysteria erant». Bonaventure shows this unique character of the mission of Francis, in such a way that it was only Francis who would have been part of the order of Seraphim. Therefore it would be incorrect to call the Order of Friars Minor as an *ordo seraphicus*.

<sup>7</sup> Stanislao da Campagnola, *L'angelo del sesto sigillo e l'«alter Christus»*. *Genesi e sviluppo di due temi francescani nei secoli XIII-XIV*, Roma 1971. On page 171 the author notes: «La *Legenda maior*, un'opera considerata classica tra le agiografie medioevali e fedele interprete della figura e della spiritualità del Poverello d'Assisi, porta comunque in sé il segno dei tempi: tempi pieni di attesa di una nuova età imminente. È appena il caso, infatti, di ricordare che proprio il 1260 era l'anno, in cui, secondo un'opinione assai diffusa, doveva iniziare questa età nuova».

insist on the theologically incorrect concept of Francis as being “another Christ” (*alter Christus*). This notion probably never entered the mind of Bonaventure. What was present to his mind, however, was the living representation of the image, an icon which speaks in the sense that it projects itself back to the origin of its inspiration.

Christ Crucified is the *signaculum similitudinis Dei viventis* (seal of the living God).<sup>8</sup> This seal, or sacrament represents in a vivid and efficacious way the same similitude of the living God impressed upon the body of Francis with the power of the Holy Spirit. The iconographical representation of angel which bears the stigmata in his hands in one of the ribs of the vault above the main altar of the lower Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi denotes a bonaventurian influence in the interpretation of Francis as the angel who rises from the east with the seal of the living God.<sup>9</sup>

The project of Bonaventure in the *Legenda Maior* departs from the prologue in order to build an icon of Francis on two levels. An important level is that of the life of Saint Francis divided according to the various virtues which follow one another along a triple way corresponding to the three ways of purification, illumination and mystical union. This level constitutes the framework of the biographical account from the fifth to the thirteenth chapter of the *Legenda Maior*. At the same time, however, there is another level which interests us more closely. It is precisely that of the representation of the spiritual journey of Francis through seven visions of the cross, which are then summarized by Bonaventure after the account of the stigmatization.<sup>10</sup>

A look at these visions or apparitions shows that, in the majority of the cases, they are a creation of Bonaventure in order to situate Francis within the context of a mystical ascent through six grades of illumination in order to arrive at ecstatic union in the vision of the crucified Seraph on La Verna. We can see a link between the visions of the cross and the spiritual journey of Francis in the *Legenda Maior*. The vision of the military arms marked with the cross refers to spiritual combat in the state of purification. The same can be stated in the case of the vision of Christ fastened to the cross, when Francis’ soul “melted at the sight, and the memory of Christ’s passion was so impressed on the innermost recesses of his heart. From that hour, whenever Christ’s crucifixion came to his mind, he could scarcely contain his tears and sighs, as he later revealed to his companions when he was approaching the end of his life.”<sup>11</sup> The state of illumination is clearly seen in the representation of the vision of brother Sylvester, when he sees the town of Assisi surrounded by “a huge dragon which, because of its enormous size,

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<sup>8</sup> *Legenda Maior*, Prologue 1.

<sup>9</sup> Pasquale Magro, *Il Simbolismo Cristiano della Chiesa-Reliquiario di S. Francesco in Assisi*, Casa Editrice Franciscana, Assisi 1993, 74 (illustrazione numero 30); Rossano Zas Fritz De Col, «Il Simbolismo secondo San Bonaventura», in *Collectanea Franciscana* 68 (1998) 493-519.

<sup>10</sup> *Legenda Maior*, XIII,10 (*Analecta Franciscana* X [AF X], 620). The second vision, that of Christ fastened to the cross, (*Legenda Maior* I,5), seems to have been inserted by Bonaventure in order to prepare the episode of Francis’ encounter with the leper and his vocation coming from the Crucifix of San Damiano. The vision is not found in the other Sources.

<sup>11</sup> *Legenda Maior*, I,5. The English quotations in the text are taken from *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*. Vol. II: The Founder, edited by R.J. Armstrong, W. Hellmann and W. Short, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY, 2000, 525-683 (The Major Legend of Saint Francis).

seemed to threaten the entire area with destruction. Then he contorted issuing from Francis' mouth a golden cross whose top reached the heavens and whose arms stretched far and wide and seemed to extend to the ends of the world. At the sight of its shining splendor, the foul and hideous dragon was put to flight."<sup>12</sup> The same level of illumination is evident in the episode of brother Pacifico who "saw Francis, the preacher of Christ's cross, marked with two bright shining swords intersecting in the shape of a cross. One of them stretched from his head to his feet, and the other across his chest from one hand to the other ... He merited again to see a great Tau on Francis' forehead, which displayed a variety of different colours that caused his face to glow with wonderful beauty."<sup>13</sup> The state of mystical union with the crucified is presented in the episode of the Chapter of Arles, when brother Monaldo "saw with his bodily eyes blessed Francis lifted up in the air with his arms extended as if on a cross, blessing the brothers."<sup>14</sup>

The episode of the stigmatization is the apex of the experience of union with Christ Crucified in the life of Saint Francis. Bonaventure presents the episode as a *transitus*, a paschal experience, in which Francis participates in the same *transitus* of Christ in His passion.<sup>15</sup> The experience of mystical union is presented as an ascension into ecstatic levels of experience, which Bonaventure expresses with a specific latin word: *sursumactio*,<sup>16</sup> which we already meet in the *Itinerarium*. The stigmata are described as a *sacramentum Domini*<sup>17</sup> (the Lord's sacrament), which operates in the body of the *Poverello*. In the episode of the death of Saint Francis, the stigmata are no longer seen as a sign of suffering, but one of glorification, of a participation in the joy of the resurrection of Christ, who carries the signs of the passion in His glorified body.<sup>18</sup> The stigmata are the definite seal of Christ on the body of Francis. Christ confirms once and for all the pontifical seal on the *forma vitae* of the Gospel embraced by the Friars Minor<sup>19</sup>. A close examination of the Sources which speak about the episode of the stigmata as the culmination of the experience of Francis' union with Christ Crucified can enlighten our reflection, but this goes beyond the aim of our paper<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> *Legenda Maior*, III,5 (The Major Legend of St. Francis, 544-545).

