

Krijn Pansters

## *Imitatio imitacionis*

### In the Footsteps of the Imitation of Christ in Early Franciscan Texts

**Abstract:** Francis of Assisi (†1226) was not only a charismatic follower of Christ, but also an exemplary leader with many followers who were also followers of Christ. In the transition from his words to his Bible-based writings and in the transmission of these writings into new literary and spiritual contexts, we discern five exemplary ways of imitation: Francis as imitator of Christ, Francis as spiritual leader, literal imitation, shared imitation, and literary imitation. We also discern three historical processes: one of juridification, one of feminization, and one of spiritualization. In all five ways and all three processes, we see shifting political and spiritual interests at work. After Francis had laid down his main message in a rule and a testament, essential elements of these works resurged in Franciscan and papal documents that aimed to provide legal support to different religious groups and positions on the matter of true imitation. When Clare of Assisi cited the words of Francis in her own letters and rules, she not only stressed female elements in them but also explained their meaning to her own community in more suitable, viz., contemplative, terms. The multiple times that Bonaventure of Bagnoregio used Francis as an exemplar in his legal and spiritual treatises, he presented his deeds and words as those of a true spiritual imitator of Christ. This paper ventures on well-trodden paths, but its fresh perspective of key motifs in shifting contexts will hopefully open up the fairly complex literary process in which “Francis the lover of Christ” is continually echoed and the echo continually copied into new texts with different purposes, audiences, and backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Francis of Assisi, exemplarism, spirituality

## 1 Introduction

In 2019, it is exactly 900 years ago that saint Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) went to Egypt to visit sultan Malek Al-Kamil in order to preach the gospel.<sup>1</sup> In many places, people now celebrate this important event as groundbreaking and exceptional, usually framing it as an early form or even as the first example of interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Two of many examples may suffice to show what

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initiatives are taken to highlight this memorable meeting and to use it in a modern-day context. The first example is the two-day seminar of the Interfranziskanische Arbeitsgemeinschaft (Infag) “Franziskus und der Sultan – Dialog statt Hetze” in Zell am Main, 29–31 March 2019, whose poster has the following:

Entgegen der vor 800 Jahren vorherrschenden christlichen Meinung, Kreuzzüge als adäquates Mittel der Missionierung und der Befreiung des Hl. Landes zu sehen, setzte der heilige Franziskus 1219 bewusst ein Zeichen des Dialogs. [...] Wie begegnen wir ‚dem Fremden‘? [...] Im Grundlagenseminar 2019 betrachten wir – ausgehend von der historischen Begegnung – den Religions- und Kulturdialog heute in unterschiedlichsten Facetten und suchen nach unseren Möglichkeiten des Aufeinanderzugehens und Kennenlernens des Fremden. [...] Unter der Devise ‚Vom Streitgespräch zum Kulturdialog‘ soll es dann praktisch werden, inklusive verschiedener Exkursionsangebote mit Begegnungen mit Menschen aus unterschiedlichen religiösen und kulturellen Hintergründen.<sup>2</sup>

The second example is a learning module developed for schools in Belgium and the Netherlands, “Franciscus en de sultan, 800 jaar ontmoeting” (“Francis and the sultan, 800 years of meeting”), whose introduction states:

Francis set an example for his time. His action radically diverged from what the Zeitgeist demanded of him. Like sultan Malek Al-Kamil, he broke the chain of violence of his time in order to meet the other out of a desire for fraternity and peace. Our time, too, is marked by fear for the other, war, and terrorist attacks against innocent citizens, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. We need bridge-builders, people who reach out to ‘the other,’ often ‘the enemy.’ How can this historical meeting of Francis and the sultan of Egypt inspire us to that, today?<sup>3</sup>

These spiritually rich initiatives are generally poor in historical awareness. Their problem is *not* their religious or political motivation, but their historical claim

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1 As Francis states in his *Rule*, chapter 16 (on going among the infidels): “to acknowledge that they are Christians [...] to announce the Word of God [...] in order that [unbelievers] may believe in almighty God [...] and be baptized and become Christians because no one can enter the kingdom of God without being reborn of water and the Holy Spirit.” Two recent publications that are very clear about the purpose of Francis’ mission: Katharina HEYDEN, *Die legendäre Begegnung zwischen Franz von Assisi und Sultan Melek al-Kamil oder: Von der geschichtsprägenden Absicht in Geschichten*, in: *Mediaevistik* 31 (2018), pp. 203–229; Volker LEPPIN, *Franziskus von Assisi*, Darmstadt 2018, pp. 187–198.

2 <https://franziskaner.net/grundlagenseminar-franziskus-und-der-sultan/> (10.06.2019).

3 “Franciscus stelde een teken in de tijd. Hij deed iets radicaal anders dan wat de tijdsgeest hem influisterde. Net zoals sultan Malek Al-Kamil verbrak hij de spiraal van geweld waarin zijn tijd verweekeld was om de ander te ontmoeten vanuit een verlangen naar broederschap en vrede. Ook in onze tijd die getekend wordt door angst voor de andere, oorlog en terroristische aanslagen tegen onschuldige burgers, of ze nu joods, christelijk of moslim zijn, is er nood aan bruggenbouwers, aan mensen die ‘de andere’, soms ‘de vijand’ de hand reiken. Hoe kan deze historische ontmoeting van Franciscus met de sultan van Egypte ons vandaag de dag daartoe inspireren?” (<https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/franciscus-en-de-sultan/> (10.06.2019)).

