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THEOLOGICAL AND POLEMICAL USES OF HAGIOGRAPHY: A CONSIDERATION OF BONAVENTURE'S *LEGENDA MAJOR* OF ST. FRANCIS

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Introduction

Bonaventure's *Legendae* of St. Francis of Assisi¹ occupy an ambiguous position in relation to his theological and spiritual works. In the first place, many historians believe that Bonaventure wrote the *Legenda Major*, or *Major Life*, to restore unity to the Franciscan Order. According to some historians of the Order, such as Raphael Huber, this is to Bonaventure's credit.² John Moorman and other writers, however, view Bonaventure's portrayal of Francis as tantamount to a rejection of the Franciscan ideal.³ The *Major Life* also has been criticized for being unoriginal and inferior to the other early biographies of Francis. For instance, according to Rosalind Brooke, the *Major Life* "is little more than an elegant pastiche of earlier *Lives*."⁴ In addition, because the *Major Life* is classified as a work primarily pertaining to the history of the Franciscan order, it is not discussed in studies of Bonaventure's mystical theology.⁵ Finally, most of the scholarship on the *Major Life* is several decades old, and it appears that scholarly analysis of the work and its context essentially has ceased.

Yet analysis of the scholarship reveals that the circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Major Life* have caused historians to overemphasize the significance of the work to the Order's development. As Ewert Cousins has written, "Modern scholarship has been distracted by this historical question from taking adequate account of the distinct spiritual dimensions of Bonaventure's biography [of Francis]."⁶ Indeed, the historical context of the *Major Life* does not fully explain its content. Regardless of the function of Bonaventure's *Lives* in the history of the Franciscan Order, the *Major Life* also needs to be considered in connection with his other mystical writings. The *Major Life* was not written solely to restore harmony to the Franciscan Order, for Bonaventure also used the *Major Life* to illustrate his understanding of the mystical ascent of the soul, through the life of its greatest exemplar.

The Historical Context of the *Major Life of St. Francis*

Although an analysis of the *Major Life* must address more than its historical context, the political

¹Benen Fahy, trans., "Major and Minor Life of St. Francis with Excerpts from Other Works by St. Bonaventure," in Marion A. Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 4th ed., rev. (Chicago, 1983): 613–851.

²See Raphael M. Huber, *A Documented History of the Franciscan Order* (Milwaukee, 1944); and Damien Vorreaux, "Introduction to the Major and Minor Life of St. Francis," trans. Paul Vorreaux, in Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 615–626. Vorreaux writes that after Bonaventure's portrayal of the "pacifying activity of Francis...it became manifestly illogical for a Franciscan to carry on quarrels in the name of an ideal that excluded all quarrels," 619.

³John R.H. Moorman, *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis of Assisi* (Manchester, 1940). Moorman writes that Bonaventure's ideal "was not the ideal for which Francis had lived and died," 141.

⁴Rosalind Brooke, "The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi," in *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London, 1967), 189. Similarly, Moorman writes that "when we examine the *Legenda* we find that it is actually little more than a transcription from the two *Legendae* of Celano," *The Sources*, 142.

⁵The *Major Life* is virtually ignored in such important considerations of Bonaventure's theology and mysticism as J. Guy Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, NJ, 1964); and Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of Bonaventure*, trans. Iltyd Trethowan and Frank J. Sheed, rev. ed. (Paterson, NJ, 1965). Both comment briefly on the *Major Life*, agreeing that the primary function of the work was to restore harmony to the Order.

⁶Ewert Cousins, trans. and introd., *Bonaventure. The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, 1978), 42.

implications of the work cannot be denied. When Bonaventure became Minister General of the Order, there was great strife, both within the Order and between certain groups of Franciscans and the institutional church. For the most part, the struggle within the Order was a struggle over the life and ideals of Francis himself. Much of the disagreement centered around Francis's relationship to the church, and stemmed from the lack of writings by Francis himself—which is compounded by the fact that only half of his writings have been preserved. Francis, apparently, was not as intentional about leaving a record of his spiritual ideals as he was about living them.

