

**MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY "1 DECEMBER 1918" ALBA IULIA  
Doctoral School of Theology**

**SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND EASTERN  
SPIRITUALITY. NOTES, COMMENTS AND  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

**SUMMARY**

**PhD supervisor:**

**Rev. Prof. Habil. Nicu DUMITRAȘCU, PhD**

**Author,**

**Rev. Liviu Octavian MARINA FIȚ, PhD**

**Alba Iulia**

**2019**

# CONTENT

<b>Introduction.....</b>	
<b>1. The Western Church at the beginning of the thirteenth century.....</b>	
1.1. Short history; the pontificate of Pope Innocent the III <sup>rd</sup> .....	
1.1.1. Caring for the Crusade.....	
1.1.2. Extermination of heresy.....	
1.1.3. The Reformation of the Church and the Roman Curia.....	
1.1.4. Council of the Lateran IV (November 1215).....	
1.2. Monastic life at the birth of Saint Francis of Assisi.....	
1.2.1. Benedictine rule and its influence until the thirteenth century.....	
1.2.2. The Carthusians.....	
1.2.3. The Camaldolese.....	
1.2.4. The Cistercians.....	
1.2.5. Stefano of Muret and Grandmont order.....	
1.3. Conclusions.....	
<b>2. Saint Francis of Assisi.....</b>	
2.1. A brief presentation of Saint Francis' life.....	
2.2. The writings of Saint Francis.....	
2.2.1. Rules and exhortations.....	
2.2.2. Other writings of Saint Francis.....	
2.3. Conclusions.....	
<b>3. The Franciscan Rule and the Pachomian and Basilian Rules .....</b>	
3.1. The beginnings of monastic rules.....	
3.2. The Rule of Saint Pachomius the Great.....	
3.2.1. The Life of Saint Pachomius the Great.....	
3.2.2. Considerations on the monastic rule of Saint Pachomius the Great.....	
3.3. The rule of Saint Basil the Great.....	
3.4. The Franciscan Rule.....	
3.5. Conclusions.....	
<b>4. The ecumenical dimension of Franciscan spirituality .....</b>	
4.1. Relationships with non-Christians and non-Catholics.....	
4.1.1. Relationship of Franciscanism with Islam.....	
4.1.2. Relationship of Franciscanism with Protestantism.....	
4.1.3. Relationship of Franciscanism with Orthodoxy.....	
4.2. Pan-cosmic vision of Saint Francis.....	

4.3. Orthodox vision of creation at the Holy Fathers.....	
4.4. Conclusions.....	
<b>5. The social dimension of Franciscan spirituality.....</b>	
5.1. Poverty assumed voluntarily.....	
5.2. Vision on the disease.....	
5.3. The True joy.....	
5.4. Conclusions.....	
<b>6. An ever-present theological challenge: the issue of stigma.....</b>	
6.1. Preliminaries. The Stigmata of St. Francis.....	
6.2. Evolution of the phenomenon of stigma over time.....	
6.3. The vision of Orthodox theology towards the phenomenon of stigma...	
6.4. Conclusions.....	
<b>7. The Hesychast Movement and the Franciscan Spirituality.....</b>	
7.1. General aspects of the hesychast concept.....	
7.2. Prominent representatives of the hesychasm between X - XIII century.	
7.2.1. Saint Simon the New Theologian (949 - 1022).....	
7.2.2. Pious Nechifor from loneliness (1215 - 1290).....	
7.2.3. Saint Gregory the Sinaite (1255 - 1346).....	
7.2.4. Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359).....	
7.3. The Franciscan Spirituality.....	
7.3.1. Uninterrupted prayer.....	
7.3.2. The prayer that "sees" God.....	
7.3.3. Short and repeated prayer.....	
7.3.4. The prayer of regret.....	
7.3.5. The Prayer of the Name of Jesus.....	
7.3.6. Prayer of peace (Hesychast).....	
7.3.7. The divine light, the gift of the prayer.....	
7.4. Conclusions.....	
<b>8. The Personality and Influence of Saint Francis. The Franciscan Life Model...</b>	
8.1. The reception of Saint Francis in the minor order and in the Western society.....	
8.2. The reception of Saint Francis by the Protestants.....	
8.3. Dialogue between Franciscanism and the cultures of non-Christian religions.....	
8.3.1. Dialogue between Franciscanism and Mosaicism.....	
8.3.2. Dialogue between Franciscanism and Islam.....	
8.3.3. Dialogue between Franciscanism and Buddhism.....	