<sup>13</sup> *Legenda Maior*, IV,9 (The Major Legend of St. Francis, 556).

<sup>14</sup> *Legenda Maior*, IV,10 (The Major Legend of St. Francis, 557).

<sup>15</sup> *Legenda Maior*, XIII,2 (AF X, 616): «Sane cum in trina libri apertione Domini passio semper occurreret, intellexit vir Deo plenus, quod sicut Christum fuerat imitatus in actibus vitae, sic conformis ei esse deberet in afflictionibus et doloribus passionis, antequam ex hoc mundo transiret».

<sup>16</sup> *Legenda Maior*, XIII,3 (AF X, 616): «Cum igitur seraphicis desideriorum ardoribus sursum ageretur in Deum et compassiva dulcedine in eum transformaretur, qui ex caritate nimia voluit crucifigi».

<sup>17</sup> *Legenda Maior*, XIII,4 (AF X, 617).

<sup>18</sup> *Legenda Maior*, XV,2 (AF X, 624): «Inventa quoque fuit patentius in ipsius corpore non inflictata humanitus neque facta plaga vulneris lateralis, instar vulnerati lateris Salvatoris, quod redemptionis et regenerationis humanae in ipso Redemptore nostro protulit sacramentum. Erat autem similitudo clavorum nigra quasi ferrum, vulnus autem lateris rubeum et ad orbicularitatem quamdam carnis contractione reductum rosa quaedam pulcherrima videbatur. Caro vero ipsius reliqua, quae prius tam ex infirmitate quam ex natura ad nigredinem declinabat, candore nimio renitescens, illius secundae stolae pulchritudinem praetendebat».

<sup>19</sup> *Legenda Maior*, IV,11 (AF X, 576): «Impressa sunt ei stigmata Domini Iesu digito Dei vivi tamquam bulla summi Pontificis Christi ad confirmationem omnimodam regulae».

<sup>20</sup> The most complete and exhaustive study on the stigmata of St. Francis is that by Octavianus a Reiden, «De sancti Francisci Assisiensis stigmatum susceptione. Disquisitio historico-critica luce testimoniorum saeculi XIII», in *Collectanea Franciscana*, 33 (1963), 210-266, 392-422; 34 (1964), 5-62, 241-338.

We have noted that the aim of the prologue of the *Legenda Maior* is that of presenting to the brothers the icon of Francis who becomes a living representation of Christ Crucified. Bonaventure goes beyond the historical contingencies of the Order of Friars Minor, in order to present Saint Francis who is a perennial model, a strong and indisputable point of reference for the following of Christ of the brothers. Departing from this representation Bonaventure could then construct models of conduct which present Francis united to the mystery of the cross of Christ during all stages of his life.<sup>21</sup>

The meeting of Francis with the leper becomes the first step in the school of the Crucifix. Bonaventure presents the leper as an icon of Christ on the cross, who, according to the expression of the prophet Isaiah, appeared “despised as a leper.”<sup>22</sup> There is a real contact, which I would also call a physical contact, with the mystery of suffering. The same Christ, who according to Bonaventure, appears to Francis fastened to a cross, appears to him in a very real way in the person of the leper, whose body becomes a sacrament of Christ Crucified, of him who *ut leprosus apparuit* (appeared despised as a leper).

The sacramental aspect of the signs of the passion in the stigmatized body of Francis is connected with this representation of the leper. When Francis comes down from Mount La Verna, although his body was very weak, it becomes a living sign of the power of the Word of the Cross. Bonaventure presents Francis in the following terms: “Now fixed with Christ to the cross, in both body and spirit, Francis not only burned with a seraphic love into God but also thirsted with Christ crucified for the multitude of those to be saved. Since he could not walk because of the nails protruding from his feet, he had his half-dead body carried through the towns and villages to arouse others to carry the cross of Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

For Francis and the first brothers, the cross of Christ becomes the book of liturgical prayer of the fraternity. This is how Bonaventure describes the prayer life of the first brothers at Rivotorto: “They did not yet have liturgical books from which to chant the canonical hours. In place of these they had the book of Christ’s cross which they studied continually day and night, taught by the example and words of their father

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<sup>21</sup> Ilia Delio, «The role of the Crucified in Bonaventure’s doctrine of mystical union», in *Studia Mystica* 19 (1998) 8-20. Idem, *The burning love of the Crucified: Bonaventure’s mysticism of the Crucified Christ*, Quincy, Illinois, Franciscan Press, Quincy University, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> *Legenda Maior*, I,6 (AF X, 562): «Nam cum prius leprosorum non solum consortium, verum etiam longinquum contuitum vehementer horreret, iam propter Christum crucifixum, qui iuxta verbum propheticum contemptibilis ut leprosus apparuit, ut semetipsum plene contemneret, humilitatis et humanitatis obsequia leprosis benefica pietate praestabat».

<sup>23</sup> *Legenda Maior*, XIV,1 (AF X, 620-621): «Christo igitur iam cruci confixus Franciscus tam carne quam spiritu, non solum seraphico amore ardebat in Deum, verum etiam sitiebat cum Christo crucifixo multitudinem salvandorum. Faciebat proinde, quoniam propter excrescentes in pedibus clavos ambulare non poterat, corpus emortuum per civitates et castella circumvehi, ut ad crucem Christi ferendam ceteros animaret».

who spoke to them constantly about the cross of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Bonaventure links this experience also with the prayer *Adoramus te* of the Testament.