Although Francis wrote various Rules for the Franciscans, they were largely compilations of Scripture, for he believed that the Gospel itself provided the ultimate Rule for the Order.⁷ Some historians have speculated that the Rules written by Francis represent his acquiescence to the authority of the church rather than his own beliefs. Moorman, for instance, classifies them as writings “in which it is not he alone who is speaking but the voice of those who shared among themselves the control of the Order, sometimes inducing Francis to write things with which he did not altogether agree.”⁸ Francis did not write any theological or mystical treatises, although his prayers and poems can be classified as works of mystical devotion; and his *Testament*, the closest of his surviving writings to a final statement, was declared null by a papal decree, after which provincial ministers ordered that all copies of it be burned.⁹

Despite claims that the church might have interfered with Francis and then co-opted his ideal after his death, it is impossible to determine the extent of this interference, if in fact there was any. Moreover, the controversies surrounding the life and writings of Francis have made it impossible to define the Franciscan ideal. As C.H. Lawrence writes, “anyone who sets out to describe the personality and teaching of St. Francis must recognize that the enterprise is subject to severe limitations.”¹⁰ Any assertions about Francis's ideal that are supported by his writings alone can be questioned on the basis of the presumed influence, or coercion, of the church or of certain factions within the Order.¹¹ As Moorman writes, “we must remember that Francis as a writer was not wholly free.”¹² Despite the ambiguous nature of the Franciscan ideal itself, the bitter disagreements over the life of Francis, which surfaced within twenty-five years of his death, if not before, are essential to understanding the history of the early *Lives* of Francis. Moreover, an analysis of the struggle over the Franciscan ideal, rather than a definition of the ideal itself, is more important in considering the *Major Life*. In other words, the nature of the disagreement is more important in a scholarly inquiry than trying to decide which side was right.¹³

Although the strife was not the result of a simple bifurcation, the Order was divided between the Spirituals and the Conventuals. The Spirituals saw themselves as the upholders of the Franciscan ideal. They opposed all modifications of what they considered to be the Franciscan way of life: absolute poverty, humility, and simplicity.¹⁴ Some of the Spirituals viewed Francis as the herald of

⁷*Testament*, sentence 14, in Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, trans. and eds., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, 1982), 154–155.

⁸Moorman, *The Sources*, 17. In a similar vein, Paul Sabatier argues in his biography of Francis, *La Vie de S. François d'Assise* (Paris, 1894), that the church co-opted the Franciscan ideal, even while Francis was alive, in order to contain a potentially revolutionary movement.

⁹C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London, 1989), 244.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 245.

¹¹For example, Huber suspects that the Spirituals might have changed Francis's *Testament*: “It is problematical just what the original *Testament* contained and in how far the ‘Spirituals’ may have altered it,” 80.

¹²Moorman, *The Sources*, 17.

¹³Scholarly work on Franciscan history and the early biographies of Francis is marred by a tendency to favor one side or the other of the argument. Huber, for instance, describes the Spirituals in negative terms and refers to them as “excessive.” On the other hand, Moorman aligns himself with the Spirituals by asserting that Bonaventure and the Order as whole betrayed Francis's ideal. Although Sabatier later modified his views, in “L'Originalité de Saint François d'Assise,” in Sabatier, et al., eds., *Franciscan Essays*. British Society of Franciscan Studies Publications. Extra ser., vols 1–2 (Aberdeen, 1912), 1:1–17, his perspective in *La Vie de S. François* is firmly on the side of the Spirituals.

