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**A Neglected Classic of Franciscan Spirituality: The *Book of Conformities* of Bartholomew of Pisa**

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# **A Neglected Classic of Franciscan Spirituality**

## *The Book of Conformities of Bartholomew of Pisa*

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At a book launch hosted by the Franciscan International Study Centre in Canterbury, the general editors of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* presented the third and, they presumed, last volume in that series.<sup>11</sup> The series gives modern English versions of early writings concerning the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Italian saint, Francis of Assisi, in chronological order. The texts included in the third volume date from 1280 to 1365. The most famous of these by far is the *Fioretti*, the “Little Flowers of Saint Francis,” a classic of early Italian literature from the mid-1300s.<sup>12</sup> The volume ends with a little-known text from 1365 by the French friar Arnald of Sarrant, “On the Kinship of Saint Francis,” (*De cognatione s. Francisci*).<sup>13</sup> Like several authors in that same volume, Arnald was interested in the parallels he could discern between the life of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and the life of Jesus, and presented these as nine “conformities” or similarities.

During a question-and-answer session following the presentation of the volume, a member of the audience asked if there would be a fourth volume in the series. The reply was “No,” and the

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<sup>11</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, William J. Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1999-2001) (*FA*).

<sup>12</sup> *FA* 3: 566-658.

<sup>13</sup> *FA* 3: 673-733.

reason given was that there was an immense roadblock in the way, located at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was an immense text on the life of Francis, running to more than 1,500 pages in its modern printed edition in Latin. No one had ever published a full translation of this large work, and for any Franciscan texts that followed it, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward, it was an essential point of reference. Further progress on a full, chronological presentation of hagiographical texts about Francis in English would be halted unless and until that vast work would be translated.

A little later, as the public was enjoying tea during the book-signing, the same person who had asked the question introduced himself to the editors. Dr. Christopher Stace expressed an interest in translating the work, a project that will, *Deo volente*, soon emerge in published form. This considerable scholarly undertaking, it is hoped, will open the way toward continuing publication of an English-language collection of Franciscan documents from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. In expectation of that important contribution to English-language *Franciscana* the publication of the current celebratory volume presented an appropriate occasion to introduce a 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience to this once popular and now neglected classic of 14<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan spirituality.

### **The Text and its Controversial History**

What is this large text, and why it is important? The book in question is *The Book of the Conformities of the Life of Saint Francis to the Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, written between 1385 and 1390 by a professor of theology, the Friar Minor Bartholomew of Pisa (d. 1400 ca.).<sup>14</sup> It proposed many similarities to be found in accounts of the life

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<sup>14</sup> The standard critical edition is *De Conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam domini Iesu*, *Analecta Franciscana* IV, V (Ad Claras Aquas/Quaracchi: Collegio S. Bonaventura, 1906, 1912) (AF). The major English work on the text to date is that of Carolly Erickson, *Francis Conformed to Christ: Bartholomew of Pisa's De Conformitate in Franciscan History* (Ph.D. diss.) (New York: Columbia, 1969). See also her overview of

of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) to events in the life of Christ reported in the Gospels.

Little read today, it was, in its day, a very popular devotional book. But a century after its creation it became a source of controversy, and up to the present scholars have argued its merits. It was among the earliest printed books brought to the Americas, arriving in today's Venezuela in 1516. Luther felt obliged to comment on it in the 1540s, and its supporters and detractors assured it remained the center of an extended religious polemic that lasted into the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Yet today neither the author nor his work would likely be included in most surveys of the history of Christian spirituality in the later Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> What happened?

To answer these questions, we must step back and examine the basic notion on which the work was based, the notion of “conformity” of a believer to Christ. We then need to consider the ways in which such conformity was understood, rightly or wrongly, by opposing sides during the era of the Reformation. And, in order to grasp the reasons for which debates over its content endured so long, we should examine the important role of religious printers in the distribution of the text and the written attacks of its opponents.

### **Bartholomew of Pisa**

The author of the *Conformities*, Bartholomew of Pisa, was a member of the Order of Friars Minor, educated at Bologna, and destined for a teaching appointment as lector at Cambridge University in 1373. The hostilities of the Hundred Years' War prevented him from

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the text in “Bartholomew of Pisa, Francis Exalted: *De Conformitate*,” *Medieval Studies* 34 (1972) 253-74. Most recently, in Italian, an excellent overview of the text and its influence is given by Alessandro Mastromatteo, *Similem illum fecit in gloria sanctorum. Il profilo cristiforme di Francesco d'Assisi nel De conformitate di Bartolomeo da Pisa* (Rome: Antonianum, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> It has been my privilege to work in this part of the Doctoral Program in Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union with the two deans honored in this publication, Dr. Judith Berling and Dr. Arthur Holder, for whose scholarly research and commitment to student learning this contribution is a small token of gratitude.

reaching England,<sup>16</sup> but he received his title as master of theology by papal dispensation in 1375. He was lector of theology in the study centers of the Franciscan Order in his native Pisa, and in Siena, Padua and Florence. A prolific writer, Bartholomew has left us, besides his great work on St. Francis, several collections of sermons, and a book on the Life of the Virgin Mary.<sup>17</sup> But his longest work proved to be his most popular, as attested by its more than one hundred and fifty extant manuscripts and three printed editions.

