

Narrative and Rhetoric in Franciscan Martyrdom

by Christopher MacEvitt

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Martirio e consapevolezza storica nell'ordine francescano tra Due e Trecento

a cura di Thomas Frank

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The essay outlines the author's personal approach to the meaning of martyrdom for the Franciscan Order. The book under discussion grew out of previous research on the Crusades and the 'Frankish' presence in the Near East. The author responds briefly to some of the criticisms made by the three readers, explaining why he favored narrative sources about martyrdoms carried out in Islamic lands. He concludes with the hope that the book will lead to new reflections on the connections between martyrdom, holiness, the Franciscan Order, evangelization and crusade in the final centuries of the Middle Ages.

Il saggio delinea l'approccio personale dell'autore al significato del martirio per l'ordine francescano. Il libro in discussione è nato partendo da ricerche precedenti sulle crociate e sulla presenza dei Latini nel Vicino Oriente. L'autore risponde brevemente ad alcune delle critiche avanzate dai tre lettori, spiegando perché ha privilegiato fonti narrative su martiri compiuti in terre islamiche. Conclude con l'augurio che il libro possa portare a nuove riflessioni sui nessi tra martirio, santità, ordine francescano, evangelizzazione e crociata nei secoli finali del medioevo.

Medioevo, secoli XIII-XIV, ordine francescano, martirio.

Middle Ages, 13th-14th centuries, Franciscan Order, martyrdom.

It is an unexpected honor and a pleasure to discuss my book *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans* with such an esteemed set of interlocutors and have it published in *Reti Medievali Rivista*. I would particularly like to thank Thomas Frank for having organized this opportunity; it is the first I have had to look back on the book since publication. I would like to begin by reiterating a perspicacious remark made by Daniele Solvi; I am not trained as a Franciscanist, nor was this book written with that perspective in mind. Two questions brought me to this research project, one broad and one quite specific: first, what was the Franciscan attitude towards Islam and Muslims and second, why did Franciscan martyrdoms take the distinctive form that they did? While the arguments of the book in the end hinge on the Order, its values and history, I did not begin there, and my own intellectual evolution has not been made entirely explicit in the book. The outside perspective that this provided has been both a help and hindrance in my pursuit of the subject at hand. The astute commentary by my Franciscanist colleagues has made clear that

as a result my work is not as thoroughly rooted in Franciscan scholarship as it could have been, a result of my distance from Franciscan Studies as a field.

My interest in Franciscan martyrdom, and particularly the fourteenth-century *passiones* that are at the heart of the book, emerged from a broad interest in religious interaction in the medieval Mediterranean. My first book examined the relations between Frankish settlers and indigenous Christians in Syria and Palestine following the First Crusade.¹ Following its publication, my attention turned to the legacy of the Frankish East after the Mamluk conquests of the late thirteenth century. My interest in the Franciscan martyrdom narratives arose out of a proposed monograph on the place of the Franks in memory and space after the fall of Acre in 1291 (which I am once again working on). I was thus particularly pleased that Paolo Evangelisti raised the subject of the Franciscans of the Holy Land. The Franciscans of the Custodia are indeed central to the questions that led me to the Franciscan *passiones*. What was the relationship between the friars and the Frankish kingdom that had once ruled Jerusalem? What was the dynamic between those religious institutions that once dominated the city under Frankish rule, such as the canons of the Holy Sepulcher, and the friars who had replaced them as the primary representatives of Latin Christian claims in the Holy City?² I came to understand that I could not fathom the Franciscan conception of Jerusalem's past without understanding how the Order positioned itself in relationship to Jerusalem's current rulers, the Mamluk sultans of Egypt, and to the Islam that was predominant in the fourteenth-century city. Given the broad roles that many Franciscans played as preachers, diplomats, and administrators across the Mediterranean, I wondered: what image of Islam and Muslims did Franciscan sources propagate? While there has been considerable work done on the subject broadly, I found relatively little on the large body of extant *passiones*. As I pursued this subject, I stumbled over the Franciscan *passiones* again and again, particularly those of the martyrs of Morocco; relegated to footnotes that inevitably cited the *Chronica XXIV generalium*, they were never discussed at any length and rarely was any secondary scholarship cited.³ What began as a footnote in a chapter on fourteenth-century Jerusalem had suddenly become an entire book devoted to Franciscan *passiones*. As a result, I put aside the work I had done on the legacy of the Franks as I worked through the richness of Franciscan scholarship and struggled to understand why Franciscans seemed so interested in stories of Muslim persecutors and why that interest developed so suddenly in the fourteenth century. Thus, my engagement with the Franciscan *passiones* was not 'up' from the

¹ MacEvitt, *Crusades and the Christian World*.