¹⁴John R.H. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford, 1968), 192.

the New Age of the Spirit who had been prophesied by Joachim of Fiore, whose teachings—or at least those attributed to him—were considered heretical by the church. The Spirituals' resistance to the authority of the church strengthened their association with Joachinism and created hostility between the church and the Order.¹⁵

The Conventuals, on the other hand, thought that adaptations in the Franciscan way of life were necessary for the Order to fulfill its calling. According to the Conventuals, the Order existed to serve the church and had always been obedient to the authority of the church. Therefore, changes in the Franciscan way of life did not represent a departure from the most important elements of its calling: to obey and to serve the church. As Moorman writes, "To the Conventuals the Order was essentially a tool in the hands of the Church, to be used as and where it was most needed."¹⁶ Because the Conventuals valued obedience and submission to the church, they viewed the Spirituals "as rebels and heretics, men who refused to accept the discipline they owed to their superiors, and who openly challenged the decisions of popes."¹⁷

Bonaventure's sympathies were with the Conventuals, or at least with the dominant position in the church, which was undoubtedly a reason for his election. He became Minister General of the Order when John of Parma was accused of Joachinism and subsequently forced to resign the office. According to Huber, "the Order at the time of Bonaventure's election was on the verge of a crisis."¹⁸ Three years after Bonaventure's election, the Chapter of Narbonne (1260) made several declarations in an attempt to define the Order once and for all. One of these decisions was to commission Bonaventure to write the official biography of Francis. Bonaventure presented the *Major Life* to the Chapter of Pisa in 1263, where it was unanimously approved.¹⁹ Three years later, the Chapter of Paris ordered that all other existing biographies were to be destroyed, so that only Bonaventure's account of the life of Francis would remain.²⁰ These circumstances alone are enough to indicate that the *Major Life* played an integral part in defining the Order over and against the claims of the Spirituals. The suppression of all previous biographies of Francis would make it increasingly difficult for the Spirituals to show that the Order had betrayed the Franciscan ideal. The intention of the suppression must have been that the Franciscan ideal should be shaped by the *Major Life*.

The Sources of the *Major Life of St. Francis*

At the time of the *Major Life's* composition, the existing biographies of Francis were the three *Lives* by Thomas of Celano²¹ and Julian of Speyer's subsequent abridgement of Thomas's materials.²² Thomas's *First Life* was, at one time, the official biography. Pope Gregory IX had commissioned Thomas to write the biography on the occasion of Francis's canonization. Although it is not clear why Thomas was chosen to write the first official biography, Brooke notes that Thomas was "one of the leading stylists of his age."²³ Moorman claims that Thomas was chosen for a second reason as well. "At a time when party feeling was beginning to run high," he writes, "[Thomas] was known to be a man of moderate views who could be relied upon to give an unbiased portrait of the man who Gregory wished to have presented to the world."²⁴ Although he was a friar and had probably met

¹⁵Huber, 148.

¹⁶Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, 191.

¹⁷Ibid., 192.

¹⁸Huber, 148.

¹⁹Ibid., 156.

²⁰Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, 152n.

²¹Placid Hermann, trans., "First and Second Life of St. Francis with Selections from Treatise on the Miracles of Bl. Francis by Thomas of Celano," in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi*, 177–611.

²²Jason M. Miskuly, trans., "Julian of Speyer: Life of St. Francis," *Franciscan Studies* 49 (1989): 93–174.

²³Brooke, "The Lives of St. Francis," 182.

²⁴Moorman, *The Sources*, 62–63.

Francis, there is no evidence that Thomas was one of Francis's close companions.²⁵

The style and structure of Thomas's *First Life* is typical of medieval hagiography. According to Brooke, the *First Life* fits the most common paradigm of medieval biography, the heroic.²⁶ Drawing on R.W. Southern's description of the heroic type, Brooke writes that the *First Life* "contains all 'the essential and invariable features' of [Southern's] classification: the portents at birth, the miracles and prophecies during life, the deathbed with attendant signs and the continuation of miraculous intervention after death."²⁷ Thomas also uses the language of secular romances for hagiographic purposes, describing Francis as "the valiant knight of the Lord" and emphasizing his devotion to "Lady Poverty."

