

ROBERTO CARACCIOLO'S SERMON  
ON THE MIRACLE OF THE STIGMATIZATION OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI<sup>1</sup>

*EL SERMÓN DE ROBERTO CARACCIOLO  
SOBRE EL MILAGRO DE LOS ESTIGMAS DE FRANCISCO DE ASÍS*

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*Abstract:* Roberto Caracciolo (d. 1495), a relatively unknown Franciscan friar in present day scholarship, was one of the greatest preachers of his generation. A favorite among popes, he was held in such high esteem that in his mid-20s he was invited to preach for grand occasions such as the canonization of Bernardino da Siena. His sermon on the stigmata of Francis of Assisi tells us a good deal about the late medieval Franciscan view of the Poverello's reception of the five wounds of Christ. This paper will examine Roberto Caracciolo's understanding of the stigmatization as a miracle. It will assess how he fashioned his argument to dispel doubt from the minds of those who questioned the authenticity of an event that purported to transform the skin and bones of Francis of Assisi into the crucified likeness of Christ. Ultimately, it will consider the exceptional esteem in which Roberto and his contemporaries held both Francis of Assisi and the miracle of his stigmatization.

*Keywords:* Francis of Assisi; miracles; stigmata; preaching; Roberto Caracciolo.

*Resumen:* Roberto Caracciolo (m. 1495), fraile franciscano relativamente poco conocido en la actualidad entre los estudiosos, fue uno de los más grandes predicadores de su generación. Favorecido por los papas y tenido por ellos en gran estima, con apenas veinticinco años fue invitado a predicar en ocasiones tan importantes como la canonización de Bernardino de Siena. Su sermón sobre los estigmas de Francisco de Asís ilustra detalladamente la visión que, durante la Baja Edad Media, tenían los franciscanos de cómo recibió el Poverello las cinco llagas de Cristo. El objetivo concreto de este artículo consiste en examinar la opinión de Roberto Caracciolo acerca de los estigmas, considerados por él milagrosos. Se observará también cómo Caracciolo elaboró su argumentación para disipar las dudas de quienes cuestionaban la autenticidad de un suceso que pretendía transformar la piel y los huesos de Francisco de Asís en la imagen de Cristo crucificado. Por último, se examinará el excepcional aprecio que Roberto y sus coetáneos sentían por Francisco de Asís y el milagro de sus estigmas.

*Palabras clave:* Francisco de Asís; milagros; estigma; predicación; Roberto Caracciolo.

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## SUMMARY

1. Introduction.– 2. Background: Roberto Caracciolo.– 3. The *Sermones de sanctis* of Roberto Caracciolo: dispelling doubts about the stigmata.– 4. The miraculous process: validating the authenticity of the stigmata.– 5. Bibliography.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are thousands of extant homilies on saints from the Middle Ages contained in *sermones de sanctis* collections<sup>2</sup>. Many of these deal primarily with saints from the New Testament and early Christian era, in particular martyrs. There are medieval sermons, however, which also deal with “modern” saints<sup>3</sup>. One of the most preached about contemporary saints of the later medieval period was Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226). In some sermons dealing with the Poverello one finds detailed information concerning the miracle of the stigmata<sup>4</sup>. This is not entirely typical as *sermones de sanctis* normally emphasized the moral characteristics of a holy person such as honesty, bravery, steadfastness and selflessness. These virtuous ideals were meant to serve as models of holiness for the Christian community to emulate, while de-emphasizing the more spectacular aspects of a given saint’s miraculous career. As Michael Goodich has argued, the tendency to focus on the moral quality of a person’s holiness rather than on his or her astonishing feats was an attempt to play down miracles because claims of the wondrous had critics not only among unbelievers but also among believers<sup>5</sup>. However, sermons which treat the stigmatization of Francis of Assisi offer a major exception to this general rule in that they dwell more on the miraculous associated with Francis rather than on his saintly qualities. The Franciscan Roberto Caracciolo (1425-1495) provides a useful and succinct example of how a *sermo de sanctis* focused on the miraculous qualities of Francis’s reception of the five wounds of Christ. This article will, therefore, assess what pastoral literature can tell us about attitudes toward the miraculous in relation to the conceptualization and understanding of stigmatization in the later Middle Ages.

## 2. BACKGROUND: ROBERTO CARACCILO

Roberto Caracciolo was one of the most successful preachers of his generation. Born in 1425 in Lecce, he was educated by the Conventual Franciscans and then joined the Observant branch of the order, only to defect to the Conventuals

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<sup>2</sup> Several can be found in J-B Schneyer, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones*.

<sup>3</sup> G. Ferzoco, *Sermon Literature*, pp. 103-125; idem, *The Context of Medieval Sermon*, pp. 279-291.