The theme of the cross constitutes the foundation of the spiritual journey of Francis along the triple way of the virtues listed by Bonaventure in the *Legenda Maior*. When he introduces this section, at the beginning of chapter 5, Bonaventure insists upon the centrality of the mystery of the cross in the spiritual journey of Saint Francis: “When the man of God, Francis, saw that many were being inspired by his example to carry the cross of Christ with fervent spirit, he himself, like a good leader of Christ’s army, was encouraged to reach the palm of victory through the height of heroic virtue. He directed his attention to this texts of the Apostle: ‘Those who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires.’ (Gal 5:24) To carry in his own body the armour of the cross, he held in check his sensual appetites with such a rigid discipline that he scarcely took what was necessary for the sustenance of nature.”<sup>25</sup>

In one of the sayings of Saint Francis which Bonaventure takes from *The Memorial of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano, the Seraphic Doctor shows the superiority of the *sapientia crucis* (wisdom of the cross) of Francis to all the other forms of human wisdom. According to Bonaventure, Francis once said: “Whoever desires to attain this height must renounce in some way not only worldly wisdom but also the expertise of knowledge, that, having renounced even this possession, he might enter into the mighty works of the Lord and offer himself naked to the arms of the Crucified.”<sup>26</sup>

We know that the same line of thought is found in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, which has been quoted by so many Church Fathers and writers. When we hear it coming from the pen of Bonaventure, it shows how the Seraphic Doctor understood very deeply the sublime but relative value of human wisdom, when confronted with the folly of the cross. *stoltezza della croce*. In the *Itinerarium* Bonaventure uses the same argument, when he meditates upon the wisdom of the cross made manifest in the episode of Francis’ stigmata.

The missionary zeal of Francis, who goes to the East in order to preach Christ to the Saracens, is seen by Bonaventure to be a result of his inner burning of love towards

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<sup>24</sup> *Legenda Maior*, IV,3 (AF X, 572): «Nondum ecclesiasticos libros habebant, in quibus possent horas canonicas decantare. Loco tamen illorum librum crucis Christi continuatis aspectibus diebus ac noctibus revolvebant, exemplo patris et eloquio eruditi, qui iugiter faciebat eis de Christi cruce sermonem».

<sup>25</sup> *Legenda Maior*, V,1 (AF X, 577): «Cum igitur cerneret vir Dei Franciscus suo exemplo ad crucem Christi baiulandam ferventi spiritu plurimos animari, animabatur et ipse tamquam bonus dux exercitus Christi ad palmam victoriae per culmen invictae pervenire virtutis. Attendens enim illud Apostoli verbum: *Qui autem sunt Christi, carnem suam crucifixerunt cum vitiis et concupiscentiis*: ut crucis armaturam suo ferret in corpore, tanta disciplinae rigiditate sensuales appetitus arcebat, ut vix necessaria sumeret sustentationi naturae».

<sup>26</sup> *Legenda Maior*, VII,2 (AF X, 587): «Ad huius, inquit, culmen qui cupit attingere, non solum mundanam prudentiae, verum etiam litterarum peritiae renuntiare quodam modo debet, ut, tali expropriatus possessione, introeat in potentias Domini et nudum se offerat brachiis Crucifixi». The text in 2C 194 is the source for Bonaventure’s account. For the theme of spiritual nakedness in reference to the cross, cfr. Jean Châtillon, «*Nudum Christum nudus sequere*. Note sur les origines et la signification du thème de la nudité spirituelle dans les écrits spirituels de saint Bonaventure», in *S. Bonaventura 1274-1974*, Vol. IV, 719-772.

Christ Crucified: “Jesus Christ crucified always rested like a bundle of myrrh in the bosom of his soul, into Whom he longed to be totally transformed through an enkindling of ecstatic love.”<sup>27</sup> Driven by this divine love Francis wanted to die a martyr’s death, in order to give supreme witness to the virtue of charity.

Another important theme in the *Legenda Maior* is that regarding the nakedness of Francis, who wants to imitate the poor Christ, who dies naked on a cross. In the episode of Francis who renounces his father’s possessions, Bonaventure comments:

Un altro tema importante nella *Legenda Maior* è quello della nudità di Francesco, che vuole imitare Cristo che, povero, muore nudo sulla croce. Nell’episodio di Francesco che rinuncia all’eredità paterna, Bonaventura comments: “Thus the servant of the Most High King was left naked that he might follow his naked crucified Lord, whom he loved. Thus the cross strengthened him to entrust his soul to the wood of salvation that would save him from the shipwreck of the world.”<sup>28</sup>

This prophetic gesture, which signed the beginning of the penitential life of Francis, is then repeated as the crowning of the same experience in the moment of his death: “In all things he wished without hesitation to be conformed to Christ crucified, who hung on the cross poor, suffering, and naked ... O truly the most Christian of men, who strove by perfect imitation to be conformed while living to Christ living, dying to Christ dying, and dead to Christ dead, and deserved to be adorned with an expressed likeness.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Christ, the Crucified Word, in the Writings of Saint Bonaventure**

As a hagiographical work, the *Legenda Maior* cannot be fully understood without at least a superficial knowledge of the other works of the Seraphic Doctor. Sophronius Clasen had already stated that the methodological error of some scholars was that of having studied the *Legenda Maior*, isolating it from the other works of Bonaventure.<sup>30</sup> Another erroneous method is that of studying the *Legenda Maior* as a work of literature, devoid of any contact with the living experience of the charism of Francis as Bonaventure understands it. For these reasons, although within the limited scope of our analysis, we shall try to present some of the other writings of the Seraphic Doctor, which throw light upon the experience of Francis as Bonaventure lived it, and within the context of his

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<sup>27</sup> *Legenda Maior*, IX,2 (AF X, 598): «Christus Iesus crucifixus intra suae mentis ubera et myrrhae fasciculus iugiter morabatur, in quem optabat per excessivi amoris incendium totaliter transformari».