Despite its popularity in the original Latin, it has never been published in a full translation. Partial English, German and French translations, of the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century (frequently tendentious) included only a selection of passages considered useful for religious polemic. The single translation of the entire text, in Italian, produced in 1543-44 by the Tuscan Observant friar Dionigi Pulinari (d. 1582), still remains in its original manuscript form in the National Library in Florence.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Content of the Book of Conformities and its Organization**

To understand how the very large text of the *Conformities* is organized, it is useful to understand it by means of an image used by Bartholomew himself to guide his reader. An image of a tree was included along with the original text of the *Conformities*, and both were approved by the General Chapter of the Friars Minor in 1399, explicitly mentioned in the decree allowing for its copying and use.<sup>19</sup> The editions of 1510 and 1513 feature slightly different representations of such a

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<sup>16</sup> Raoul Manselli, "Bartolomeo da Pisa (da Rinonico, de Rinonichi)," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* VI (Rome: Treccani, 1964) 756-758.

<sup>17</sup> *Quadragesimale Magistri Bartholomei de Pisis ... de contemptu mundi...* (Milan: Ulrich Scinzenzeller, 1498); *Sermones ... dubiorum et casuum conscientialium contemptivi et elucidativi super Evangelii quadragesimalibus* (Lyon: Romain Morin, 1519); *De vita et laudibus b. Mariae Virginis libri sex* (Venice: Pietro Dusinelli, 1596).

<sup>18</sup> Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze cod. II, III, 162; cod. II, III, 163; cod. II, III, 168. See Mastromatteo, 61.

<sup>19</sup> The decree of approval is given in AF V 503-4.

tree, consisting of a central trunk with twenty branches arranged symmetrically on its two sides, each branch bearing two fruits, the whole annotated with captions explaining the branches and fruits. Each of the fruits represents one “conformity,” that is, a similarity between the lives of Jesus and Francis. The first part of each fruit or conformity, generally the shorter part, describes an element of the life of Jesus, while the second, longer part describes a corresponding event or quality in the life of Francis.

The forty fruits or conformities are divided into three books, each concerned with a part of the life of Christ and corresponding events in the life of Francis. Book One contains Fruits One through Eight, based on the early life of Christ up to the beginning of his public ministry; Book Two, Fruits Nine through Twenty, roughly covering the years of Christ’s public ministry; and Book Three, Fruits Twenty-One through Forty, mostly concerned with the suffering, death, resurrection and glorification of Christ. By far the longest sections of the text are Fruits Eight and Nine, each exceeding two-hundred pages in the Latin Quaracchi edition. Fruit Eight gives an exhaustive listing of all the places inhabited by the friars at the time of the book’s composition; and Book Nine reproduces an extensive commentary on the Rule of the Friars Minor by the leading author of the dissident Franciscan Spirituals, Angelo Clareno (d. 1337). This part of the *Conformities* has its own history as a separate work, frequently copied in manuscript form as a study-guide to accompany the reading of the Franciscan Rule.<sup>20</sup>

### **Bartholomew’s Method**

The erudite, often verbose prose of Bartholomew of Pisa depends on his encyclopedic knowledge of the Biblical texts of the Latin Vulgate. In addition to the Biblical text itself, his explanations frequently cite “the Gloss,” that is, the *Glosa ordinaria*, with its complex apparatus

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<sup>20</sup> See David Burr, ed., *Early Commentaries on the Rule of the Friars Minor* Volume III: Angelo Clareno (St. Bonaventure NY: Franciscan Institute, 2014).

of commentary on different levels of almost every line of the Latin Bible, its vocabulary, grammar, historical background, moral meaning, and symbolic significance. Having chosen a fruit or conformity to explore, for example Jesus's choice of twelve apostles, Bartholomew proceeds to a brief biographical précis for each of the Twelve, drawing on Biblical texts; and offers an exhaustive listing of New Testament texts in which each is mentioned.<sup>21</sup> Having concluded the first part of this fruit or conformity, he then turns to the second part, tracing similarities in the life of Francis. Mining the rich trove of earlier Franciscan sources at his disposal (a surprisingly complete collection, from what we know of texts about Francis available in his day), he identifies each of the earliest twelve companions of Francis, with a biographical sketch from the sources available, demonstrating the ways in which Francis's choice of brothers mirrors that of Christ and the Apostles.<sup>22</sup>

Had Bartholomew limited himself to such general statements of similarity the text would probably never have become controversial. But, as will appear below, he moved beyond such general similarities to make statements that seem to make Francis more than merely "similar" to Christ, leading some later readers to the mistaken belief that he wanted to substitute the disciple for the Master.