(“ausgehend von der historischen Begegnung”; “this historical meeting”). Consequently, they promote forms of imitation that are, technically, false. It was Francis’ primary aim to convert the sultan to Christianity, albeit in a peaceful way that opposed the violence of the crusader and Muslim armies. Most modern-day followers of Francis, however, want peace, not conversion.<sup>4</sup> The misunderstanding is therefore not spiritual but historical: these genuine believers who rightly refer to the roots of their spiritual tradition ignore certain historical realities – facts established by scholarship – or use them rather selectively, happy to create or reproduce a narrative that ignores the complexity of the event. But is it not true that we, narrators who may also be imitators, have to try to tell the whole story in order to do justice to Francis and serve the truth? Exactly this is what makes the matter so very interesting: trying to tell the whole story is what almost never happens in the event of spiritual imitation, whether in 1219 or 1519 or 2019.<sup>5</sup> Imitational narrative constitutes, by its very nature, an interpretation of a selection: of gestures, of stories, of acts, of views. It captures the imitation of the *aspects* that draw a particular person or group to a particular person or text.

In this article, I will deal with the imitation of Francis of Assisi. The poor and powerful men and women who followed in his footsteps probably form one of the strongest and most striking traditions of spiritual imitation. Their stories, laid down in primary witness accounts of an exciting new “Rule and Life,”<sup>6</sup> also form a textbook case of selectivity, subjectivism, adaptation, and accentuation in imitational discourse. The early sources and documents are a wonderful playground for historians who are looking for a whole range of imitation-motifs. Although much has been written on Franciscan *imitatio*, both Francis’ imitation of Christ and the

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4 See, for example, Krijn PANSTERS and Jan SLOOT, *De Franciscaanse Beweging. Vijftig jaar in het spoor van Franciscus en Clara van Assisi*, Nijmegen 2015, *passim*. Four dimensions of modern Franciscan spirituality are identified in this book: Francis and Clare as source of spirituality; community as place of spirituality; social themes (ecology, poverty, peace); and individual spiritual development. Some Franciscan authors discuss Christian conversion *from within*, for example David B. COUTURIER, *The Four Conversions: A Spirituality of Transformation*, St. Bonaventure 2016.

5 Scholarly discourse and spiritual imitation come together in this year’s international conference “The Franciscan Legacy from the 13th Century to the 21st: Assessing the Continuing Significance of St Francis and Franciscan Traditions of Theology, Spirituality, and Action. An International Conference in Honour of the 800th Anniversary of St Francis’ Meeting with Sultan Malek Al-Kamil” in Durham, 5–7 November 2019.

6 Francis, *Rule 1,1* (Francis of Assisi, *Early Documents 1*, ed. Regis J. ARMSTRONG et al., New York et al. 1999, p. 100). Apart from the works of Francis (his *Rule*, *Admonitions* and *Testament*) and Clare (her *Rule*), I use the following selection of earliest sources: *Life of Francis* (1228–1229), *The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty* (b. 1238), *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* (1245–1247), *The Assisi Compilation* (b. 1260), and the relatively late *Life of Juniper* (included in manuscripts of the *Fioretti* (fourteenth century)). I furthermore use Jacques de Vitry’s *Letter* (1220) and *Historia Occidentalis* (c. 1225), the bull *Quo elongati* (1230), and the Franciscan *Constitutions of Narbonne* (1260).

followers' imitation of Francis and Christ,<sup>7</sup> nowhere have the different dimensions of early Franciscan imitation been studied together and in a systematic way, namely, as manifestations of Francis as imitator of Christ; Francis as spiritual example; literal imitation of Francis; shared imitation of Francis; literary imitation of Francis; and further Franciscan imitative uses (of fools, of Lady Poverty, and of Christ in the fraternity). With these, I have thus selected a number of exemplary ways of imitation – ways in which Francis becomes a spiritual example to the readers of these texts. I label them *imitatio imitationis* because, ultimately, they are all imitations of the primary form of imitation of going in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, in the way of earlier Christian imitators like the apostles and the saints.

## 2 Francis and Christ

The first exemplary way of imitation in the early sources concerns Francis as imitator of Christ – a recurring motif in early Franciscan hagiography. The earliest biographer, Thomas of Celano, writes in chapter 30 of his *Life of Francis* (1228–1229):

His highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest proposal was  
to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things,  
to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ  
and to retrace His footsteps completely  
with all vigilance and all zeal,  
all the desire of his soul  
and all the fervor of his heart.<sup>8</sup>

Another example is *The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty* (b. 1238), which calls Francis “the Savior’s true imitator and disciple” who “gave himself with all eagerness, all longing, all determination to searching for, finding,

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Malcolm D. LAMBERT, *Franciscan Poverty: The Doctrine of the Absolute Poverty of Christ and the Apostles in the Franciscan Order 1210–1323*, St. Bonaventure 1998, pp. 33–72; LEPPIN (note 1), pp. 247–251, 259–262, 287–291; Frank PETERS, *Aus Liebe zur Liebe. Der Glaubensweg des Menschen als Nachfolge Christi in der Spiritualität des hl. Franziskus von Assisi* (Veröffentlichungen der Johannes-Duns-Skotus-Akademie für franziskanische Geistesgeschichte und Spiritualität 6), Kevelaer 1995; André VAUCHEZ, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and the Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. Michael F. CUSATO, New Haven, London 2012, pp. 45–49; Sigismund VERHEY, *Der Mensch unter der Herrschaft Gottes. Versuch einer Theologie des Menschen nach dem hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, Düsseldorf 1960, pp. 81–106; Kenneth Baxter WOLF, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered*, Oxford 2003, 39–68. See furthermore note 48.