<sup>28</sup> *Legenda Maior*, II,4 (AF X, 565): «Sic igitur servus Regis altissimi nudus relictus est, ut nudum sequeretur crucifixum Dominum, quem amabat; sic utique cruce munitus, ut animam suam ligno salutis committeret, per quod de mundi naufragio salvus exiret».

<sup>29</sup> *Legenda Maior*, XIV,4 (AF X, 622): «Voluit certe per omnia Christo crucifixo esse conformis, qui pauper et dolens et nudus in cruce pependit ... O vere christianissimum virum, qui et vivens Christo viventi et moriens morienti et mortuus mortuo perfecta esse studuit imitatione conformis ex expressa promeruit similitudine decorari».

<sup>30</sup> Sophronius Clasen, «S. Bonaventura S. Francisci Legendae Maioris compilator», in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 54 (1961) 241-272; 55 (1962) 2-58; 289-319.

theology which sees the entire life of Francis being marked by the sign of the *Verbum Crucifixum*, the Crucified Word.<sup>31</sup>

We have already noted how Bonaventure begins the *Legenda Maior* with a reference to the grace of God our Saviour. This grace appears in the last days in the person of Saint Francis. Bonaventure speaks profusely about grace in his *Collationes de Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, where he gives us a unique expression which recurs nowhere else in such an explicit way in his writings. Bonaventure affirms that “grace descends on rational minds through the Uncreated Word, through the Crucified Word and through the Inspired Word.”<sup>32</sup> In this Trinitarian vision, Bonaventure sees human nature as a fruit of creation by the Uncreated Word. Because of sin, this same human nature is in need of redemption and recreation by means of the Incarnate Word: “After man sinned, divine wisdom provided through the condescending way of the Incarnate Word, by means of whom man could regain the state of grace.”<sup>33</sup>

Bonaventure, however, does not speak about the Incarnate Word in a generic sense, but in this particular case he specifies it when he presents it as a Crucified Word, operating our salvation in the paschal mystery: “In order to heal our weaknesses, grace descended into us through the Crucified Word ... We are made alive in Christ through Christ, because Christ has won over death. Therefore death could not absorb Him, but rather He, the fountain of life, absorbed death.”<sup>34</sup>

The figure of Saint Francis does not explicitly appear in these texts, just as it does not appear in the majority of the Bonaventurian references to the theology of the cross. However, the link between the life of Francis as an exemplification of Christ Crucified, and the speculative theology of the Seraphic Doctor, is very much evident. If Francis is presented as a sign of the grace which descends in these last days and takes form in his stigmatized body, then we can say that Francis is the emblematic figure of how grace descends to us through the Crucified Word in order to renew man in the image of Christ in his *beata passio* (blessed passion). The life of Francis, as we have noted, is presented by Bonaventure as a symbiosis between death and life, suffering and glory.

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<sup>31</sup> Noel Muscat, *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi in the light of Saint Bonaventure's Theology on the «Verbum Crucifixum»*, Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, Facultas Theologica – Sectio Spiritualitatis. Thesis ad Doctoratum N. 300, Romae 1989, 171-172: «The *Legenda Maior*, in fact, is the result of Bonaventure's experience of the Franciscan life (the historical dimension) as well as of his theological reflection upon Francis' life and ideal (the mystical dimension). If one neglects one or the other of these basic elements, one risks losing sight of the richness of this medieval hagiographical document».

<sup>32</sup> *Collationes de Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, I,5 (V, 438): «Gratia descendit super mentes rationales per Verbum incarnatum, per Verbum crucifixum et per Verbum inspiratum». English translations from the works of Bonaventure are the author's own, except where other translations are indicated.

<sup>33</sup> *Collationes de Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, I,5 (V, 438).

<sup>34</sup> *Collationes de Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, I,6 (V, 438): «Ut sanaret languores nostros, descendit in nos per Verbum crucifixum ... Nos sumus vivificati Christo per Christum, quia Christus de morte triumphavit; unde non potuit ipsum mors absorbere, immo fons vitae absorbit mortem».

Franciscan theology is characterized by an encounter between extremes, exactly because it is intrinsically based upon the concept of incarnation.<sup>35</sup> As Minister General, Bonaventure had to reflect upon the identity of the Order of Friars Minor, and in order to accomplish this he needed to present the figure of Francis within the context of his theological reflection. If Christ, as an Incarnate and Crucified Word, was the central and focal point of speculative theology of Bonaventure, Francis became the living exemplification of this Christology. From the concept of Christ as centre of creation and of history, as the point of encounter between heaven and earth, between God and man, Bonaventure draws his conclusions to present the figure of Francis of Assisi as a point of encounter so that the brothers could live the same ideal he embraced.