### **The Spirituality of "Conformity"**

When faced with the very lengthy text of the *Book of Conformities* today's reader runs the risk of missing the theological forest for the textual trees. Rising above the immense quantity of detail spilling over each page of Bartholomew's work, a cohesive theme can be identified. Every Christian believer is called to be conformed to Christ, the head of the body of which each of them is a member. In the writings of St. Paul, such conformity is the goal of a process of

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<sup>21</sup> AF IV 165-75.

<sup>22</sup> AF IV 175-78.

maturity expected in the life of any sincere believer: “Those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29). In other words, becoming more like the image of Christ, the Son of God, the believers, like younger siblings, come to resemble their elder brother, the first-born. All of this is quite orthodox Christian teaching.

From the time of his earliest biography, Francis had been compared with Jesus, as his faithful follower, his herald, even his standard-bearer. Over the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> century he had come to be interpreted also in light of the prophecies of Abbot Joachim of Fiore, as he became associated with “the angel of the sixth seal” of the Book of Revelation, harbinger of a new Age of the Spirit about to break into the history of Church and society.<sup>23</sup>

But a special interest also began to grow in showing the “conformity” of Francis to his master, Christ, that is, the ways in which he was shaped or molded to represent (and re-present) the life of Jesus of Nazareth to his contemporaries of the 1200s and beyond. A quick glance at some well-known early Lives of Francis show him, like Jesus, with twelve early disciples; they are clothed in a single tunic without a belt or shoes, following the words, and presumably the example, of Jesus as He sent His disciples on their first preaching missions. There would likely be little objection to this approach to “conformity” of the life of Francis to that of Jesus. But Bartholomew was capable of exaggerated statements, sometimes given the impression of being carried away by his own rhetoric. Remarks such as these would later lead an indignant Luther to consider the work idolatrous, substituting the worship of St Francis for that due to Christ himself. Though Bartholomew goes to some trouble to explain on more than one occasion that he has no intention of doing such a thing, in fact even a

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<sup>23</sup> See Mastromatteo, 44-45.



kindly disposed reader must find some of his comparisons between the Saint and his Master too boldly stated. An example of the problem can be found in the following:

It was a miracle that Christ imparted such power to his cross; but it was more miraculous that he gave himself wholly to blessed Francis through his stigmatization. ... It was a miracle that Christ preserved his body intact for three days; but it was more miraculous that he preserved his stigmata on blessed Francis for two years without their corruption. – It was a miracle that Christ was fastened to the cross by others with nails of iron; but it is more wonderful that when blessed Francis was stigmatized he was crucified by Christ himself with nails of flesh.<sup>24</sup>

While never drifting into heterodox statements, the repetition of “it was more miraculous” can easily give the impression that Bartholomew somehow considers Francis the Saint as somehow superior to Christ his Lord, something the text in fact never says, but which later critics were ready to infer.

### **Early Diffusion of the Conformities: Manuscripts**

The book was destined to play a lively role in the world of printed books a century after its final approval by the Order’s 1399 General Chapter. Yet its rich manuscript tradition indicates that it was already well known long before the printing press made it more widely available. The first volume of the modern critical edition by the Quaracchi editors in 1906 in *Analecta Franciscana* IV gives a careful listing of a dozen manuscripts used for preparation of that edition.<sup>25</sup> Six years later, as the editors prepared the second volume of the work for the press, additional manuscripts that came to the notice of the editors in the years preceding the 1912 publication were noted in *Analecta*

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<sup>24</sup> Conformity 31, part 2, in *AF* V 395-7. I am grateful to Dr. Stace for sharing with me the draft of his translation used here.

<sup>25</sup> *AF* IV xxv-xxxii.

*Franciscana V*, requiring another ten pages to cover them all.<sup>26</sup> After 1912 further discoveries have added even more manuscripts to the collection, noted by Walter Seton, Benvenuto Bughetti, and Diego Ciccarelli.<sup>27</sup> The research of Carolly Erickson<sup>28</sup> has also called attention to the manuscripts of Monteprandone,<sup>29</sup> and of the National Library in Rome.<sup>30</sup> Most recently, Alessandro Mastromatteo has presented the manuscripts known up to the time of his writing in 2012.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Work: Printed Editions**

Three editions of the *Conformities* were printed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first, in an edition prepared by Francesco Zeno, Vicar General of the Observant friars, was printed in 1510 in Milan by the Flemish typographer Gothard van der Bruggen (Gotardo da Ponte).<sup>32</sup> Just three years later, in 1513, also in Milan, an edition with some corrections was prepared by the Conventual friar and theologian Giovanni Mapello<sup>33</sup> and printed by Giovanni (Zanotto) Castiglione, a typographer active both in Milan and Turin.<sup>34</sup> A third edition, of 1590,

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<sup>26</sup> AF V xlix-lx.

<sup>27</sup> W. Seton, "Two manuscripts of Bartholomew of Pisa," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum (AFH)* XVI (1923) 191-199; Diego Ciccarelli, "Un codice messinese delle Conformità di Bartolomeo da Pisa," *Archivio storico messinese* 28 (1977) 85-107; B. Bughetti, "Una nuova compilazione di testi intorno alla vita di s. Francesco," *AFH* 20 (1927), 525-527, 534, 562.