<sup>8</sup> ARMSTRONG (note 6), *Francis of Assisi* 1, p. 254.

and embracing holy poverty.”<sup>9</sup> Many more such parallels are drawn by the hagiographers between Francis and Christ, each with their own thematic focus.<sup>10</sup> The link is established by Francis himself: in his own actions (as recorded in the documents) and in his own writings, for example in chapter 6 of the *Admonitions*:

Let all of us, brothers, consider the Good Shepherd Who bore the suffering of the cross to save His sheep. The Lord’s sheep followed Him in tribulation and persecution, in shame and hunger, in weakness and temptation, and in other ways; and for these things they received eternal life from the Lord. Therefore, it is a great shame for us, the servants of God, that the saints have accomplished great things and we want only to receive glory and honor by recounting them.<sup>11</sup>

In his *Testament*, especially, Francis makes it very clear that Christ is the origin and foundation of his way of life:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. [...] And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. [...] And those who came to receive life gave whatever they had to the poor and were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and short trousers. We desired nothing more.<sup>12</sup>

Note three things here. First, Francis receives, passively, internal commands and directions from the Lord Jesus Christ (“The Lord gave me”), and he does, actively, as the Lord does (“I showed mercy”). Second, Francis’ imitation is most visible on the outside: in gestures, in giving, and in clothing. Third, Francis here also imitates in writing, by actually quoting from Sirach 35:4 (“Whoever shows mercy”) and referring, indirectly, to Tobit 1:3 (“I performed many acts of charity”).

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**9** ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 530. Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 2,162 has the following: “But in order to show himself in all things a true imitator (*imitatorem*) of Christ [...]” (Francis of Assisi, Early Documents 2, ed. Regis J. ARMSTRONG et al., New York et al. 1999, p. 386).

**10** The parallels are echoed in historiographical discourse, for example in Luke of Túy, *Against the Errors of the Albigensians* (1231–1234): “pious testimony is set forth that in the hands and feet of blessed Francis four marks of nails appeared in this soldier of Christ. These demonstrated his perfect victory over the struggle of the world and that by the sign of the four nails of our Lord’s Passion he was a imitator (*sequelam*) of his King, Jesus Christ” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 596).

**11** ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 131.

**12** ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, pp. 124–125.

### 3 Setting an Example

The second exemplary way of imitation in the sources concerns Francis as a spiritual leader. His leadership takes two forms: indicative and imperative.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, he is a leader who indicates by his own deeds and gestures what the brothers, his followers, should do. For example in chapter 53 of *The Assisi Compilation* (b. 1260):

One time when blessed Francis was at that same place, a certain brother, a spiritual man, an elder in religion, was staying there. He was very sick and weak. Considering him, blessed Francis was moved to piety toward him. The brothers back then, sick and healthy, with cheerfulness and patience took poverty for abundance. They did not take medicines in their illnesses, but more willingly did what was contrary to the body. Blessed Francis said to himself: 'If that brother would eat some ripe grapes early in the morning, I believe it would help him.' One day, therefore, he secretly got up early in the morning, and called that brother and took him into the vineyard which is near that same church. He chose a vine that had grapes that were good and ready for eating. Sitting down with that brother next to the vine, he began to eat some grapes so that the brother would not be ashamed to eat alone, and while they were eating them, that brother praised the Lord God. As long as he lived, he always recalled among the brothers, with great devotion and flowing tears, the mercy the holy father had done to him.<sup>14</sup>

This is indicative leadership: showing by deeds, and the rest will follow.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Francis is also a commander, viz., a leader who tells his brothers what to do. An example of his imperative leadership can be found in chapter 17 of Celano's *Life of Francis*:

The brothers at that time begged him to teach them how to pray, because, walking in simplicity of spirit, up to that time they did not know the Church's office. Francis told them: 'When you pray, say "Our Father" and "We adore you, O Christ, in all your churches throughout the whole world, and we bless you, for by your holy cross you have redeemed the world."' The brothers, devout disciples of their master, strove diligently to observe this. For they attempted to fulfill completely not only the things he told them as brotherly advice or fatherly commands, but even those things he thought or meditated upon, if they could know them by some indication. The blessed father told them that true obedience is not about just what is spoken but also about what is thought, not just what is commanded but what is desired, that is: 'If a brother subject

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<sup>13</sup> Krijn PANSTERS, Exemplarisch leiderschap, in: Willem Marie SPEELMAN (ed.), *Volg de liefde! Leiderschap in het licht van Franciscus en Clara van Assisi*, Utrecht 2019, pp. 31–47.

<sup>14</sup> ARMSTRONG (note 9), *Francis of Assisi* 2, p. 152.

<sup>15</sup> Another example is Celano, *Legend for Use in the Choir* 2: "He taught them to eliminate their vices, to repress urgings of the flesh, and to render their exterior senses insensitive to all things that clamor for attention. For as often as he himself felt the tickling of the flesh – as often happened – he used to immerse himself into a ditch filled with ice and snow. All of the others with him used to imitate this example (*exemplum imitantur*) of mortification" (ARMSTRONG (note 6), *Francis of Assisi* 1, p. 321).

to a prelate not only hears his words but understands his will, he should immediately ready himself fully for obedience, and do whatever by some sign he knows the other wants.<sup>16</sup>

This is all legal language: orders like “When you pray, say” and “If a brother, he should” indicate an imperative imitation, viz., a following in function of obedience. What precedes it is, again, indicative imitation: “even those things he thought or meditated upon, if they could know them by some indication”; “do whatever by some sign he knows the other wants.”