² See, for example, Elm, "Mater ecclesiarum in exilio;" Elm, "Kapitel der Regulierten Chorherren vom Heiligen Grab in Jerusalem."

³ This was of course before the work of Campopiano, *Writing the Holy Land*, and Covaci, *Between Traditions: The Franciscans of Mount Zion*. I discovered Isabella Heullant-Donat's foundational work as my research progressed.

thirteenth-century foundational material of the Franciscan movement, but instead ‘in’ from the outside, from the broader context of the interaction of Christians and Muslims in the fourteenth century. This is a partial explanation why I did not include the Franciscans in the Holy Land in the book, as I had chosen to reserve that subject for my next book, but Evangelisti wisely reminds me that perhaps I was too draconian in my separation of the two projects.

In contrast to my own recent engagement with Franciscan Studies, the three commentators are deeply ensconced within the study of the Franciscan Order, and their comments arise from their broad knowledge of that tradition. Each of the respondents offers a distinct perspective that show the many questions that still need to be pursued concerning the subject of Franciscan martyrdom beyond the argument offered in my monograph. I will respond to each in turn. Daniele Solvi, whose work has spanned such an impressive range of Franciscan history, has been quite generous in his reading of the book. As already noted, Solvi correctly situated me as a non-Franciscan scholar. Solvi also helpfully reminded me of part of my own impetus for taking on the project: aside from an interest in the Franciscan impact on Jerusalem, it also arose from a curiosity about the distinctive form that many Franciscan martyr narratives took. In some ways, he expresses my perspective better than I have myself, and I can honestly say that I learned something about my own argument from his response.

Solvi reads the book as a whole, and thus engages with the first chapter, which offers my own take on the history of Christian martyrdom. Looking at martyr narratives through the lens of conversion and miracle, I argue that early pre-Constantinian narratives were focused on the martyr as a citizen of heaven. It was only after the Peace of the Church that Christians wanted the martyrs to demonstrate their power on earth through conversions and miracle stories. Solvi sensibly suggests that my argument is too severe in marking out the distinction of these two narratives. The dichotomy between early Christian and post-Constantinian narratives is evident, but as Solvi suggests, both remain available to the Franciscans in the fourteenth century, and I agree that the book could show that flexibility more clearly.

I was less certain about Solvi’s suggestion that “factual constraints” condition the type of narrative that an author might chose. For the most part, martyrologists were not blessed (or perhaps cursed) with an abundance of evidence or pre-existing narratives. While some narratives had some information circulating about them before their first narrative was composed, most did not. Indeed, the lack of evidence would suggest that some number of the martyrs were entirely fictional. Miracles and conversion arise as a result of expectations of the genre, not from pre-existent facts. Let us take as an example the best documented Franciscan martyrdom narrative, that of the martyrs of Tana (1321). In the first account of their death, the letter by Jordan Catala de Sévérac, Jordan preferred to discuss his own conversions rather than suggest that the death of the martyrs may have turned anyone to the

Christian faith. But the letter offered by Bartholomew, the Franciscan *custos* of Tabriz, added an account of the miraculous preservation of Jacopo da Padova in the fire of the *maydan* of the city.⁴ While this may have been based on other oral reports that reached him, he would not have been constrained by unwritten information. The story of the fire clearly drew on earlier Christian stories, including that of Francis himself before the sultan, again suggesting that the miraculous elements are best understood as intertextual, rather than as originating in an oral report. Odorico di Pordenone, for his part, was able to retell the story in such way so that the people of the city were on the cusp of conversion (mentioned as such in Bartholomew's letter) but were distinguished as non-Muslims, in contrast to the rulers of the city, the *cadì* and the *melech*.⁵ Had the narrative not served their purpose, each narrator could either have simply not included it and chosen a different martyr to focus on, or could take the initiative to shape the story to their needs.