<sup>28</sup> "Bartholomew of Pisa, Francis Exalted: *De Conformitate*," *Medieval Studies* 34 (1972) 254 n. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Amedeo Crivellucci, "I codici della libreria raccolta da S. Giacomo della Marca nel Convento S. Maria delle Grazie presso Monteprandone" (Livorno: Raffaele Giusti, 1889) 66-67.

<sup>30</sup> Cod. 1015 (S. Bonav. 3) of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emmanuele II, Fondi minori S. Bonaventura, described by Odulf Schäfer, OFM, "Descriptio codicum franciscalium in bibliotheca centrali nationali Romae asservatorum," *Antonianum*, 23 (1948) 347-80.

<sup>31</sup> Mastromatteo, 58-9.

<sup>32</sup> *Liber Conformitatum vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Jesu Christi*.

<sup>33</sup> *Opus auree et inexplicabilis bonitatis et continentie, Conformitatum scilicet vite beati Francisci ad vitam Domini nostri Jesu Christi*.

<sup>34</sup> Arnaldo Ganda, *I primordi della tipografia milanese. Antonio Zarotto da Parma (1471-1507)* (Florence: Olschki, 1984) describes Castiglione (c. 1524) as working for the pioneering printer in Milan Antonio Zarotto, and eventually taking over the operation of his

corrected by the Italian Conventual friar Geremia Bucchio, formerly Minister Provincial of Tuscany, was printed in Bologna by Alessandro Benazzi.<sup>35</sup> An early 17<sup>th</sup>-century publication (1620, Bologna) is merely a reprint of the 1590 edition with a few corrections.

### **The *Conformities* Travel to the Americas**

Spain was glad to propagate use of the *Conformities*, not only at home but also in its overseas dominions, part of a broader phenomenon that Georges Goyau of the Académie Française once called “les étranges destinées” of the book.<sup>36</sup> When twelve Observant Friars departed from Rouen, sent by the General Chapter there in 1516 to Cumaná (Venezuela) under Spanish royal patronage,<sup>37</sup> their baggage included the *Book of Conformities* of Fr. Bartholomew of Pisa.<sup>38</sup> Undoubtedly the *Conformities* was intended as one of the guides for their work, according to the Franciscan plan of evangelization promoted by the reforming Franciscan Cardinal Cisneros.<sup>39</sup>

In 1524, the "Twelve Apostles" of Mexico set out from Spain to Mexico, and they too brought with them the *Book of the Conformities*. The *Conformities* had a special influence on the mission to Mexico, according to the Franciscan historian of the Americas Francisco Morales:<sup>40</sup>

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printing business.

<sup>35</sup> *Liber aureus inscriptus liber conformitatum vitae beati ac seraphici patris Francisci ad vitam Jesu Christi Domini nostri*. (Nunc denuo in lucem editus atque... correctus a... Jeremia Bucchio,... Cui... addita est perbrevis... historia omnium virorum qui sanctitate... in Franciscana religione... excelluerunt).

<sup>36</sup> Georges Goyau, “Les étranges destinées du livre des Conformités,” in Henri Lemaître, ed., *Saint François d'Assise: son oeuvre, son influence, 1226-1926* (Paris: E. Droz, 1927).

<sup>37</sup> *Real Cedula* of November 8, 1516, signed by Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros and the future Pope Hadrian VI. See José María Alonso del Val O.F.M., “El Milenarismo en la primera evangelización de los franciscanos en América,” in José Ignacio de la Iglesia Duarte, ed., *Milenarismos y milenaristas en la Europa medieval: IX Semana de Estudios Medievales, Nájera, 1998* (Logroño. Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 1999) 367.

<sup>38</sup> Alonso del Val, 374.

<sup>39</sup> Alonso del Val, 375.

We have documentation on the circulation of two other important books which played a significant part in the spiritual formation of the 16th-century Franciscans of Mexico: the *De conformitate vitae b. Francisci ad vitam Domini Ihesu* by Bartholomaeus of Pisa and the *Arbor vitae crucifixus Iesu* by Ubertino de Casale. On the first one, Francisco Jimenez writes in the biography of Martin de Valencia [d. 1534]: "It seems to me that I heard from him [Martin of Valencia] or from somebody else, that he received the habit in the town of Mayorga, which belongs to the [Franciscan] province of Santiago; and when he was a novice he read the book of "Conformidades" of our father, Saint Francis, and that such reading much enlightened him and [thus] he began to know the virtue of poverty. (Jimenez, "Vida de fray Martin de Valencia, p. 225)

In the inventories of the Franciscan houses of Mexico there is an early copy of the *Book of Conformities* noted in the friars' library in Texcoco, belonging to the Province of the Holy Gospel of Mexico.<sup>41</sup> Discussions of the distribution of the *Conformities* and its importance in the New World can also be found in other scholarly works on the Franciscan evangelization of the Americas.<sup>42</sup>

### **The *Conformities*, its Critics and Printers**

The *Book of Conformities*, with its supporters and its critics, was destined to influence the fortunes of some prominent printers over the course of the centuries. In Germany, France, Flanders, and England, printers satisfied the demand for religious books, including polemical

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<sup>40</sup> Francisco Morales, "New World Colonial Franciscan Mystical Practice," in Hilaire Kallendorf, ed., *A New Companion to Hispanic Mysticism* (Leyden: Brill, 2010) 71- 102 (here 95).