In the prologue to the *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure presents Holy Scripture as the meeting point of all creation and all science. For Bonaventure Scripture becomes a *crux intelligibilis*, an intelligible cross, which is the key to interpret all creation and all history: “[Holy Scripture] deals with all the universe with reference to its height and depth, to its beginning and end, and also with reference to its intermediate evolution, under the form of an intelligible cross, in which all the operations of the universe are to be described, and in a certain way, perceived with the light of the mind.”<sup>36</sup>

In this vision of an encounter between extremes, or coincidence of opposites, Bonaventure speaks about the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation in a world which is in need of redemption. In the fourth section of the *Breviloquium*, dedicated to the Incarnation of the Word, Bonaventure writes:

“It was most convenient that the principle of reparation of all things would be God most high, so that, as God had created all things through the Uncreated Word, so He would redeem all through the Incarnate Word ... Now, what is more powerful than that which can unite in one person two extremes which are distant to the highest degree from one another? What is more wise and more congruent than the realization, for the perfection of all the universe, of the union between the first and the last, that is, the union between the Word of God, which is the principle of all things, and human nature, which was the last of all creatures? What is more benevolent than the fact that the Lord assumes the form of a slave for the salvation of the slave?”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ewert H. Cousins, «The Coincidence of Opposites in the Christology of Saint Bonaventure», in *Franciscan Studies* 28 (1968) 27-45; «The Two Poles of Bonaventure’s Theology», in *S. Bonaventura 1274-1974*, Vol. III, 153-176.

<sup>36</sup> *Breviloquium*, Prol. 6 (V, 208): «Unde ipsa (Sacra Scriptura) agit de toto universo quantum ad summum et imum, primum et ultimum, et quantum ad decursum intermedium, sub forma cuiusdam crucis intelligibilis, in qua describi habet et quodam modo videri lumine mentis tota machina universi».

<sup>37</sup> *Breviloquium*, IV,1 (V, 241): «Decentissimum fuit, rerum principium reparativum esse Deum summum, ut, sicut omnia creaverat Deus per Verbum increatum, sic omnia curaret per Verbum incarnatum ... Quid autem potentius quam coniungere extrema summe distantia in unam personam? Quid sapientius et congruentius, quam quod ad perfectionem totius universi fieret coniunctio primi et ultimi, Verbi scilicet Dei, quod est omnium principium, et humanae naturae, quae fuit ultima omnium creaturarum? Quid benevolentius, quam quod Dominus propter servi salutem accipiat formam servi?»

The foundations of this theology of the Incarnation can be found in a living experience of poverty and humility modelled upon that of Christ, the Incarnate and Crucified Word. Bonaventure certainly would have known the direct experience of Francis of Assisi in order to arrive to comprehend the depth of the *sapientia crucis* which is hidden in the pages of Holy Scripture. His theological speculation departs from the same experience of Francis, which Bonaventure presents as one who searched for this hidden centre, which is Christ, the Crucified Word, who reveals the profound sense of the *liber naturae* (book of nature) and of the *liber Scripturae* (the book of Scripture) in the mystery of his self-emptying. In the *Breviloquium* this vision is already present more in a mystical than in a rational-speculative way. We can, however, state that in other works of the Seraphic Doctor, such as the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, it arrives at its peak, when human reason and speculation gives way to the *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) of the contemplation of the cross which links the extremes and opposites in a centre of unity and reconciliation, thus announcing the prelude of the eschatological peace to which the *homo viator* (journeying man) thirsts in his search for God.

In 1259 Bonaventure went up to Mount La Verna, as a pilgrim in search for inner peace. There he had the mystical experience of the speculation of a poor man in the desert.<sup>38</sup> On La Verna Bonaventure found the secret of the peace of the seventh day in the unitive experience of Saint Francis who met on that spot the Crucified Seraph and whose flesh was stamped with the holy stigmata. The *Itinerarium* is certainly a work of great philosophical speculation, but at the same time Bonaventure is conscious that he had to face a mystery which one cannot penetrate except with the power of the *sapientia crucis* of Francis. The key for reading and interpreting the *Itinerarium* consists in this humble stooping towards the true wisdom which comes from the *speculatio* of Christ Crucified. That is why Bonaventure admonishes us:

“First, therefore, I invite the reader to the groans of prayer through Christ crucified, through whose blood we are cleansed from the filth of vice – so that he not believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavor without grace, reflection as a mirror (*speculatio*) without divinely inspired wisdom.”<sup>39</sup>

The *Itinerarium*, which is the journey of the soul into God through six grades of spiritual ascent towards the seventh stage of mystical union, is built upon a seven-fold structure which is common in Bonaventure and in medieval theology, and which has as

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<sup>38</sup> The *Itinerarium* begins with the expression: «Incipit speculatio pauperis in deserto» (V, 296).

<sup>39</sup> *Itinerarium*, Prologo (V, 296): «Igitur ad gemitum orationis per Christum crucifixum, per cuius sanguinem purgamur a sordibus vitiorum, primum quidem lectorem invito, ne forte credat, quod sibi sufficiat lectio sine unctione, speculatio sine devotione, investigatio sine admiratione, circumspectio sine exultatione, industria sine pietate, scientia sine caritate, intelligentia sine humilitate, studium absque divina gratia, speculum absque sapientia divinitus inspirata». English translation of the *Itinerarium* taken from: *Bonaventure. The Soul's Journey into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis*, Translation and introduction by Ewert Cousins, Preface by Ignatius Brady, Paulist Press, New Jersey 1978, 55-56 (hereafter *Bonaventure. The Soul's Journey into God*).

its centre the mystery of the cross revealed in the stigmatized body of Saint Francis. On La Verna Bonaventure understood the dynamism of this experience of mystical union:

“This was shown also to blessed Francis, when in ecstatic contemplation on the height of the mountain – where I thought out these things I have written – there appeared to him a six-winged Seraph fastened to a cross.”<sup>40</sup>

Bonaventure tries to explain the mystical union of Francis with the Crucified through the category of a paschal experience. The point of arrival of the long journey of the soul in search for God is found in this transforming experience of Francis, which Bonaventure himself experienced and proposes to his readers:

“Whoever turns his face fully to the Mercy Seat and with faith, hope and love, devotion, admiration, exultation, appreciation, praise and joy beholds him hanging upon the cross, such a one makes the Pasch, that is, the passover, with Christ. By the staff of the cross he passes over the Red Sea, going from Egypt into the desert, where he will taste the hidden manna; and with Christ he rests in the tomb, as if dead to the outer world, but experiencing, as far as is possible in this wayfarer’s state, what is said on the cross to the thief who adhered to Christ: ‘Today you shall be with me in paradise.’”<sup>41</sup>