Following a fairly standard hagiographic form, the *First Life* begins with Francis's conversion, giving only essential information about his youth. Because he is writing the life of a saint rather than a secular biography, Thomas is not interested in relating the details of Francis's childhood or, for that matter, any of the ordinary events of his life. After describing Francis's journey to Rome and his meeting with Pope Innocent III—which again emphasizes mystical elements, such as Innocent's prophetic dream, instead of mundane details—Thomas illustrates Francis's embodiment of poverty, simplicity, humility, and obedience. After a lengthy account of Francis's death, the book ends with stories of his miracles, in which Thomas repeatedly refers to Francis as a saint. Thomas tells us that miracles "do not make sanctity, but only manifest it."²⁸ Yet he expects his readers to react as do the men in the *First Life* who witness Francis's miracles and say, "Truly this man is a saint and a friend of the Most High."²⁹

Thomas's *Second Life* departs from the heroic model and is atypical of medieval hagiography in general. The *Second Life* does not emphasize "the impact of supernatural power on the natural world," which, according to Southern, is the defining characteristic of the heroic model.³⁰ As Brooke writes, the *Second Life* is a notable exception to most saints' lives in that "there are hardly any miracles, and Francis is represented as a man of exceptional sanctity, indeed, but as a recognizable human personality."³¹ In fact, Thomas's lack of attention to the miraculous caused John of Parma, then Minister General of the Franciscans, to order him to write an addendum, which Thomas called the *Treatise on the Miracles*.³²

Whereas the *First Life* was written to illustrate Francis's sanctity, the majority of the *Second Life* deals more with Francis the man. The *Second Life* begins with an expanded account of Francis's youth and the beginning of the Order; as Moorman notes, "it is the beginning of a true biography."³³ The second and more substantial part of the work is quite different. Moorman claims that, in writing the *Second Life*, "Celano regarded himself as the mouthpiece of a large number of the friends and companions of S. Francis."³⁴ By presenting Francis's teachings on a number of critical matters, however, he also became Francis's mouthpiece. Indeed, Thomas's stated purpose is to record "the deeds and also the words of our glorious father Francis, in as much as they were better known to us than to the rest because of our close association with him and our mutual intimacy."³⁵

Although Thomas's *Lives* do not describe any of the conflicts within the Order during—or, for that matter, after—Francis's life, it is easy to understand how Thomas's *Second Life* could play a role

²⁵See Brooke, "The Lives of St. Francis," 182–183, and Moorman, *The Sources*, 62–63.

²⁶See R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and His Biographer: A Study of Monastic life and Thought, 1059-c. 1130*. The Birkbeck Lectures, 1959 (Cambridge, 1963), 320–328. The "Heroic Pattern" is described on pp. 320–323.

²⁷Brooke, "The Lives of St. Francis," 181.

²⁸Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 26.70, in Hermann, 287.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 21.59, in Hermann, 279.

³⁰Southern, 320.

³¹Brooke, "The Lives of St. Francis," 187–188.

³²Huber, 127.

³³Moorman, *The Sources*, 112

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, Prologue, 1, in Hermann, 359.

in these conflicts. Thomas was claiming special knowledge of Francis's activities and his teachings, and therefore of the Franciscan ideal. If Sabatier and Moorman are correct that Pope Gregory IX (then Cardinal Ugolino) interfered with Francis and attempted to control the Order, Thomas was certainly in no position to reveal this in his *Lives* of Francis. Yet even though he might have felt constrained by Gregory IX, Thomas's *Second Life* does support many of the arguments of the Spirituals.

Thomas's *Second Life* claims to present Francis's teachings on a number of controversial topics. Much of the conflict between the Conventuals and Spirituals stemmed from adaptations—or, from the perspective of the Spirituals, relaxations—of the Franciscan way of life. The Spirituals thought that the Franciscans should be strict in their vows of poverty, but the Conventuals were living in communities and practicing corporate ownership of goods. The Conventuals were also becoming more involved with the universities, and many were accepting offices in the church.