<sup>41</sup> Lino Gomez Canedo, "Milenario, escatología y utopía en la evangelización de América," en *Evangelización y Teología en América: siglo XVI* (X Simposium Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra) (Pamplona: EUNSA, 1990) II, 1405.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Carlos Herrejón Peredo, "Marcel Bataillon y el Humanismo mexicano en el siglo XVI," in *Relaciones: Estudios de Historia y Sociedad* 21 (2000) 187-99, who points out how Bataillon correctly identified the *Book of the Conformities* as an influential text in the Franciscan evangelization of the Americas.

ones, from the earliest years of the Reformation. One of these was the German printer Hans Lufft (d. 1584) of Wittenberg, rendered famous for his printing of Luther's Bible of 1534. He became involved in the complex story of the *Conformities* in 1542 with his printing of a work by a disciple of Luther, Erasmus Alber of Bruchenbrücken (d. 1553). Alber had composed a vitriolic attack on the work of Bartholomew of Pisa, adducing it as a prime example of the exaggerations of Catholic devotion to the saints, giving it the title, "The Barefoot Monks' Jester" (referring to Francis) with a Foreword by Martin Luther.<sup>43</sup> Alber's work portrayed the work of Bartholomew as effectively substituting the figure of Francis for that of Christ, alleging that the friars, and the luckless faithful duped by their false teaching, engaged in the worship of idols (Francis, as well as other saints). This polemical treatise was destined to make the *Conformities* famous, or infamous, by selecting individual selections from the text as examples of idolatry and blasphemy.

Another printer known for his publication of a Bible, this one in England, also became involved in this controversy over the *Conformities*. Richard Grafton (d. 1573), finished printing the Great Bible of 1539 after its original printing in Paris was halted by authorities there. He had set up shop in the empty buildings of the London Greyfriars near Newgate in 1539, just a year after its suppression. Ironically the history of this Franciscan house could be traced back to the arrival in 1224 of the Friars Minor (Greyfriars) sent to England by St. Francis himself just two years before his death. It was there in 1550 that Grafton printed Alber's attack on devotion to Francis in an English translation. The English title of the translation of Alber refers to the "*heape or numbre of the blasphemous and trifling doctrines of the wounded idole Saint Frances*" taken from the *Conformities*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Der Barfuser Münche Eulenspiegel und Alcoran mit einer Vorrede D. Martini Luth[eri]*.

<sup>44</sup> *The alcaron of the barefote friers, that is to say, an heape or numbre of the blasphemous and trifling doctrines of the wounded idole Saint Frances: taken out of the*

In Geneva, Alber's work would occupy the French printer in exile, Conrad Bade (d. 1562). He was destined to become well known in England for his own foray into Bible printing, as he produced the English New Testament of William Whittington in 1577. He had earlier involved himself in the *Conformities* controversy in 1560 by publishing his French translation of Alber's *Eulenspiegel* (adding his own Preface), calling the *Conformities* "a sea of blasphemies and lies about a stigmatized idol."<sup>45</sup>

Back in Germany, in the last decade of the sixteenth century a new series of polemical publications about the *Conformities* began to appear.<sup>46</sup> In 1591, the Lutheran pastor and court preacher of Württemberg Lucas Osiander published his work with a lengthy and ironic title:

*A fine fragrant rosary, bundled together from the exquisite, excellent book of the Franciscan monks, which they call the Book of the Conformities, to honor the Barefoot monks, in the monastery of Freiburg in Breisgau, and produced on the press, in and by which the special devotion and holiness of the Seraphic brothers is to be known.*<sup>47</sup>

Osiander had deliberately mistranslated several sections of the *Conformities* in his determination to discredit the work. The Franciscan Georg Ecker, working with Abraham Gemperlin, a pioneering printer in

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*boke of his rules, called in latin, Liber conformitatum*

<sup>45</sup> *L'Alcoran des cordeliers. Tant en latin qu'en françois. C'est a dire, la mer des blasphemes et mensonges de cest idole stigmatizé, qu'on appelle S.Francois: le quel livre a este recueilli mot a mot par le Docteur Erasme Albere, du Livre des conformitez de ce beau S. François a Jesus Christ ..., composé par un cordelier, et imprimé a Milan, l'an 1510.*

<sup>46</sup> See fuller treatment in Johannes Janssen, *History of the German People at the Close of the Middle Ages*, trans. by A. M. Christie (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1906) X 135-7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ein schöner wolriechender Rosenkrantz : zusammen gebunden, auß dem köstlichen, vbertrefflichen Buch der Franciscaner Mönch, welches sie Librum conformitatum nennen; Zu Ehren der Barfusser Mönch, im Kloster zu Freiburg im Preißgew, in den Truck verfertigt. Darauß die besondere andacht vnd heiligkeit der Seraphischen Brüder zu uernemen* (Tübingen: Georg Gruppenbach, 1591).