## 4 Literal Imitation

The third exemplary way of imitation in the sources is literal imitation. Most interesting is the example of one of the first brothers, John the Simple. In chapter 61 of the *Assisi Compilation* we read about this “man of amazing simplicity:”

So, whenever blessed Francis was in some church or in some other place to pray, he wanted to watch and observe him so that he could imitate all his gestures. If blessed Francis knelt, or joined his hands toward heaven, or spat, or coughed, he would do the same. With great joy, blessed Francis began to reprove him for these kinds of simplicity. But he answered: ‘Brother, I promised to do everything you do. Therefore I want to do everything you do.’<sup>17</sup>

Another imitator-brother is Juniper, who followed Francis not only blindly but also indiscriminately. Like Francis, he is also known as a ‘jester of the Lord.’ In his case, irony becomes the greatest teacher of true imitation, which should revolve around spiritual insight. Several illustrations of his imitational zeal can be found in the *The Life of Juniper*, a work often included in manuscripts of the *Fioretti* (fourteenth century), like this one in chapter 4:

Brother Juniper was so full of pity and compassion for the poor, that when he saw anyone poor or naked he immediately took off his tunic, or the hood of his cloak, and gave it to him. The guardian therefore laid an obedience upon him not to give away his tunic or any part of his habit. A few days afterwards, a poor half-naked man asked an alms of Brother Juniper for the love of God, who answered him with great compassion: ‘I have nothing which I could give thee but my tunic, and my superior has laid me under obedience not to give it, nor any part of my habit, to anyone. But if thou take it off my back I will not resist thee.’ He did not speak to a deaf

<sup>16</sup> ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 222.

<sup>17</sup> ARMSTRONG (note 9), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 164. Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 2,143 has the following: “The saint often proposed his life as worth imitating (*imitandam*) and merri-ly calling him not Brother John, but Saint John” (ARMSTRONG (note 9), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 369).

man; for the beggar forthwith stripped him of his tunic, and went off with it. When Brother Juniper returned home, and was asked what had become of his tunic, he replied: 'A good man took it off my back, and went away with it.' And as the virtue of compassion increased in him, he was not contented with giving his tunic, but would give books, or cloaks, or whatever he could lay his hands on, to the poor. For this reason the brethren took care to leave nothing in the common rooms of the convent, because Brother Juniper gave away everything for the love of God and to the glory of his name.<sup>18</sup>

This text, in all its display of naivety, was a great teaching tool in the time of its writing (and up until today). True imitation is not literal imitation without thinking (too literal imitation), but imitation combined with common sense. This message was well received in a time when the Franciscans were actually involved in a struggle to discern the direction of the Order: toward more literal or more mitigated forms of the life of poverty.

## 5 Shared Imitation

The third exemplary way of imitation in the sources is shared imitation. About this way we can be brief, as it essentially concerns the whole history of the Order from the very beginning. Franciscan religious have founding father Francis as their icon, exemplar, and patron. Each and everyone in their own way follow “his form, rule and teaching” and adopt his “norm of life” (him as a norm of life), as can be seen in chapter 15 of Celano’s *Life of Francis*:

Thanks and the voice of praise resounded everywhere, as many, casting aside earthly concerns, gained knowledge of themselves in the life and teaching of the most blessed father Francis and aspired to love and reverence for their Creator. Many people, well-born and lowly,

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**18** *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Arthur LIVINGSTONE, Grand Rapids 1930, p. 146. Cf. in modern Italian translation: “Tanta pietà avea alli poveri Frate Ginepro e compassione, che quando vedea alcuno che fusse vestito male o ignudo, di subito toglieva la sua tonica, o lo cappuccio della sua cappa, e davallo al così fatto povero: e però il Guardiano gli comandò per obbedienza ch’egli non desse a nessuno povero tutta la sua tonica, o parte del suo abito. Avvenne caso, che a pochi di passati scontrò uno povero quasi ignudo, domandando a Frate Ginepro limosina per lo amore di Dio; a cui con molta compassione disse: lo non ho ch’io ti possa dare, se non la tonica: ed ho dal mio Prelato per la obbedienza, che io non la posso dare a persone, nè parte dello abito: ma se tu me la cavi di dosso, io non ti contraddico. Non disse a sordo: che di subito cotesto povero gli cavò la tonica a rovescio, e vassene con essa, lasciando Frate Ginepro ignudo. E tornando al luogo e addomandato dove era la tonica, risponde: Una buona persona la mi cavò di dosso, e andossene con essa. E, crescendo in lui la virtù della pietà, non era contento di dare la sua tonica, ma dava e’ libri, paramenti e mantella, e ciò che gli veniva alle mani dava ai poveri. E per questa cagione li Frati non lasciavano le cose in pubblico, perocchè Frate Ginepro dava ogni cosa per l’amore di Dio, e a sua laude” (Fioretti di San Francesco, trans. Luigi LUZZATTI, Milano 1917, p. 197).

cleric and lay, driven by divine inspiration, began to come to Saint Francis, for they desired to serve under his constant training and leadership. All of these the holy one of God, like a fertile stream of heavenly grace, watered with showers of gifts and he adorned the field of their hearts with the flowers of perfection. He is without question an outstanding craftsman, for through his spreading message, the Church of Christ is being renewed in both sexes according to his form, rule and teaching, and there is victory for the [triple] army of those being saved. Furthermore, to all he gave a norm of life and to those of every rank he sincerely pointed out the way of salvation.<sup>19</sup>

There are multiple *imitatio*-aspects in this rich text. Spiritual imitation contains, among other things, thanks and praise; knowledge of oneself in the life and teaching of the father; aspiration and inspiration; a desire to serve under his constant training and leadership; grace and gifts; his form, rule, and teaching; a norm of life; and the way of salvation.<sup>20</sup> This complexity of the phenomenon of imitation, which connects knowledge with inspiration and desire with gift, we also find in many other Franciscan hagiographical texts. Responding to concrete circumstances such as spiritual and institutional changes in the Order, they focus again and again on the originary form (Francis) and the originary norm (his life).<sup>21</sup>

## 6 Literary Imitation

The fifth exemplary way of imitation in the sources is literary imitation. One example taken from the early Franciscan documents will show how imitation works in the case of the copying of central motifs, in particular through direct reference. It illustrates, on the one hand, the literary relationship between Francis and Clare as a reflection of their spiritual relationship, and, on the other hand, the reception of key

<sup>19</sup> ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 216.