The Spirituals were able to use Thomas's *Second Life* to support their condemnation of the practices of the Conventuals. The *Second Life* offered “proof” that such compromises were contrary to the Franciscan ideal. According to the *Second Life*, Francis discouraged the study of books and was against the friars' holding clerical offices.³⁶ Thomas also claims that Francis repeatedly said that “in as far as the brothers depart from poverty, in so much will the world depart from them, and they will seek...and not find.”³⁷ According to Thomas, what would offend Francis the most would be “if he saw anything contrary to poverty in his brothers.”³⁸ Such statements could be used by the Spirituals, for they agreed that absolute poverty was indispensable to the Franciscan ideal. It is not surprising that only two copies of Thomas's *Second Life* escaped destruction by the Conventuals.³⁹

Besides its use by the Spirituals, there were other problems with Thomas's account of the life and miracles of Francis. Each of his three works contained varying amounts of differing material, and even more repetition. The many lapses in chronology made it difficult to combine the writings, and none of the accounts was particularly suitable for liturgical use. Thomas's two *Lives* and his *Treatise on the Miracles* presented a wealth of material about Francis, but the works as a whole were cumbersome and in need of organization.

In response to the need for a shorter account of the life of Francis, Julian of Speyer composed an edited version of Thomas's *First Life*.⁴⁰ Julian's *Life of Francis*, at 3792 words in length, is 54.4 percent shorter than Thomas's *First Life*, which is 27,411 words long.⁴¹ According to Miskuly, Julian's primary concern was brevity; he probably wrote his *Life* of Francis for liturgical use. Miskuly notes that “Julian's most consistent editorial interpolation throughout the *Vita Sancti Francisci*, which is repeated in varied forms some twenty-six times, concerns the work's length.”⁴²

Although Julian condenses Thomas's account, rather than substantially altering it, Julian's *Life of St. Francis* was written for a different purpose. Julian appears to be more concerned with the moral edification of his readers, and states his purpose in the prologue to the work:

We will first set forth certain of [Francis's] weaknesses, so that when his final manner of life, which we cannot fully or worthily explain, is compared to his early life, the Author of his conversion may be splendidly praised by all, the becoming humility of the innocent increased, and a firmer hope of pardon given to those

³⁶Ibid., 32.62, 106.145, in Hermann, 415, 479.

³⁷Ibid., 40.70, in Hermann, 422.

³⁸Ibid., 25.55, in Hermann, 411.

³⁹Rosalind B. Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government: Elias to Bonaventure*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, new ser., 7 (Cambridge, 1959), 212.

⁴⁰Although the date of Julian's work is uncertain, Miskuly indicates that it was written between the publication of Thomas of Celano's *First* and *Second Lives*. See Miskuly, 97–101.

⁴¹Ibid., 101.

⁴²Ibid., 110.

who have fallen from grace.⁴³

Because of the focus on the contrast between Francis's early life and his saintly "final manner of life," Julian's account places greater emphasis than Thomas on the waywardness of the youthful Francis, even though most of the material is drawn from Thomas's *First Life*.

As Miskuly points out, "in many ways, Julian of Speyer's *Vita Sancti Francisci* is simply a condensation of Celano's earlier *Vita Prima*."⁴⁴ At the same time, the kind of material omitted by Julian changes the focus of the work. Julian "omits many of Celano's observations and editorial interpolations, rearranges material the *Vita Prima* treats out of historical and/or logical sequence, and, for the most part, excludes Celano's remarks about people other than Francis himself."⁴⁵

Julian focuses on the events of Francis's life, and he seems to view Thomas's work as an appropriate source of information. Miskuly goes too far, however, when he assumes that "Julian's dependence on Celano's *legendae* indicates that he, at least, regarded their factual material as accurate and valuable and their presentations of St. Francis valid," or he would not have used Thomas's *First Life* so extensively.⁴⁶ There are other reasons to use existing sources, and it is also important to remember that Thomas's work had been commissioned by the pope. As the official biography, Thomas's work had a high degree of authority, if not strict accuracy. Finally, Julian's condensation of Thomas's *First Life* did not validate Thomas's presentation of St. Francis; instead, Julian's omissions resulted in a different presentation of St. Francis, and Julian's work occupied a neutral position in the conflict between the Spirituals and the Conventuals.