Fribourg (Switzerland), composed an equally stinging correction of Osiander in 1591, called the “garland of nettles, taken from the delicious and excellent works, not the Table Talk, but the noble Works and books of the dear man and ex-monk Martin Luther, etc.”<sup>48</sup>

Michael Anisius, a friar of Bamberg, wrote his own attack on the work of Osiander (whom he calls “Hoserle”) with this title:

*The Friendly tearing apart of a beautiful and sweet-smelling Rosary, which a city maid called Hoserle gathered out of the delicious, excellent Book of the Franciscan Monks, which is called the Book of Conformities.*<sup>49</sup>

He hotly contested the evident errors of Osiander’s translation of the *Conformities* with the kind of personal insults that characterized the religious polemic of the age. While the creativity of the titles of these works may not be paralleled by those of theological works today, they certainly attest to the interest of readers who kept printers busy in both Catholic and Protestant territories throughout the 1500s.

## Into the 17<sup>th</sup> Century

The fate of the *Conformities* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century evokes a personal reminiscence closely tied to a long-time interest in presses and printing. I remember making my way on a chilly March morning through the miscellaneous household furnishings auction, a weekly event for the last five hundred years or so in the Vrijdagmarkt of Antwerp (it is the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ein Schöner Alcoranischer Nessel Kranz. Auß den Köstlichen unnd Ubertrefflichen, nicht Tischreden, sondern Fürnemen Operibus, unnd Büchern des uil Seeluerlürstigen, auch deßhalben Teuren Manns und außgesprungenen Mönchs Martini Lutheri. Für ein Meßkram Zusamen in unterschiedenen Azoaras gebunden, unnd auff des Gottlosen Lucas Osianders [.], Unsinnig Alcoranische Haupt [.], aufgesetzt, etc. Meniglichem zu einem Spiegel der Lutherischen Gottslesterung und Abscheulichen Unflats in Tag gegeben [.].* (Freyburg in Uchtlandt: Abraham Gemperlin, 1591).

<sup>49</sup> *Freundtliche Zerzeissung. Deß schönen, wolriechenden Rosenkrantz, welchen ein Stuetische Graßmagd, Hoserle genandt, auß dem köstlichen, ubertrefflichen Buch der Franziscaner-Mönch, welches sie Librum Conformitatum nennen, abgebrochen* (Eder, Ingolstadt, 1592).

world's oldest auction of its kind, I was told). Beyond and slightly above the piles of used carpets, dusty tables, and solid-looking dining-room chairs, I could see something of equally significant historical interest and of approximately the same vintage, the façade of the Plantin-Moretus Press, housing what are claimed to be the two oldest operating printing presses in the world. The double name of this impressive press derives from the marriage, in 1570, of Jan Moretus to Martina, daughter of the founder of the press, Christophe Plantin, a Parisian immigrant and Bible printer of the first order.

In 1572 Plantin's press produced the great Antwerp Polyglot Bible for Philip II of Spain, one of the notable achievements of multilingual typesetting. After Plantin's death in 1589, Moretus headed the establishment and ventured into the world of Franciscan texts. In 1597, with the expert help of a Flemish Franciscan editor, the scholarly Henricus de Vroom (Henricus Sedulius), he published an edition of *The Life of St. Francis (De vita s. patris Francisci)* by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.<sup>50</sup> A decade later, in 1607 he published de Vroom's *Apologeticus aduersus Alcoranum Franciscanorum, pro Libro Conformitatum*.<sup>51</sup> This was a defense of the *Conformities*, and more generally of the Franciscan Order, which carefully explained Bartholomew's citations from Scripture, from Church Fathers and works of ancient philosophers, demonstrating the errors of Alber in his criticism of the *Conformities*. But such a refutation did little to stop the publishing fortunes of attacks on Bartholomew's work. In 1664 a Dutch version of Alber's work appeared, "after the copy printed at Geneva," (presumably an earlier edition) probably printed at Amsterdam.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Dirk Imhof, *Jan Moretus and the Continuation of the Plantin Press (2 Vols.): A Bibliography of the Works published and printed by Jan Moretus I in Antwerp (1589-1610)* (Leyden: Brill, 2014) 116 (B-47).

<sup>51</sup> Imhof, 649 (S-34).

<sup>52</sup> *Den Alcoran der Franciscaner monnicken. Waer in de grouwelijcke en afgodische leere der barvoeter-monnicken, ende de superstie der papisten bloot wertaengewesen. Getrocken uyt een boeck ghenoeemt Liber conformitatum*



In England Alber's work continued to attract readers, as attested by further editions of his work. In 1603, William White in London printed another English edition of Alber's work previously printed by Grafton. At "Goat-court on Ludgate Hill," London printer Langley Curtis printed the English version of Alber in 1679 with an extended title identifying the *Conformities* as "A sink of lyes and blasphemies" of the Franciscans, "a considerable order of regulars among the papists."<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, Curtis was also accused of printing some other works without the proper license, and the authorities intervened by sending investigators to the press to make inquiries. His wife, Jane, on March 6, 1689, seems to have intimidated these officials of the Stationers' Company Court in London, according to the testimony of one of its messengers: "she soe reviled & threatened the said Messenger (even in Court) for executing his said Warrant That the Court were apprehensive he might be in danger of his life by doieng his duty."<sup>54</sup> As far as current bibliographies indicate, the Curtis book was the last major publication in the English language dedicated to the *Conformities* until the 1960s.