The icon of Francis as the exemplification of Christ Crucified, is represented by Bonaventure as the fruit of a long experience of prayer and interior searching. In front of this icon one has to stop and contemplate. The Seraphic Doctor tries to explain how this contemplation comes about. He says that it is a question of the *apex affectus* (height of affection) which goes way beyond any operation of a rational kind, it is a *docta ignorantia* which hides the mysteries of theology in the most luminous darkness of a silence full of wisdom.<sup>42</sup> Bonaventure makes use of mystical terms present in the treatise *De mystica theologia* by Dionysius the Areopagite. In this way he arrives at the centre of the value of philosophical speculation which stops in front of the coincidence of opposites of the mystery of the cross, which is both darkness and light at the same time.

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<sup>40</sup> *Itinerarium*, VII,3 (V, 312): «Quod etiam ostensum est beato Francisco, cum in excessu contemplationis in monte excelso – ubi haec, quae scripta sunt, mente tractavi – apparuit Seraph sex alarum in cruce confixus». Bonaventure. *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 112.

<sup>41</sup> *Itinerarium*, VII,2 (V, 312): «Ad quod propitiatorium qui aspicit plena conversione vultus, aspiciendo eum in cruce suspensum per fidem, spem et caritatem, devotionem, admirationem, exultationem, appretiationem, laudem et iubilationem; pascha, hoc est transitum, cum eo facit, ut per virgam crucis transeat mare rubrum, ab Aegypto intrans desertum, ubi gustet manna absconditum, et cum Christo requiescat in tumulo quasi exterius mortuus, sentiens tamen, quantum possibile est secundum statum viae, quod in cruce dictum est latroni cohaerenti Christo: *Hodie mecum eris in paradiso*». Bonaventure. *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 111-112.

<sup>42</sup> *Itinerarium* VII,4-5 (V, 312-313): «In hoc autem transitu, si sit perfectus, oportet quod relinquuntur omnes intellectuales operationes, et apex affectus totus transferatur et transformetur in Deum. Hoc autem est mysticum et secretissimum, quod nemo novit, nisi qui accipit, nec accipit nisi qui desiderat, nec desiderat nisi quem ignis Spiritus sancti medullitus inflamat, quem Christus misit in terram. Et ideo dicit Apostolus, hanc mysticam sapientiam esse per Spiritum sanctum revelatam ... nova et absoluta et inconvertibilia theologiae mysteria secundum superlucentem absconduntur occulte docentis silentii caliginem in obscurissimo, quod est supermanifestissimum, super splendentem, et in qua omne relucet, et invisibilium superbonorum splendoribus superimplentem invisibiles intellectus». For an English translation: Bonaventure. *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 113-114.

If the *Itinerarium* departs from the speculation of a poor man in the desert, who could well be an indication of Saint Francis himself, one could say that it concludes with the representation of this poor man as an icon of Christ, who is poor and naked upon the cross, of that Christ who is “the origin of all wisdom.”<sup>43</sup>

The *Itinerarium* was written some months before the mandate which Bonaventure received from the Chapter of Narbonne in 1260 to write a new life of Saint Francis, the *Legenda Maior*. In this way we can see a link between these two works in the way they present Francis on the mystical and theological level. When Bonaventure became Minister General, he had to face the problem of presenting to the Order a founder who would be a principle of unification, while at the same time of making an interpretation of sacred history in the light of biblical revelation and in a correct eschatological understanding of the mystery of Christ. In front of the most varied interpretations of Joachimism and Aristotelism, particularly present in the University of Paris, Bonaventure felt the need to answer with force, presenting his theological interpretation of history, as a history of salvation, in which the mystery of the cross stands at the centre in order to confound all the logic of this world. This is the theme of the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, from which we shall quote some extracts for our reflection upon Francis as the exemplification of Christ Crucified in the context of a Christian vision of history.<sup>44</sup>

The central idea which is of interest to us is that of the Word as a medium of all sciences. In the *Hexaëmeron* Bonaventure writes: “The Word expresses the Father and the things He made, and principally leads us to union with the Father who brings all things together; and in this regard He is the Tree of Life, for by this means we return to the very fountain of life and are revived in it.”<sup>45</sup>

Christ is the *medium* between the Father and creation. In him one can understand the process of *egressus* (going out) from God and *reditus* (returning) into God, which marks the theology of the Seraphic Doctor in a strong way. The tree of life is a symbol of the Cross of Christ, which Bonaventure presents as the centre of human logic.

In the mystery of the Cross, Christ is presented as the centre of the economy of salvation: “How marvelous is divine wisdom, for it brought forth salvation through the cinders of humility. For the center is lost in the circle, and it cannot be found except by two lines crossing each other at right angle.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Christus, unus omnium magister*, 1 (V, 567): «Unus est magister vester, Christus ... ipse est, qui est origo omnis sapientiae ... Ipse Christus est autem fons omnis cognitionis rectae».

<sup>44</sup> *San Bonaventura. La Sapienza Cristiana. Le Collationes in Hexaemeron*, a cura di Vincenzo Cherubino Bigi, editoriale di Inos Biffi, Jaca Book, Milano 1985.

<sup>45</sup> *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, I,17 (V, 332): «Verbum ergo exprimit Patrem et res, quae per ipsum factae sunt, et principaliter ducit nos ad Patris congregantis unitatem; et secundum hoc est lignum vitae, quia per hoc medium redimus et vivificamur in ipso fonte vitae». English translation is taken from: *The Works of Bonaventure. Vol. 5: Collations on the Six Days*, Translated from the Latin by José de Vinck, St. Anthony Guild Press, Paterson, New Jersey 1970, 9 (hereafter *Collations on the Six Days*).