8.3.4. Dialogue between Franciscanism and Hinduism.....	
8.4. The reception of the personality of Saint Francis in the Eastern Theological Culture.....	
8.4.1. The Reception in the Romanian Theological Culture.....	
8.5. Conclusions.....	
<b>General conclusions.....</b>	
<b>Bibliographical references.....</b>	

My PhD thesis, entitled *Saint Francis of Assisi and Eastern spirituality. Notes, comments and comparative analysis*, is a synthetic work aimed at presenting the life and personality of the most famous Western saint of the Middle Ages viewed from the point of similarity with the Orthodox spirituality.

The work is divided into eight chapters preceded by introduction and followed by conclusions and bibliographical references.

*In the introductory part* I wrote about the possibility of using the ‘saint’ word for a believer of the Catholic Church who was distinguished by an exemplary life, recalling both the decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Synod of Crete on June 16-26, 2016, and the mutual vision that The Westerners have to the Orthodox Church.

Although there are many works and studies about Saint Francis of Assisi in the Western world, we believe it is important that the greatest saint of the Catholic Church after the Great Schism be made known to the Romanian Orthodox environment, not only in what life meant, his written work, but also the convergence points with Oriental Christian spirituality.

Regarding the state of research into the relationship between Saint Francis and Eastern spirituality, two important books have been written so far, both of which come from the Catholic environment. The first belongs to the Catholic archbishop of Corfu, Yannis Spiteris, and treats the consistency of spirituality and doctrines between Saint Francis and the Orthodox world, insisting more on the testimonies of Greek culture and theology<sup>1</sup>. The second, published in 2007, is the author of the director of the Assisi Center for Ecumenism, the Romanian Franciscan brother Silvestru Bejan, completing the similarities between Saint Francis and the Orthodox world with testimonies from the Russian Orthodox Churches and Romanian, alongside the re-evaluation of Greek testimonies<sup>2</sup>.

**The first chapter** looks at the context of the Western Church at the beginning of the 13th century, examining both the pontificate and the personality of Pope Innocent the III<sup>rd</sup> (1198-1216) and the monastic life of that period.

Thus, in connection with the work of Pope Innocent the III<sup>rd</sup>, I first emphasized the special care that he had for the liberation of Jerusalem and the territories of the Holy Land conquered by Saladin in 1187, which led to the support of the idea of the crusade against the Muslims (the fourth crusade of 1202 - 1204).

---

<sup>1</sup> Yannis SPITERIS, *Francis and the Christian East. A comparison* (Rome: Cappuccini Historical Institute Edition, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Silvestro BEJAN, *Saint Francis of Assisi in the rewriting of some Orthodox circles* (Padua: Edizioni Messaggero, 2007).

On the other hand, the Pope's concern was directed to the extermination of heresy (the Cathar and the Waldensians movement), which found numerous followers, especially among the simple believers. It has come so far that a very bloody crusade (the Albigensian crusade of 1209) was triggered against them.

Under these circumstances, and because the general moral status of the clergy and believers was not at very high standards, Pope Innocent the III<sup>rd</sup> wanted, through the Fourth Council of the Lateran (November 1215), to reform the Catholic Church and the Roman Curia.

The monastic life at the birth of Saint Francis was characterized by the presence of several monastic orders, all of which blended the oldest Western monastic rules: the Augustinian rule and the Benedictine rule. The most well-known orders were: the Carthusians, the Camaldolians, and the Cistercians. In this context, Saint Francis does not want to create a new monastic order but to apply to the masses of believers the principles of Christian life that result from living the Gospel.

**The second chapter** presents the biography of Saint Francis, starting from the information contained in the first works written in this respect, those of Tommaso da Celano (*Vita Prima di San Francesco d'Assisi and Vita Seconda di San Francesco d'Assisi*) and San Bonaventura da Bagnoregio (*Leggenda maggiore*), completing them with details in other works included in the volume *Fonti Francescane* (especially Sezione seconda - Biografie di Francesco d'Assisi).

The 44 years of the life of Saint Francis (1181/1182 - 03 October 1226) creates the painting of a character who moves from a life characterized by commerce, money, entertainment, and the desire of chivalrous affirmation to another, profoundly spiritual and missionary at the same time. From the emblematic moments of Assisi's 'Poor' mission, which preaches the repentance of all Christians, we mention: the kiss offered to a leper, the sermon of the birds, the Gubbio wolf, the meeting with the sultan Melek-al-Kamel of Egypt, the Greccio presets, the stigmata on Mount Verna.