<sup>20</sup> Other examples are given by Julian of Speyer, *The Divine Office of Saint Francis* 6: “Grant, that by imitating him (*ex eius imitatione*) we may look away from everything on earth, in order to enjoy forever sharing the gifts of heaven” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 330); Henri d’Avranches, *The Versified Life of Saint Francis* 5: “A man of discretion in Assisi sees the great man’s footmarks worth imitating (*imitanda*), and begins to shoulder poverty’s ignoble burden” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 461); Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 1,75: “Struck to the heart by what he saw, the priest cast off harmful delay, left the world and became a perfect imitator (*imitator*) of the man of God (2 Kgs 1:10)” (ARMSTRONG (note 9), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 320).

<sup>21</sup> On the relation between norm and form in the spiritual program of the Franciscan Order, see Krijn PANSTERS, Norm and Form: Virtues as Constituents of Identity in Medieval Religious Communities, in: M. BREITENSTEIN et al. (eds.), *Identität und Gemeinschaft. Vier Zugänge zu Eigengeschichten und Selbstbildern institutioneller Ordnungen (Vita regularis. Abhandlungen 67)*, Berlin 2016, pp. 99–124. See also Giorgio AGAMBEN, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam KOTSKO, Stanford 2013, pp. 60–61.

Christian-Franciscan formulations in the later documents. As medieval spiritual theologians, Francis and Clare use the Bible to explain their most fundamental views and to reassert the importance of their message.<sup>22</sup> When Francis speaks about the sublimity of the highest poverty, for instance, he speaks intensively ‘biblical,’ like in chapter 6 of his *Rule* of 1223:

Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, (1 Pt 2:11) serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made Himself poor in this world (2 Cor 8:9). This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue (Jac 2:5). Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living (Ps 142:6).<sup>23</sup>

No surprise here, as these are popular biblical passages. This franciscanized biblical speech, however, becomes female franciscan speech in chapter 8 of the *Rule* of Clare, written in 1253 (30 years after the *Rule* of Francis):

Let *the sisters* not appropriate anything to themselves, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all; instead, as pilgrims and strangers in this world (1 Pt 2:11) who serve the Lord in poverty and humility, let them confidently *send for* alms. Nor should they be ashamed, since the Lord made Himself poor in this world for us (2 Cor 8:9). This is that summit of the highest poverty which has established you, *my dearest sisters, heiresses and queens* of the kingdom of heaven; it has made you poor in things but exalted you in virtue (Jac 2:5). Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living (Ps. 142:6) [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup>

In multiple places, Clare literally repeats the words of Francis. In doing so, she seems to express her desire for full, literal, imitation, her aim to get as close as possible to her spiritual father also after his death, her will to be obedient in acting and writing. In those delicate places where the female form is absolutely required, however, different words are used but with substantially the same spiritual meaning. Words taken from Francis (including his borrowings from the Bible) now express the essence and destination of Franciscan sisterhood, viewed and lived in a typical biblical-franciscan way. Sisters, who cannot do without a house and a place and “anything at all,” now go “as pilgrims and strangers in this world” on a purely spiritual path, in the way of religious women (*peregrinae et advenae*). They cannot go seeking for alms (*vadant*) but need to send for alms (*mittant*). They cannot be heirs and kings (*heredes et reges*) of the Kingdom of Heaven but they are its heiress-

<sup>22</sup> See Krijn PANSTERS, *Spiritual Morality: The Religious Orders and the Virtues, 1050–1300*, unpublished dissertation, Louvain 2019, p. 191; Krijn PANSTERS, *Spirituele ethiek. Franciscaanse perspectieven*, Eindhoven 2017, pp. 78–87.

<sup>23</sup> ARMSTRONG, *Francis of Assisi* 1, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> Regis J. ARMSTRONG (ed.), *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, New York 2006, p. 119.

es and queens (*heredes et reginas*), like heirs and kings poor in things and exalted in virtue. Spiritual solutions like these, marking real imitational problems in the shift from male and itinerant to female and enclosed, reveal Clare's resolution to remain as close as possible to Francis and his way of life.

Pope Gregory IX already referred to the same passage in the *Rule* of Francis in his bull *Quo elongati*, issued in 1230 (seven years after the *Rule*):

Furthermore, the Rule clearly states that 'the brothers shall not appropriate anything as their own, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all.' But as time goes on the brothers fear that the poverty of the Order will be compromised, especially since some people have been maintaining that moveable property belongs to the brotherhood in common. And so in this matter also you have humbly requested us to give attention to these threats for the sake of your consciences and for the purity of the entire Order. Therefore, we decree that property may be possessed neither individually nor in common. However, the brotherhood may have the use of equipment or books and such other moveable property as is permitted, and that the individual brothers may use these things at the discretion of the general and provincial ministers. Dominion over places or houses is excepted; this is the right of those to whom you know they belong.<sup>25</sup>

In the use and explanation of the words of Francis, we see four fundamental changes between *regula* and *bullae*. First, a religious possibility (*nihil sibi appropriet*) becomes a juridical problem (*nichil sibi appropriet*). Second, the poverty of Christ (*paupertate Domino*) becomes the poverty of the Order (*ordinis paupertatem*). Third, the humility of Christ (*humilitate Domino*) become the humility of the brothers (*humiliter*). Fourth, seeking alms with confidence (*vadant pro eleemosyna confidenter*) becomes a humble request to the pope (*humiliter supplicatum*) – *supplicare* (to beg on one's knees) being the same word for seeking alms and making requests. Although not all changes concern the best way of imitating Francis directly, we can use contrasting passages like these in particular as a lens on real and difficult material and spiritual developments within the order from the moment of Francis' death in 1226, when discussions on the true nature of the Franciscan imitation of the imitation of Christ start. Essentially, these developments and discussions are one continuous commentary on Francis as a model and the biblical truths that he mirrors.<sup>26</sup> In 1253, 23 years after this bull, an

<sup>25</sup> ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 573.