I am not at all surprised to find some discomfort with my reading of Thomas of Celano and his triple narrative of Francis's desire for martyrdom. Solvi is of course correct in arguing that Thomas understood Francis's desire for martyrdom as an expression of sanctity, of Francis's desire to be with God, and as a sign of the saint's deep humility. I would suggest, however, that this was not at odds with a critique of that desire also being imbedded in the narrative. Even if Thomas himself was not intending his account to criticize his saintly founder, his narrative could still preserve such a critique. Patricia Cox Miller has written of another saint (Jerome):

The explicit intentions of an author, however, cannot always control or limit the meanings that arise from the associative movements and configurations of his or her text's tropes and metaphors. Texts can articulate perspectives and bear significations that are quite different from the announced goals of the author.⁶

Thomas's praise of Francis could also express his discomfort with the saint's path, even unintentionally.

I fully understand Solvi's skepticism about my claims that the *Chronica XXIV generalium* was written to bridge the chasm between spirituals and conventuals, and accept his emendation gratefully. Rather than framing it as a conflict between conventuals and spirituals that has its roots in the late thirteenth century, Solvi sensibly suggests that this would be better framed as a direct reaction to John XXII's *Quum inter nonnullos* of November 1323, which declared that belief in the absolute poverty of Christ and the apostles was a heresy. The framing of 'spirituals and conventuals' generalizes the anxiety about identity into a set of issues that extended far beyond the 1320s and 30s when we see the martyrdom narratives emerging. It also obfuscates the

⁴ Gadrat, *Une image de l'Orient au XIV^e siècle*, 309-15; MacEvitt, *Martyrdom of the Franciscans*, 106-25.

⁵ Odorico da Pordenone, "Relatio."

⁶ Miller, "Blazing Body," 23.

actual divisions that occurred in the wake of John's bulls, which did not fall along the spiritual-conventual divide. Paolo Evangelisti, it should be noted, also rejects as overly simplistic the dichotomy of spiritual and conventual. Solvi also points out that the martyrs were part of the community of Franciscan saints, and that before their addition, martyrs were notably lacking in the register of Franciscan saints. This begs the question: why, given the way in which Franciscans imagined the Order as a recapitulation of the providential story of the Church, did they not seize upon the martyrs earlier? The book touches on this, but more could be made of this point.

It is a bit intimidating to have Maria Teresa Dolso comment on my work, given her deep knowledge of the *Chronica XXIV generalium*, which plays such a significant role in my own book. Her comments on the *Chronica* are immensely useful, and I look forward to her forthcoming article adding another manuscript to the conversation. I share Dolso's sense that the *Chronica* must be read in the context of Angelo Clareno's chronicle, and appreciated her elaboration of this dynamic. Dolso questions, however, the link between contemplation and martyrdom in the example of Giles of Assisi, Francis's third disciple and one of the most important of his early companions. I too am uncertain about the contrast his *vita* offers. Contemplation, Dolso suggests, can serve as a synecdoche of the eremitic movement within the Order – simplicity, manual labor, suspicion of clericalization, rural hermitages over urban convents. But what does martyrdom reflect in contrast to the simplicity that Giles embodied? It suggests, to me at least, that martyrdom was not a satisfactory replacement for poverty for at least some Franciscans. Were the values for which contemplation was emblematic somehow seen in opposition to what martyrdom represented? Or was the *simplicitas* that Giles embodied desired as an alternative source of unity, especially in the late fourteenth century on the cusp of the emergence of the Observants?

Dolso also helpfully highlights the gap between Francis's intentions for evangelization and the narratives of the martyrs, a gap I note but perhaps could have explored further. But she also presses my argument about the positioning of the martyrs as exemplifying "Franciscan conformity to the apostolic model", pointing out that the *missio* of the friars received to attack the 'law of Muhammad' cannot be identified as an evangelical exhortation. If Dolso means this in reference to the New Testament, this is certainly true. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, no reference is made to attacking other religions or *leges*. Nevertheless, by the fourteenth century (indeed much earlier) Latin Christians understood that they were called upon to denounce Jewish law as standing in opposition to Christian faith. Given how often Jews and Muslims were conflated, it is not difficult to imagine how this might have been transferred to the 'law of Muhammad' as well.