In the same chapter, I also mentioned the writings of Saint Francis, which can be grouped into three categories: prayers and exhortations; letters; praises and prayers. From the last category belongs also the most famous work of the saint: *The Song of the Creatures* or *The Song of the Brother Sun*.

**The third chapter** confronts the Franciscan rule with the oriental monastic rules of Saint Pachomius the Great and Saint Basil the Great.

The three monastic rules analyzed, even though they were written in various periods of Christian history and in totally different cultural-religious and socio-political contexts, still

share several ideas, namely: they are based on the Holy Gospel and Scripture, emphasizes the importance of the three monastic votes (poverty, obedience and virginity), talks about how the brothers can be received at the monastery, makes references to the practice of virtues, to work manually and to other works considered worthy of the monk, of nuns as well as of those in the world.

Regarding the monastic rule of Saint Francis we retain the three stages of his crystallization, with the modification of the normative text originally born of the spiritual experience of the Saint, reinforced by the scriptural text, but formally approved in a more legal form in the variant the papal bull "Solet annuere" of November 29, 1223.

The rule of Saint Francis, as well as Oriental ones, treats the life of the brother (or monk) as being lived within the Church. That is why these rules do not replace the Sacred Scripture or the Tradition of the Church, but they apply their principles to the life shared by those believers who wish to worship their entire existence with God. The expression of the Savior, "My words are spirit and life" (John 6:63) must also be applied to the text of the monastic rules in the sense that their content should not be limited to the semantic envelope but be a much deeper, spiritual and guiding one life. This desideratum remains as it is today, as it was in the Middle Ages, with the mention that each epoch is called to spiritually transform the reality that is specific to its own period of life: as the word of God always remains, so the monastic rules keeps its current news constantly.

Although the monastic rules are divided into several articles or paragraphs, for a correct understanding of them, we must have a unitary vision of the message they send out of the words of life they give us with reference to the Kingdom of God.

Even if Saint Francis was not a man of great culture, we can assume that he was aware of the Rules of Saint Basil the Great directly through their Latin version of Rufin, or indirectly through his main ideas transmitted by Saint John Cassian and even by Saint Benedict of Nursia.

The one who claimed for the first time the influence of Saint Basil the Great in the Franciscan Rule was Angelo Clareno, the main exponent of the spiritual Franciscans, exiled for a long time in Greece. In his work, *Expositio super Regulam Fratrum Minorum*, he quotes very often Saint Basil the Great, putting it in analogy with Saint Francis: in explaining the term "minores", in connection with evangelical counseling (especially poverty), in prudence with which the brothers must be accepted in the monastery, in reporting to work, in explaining the chemotic way of life, in serving the superior of the monastery, in framing and correcting the brethren, in the relations of the brethren with the monks' nunnery.

**The fourth chapter** is dedicated to the ecumenical dimension of the Franciscan spirituality and the pan-cosmic vision of Saint Francis.

The ecumenical side of Francis' personality is first of all seen in the fact that he was the first Christian missionary since the fall of Jerusalem in 1187, who was preoccupied with the preaching of the word of the Gospel in Islam as well, showing deep love that characterize and excite him to wish his conversion to evangelical truth. Even if personally arrived once in Islamic territories, the concern for these areas was manifested by the permanent sending of brothers as Christian missionaries when they felt God's call for such obedience.

The evangelical conversion of Saint Francis determined the opening of his soul to all people, regardless of religion, allowing them to see in all fellow Christians smaller brethren. Convinced that one is the Father in Heaven, just as one is the Master, Jesus Christ, and we are all brothers, Saint Francis always presented himself as a "brother" and received them all, without distinction, as "brothers". This optic of universal brotherhood, founded on the paternity of God and Christ, nurtured in the soul of the 'Poor' a profound respect for man and through man toward to all creation. His brotherly love extended not only to men, created by God in the image of His Son and to His soul likeness, but also to the animals and all the creatures he called the "brother" and "sister".

The explanation of this way of reporting to creatures must be sought in the profound soul change of Saint Francis (metanoia) according to the spirit of the Gospel, which made him a free man. Thus, for him the creation is freed from the bondage of corruption and becomes capable of expressing God's plan itself (Romans 8, 19-21), Saint Francis being able to recognize in all that surrounds the purpose of divine creation and to see in all creatures, brothers and sisters to respect, love and associate with themselves in the song of God's praise.