<sup>26</sup> Not only 1 Pt 2:11, 2 Cor 8:9, Jac 2:5 and Ps 142:6 in chapter 6 of the *Rule*, but also the amalgam of synoptic texts that had been Francis' initial inspiration: "Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts, no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep" (Mt 10:9–10); "He told them: 'Take nothing for the journey – no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt'" (Lk 9:3); "They went out and preached that people should repent" (Mk 6:12). To these texts come the three texts that the first brothers found in answer to their prayer (*Anonymus Perusinus* 11): "Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me'" (Mt 19:21); "Then

independent and courageous Clare of Assisi returns to the literal spiritual text of Francis, quite literally ignoring the developments and discussions among his male followers.<sup>27</sup>

The juridification of the Franciscan charism continues, however, under General Minister Bonaventure. Chapter 3 of the *Constitutions of Narbonne* of 1260, composed under his direction, deals with the same matter in equally juridical but more spiritual terms:

Since according to the Rule ‘the brothers should appropriate nothing for themselves,’ we ordain that the brothers not take any one to court, either on their own or on another’s behalf, over any temporal thing or injury, so that in all things the purity ‘of the highest poverty’ might be observed.<sup>28</sup>

Here, like in the papal bull, Francis’ “most exalted poverty” (*altissima paupertas*) becomes associated with purity. But whereas Pope Gregory IX means the purity of the entire Order (*totius ordinis puritati*), Bonaventure means the purity of the highest poverty (*puritas altissimae paupertatis*) itself! Our main imitational category of “being poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue” (*pauperes rebus fecit, virtutibus sublimavit*) is now a sign of authentic spirituality in the context of internal obedience.

## 7 Further Uses

These and more examples show in which ways Franciscan imitation is itinerant itself, always appearing in a form that fits (and confounds) the current context.<sup>29</sup> The

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Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’” (Mt 16:24); “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26). See PANSTERS (note 22), p. 33; William J. SHORT, *The Rule and Life of the Friars Minor*, in: Michael J. P. ROBSON (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 50–67 (54–55).

**27** On the developments and discussions around her own way of life, see Bert ROEST, *The Rules of Poor Clares and Minoresses*, in: Krijn PANSTERS (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Rules and Customaries* (Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 93), Leiden, Boston 2020, pp. 315–342.

**28** Writings Concerning the Franciscan Order, trans. Dominic V. MONTI (Works of St. Bonaventure 5), St. Bonaventure 1994, p. 88.

**29** I take the word “confound” from Francis’ *Salutation of the Virtues*: “Holy Poverty confounds the desire for riches, greed, and the cares of this world” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 165). This in order to show that with every reproduction/reformulation comes discussion, contention, and friction.

term imitation is furthermore used in three other meanings.<sup>30</sup> First, Francis “became an imitator of those whom the Jewish leaders considered ignorant and without learning” after his conversion.<sup>31</sup> Second, Lady Poverty herself invites the brothers to imitate her. Some of them, however, question her good intentions: “she wants to seduce us into imitating her. She is miserable and wants us to be miserable with her.”<sup>32</sup> Third, the imitation of Christ remains central also for the Franciscan brothers themselves. This is shown in chapter 11 of the first book of Celano’s *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* (1245–1247), where it is told that Francis tells the Pope a parable about a poor woman and a king:

Francis himself was this woman, not because he was soft in his deeds, but because he was fruitful and bore many children. The desert was the world, which was then wild and sterile, with no teaching of virtue. The many beautiful children were the large number of brothers, clothed with every virtue. The king was the Son of God, whom they resemble by their holy poverty. They were fed from the king’s table, refusing to be ashamed of their lowliness, when, in imitation of Christ, they were content to live on alms and realized that because of the world’s contempt they would be blessed.<sup>33</sup>

Does the fact that Francis bares many children mean that he “imitates” a woman? Regardless of the answer, the brothers are the children of Francis, clothed, like father, like son, with every virtue.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, they resemble Christ, whom they imitate by their holy poverty.<sup>35</sup>

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**30** Related terms used are: example, following, footsteps/footmarks, image, likeness, mirror, model, and resemblance. See, for example, *The Assisi Compilation* 41: “Zeal for souls, which filled him completely, made him want his sons to resemble him as a true likeness (*sibi filios vera similitudine respondere*)” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 144).

**31** Celano, *Life of Francis* 10 (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 204). Before his conversion, Francis was “a zealous imitator (*aemulator*) of foolishness” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 183).

**32** ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 543. See also in another chapter: “I surely want each one of you to become an imitator of the holy ones (*sanctorum imitatore*) who have inherited me in faith and in patience” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 549). Other virtues can also be “imitated,” for example in chapter 103 of the *Assisi Compilation*: “but wanted and preached to the brothers to be eager to have and imitate (*imitari*) pure and holy simplicity” (ARMSTRONG (note 9), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 207).

**33** ARMSTRONG (note 9), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 255–256. Another example is *Fregit Victor* 6 (sometimes attributed to Celano): “Tell us, tell us why, O Francis – To the cross why were you fastened? – In that this world abdicating – And the Cross by imitating, – Of Christ’s life I was conveyor” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 358).