<sup>46</sup> *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, I,24 (V, 333): «Mirabilis fuit sapientia divina, quae per cinerem humilitatis operata est salutem. Medium enim, cum amissum est in circulo, inveniri non potest nisi per duas lineas se orthogonaliter intersecantes». *Collations on the Six Days*, 13.

The image of the cross in the middle of the circle reminds us of the figure of Christ Crucified:

“Christ was such a Center in His crucifixion. God is our king before ages; He has wrought salvation in the midst of the earth. The earth is clearly the center, and hence it is the lowest, and of modest size; and because the lowest and of modest size, it receives all the heavenly influences, and brings forth a marvelous multiplication of beings. Likewise the Son of God, the very small and poor and humble One, assuming our earth, and made of earth, not only came upon the surface of the earth, but indeed to the depth of its center, that is, He has wrought salvation in the midst of the earth, for after His crucifixion, His soul went down into hell and re-established the heavenly thrones. Such a Center has a saving power: and anyone who draws away from it is condemned, as drawing away from the means of humility ... In such a center He has wrought salvation, that is, in the humility of the cross.”<sup>47</sup>

Bonaventure explains how the Cross was the occasion for the definite victory of Christ over the devil. The syllogism of the Cross won over the false syllogism of the devil, through the coincidence of opposites. In this way, human weakness was won over by divine power, suffering was won over by impassibility, and death was won over by the life which was hidden in the divinity of the Son of God. The reasoning of the devil was won over by the *sapientia crucis* which destroyed his power. This is the perfect syllogism, or way of reasoning, of Christ, according to Bonaventure:

“The major proposition existed from all eternity, the minor came about on the cross, and the conclusion appeared in the resurrection. The Jews believed they had confounded Christ, and they taunted Him: ‘If Thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross!’ For Christ did not say: ‘Allow Me to live,’ but ‘Allow Me to take on death, to be joined with the opposite extreme, to suffer and to die.’ The conclusion follows from that. And so He Himself made a fool of the devil.”<sup>48</sup>

The vision of the victorious cross in the *Hexaëmeron* is presented at the same time of the vision of the crucified Seraph to Francis upon La Verna. When Bonaventure discusses the theme celestial hierarchy, and speaks about the religious Orders in the

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<sup>47</sup> *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, I,22-23 (V, 337): «Hoc medium fuit Christus in crucifixione. In Psalmo: *Rex noster ante saecula operatus est salutem in medio terrae*. Terra enim plane centrum est, et ideo infima et ideo modica; et quia infima et modica, ideo suscipit omnes influentias caelestes, et ideo facit mirabiles pullulationes. Sic Filius Dei infimus, pauperculus, modicus, humum nostram suscipiens, de humo factus, non solum venit ad superficiem terrae, verum etiam in profundum centri, scilicet operatus est salutem in medio terrae, quia post crucifixionem anima sua in infernum descendit et restauravit caelestes sedes. Hoc medium est salvativum; a quo recedens damnatur, scilicet a medio humilitatis ... In hoc medio operatus est salutem, scilicet in humilitate crucis». *Collations on the Six Days*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, I,28 (V, 334): «Maior proposition fuit ab aeterno; sed assumption in cruce; conclusion vero in resurrectione. Iudaei credebant Christum confudisse et improperebant ei: *Si Filius Dei es, descende de cruce*. Nam Christus non dicebat: sinite me vivere, sed dicebat: sinite me mortem assumere et alteri extremitati copulari, pati, mori; et tunc sequitur conclusio. Unde ipse illudit diabolo». *Collations on the Six Days*, 15.

history of the Church, he mentions the order of Seraphim, that is of those who dedicate themselves to God *secundum modum sursumactivum* (according to the uplifting way):

“And he said that this apparition of the Seraph to Blessed Francis, which was both expressive and impressed, showed that this order was to correspond to this one (the Seraph), but that he (Francis) was to attain it through hardships. In this vision, there were great mysteries.”<sup>49</sup>

I would like to conclude this section on the *Hexaëmeron* by quoting another text taken from the last *collatio*, which speaks about the hierarchized soul. In this text Bonaventure is quoting a saying of brother Giles regarding Saint Francis. I believe that this is an illuminating example of a genuine wisdom of the cross which is a fruit of the simplicity of the Gospel which lies at the basis of the following of Christ along the way of the cross:

“[Bonaventure] said that once he was speaking with Brother Aegidius, who told him that we are not wise compared to Francis, the wise merchant: but we waste our substance, for we should pay a denarius to a man for him to strike us. And we do not even have the wisdom of the ass that bears its burden, and the more blows and insults it receives, the better it carries its load.”<sup>50</sup>

To carry ones load was the programme of the life of Saint Francis, it was the secret of the success of the poor disciple of the Crucifix, of him who became the exemplification of the Word made man to save humanity as a Crucified Word.

## Conclusion

These few references to the figure of Saint Francis as an exemplification of the *theologia crucis* of Saint Bonaventure are an indication of the centrality of the theme of the cross in the writings of the Seraphic Doctor. We have not referred to the centrality of the theme of the cross in other works, such as the Commentary to the Gospel of Luke and the *Apologia Pauperum*<sup>51</sup>, and we have also left out references to Francis as an icon of Christ Crucified in the *Sermones* of Bonaventure for the feastday of Saint Francis.<sup>52</sup> Our

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<sup>49</sup> *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, XXII,23 (V, 441): «Iste ordo non florebit, nisi Christus appareat et patiatur in corpore suo mystico. Et dicebat, quod illa apparitio Seraph beato Francisco, quae fuit expressiva et impressa, ostendebat, quod iste ordo illi respondere debeat, sed tamen pervenire ad hoc per tribulationes. Et in illa apparitione magna mysteria erant». *Collations on the Six Days*, 352.