The profound connections with the Orthodox theology, as evidenced by the writings of Saint Francis and some moments in his biography (the call to God's ministry as a result of the obedience of an evangelical pericope, the way of living of the minors brothers with a focus on prayer, reporting to work, similar behaviors "fools to Christ") complements the ecumenical side of Franciscan spirituality.

Regarding the similarities between the pan-cosmic vision of Saint Francis and the Oriental spirituality expressed through the life and thought of the Orthodox saints (Saint Basil the Great, Saint John of Damascus, Saint Isaac Sir, Saint Sergey of Radonj, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, Saint Siluan Athonite) we can say that we are talking about understandings and manifestations in different historical epochs of the same common tradition of the Church. Especially for non-Christian religions, Saint Francis's relationship with the animal world is a central point of his personality.



**The fifth chapter** describes the social dimension of Franciscan spirituality and deals with three related issues: poverty, sickness and true joy.

From the life of Saint Francis we understand that for a faithful following of Christ, the Christian must assume a state of poverty understood not only as evangelistic counsel addressed to a small number of people but as a cardinal point for anyone who wants to join the minor brothers and live with them. The weight of assuming the condition of poverty has been seen early on even amongst his disciples, that is why, through the *Testament*, Saint Francis tries to remove any wrong interpretation of the *branded Rule* that would justify possession of material goods and receiving favors from church authority. The nickname of the 'Poor' from Assisi remains as a testimony to the fact that for both his contemporaries and posterity, Saint Francis was understood mainly through the prism of this quality that he embodied in excellence in his life.

In close connection with poverty and as a perfect assumption of it, we must also understand the vision of Saint Francis on the disease, accepted as a means of purifying life and approaching God. As one for whom the disease has been a constant of life, especially after the conversion, Saint Francis speaks of pain and suffering from his own experience every day, and therefore his teaching on this subject must be assumed with even greater consideration. The disease, accepted with faith in the care of God, may represent a way for the Christian to follow the equivalent of martyrs.

Both poverty and illness in the "spirit" of Saint Francis converge to "true joy", which not only is not troubled by temptations and humiliation but manages to accept everything in love of God and people, with the belief that "love does not never falls" (I Corinthians 13: 8).

**The sixth chapter** refers to a very delicate aspect of Saint Francis' life, that of receiving the stigma on Mount Verna on September 14, 1224.

This was somewhat criticized by the fact that the first mention of Saint Francis' stigma is only found in the letter sent by Brother Elia to notify the minor brethren about the 'Poor' moving to the eternal. Also, no mention of stigma is mentioned in the canonization document, but only later. The analysis of the historical evolution of this event in the tradition of the minor brethren and the Catholic Church in general, as well as the various Western and Oriental theological views, support the idea that we are faced with a very difficult subject that has, from the very beginning, very different opinions.

Abstracted from the more radical views on this phenomenon, for and against, we believe that the signs of the wounds of Christ imprinted on the body of Saint Francis, commonly known as "stigmata", are precisely the recognition and validation of the divine mission that the 'Poor' from Assisi received it from the incarnate Son of God, to confess Him

even by following the traces of His sufferings. Indeed, in the West, deification is also understood as the identification of man with Christ, which fades, the stigmata of Saint Francis being rooted in his courageous cult of the Holy Cross and in the desire to participate personally to the sufferings of Christ.

In the Orthodox tradition we have no examples of stigmatized saints. There are, however, some situations that could be interpreted as presentations of the glorified Lord's "taboric light" that preserves the signs of His passions even in glory, as says Nicolae Cabasila and Saint Simon the New Theologian. Thus, it is mentioned the iconographic representation of a crucified monk from the Holy Mount Athos which emanates flames and reminds of the crucifixion on a stone of Saint Seraphim of Sarov for a thousand days and a thousand nights.

This event of receiving the stigma by Saint Francis must not be interpreted as an isolated, incidental one, but rather as one that is part of a much more complex process of profound transfiguration as a result of the love that him has for God.

**The seventh chapter** shows the similarities between the Hesychast movement and the Franciscan spirituality. After reminding the general aspects of the hesychast concept and the first testimonies, even from the text of Holy Scripture that highlights the veneration of the Primary Church to the name of Jesus, I briefly presented the idea of the heart praying from some Fathers of Patericon. I recalled four Eastern saints who were noted in the experience and theorizing of the heavenly teaching: Saint Simeon the New Theologian, Saint Nichifor from Loneliness, Saint Gregory the Sinaite and Saint Gregory Palamas.