Bonaventure and the *Major Life of St. Francis*

Even though it cannot be denied that the *Major Life* was influenced by the conflicts within the Franciscan Order, it is necessary to analyze the limits of this influence. One can certainly claim that the historical situation explains why the biography was so important to the Order and therefore why Bonaventure was called upon to write it. It might be possible to claim that the historical situation explains why Bonaventure wrote such a work. Even if the circumstances surrounding the composition of the work can be used to account for its existence, however, the context of the *Major Life* cannot fully explain its content.

Despite its rather neutral position with regard to the conflicts within the Order, Julian of Speyer's *Life of Francis* offers an important point of comparison. If all Bonaventure had needed to do was to write an account of Francis's life that would promote unity within the Order, he probably would have used Julian's method of composition. In other words, Bonaventure could have edited the existing biographies, omitting everything that could support the claims of the Spirituals, as well as Thomas's authorial interjections, organizing the material chronologically and logically, and perhaps even emphasizing the miraculous in order to illustrate the difference between Francis the saint and his human followers.

The *Major Life*, however, is a very different work than Julian's *Life of Francis*. Despite Brooke's assessment, echoed by Moorman, that the *Major Life* is no more than edited version of the existing biographies, Bonaventure's work is not simply a pastiche of his sources. Julian edited and condensed Thomas's *First Life*, and Bonaventure certainly could have done the same; but when the *Major Life* is compared with Julian's work, it becomes obvious that Bonaventure did much more.

Part of the problem with labeling the *Major Life* "unoriginal" is that such evaluations reflect modern standards. Although originality is valued in modern works and often equated with creativity, medieval writers did not want their works to be perceived as "original." In terms of content,

⁴³Julian of Speyer, *Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, in Miskuly, 117.

⁴⁴Miskuly, 101.

⁴⁵Ibid., 101–102.

⁴⁶Ibid., 114.

originality in theological matters could lead to heresy. In terms of literary composition, “it was unthinkable for ancient and medieval writers not to base their composition on fixed rules and models appropriate to their purpose.”⁴⁷ According to Jean Leclercq,

In the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, no writing is done without ‘composition’: the stylistic material is arranged in a certain order. Authors conform to ways of writing and types of composition, each of which has its own rules.⁴⁸

For medieval writers, creativity was much more a matter of the use of sources, including existing works, within established forms.

The *Major Life* belongs to the same genre as the lives of Francis by Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer. Just as Julian’s purpose was different from Thomas’s, however, Bonaventure also had distinct reasons for writing his account of the life of Francis. Bonaventure no longer had to be concerned with justifying Francis’s sanctity or his canonization, as Thomas apparently had been. Nor was Bonaventure writing for the moral edification of the faithful, at least not in the same manner as Julian of Speyer in his *Life* of Francis. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bonaventure’s work would be very different; Thomas and Julian were friars, but Bonaventure was a theologian as well as a Franciscan.

Bonaventure’s study of theology provides a much better explanation for the differences between the *Major Life* and the existing biographies than the historical context or any lack of originality. In fact, had there been no conflicts within the Order, Bonaventure’s account of the life of Francis still would have been different from the works of Thomas and Julian. What distinguishes the *Major Life*, despite its heavy borrowing from other materials, is Bonaventure’s theology. Moreover, that he could write a theological treatment of the life of Francis and still take so much of his material from other sources reveals Bonaventure’s genius, not his lack of originality.