**34** Cf. Francis’ imitation of the life of his parents in chapter 1 of Celano’s *Life of Francis*: “And by long imitating (*imitatus*) their worthless life and character he himself was made more vain and arrogant” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 182). The imitation of the bad example goes back to Adam, for example in *The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty*: “The miserable one believed the evil counselor. He agreed, consented and, oblivious of God his creator

## 8 Conclusion

Hagiographical narrators are imitators who “ignore certain historical realities or use them rather selectively, happy to create or reproduce a narrative that ignores the complexity of the event.”<sup>36</sup> They “tell only a few things, to be imitated by posterity,”<sup>37</sup> giving spiritually meaningful interpretations of (aspects worth following in) a selection of gestures, stories, acts, and views.<sup>38</sup> But what about modern medievalists, who do “try to tell the whole story in order to do justice to Francis and serve the truth”?<sup>39</sup> In a way, many of them resemble the medieval chronicler and theologian Jacques de Vitry, for whom description and admiration go together perfectly. In one of his letters (1220), the canon regular states that the Order of Lesser Brothers “expressly imitates the pattern of the primitive Church and the life of the apostles in everything.”<sup>40</sup> In his *Historia Occidentalis* (c. 1225), he calls the Order “a religious way of life which should be admired and imitated.”<sup>41</sup> In the same vein, the famous Franciscan historian Kajetan ESSER, who published important historical studies like *Anfänge und ursprüngliche Zielsetzungen des Ordens der Minderbrüder*<sup>42</sup> and *Die*

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(Dt 32:18), imitated (*imitatus est*) the first transgressor” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 538).

35 In Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 2,117, the Lord also speaks to Francis about his followers: “I have entrusted this to you, a simple man, so that the things that I work in you for others to imitate (*imitanda*) may be followed by those who want to follow” (ARMSTRONG (note 9), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 349).

36 See above, Introduction. The hagiographer “wishes to demonstrate to his faithful public the divine origin of the saint’s actions and the imitable aspects of his holiness” (Krijn PANSTERS, *Dreams in Medieval Saints’ Lives: Saint Francis of Assisi*, in: *Dreaming* 19 (2009), pp. 55–63 [62]).

37 Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 2,61 (ARMSTRONG (note 9), Francis of Assisi 2, p. 308).

38 See, for example, LEPPIN (note 1), p. 16: “der Erinnerungsauftrag [to Celano] diente nicht der Klärung der Vergangenheit, sondern der Orientierung in der Gegenwart. So liest sich diese zweite Vita über weite Strecken geradezu wie ein Kommentar zur gültigen Regel der Franziskaner: Der Franziskus der zweiten Vita lebt vor, wie diese zu erfüllen ist.” Leppin refers to the “perspective” of the biographers and the “fantasy” of their contemporaries (p. 23).

39 See above, Introduction. I am not discussing here the related issue of fragmentary sources: modern biography, too, “schafft so gesehen eine Konstruktion von Sinn aus den Fragmenten” (LEPPIN (note 1), p. 23).

40 Jacques de Vitry, *Letter* 6 (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 580). See also his *Historia Occidentalis* 4: “thus imitating (*imitantes*) more explicitly the life of the apostles” (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 582).

41 Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Occidentalis* 16 (ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, p. 585).

42 Kajetan ESSER, *Anfänge und ursprüngliche Zielsetzungen des Ordens der Minderbrüder* (Studia et documenta Franciscana 4), Leiden 1966.

*Opuscula*<sup>43</sup> alongside theological bestsellers like *Der Orden des heiligen Franziskus. Seine geistige Gestalt und seine Aufgabe im Reiche Gottes*<sup>44</sup> and *Antwort der Liebe. Der Weg des franziskanischen Menschen zu Gott*,<sup>45</sup> writes in the foreword to the latter:

In diesem Sinn wird hier der Versuch gewagt, den Weg des franziskanischen Menschen zu Gott darzustellen. Unser Versuch möchte aufweisen, wie solche ‚Askese‘ als dankbare Antwort auf Gottes Liebe sich in der Geistigkeit des hl. Franziskus ausgestaltet und entfaltet. Damit soll allen, die sich dem Geist des Heiligen von Assisi verbunden wissen, ein Weg gewiesen sein, den zu gehen ihr besonderer Auftrag in der Kirche ist.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly devotion-driven and fitting in the time of the book’s appearance (1958–1967), ESSER’s central *Anliegen* is Franciscan imitation through presentation (*aufweisen*) and edification (*weisen*).<sup>47</sup>

Nowadays, the history of spiritual imitation is the domain of all kinds of scholars: historians, theologians, educational scientists, and so forth.<sup>48</sup> In the study of medieval theological traditions especially, a certain tension between historical reconstruction and contemporary retrieval remains unresolved.<sup>49</sup> Some scholars are clearly presenters of medieval ideas, committed to offering heuristic strategies and hermeneutical tools for understanding, for example, spiritual journeys or moral

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**43** Die *Opuscula* des hl. Franziskus von Assisi, ed. Kajetan ESSER and Engelbert GRAU (Neue textkritische Edition. Spicilegium Bonaventurianum 13), 2nd ed. Grottaferrata 1989.

**44** Kajetan ESSER, *Der Orden des heiligen Franziskus. Seine geistige Gestalt und seine Aufgabe im Reiche Gottes*, 2nd ed. Werl 1952.

**45** Kajetan ESSER and Engelbert GRAU, *Antwort der Liebe. Der Weg des franziskanischen Menschen zu Gott* (Bücher franziskanischer Geistigkeit 3), 3rd ed. Werl, 1967.