The categorical position of Saint Gregory Palamas on the inaccessibility of God in being, but at the same time the equally clear affirmation of deification and participation in the divine life, understood as the original purpose and end of human existence, emphasizes the distinction between essence and energies in God. Divine energies are never considered divine emanations or a diminished God, but they represent God's divine life given by God to His creatures.

Analyzing the Franciscan spirituality, there are several aspects similar to the hesychast experience. A first characteristic of Saint Francis's prayer is continuity, its uninterrupted character. The 'Poor' from Assisi urged the brethren to guide their hearts to God to make it a dwelling place for God and His Word, prayer also having the capacity to "see" God. The biographies of Saint Francis and some of his writings certainly certify that he prefers the short and repeated form of prayer, as well as the hesychasts. In Franciscan spirituality, the presence of the prayer of regret is very frequent, and Saint Francis himself repeats the phrase "God, be benevolent to me, the sinner". The Saint's biographers quite often confess their particular devotion to the name of Jesus and the well-known liturgical prayer *Adoramus Te, Christe ...*

Saint Francis added the words "Domine Iesu" (Lord Jesus), which corresponds to the first part of the Hesychast formula: "Lord Jesus Christ ...". Last but not least, the Franciscan prayer is a prayer of tranquility (hesychia), bringing the gift of divine light to the one praying earnestly.

**The eighth chapter** speaks about the personality and influence of Saint Francis and about the Franciscan way of life. Saint Francis influenced the era of time both through his sermons and writings, and by his personal manner in which he implemented the principles of Christian life inspired by the *ad literam* understanding of the evangelical message. The personality of the 'Poor' from Assisi also impressed the simple people, the lay people and the clergy, members of the high society, so that he was appreciated by all of his lifetime, but after his move to the eternal, honesty became a quasi-general.

Today we are talking about the existence of three Franciscan monastic orders: the first Franciscan order, represented only by men, with three branches: observers, conventuals and capuchin. The second Franciscan order, which consists exclusively of women, is constituted by the order of Saint Clara of Assisi or of the 'claris' (with different denominations). There is also a mixed Franciscan order, that of the "tertiary" (the third order) in which both men and women are living either in the world or in brotherhoods.

The existence of the third Franciscan order encompassing both men and women is the clearest proof of the impact of the message of Saint Francis, embodied in the assumption of his principles and by those who live in the world and are caught up in everyday realities related to family and work. Among the characteristics of the Franciscan family, besides prayer life, philanthropic acts and the effort to fulfill as strictly as possible the monastic rule left by Saint Francis, we mention two aspects: the first is that of the rich writer activity, the Franciscan brothers being very prolific in this field, the second is their status as custodians of the Holy Places in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Later I analyzed the connection of Franciscans with the Protestant world, mentioning the shift from vehement denial at the beginning of the Reformation to the interest of a critical study in the modern age, especially through the work of Paul Sabatier, *Vie de Saint François d'Assise*. I then recounted, very schematically, the report of Franciscans with non-Christian religions. Both Protestant Christianity and the great non-Christian religions consider the 'Poor's' life as the best means of dialogue with the Catholic Church and with Christianity in general. In the person of the Saint of Assisi, they see the exemplary character of his humanity, which is why the feelings towards him are admiration and appreciation.

In the last part of this chapter I have lingered on the reception of the personality of Saint Francis in Eastern culture and theology (Greek, Russian and Romanian), pointing the case of some personalities in the field. Thus, from the Greek sphere I remembered: Nikos

Kazantzakis (poet, narrator and playwright), Nikos Matsoukas (theologian), Panaghiotis Kanellopoulos (intellectual and prime minister), Fotis Kontoglou (painter) and others, from Russian culture: Nicolai Aleksandrovici Berdyev, Pavel Evdokimov, Vladimir Lossky, Nikita Struve, Maria Tatiana Alexeeva-Leskov and others, and from Romanian theology: Nichifor Crainic, Ioan Gheorghe Savin, Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală and Maria Cornelia Oros.

Studying the life and work of Saint Francis by the representatives of the Orthodox Church was, in a way, the activation of an ecumenism of the saints, and for the present times his invocation can be an aid in the work of maintaining unity and peace among men.

**The conclusions** of the entire work emphasize that even though the influence of Orthodox thought in the manifestation of the ‘Poor’ cannot be proved with historical data, yet the many convergences in spirituality lead us to affirm that it represents a synthesis between the Eastern Christian world and the Western, being the embodiment of the common tradition of the undivided Church.