<sup>50</sup> *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, XXIII,26 (V, 448-449): «Et dicebat, quod semel loquebatur cum fratre Aegidio, qui dicebat sibi, quod non sumus sapientes, sicut beatus Franciscus sapiens mercator fuit; sed nos dissipamus substantiam, quia deberemus dare unum denarium, ut homo alapam nobis daret; sed nos nec habemus sapientiam asini, qui portat sarcinam suam, et ubi plus percutitur et plura vituperia sibi dicuntur, tanto melius portat». *Collations on the Six Days*, 377-378.

<sup>51</sup> As an example, we can quote *Apologia Pauperum*, cap. III,10 (VIII, 247): «Digne proinde huic pauperculo sacro [Francisco], qui perfectionem Evangelii perfecte servavit et docuit, in apparitione seraphica stigmata sua tanquam sigillum approbativum Christus impressit».

<sup>52</sup> As an example we can quote *Sermo IV* on St. Francis, which Bonaventure delivered at Paris, 4th October 1262, and which had as its theme Mt 24:30: *Tunc apparebit signum Filii hominis in caelo* (IX,

intention was solely that of presenting this theme as it appears in the *Legenda Maior*, with some references to the mystical-theological works which contain the main lines of Bonaventure's philosophical, theological and mystical frame of mind. We have to admit that the link with the figure of Saint Francis is not always clear. However, an attentive reading of the same texts shows that Bonaventure writes as a Franciscan, and as such he cannot refrain from contemplating the Crucified Word in the life of Saint Francis.

The recipients of the writings of Bonaventure were, above all, the friars. This became particularly true during the years in which Bonaventure was Minister General, when he wanted to present the figure of Saint Francis as a founder who could guarantee structural unity to the Order of Friars Minor. One can raise the objection that, in order to satisfy his ideals, Bonaventure sacrificed the freshness of Saint Francis as he was known by the first companions. It has not been our intention to enter into these questions, which are however of great importance in the study of the Sources. We are rather interested in the fact that Bonaventure wanted to present Francis as an icon, a living and dialogical representation, a model for our imitation, a principle of unification of the same ideal. He managed to accomplish all this splendidly when he saw Francis as an exemplification of Christ Crucified. In agreement with his Trinitarian theology, which is expressed in the great mystery of God who communicates Himself to us in the mystery of the Incarnation, Bonaventure has been an authentic Franciscan. He has known how to give a sacred interpretation of history, which might even leave us with many perplexities if we do not analyze it in the light of the medieval culture in which he was writing.

For Bonaventure Francis becomes an exemplification of the *sapientia crucis* which confounds the wisdom of this world. In the *Collationes de Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, the Seraphic Doctor explains very clearly the intrinsic value of wisdom in reference to the Christ-event:

“Therefore, do not take delight in anything which is of this world, because Christ was crucified in order to wipe away this wisdom. As Christ died to wipe away and destroy false wisdom, so He rose from the dead in order to teach us true wisdom and establish it in our hearts. On the cross he has taught us to despise the wisdom of the world, and ascending in heaven he taught us to desire the wisdom of God and to love the fountain of life. All the wisdom of this world consists in despising all these things. It is the greatest folly, instead, to render null the death of Christ. Those who delight in the

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585-590). The text in Latin is found on page 586: «Inter cetera dona, quae largitus est Deus beato Francisco humili et pauperulo, istud fuit unum privilegium speciale, et si audeo dicere, singulare, quod stigmata Domini nostri Iesu Christi in corpore suo portavit per duos annos ante mortem suam ... Istud signum impressit Dominus isti pauperulo et humillimo, qui ex sua humilitate fecit se servum leproso- rum. Ad commendationem istius privilegii specialis, sive potius singularis, sumtum est verbum illud Matthaei, quod secundum litteram et historiae veritatem significat apparitionem signi dominici, id est crucis, in die iudicii; secundum allegoriam significat apparitionem signi crucis in corpore Christi in sua passione; secundum tropologiam significat apparitionem signi dominici in corpore beati Francisci». For an English translation of this text see *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. 2: *The Saint*, 719.

things of this world do this; therefore it is necessary to nullify this wisdom and to desire the wisdom which comes from above.”<sup>53</sup>

If we apply these affirmations to the life of Saint Francis written by Saint Bonaventure, we find a true exemplification of the same affirmations in a tangible experience of life. In the folly of the cross Francis understood his true calling, and he discovered the fountain of wisdom. The value of the expressive sign which gave life to a vital charism like that of Francis, according to Bonaventure, lies exactly in his having understood the coincidence of opposites in the dialectics of the Incarnation. In a culture which exalts the expressive signs of a human wisdom which does not refer any more to Christian values which have moulded and preserved it, the sign of Francis who is not ashamed to be a Christian man marked with the cross, continues to invite us to ask whether our credibility has not been watered down by our inability to become, like Francis, an expressive sign, an exemplification of the transcendental and dialogical value which unites heaven and earth and which embraces all cultures.

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<sup>53</sup> *Collationes de Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, IX,4 (V, 500): «Non ergo sapiatis quae sunt super terram, quia crucifixus est Christus, ut istam sapientiam evacualet; et sicut mortuus est Christus, ut vanam sapientiam doceret et in cordibus nostris stabiliret. In cruce docuit sapientiam mundi spernere, et in caelum vadens docuit sapientiam Dei appetere et fontem vitae diligere. Omnis sapientia mundi est spernere ista. Maxima autem stultitia est mortem Christi evacuare; quod faciunt qui sapiunt quae sunt super terram; ideo oportet sapientiam istam evacuare et sapientiam, quae desursum est, appetere».