Though the *Book of Conformities* was reprinted in 1620 (from the 1590 Bologna edition), no further full edition of the work appeared until the Quaracchi edition of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But Catholic authors, undeterred by Protestant critiques of the work, and inspired by its listing of "conformities" of the life of Francis and the life of Jesus, produced even more elaborate works in this genre. The most extraordinary of these must surely be the *Prodigy of Nature, Portent of*

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<sup>53</sup> The full title is: *The Alcoran of the Franciscans, or, A sink of lyes and blasphemies: collected out of a blasphemous book belonging to that order, called the book of the conformities: with the epistles of Dr. Martin Luther, and Erasmus Alberus, detecting the same formerly printed in Latine, and now made English, for the discovery of the blasphemies of the Franciscans, a considerable order of regulars amongst the papists.*

<sup>54</sup> Donald Francis McKenzie, Maureen Bell, *A Chronology and Calendar of Documents Relating to the London Book Trade 1641-1700: Volume III: 1686-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 53.

*Grace*, published in 1651 by the Peruvian-educated Spanish friar Pedro de Alva y Astorga (d. 1667), with 3,726 “conformities” of the life of Francis to that of Christ.<sup>55</sup> A more florid Baroque tribute to the figure of St. Francis can hardly be imagined.

### **The Conformities in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

Carolly Erickson has pointed out that severe judgments on the *Conformities* were still being formulated into the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> Johann Lorenz Mosheim, for example, in his *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History Ancient and Modern*, wrote of the Franciscans, that they

suffered to go abroad without censure and even approved and commended, an impious piece stuffed with monstrous and absurd tales, entitled, *The book of the conformities of St. Francis with Jesus Christ*; which was published in 1385 (sic), by Bartholomew Albizi (sic) a Franciscan of Pisa, with the applause of his order. This infamous book, in which the Son of God himself is put upon a level with a vile and miserable man, is an eternal monument of the impious arrogance and religious stupidity of the Franciscan order, and of the consummate indiscretion of the pontiffs for extolling and recommending those friars.<sup>57</sup>

And by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, small details of the book (notably a story about a spider consumed during the Mass)<sup>58</sup> were routinely

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<sup>55</sup> *Naturae prodigium gratiae portentum hoc est Seraphici P. N. Francisci vitae acta, ad Christi D. N. vitam et mortem regulata et coaptata* (Madrid, 1651). See Miguel Ángel Lavilla Martín, “El *Naturae Prodigium, Gratiae Portentum* de Pedro de Alva y Astorga: una colección franciscana barroca,” in Marco Nobile, Lluís Oviedo, eds., *Sanctum Evangelium observare: Saggi in onore di Martino Conti* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 2003) 211–46.

<sup>56</sup> “Francis Exalted, *De conformitate*,” 256.

<sup>57</sup> *Institutiones Historiae Ecclesiasticae Antiquae et Recentioris Libri Quattuor*, (Helmstadt: Weygand, 1755); *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History Ancient and Modern*, ed. William Stubbs, trans. by James Murdock and Henry Soames (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1863) 2: 275.

<sup>58</sup> AF IV 290: “In Abruzzi lies Brother Francis. While he was saying Mass he found a spider in the blood of Christ in the chalice, and not wishing to tip out a spider that was dipped in Christ’s blood, drank the cup spider and all. But afterwards he felt an itch in his leg and began rubbing and scratching it, and the spider emerged from his leg without

expected to be identified in descriptions of its content. Thus, in 1824, Friedrich Adolf Ebert, in *A General Bibliographical Dictionary*, was careful to describe that most significant detail of the 1510 edition in these terms:

The first and very scarce edition of a book finished in 1385, and filled with absurd tales, to which a paltry religious hatred has affixed a value, which indeed it never deserved. The history of the spider, which was the principal cause of its celebrity, is in leaf 72a (not 78) col. 1.<sup>59</sup>

For a mild and even-handed assessment of Bartholomew's tome, readers of English had to await the article by the Rev. Alfred Tolver Paget, wrote a mild review in the *Biographical Dictionary of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*.<sup>60</sup> Oddly enough, though, this Mathematical Master of Shrewsbury School, formerly of Caius College, Cambridge, refers to a mysterious early edition of the *Conformities* published in Venice, otherwise unknown, which he claims was in the library of Georg Wilhelm, Baron von Hohendorff.<sup>61</sup>

If any author can be credited with reversing the common view of Bartholomew's work, it was the French Reformed pastor and pioneering scholar of early Franciscan sources, Paul Sabatier. He gave a basically positive view of the *Conformities*, while admitting its shortcomings, in his ground-breaking late 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Vie de Saint François*.<sup>62</sup> There he remarks that few of those who write about the book seem to have read

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hurting him at all."