**46** ESSER (note 45), p. 7.

**47** See PANSTERS (note 22), p. 60. Two more examples: Klaus HEMMERLE, *Theologie als Nachfolge. Bonaventura – ein Weg für heute*, Freiburg et al. 1975; Peter MORANT, *Unser Weg zu Gott. Das Vollkommenheitsstreben im Geiste des hl. Franziskus* (Franziskanische Lebenswerte 6), Zürich et al. 1965.

**48** See, for example, Giles CONSTABLE, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought: The Interpretation of Mary and Martha. The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ. The Orders of Society*, Cambridge 1995; Hans Jürgen MILCHNER, *Nachfolge Jesu und Imitatio Christi. Die theologische Entfaltung der Nachfolgethematik seit den Anfängen der Christenheit bis in die Zeit der devotio moderna – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung religionspädagogischer Ansätze* (Religionspädagogische Kontexte und Konzepte 11), Münster 2004.

**49** See PANSTERS (note 22), pp. 201–202; Krijn PANSTERS, review of Michael F. CUSATO, Timothy J. JOHNSON and Steven J. MCMICHAEL (eds.), *Ordo et Sanctitas: The Franciscan Spiritual Journey in Theology and Hagiography. Essays in Honor of J. A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv.* (The Medieval Franciscans 15), Leiden, Boston 2017, in: *Speculum* 94 (2019), pp. 826–827. On the meaning of the term retrieval, see Keith D. WARNER, *Retrieving Franciscan Philosophy for Social Engagement*, in: *The Cord* 62 (2012), pp. 401–421; Keith D. WARNER, *The Retrieval of a Distinctly Franciscan Spirituality and Intellectual Tradition*, <https://stfrancis.clas.asu.edu/article/retrieval-distinctly-franciscan-spirituality-and-intellectual-tradition> (16.06.2019).

visions. Others are more defenders of those traditional positions, promoters of ‘the Christocentric nature of all knowledge’ or even critics of the weaknesses in a medieval author’s ‘continually relevant’ theology. Like their medieval predecessors, these scholars do not hesitate to connect the professional with the personal, cognition with affection, and learning with love. By their interpretations and reimaginings, they demonstrate how these theological texts can be read in the historical context as well as in the context of prayer and meditation. Maybe, however, modern-day medievalists still have not sufficiently answered the question to what extent the utilization of medieval knowledge and the exchange with society at large is truly worth pursuing.<sup>50</sup>

In the case of Franciscan imitation and imagination, it has often been suggested that this tradition offers an exemplary way conducive to social equality and justice, spiritual vitality, integrity and virtue, and the like.<sup>51</sup> Should our imitational texts be made fruitful within the problem-driven framework of contemporary society, then two things always have to be taken into consideration: bias and background. On the one hand, both the medieval authors (being narrator-imitators) and the modern interpreters (including narrator-imitators) have their own approaches and agendas, informed by the frames of their preference and the formats of their field.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, both groups take part in distinctive normative discourses.<sup>53</sup> Due to these personal and structural variables, the faces of Francis are principally as manifold as those of his many followers. Let us therefore return, by way of conclusion, to the simplicity of the Franciscan way of Gospel life and ask ourselves: who would not want to be like Celano’s Francis, who appeared so gloriously

in innocence of life, in simplicity of words, in purity of heart, in love of God, in fraternal charity, in enthusiastic obedience, in agreeable compliance, in angelic appearance, [f]riendly in

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**50** I mean by way of a critical, bias-resistant, value-seeking, interdisciplinary theory independent of a dogmatic framework and the subjectivity surplus of previous generations. I would also like to draw attention to two conferences of the Internationale Gesellschaft für Theologische Mediävistik (IGTM) that dealt (indirectly) with this matter: “Aktualität der Theologie des Mittelalters” (Freiburg, 2000) and “Aufgabe und Selbstverständnis theologischer Mediävistik” (Trier, 2010).

**51** See Krijn PANSTERS, *Franciscan Virtue: Spiritual Growth and the Virtues in Franciscan Literature and Instruction of the Thirteenth Century* (Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 161), Leiden 2012, pp. 199–200 for a critical reflection. See also PANSTERS (note 22), pp. 222–227 (“A Lesser Ethics – Concern for the Common Good”) for a project proposal with a Franciscan focus on moral integrity.

**52** PANSTERS (note 22), p. 193.

**53** See for the Middle Ages: Berndt HAMM, *Von der spätmittelalterlichen reformatio zur Reformatio: der Prozeß normativer Zentrierung von Religion und Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 84 (1993), pp. 7–82; Doris RUHE and Karl-Heinz SPIESS (eds.), *Prozesse der Normbildung und Normveränderung im mittelalterlichen Europa*, Stuttgart 2000. See for modernity: Rainer FORST and Klaus GÜNTHER (eds.), *Die Herausbildung normativer Ordnungen. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, *Normative Orders* 1, Frankfurt a. M. 2011; Niklas LUHMANN, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt a. M. 1984, esp. p. 445.

behavior, serene in nature, affable in speech, generous in encouragement, faithful in commitment, prudent in advice, efficient in endeavor, [...] gracious in everything, [t]ranquil in mind, pleasant in disposition, sober in spirit, lifted in contemplation, tireless in prayer, [...] fervent in everything, [f]irm in purpose, consistent in virtue, persevering in grace, [...] the same in everything, [s]wift to forgive, slow to grow angry, free in nature, remarkable in memory, subtle in discussing, careful in choices, [...] simple in everything, [s]trict with himself, kind with others, [...] discerning in everything!<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> ARMSTRONG (note 6), Francis of Assisi 1, pp. 252–253. See Krijn PANSTERS, Franciscan Virtue Ethics, in: *Franciscan Connections/The Cord* 68 (2018), pp. 22–26 (25).