Paolo Evangelisti's rich and rewarding body of scholarship has deepened the field of Franciscan studies immeasurably, and makes him an ideal respondent. His textured and comprehensive engagement with my work raises the most significant challenges to the arguments of the book. Unlike the other

commentators in this volume, Evangelisti takes issue with a central claim of the book: namely, that evangelical poverty became an unreliable and contested value in the fourteenth century. While his arguments about the efforts of minister-general Guirat Ot to stabilize and normalize the value of poverty for Franciscans are fascinating and relevant, in my understanding at least they in no way can overcome the immense destabilization that John XXII wrought. The evidence that Evangelisti points to is juridical in nature, particularly the statutes of the general chapters of the Franciscan Order. It is a truism among historians that such laws are usually to be read as what authorities desire to see, or how they imagine a community functioning, rather than a description of what actually was. Even if we argue that the Farinerian Constitutions, for example, do approximate “actual Franciscan praxis” as Bert Roest suggests,⁷ the two arguments could and most likely did coexist. We know that the integration of the new Cistercian-inspired statutes that Benedict XII imposed on the Order faced considerable resistance. Friars may well have been assured that poverty remained enshrined in the core of the Order’s identity and *also* have been deeply anxious about the meaning and value of poverty as the ideological foundations of the Order shifted, rendering poverty an unstable locus for identity. Martyrdom could never entirely replace poverty for a variety of reasons, as Evangelisti shows, but it compensated in exactly those places where poverty had crumbled. It was unassailably orthodox, and could be traced back to the examples of the apostles – the two issues where evangelical poverty was particularly vulnerable.

Evangelisti’s re-reading of the narrative of the martyrs of Tana offers an alternative reading of the martyrological sources. Instead of reading the narratives as their own source of meaning-making, Evangelisti suggests that we should prioritize the symbolic value of martyrdom elaborated in thirteenth-century materials, independent of actual martyrs and their stories. In this reading then, the martyrs of Tana (1321), the first for whom a *passio* was written, represent a falling away from the martyrological values that underpinned Franciscan ideology in the thirteenth century. This, I confess, is not entirely clear to me. Evangelisti would seem to be suggesting that the desire of the friars to avoid confrontation and avoid denouncing Muhammad was a failure to follow the instructions offered by the *Regula bullata* as well as the *Regula non bullata*. I would offer Maria Teresa Dolso’s response as a reply. I would also point out that Evangelisti’s suggestion that the *Regulae* urged the friars to preach against Muhammad was counter to the example of Francis himself, who apparently did not contravene Islamic law when preaching before the Ayyubid sultan.

The source that Evangelisti argues is most important to understand Franciscan martyrdom is material from the first century of the Order’s existence. Evangelisti points out that martyrdom is in fact a capacious term, which as-

⁷ Roest, *Franciscan Literature of Religious Instruction*, 147.

sembles within it a range of meanings, from physical death to spiritual sacrifice. Thus, the silence of the thirteenth century on martyrdom is not so quiet, if you look in the right places. As Evangelisti points out, a broad range of thirteenth-century Franciscan sources discuss and evoke martyrological values. This of course is a different set of sources than my book set out to tackle, which is focused on *martyrs* and on *narratives* of martyrdom. What Evangelisti offers us here is a diverse set of sources that could allow a scholar to explore the much broader question of the representative value of martyrdom in Franciscan meaning-making. As Evangelisti indicates, this would require pursuing different sources than the narrative ones that undergird my book. I was particularly interested in stories about martyrs who died in Islamic lands, not in the crafting of the value of martyrdom itself. Evangelisti in particular elaborates on the extensive link between Franciscans and crusade preaching. The question of martyrdom in the crusades is a fascinating one, which in some ways is akin to the Franciscan story; I know of only one martyr who died during the crusades who actually became the focus of a martyr cult. Given the way in which crusade ideology was interlaced with martyrological thinking and the extensive engagement with crusading over centuries, what explains the invisibility of crusading martyrs? While Franciscans (and others) did die during wars between Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land, those battles were generally not a part of the crusades, nor were the dead crusaders *per se*.⁸ This is obviously another rich direction of future research that Evangelisti has outlined. As he points out, Franciscans engaged the rhetoric and values of martyrdom a myriad other ways, and I hope both my book and these collected essays will help point scholars in new directions of research in thinking further about Franciscan martyrdom.

⁸ For the importance of separating the history of the crusades from the history of Frankish Syria, please see my article: MacEvitt, "What Was Crusader about the Crusader States?"

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