<sup>59</sup> *Allgemeines bibliographisches lexikon* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1821-30), trans. by Arthur Browne, *A General Bibliographical Dictionary*, 4 vols., (Oxford: University Press, 1837) 2: 937.

<sup>60</sup> (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans) 1,2: 717-8: "Albizzi, Bartholomew."

<sup>61</sup> The information is not confirmed by *Bibliotheca Hohendorffiana ou Catalogue de la Bibliotheque de feu Monsieur George Guillaume Baron de Hohendorf* (La Haye, Abraham de Hondt, 1720) no. 64, 9.

<sup>62</sup> (Paris: Fischbacher, 1894).

it thoroughly. And he excuses them, in part, by admitting that the text makes for tiresome reading, with the repetition of the same events ten or fifteen times over in the course of its reading. And that, he thought, may help to explain its neglect over the course of time, though for Sabatier it remained “the most important work” on the life of Saint Francis.<sup>63</sup> He also defended it against some of its harshest critics, arguing that the charges against it for making Francis equal to Christ are unfounded, even contradicted by the text itself.<sup>64</sup>

### **From 1900 to the Present**

In the wake of Sabatier’s studies, the Friar Editors of Quaracchi published their critical edition of the entire Latin text between 1906 and 1912. This allowed the slow, painstaking work of scholars working on “The Franciscan Question” to mine the encyclopedic work of Bartholomew for its rendering of earlier sources on the life of Francis of Assisi. The work as a whole, however, seemingly remained only a kind of depository where scholars interested in Franciscan history or biography could rummage for useful information.

It would only be in 1969 at Columbia University in New York, that Bartholomew’s work as a whole would once again be given the kind of attentive reading it had received in its earliest years. Carolly Erickson made it the subject of her doctoral dissertation, marking the first time in nearly three hundred years that a major work on the text had appeared in English: *Francis Conformed to Christ: Bartholomew of Pisa’s De Conformitate in Franciscan History*.<sup>65</sup> A few years later she published a

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<sup>63</sup> “Le livre des Conformités ... semble n’avoir été lu que d’une manière distraite par la plupart des auteurs qui en ont parlé.<sup>63</sup> Il est juste d’ajouter à leur décharge qu’il serait difficile de trouver un ouvrage d’une lecture plus pénible: les mêmes faits y reviennent jusqu’à dix et quinze fois et finissent par fatiguer les nerfs les moins délicats. C’est à cela sans doute qu’il faut attribuer l’oubli dans lequel on le laisse. Je n’hésite cependant pas à y voir l’ouvrage le plus important qui ait été fait sur la vie de saint François.” *Vie de Saint François*, cxv.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 1: “Je n’ai pas à m’occuper ici des sottes attaques de quelques auteurs protestants contre ce livre. Ceci est une querelle de théologiens qui n’intéresse en rien l’histoire. Nulle part Barthélemy de Pise ne fait de saint François l’égal de Jésus, et il lui arrive même de prévenir la critique à cet égard. V. 142a 2 [ed. 1510].”

magisterial article in *Medieval Studies*<sup>66</sup> to explain the content and significance of the *Conformities* as a useful and reliable resource for a better understanding of the changing perceptions of Francis of Assisi in the later Middle Ages. Her work has now been complemented by a thorough study in Italian of the vast work of the *Conformities*: Alessandro Mastromatteo, *Similem illum fecit in gloria sanctorum. Il profilo cristiforme di Francesco d'Assisi nel De conformitate di Bartolomeo da Pisa*.<sup>67</sup> Originally presented as a doctoral dissertation at the Pontifical University Antonianum, this work deliberately reintroduces Bartholomew of Pisa's work into the continuum of early sources that strove increasingly over the course of the first two Franciscan centuries to represent Francis as an outstanding follower of Christ.

## Conclusion

Scholars, especially those who work on ancient religious texts, must have the kind of patience that only an attentive study of history can teach. An enthusiastic and voluble Tuscan friar dedicated five years of his life to composing his great tribute to his spiritual hero, St. Francis, and waited another ten years before the authorities of his Order allowed the promulgation of the work (and they then endorsed it enthusiastically). He could hardly have imagined then the 600-year voyage to be taken by the literary vessel he launched, as it travelled up the Elbe, down the Thames, across the Pacific to Mexico, and up the Hudson to New York. For those scholars whom we now honor – Judith Berling as she celebrates her retirement from the faculty, and Arthur Holder as he celebrates his retirement from the deanship of the Graduate Theological Union – may the example of this “barefote frier” be a source of encouragement and reassurance.

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<sup>65</sup> See above, n. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> (Rome: Pontificia Università Antoniniana, 2012).

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wounded idole Saint Frances: taken out of the boke of his rules, called in latin, *Liber conformitatum*. London: Richard Grafton, 1550.

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