It is therefore inappropriate to call this work unoriginal, as Moorman does, because of the high percentage of previous authors’ work contained in it. Moorman claims that

when we examine the *Legenda* we find that it is actually little more than a transcription from the two *Legendae* of Celano. There are quotations from no less than 74 of 1 *Celano*, 92 chapters of 2 *Celano* and 108 of the *Tractatus de Miraculis*. In other words, about 85 *per cent.* of Bonaventura’s Legend is taken directly, and often verbally, from Celano.⁴⁹

Moorman criticizes the *Major Life* because it “supplies us with practically no new information”;⁵⁰ however, Bonaventure’s contribution stems from the mystical theology of the *Major Life*, not the information it provides about Francis’s life. Bonaventure did not strive for chronology or simple logic in his organization of the material in the *Major Life*. Instead, he used a structure that would mirror his understanding of the mystical ascent of the soul, an ascent experienced fully by Francis through the gift of the stigmata. By focusing almost exclusively on the percentage of previous authors’ material in the *Major Life*, Moorman fails to notice the significance of the work’s structure.

The structure of the *Major Life* makes it a work of mystical theology; as Cousins writes, “the spirituality of Bonaventure’s biography can best be seen through its structure.”⁵¹ According to

⁴⁷Jean Leclercq, introduction to *Cistercians and Cluniacs: St. Bernard’s Apologia to Abbot William*, trans. Michael Casey (Kalamazoo, MI, 1970), 15.

⁴⁸Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 3rd ed., rev. (New York, 1982), 153.

⁴⁹Moorman, *The Sources*, 142.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Cousins, 42.

Cousins, the structure of the *Major Life* mirrors the stages of mystical ascent, and de Vinck notes that most of Bonaventure's works are "geometrically constructed on a trinitarian frame."⁵² Following the work of Regis Armstrong, Cousins uses the divisions from one of Bonaventure's mystical works, *The Triple Way*, to analyze the *Major Life*.⁵³ In *The Triple Way*, Bonaventure defines the threefold hierarchical action of the soul as purgation, illumination, and perfective union.⁵⁴ Cousins finds the same division in the central chapters of the *Major Life*, with chapters five through seven corresponding to purgation, chapters eight through ten to illumination, and eleven through thirteen to perfection. These nine chapters show the "direct development from the purgation involved in [Francis's] conversion through the illumination of the virtues to the perfection achieved in the stigmata, and in the transformation in his death."⁵⁵

Although the correspondence between *The Triple Way* and the central chapters of the *Major Life* is not perfect, there are, indeed, significant parallels. For instance, in the *Major Life*, the first chapter in the purgation section (following Cousins's division) is entitled "The austerity of Francis' life and the comfort which the creatures gave him."⁵⁶ Similarly, in *The Triple Way*, Bonaventure lists "austerity" as one of the main components of purgation.⁵⁷ Humility and poverty, the virtues illustrated in the next chapters of the *Major Life*, are also related to purgation. As Bonaventure states in *The Triple Way*, austerity "consists in a certain spiritual rigor that restrains all concupiscence and prepares the soul for the love of hardship, poverty, and lowliness." In the *Major Life*, the last chapter of the purgation section emphasizes Francis's "Love for Poverty."⁵⁸

The most salient parallel between Bonaventure's understanding of illumination and *The Triple Way* involves the practice of prayer. In *The Triple Way*, prayer is associated with illumination, and Bonaventure discusses Francis and prayer in the last chapter of the illumination section of the *Major Life*.⁵⁹ The first two chapters that correspond to the step of illumination focus on Francis's great love. Bonaventure says that "the fervor of Francis's love united him so closely to God that his heartfelt compassion was enlarged so as to embrace all those who shared the same gifts of nature and of grace as he."⁶⁰ Although love is the essence of Bonaventure's understanding of perfection, it is also the driving force undergirding the whole mystical process. Indeed, the alternative title of *The Triple Way* is *Love Enkindled*.

The chapters in the *Major Life* that correspond to the stage of perfection are intended to prove that Francis had achieved illumination. Bonaventure shows Francis's knowledge of Scripture and his gifts for prophesying, preaching the gospel, and healing the sick. In the last chapter in this section, Bonaventure describes how Francis received the ultimate sign of grace, the stigmata. For Bonaventure, the gift of the stigmata represents the culmination of the mystical journey.⁶¹ According to Bonaventure, "the fervor of his seraphic longing raised Francis up to God and, in an ecstasy of compassion, made him like Christ who allowed himself to be crucified in the excess of his love," for Francis's "true love of Christ had now transformed his lover into his image."⁶²

The mystical theology of the *Major Life* shows that Bonaventure did not merely edit the existing

⁵²José de Vinck, introductory note to *The Triple Way, or Love Enkindled*, in *The Works of Bonaventure, Cardinal, Seraphic Doctor, and Saint*, trans. and ed. José De Vinck. 5 vols. (Paterson, NJ, 1960–70), 1:61.

⁵³See *The Triple Way*, in de Vinck, ed., *The Works of Bonaventure*, 1:63–94.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, Prologue, 63.

⁵⁵Cousins, 45.

⁵⁶Bonaventure, *Major Life*, chap. 5, in Fahy, 622, 629.

⁵⁷"The goods on which we are to concentrate at first are the following three: alacrity against negligence, austerity against concupiscence, and benignity against malice," *The Triple Way*, 1.8, in de Vinck, ed., *The Works of Bonaventure*, 1:67.

⁵⁸Bonaventure, *Major Life*, chap. 7, in Fahy, 680, 629. The chapter is entitled, "Francis' Love for Poverty—His Needs Are Supplied Miraculously."

⁵⁹See de Vinck, introductory note to *The Triple Way*, in de Vinck, ed., *The Works of Bonaventure*, 1:61.

⁶⁰Bonaventure, *Major Life*, 9.3–4, in Fahy, 700.

⁶¹Francis's experience on Mount Alverno was the inspiration for Bonaventure's best-known work of mystical theology, *The Journey of the Mind to God*. See *The Journey of the Mind to God*, Prologue, 2, in de Vinck, ed., *The Works of Bonaventure*, 1:6.

⁶²Bonaventure, *Major Life*, 13.3, 13.5, in Fahy, 730–732.

biographies of Francis or write a biography for political purposes alone. The mystical nature of Bonaventure's work could not have been the result of the situation within the Order. It is also not appropriate to refer to the *Major Life* as merely an edited version of earlier biographies. The arrangement of the materials shows that Bonaventure composed his work carefully, so that his understanding of the mystical ascent of the soul would be revealed in Francis's life. This is not to say that Bonaventure appropriated the biography of Francis for his own purposes. Instead, Bonaventure arranged his life of Francis to mirror the mystical journey to God, a path he certainly believed Francis to have traveled. As José de Vinck writes,

[Bonaventure] longed to perceive in full detail how Saint Francis ascended Mount Alverno. By the time he composed the *Legenda major*, he had acquired the understanding of these events from an inner vision, and thus was able to demonstrate grace at work in a soul completely open to it.⁶³

Conclusion

The ambiguities of Francis's life were undoubtedly problematic for the Franciscan Order. The various battles over the Franciscan ideal continued throughout Bonaventure's tenure as Minister General, and the life and teachings of Francis are still debated, both inside and outside the Order. For Thomas of Celano, Francis was a hero and prophet; for Julian of Speyer, he was also a moral example for the common people; for Bonaventure, his life was the embodiment of the mystical journey, and his ascent of Mount Alverno the most complete representation of the soul's journey to God. In Francis's life, Bonaventure found the most meaningful expression of the mystical ascent of the soul, and he used the *Major Life* to illustrate his understanding of the mystical journey.

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⁶³Bougerol, 20.