<sup>4</sup> See Saint Bonaventure, *Sermons Diversis*, vol. II, sermon 58, p.783. See also Bernardino da Siena, *De stigmatibus sacris gloriosi Francisci*, Tome 5, pp. 204-230. For examples and discussion of non-Franciscan sermons on the stigmata, L.-J. Bataillon, *Les stigmates de saint François*, pp. 341-347.

<sup>5</sup> Goodich explains: “*Sermones de sanctis* almost invariably focus on the moral virtues of the saint as an example to believers, and deemphasize the supernatural. The often blatant absence of references to miracles, even in sermons dealing with contemporary saints, indicates the clear desire to encourage believers to think more about the exemplary quality of the saint, than about the alleged supernatural powers, which critics such as Guibert of Nogent, Erasmus, Thomas More and others, not to speak of heretics and nonbelievers, regarded with skepticism or even disdain”. M. Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, p. 31.

definitively in 1452<sup>6</sup>. His toing and froing from the Conventuals to the Observants caused tensions to escalate between these two branches of the Franciscan order. Indeed, some of the conflict was exacerbated by Roberto's invective against the Observants when, for reasons not entirely clear, in 1451 he began to perceive his confreres as obstacles to his preaching activities<sup>7</sup>. Although he ultimately chose to stay with the Conventuals, he developed his image in the likeness of the stellar Observant preachers that sprouted from that branch of the Franciscans, most notably Bernardino da Siena (d. 1444)<sup>8</sup>.

Although he had never seen Bernardino preach, Roberto adopted the great preacher's sermons as a template for his preaching style<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, from the outset of his ecclesiastical career he demonstrated great prowess as a preacher. In his mid-twenties he delivered the official eulogy for the canonization of Bernardino da Siena in 1450<sup>10</sup>. For the grand occasion of the canonization of another Sienese saint, Catherine of Siena, in 1461 Pope Pius II invited Roberto to preach in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome, where the new saint's tomb was located<sup>11</sup>. Throughout his life he preached up and down the Italian peninsula educating audiences in the Christian faith<sup>12</sup>. Generally, his preaching style was remarkable for its gestures and impersonations<sup>13</sup>. He also was known for his ability to reduce his audience to tears through the drama of his words and actions<sup>14</sup>. Like his role model Bernardino da Siena, Roberto presented his sermons in a simplified structure that made them easy to recall<sup>15</sup>.

Throughout his ecclesiastical career he remained in great favor with the papal curia, culminating in Pope Sixtus IV's appointment of Roberto as bishop of Aquino in 1475. Thus, although little studied by contemporary scholars, Roberto was one of the most popular preachers of his generation. From among the top 50 bestselling authors of all time between the years 1455-1500, Roberto ranked 45th on the strength of the brisk sales for his sermon collections. In fact, he produced several sermon collections, which circulated throughout Europe and are extant in over 100 manuscripts and numerous printed editions<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, Roberto's sermon on the stigmatization of Francis offers an opportunity to consider a prevalent fifteenth-century view on the subject preached by one of the most persuasive and influential preachers of the second half of the fifteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Roberto Caracciolo's life and works see: See S. Bastanzio, *Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce*; B. Roest, M. van der Heijden (eds.), *Franciscan Authors, 13th-18th Century*. See also Z. Zafarana, *Caracciolo, Roberto*, pp. 446-452; A. Zawart, *The History of Franciscan Preaching*, pp. 295-298; Caracciolo also figures in B. Roest, *Franciscan Literature of Religious Instruction*, pp. 62-64.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the beginning of his disenchantment with the Observants, see S. Bastanzio, *Fra Roberto Caracciolo*, pp. 34-35. See also O. Visani, *Roberto Caracciolo e i sermonari*.

<sup>8</sup> O. Visani, *Un imitatore di Bernardino da Siena*, pp. 213-228.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 213-214.

<sup>10</sup> S. Bastanzio, *Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce*, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Caracciolo had been given the responsibility to preach the sermon on the day of Catherine of Siena's canonization. See G. Cappelluti, *S. Caterina da Siena*, p. 505, n. 21.

<sup>12</sup> For example of the sorts of sermons he preached see O. Visani (ed.), *Roberto da Lecce*.

<sup>13</sup> In one Good Friday sermon he provided detailed stage directions, and it seems that while preaching, he acted out all the roles. For further discussion see K.L. Jansen, *Preaching as Playwriting*, p. 245.

<sup>14</sup> S. Bastanzio, *Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce*, pp. 206-207.

<sup>15</sup> O. Visani, *Un imitatore di Bernardino da Siena*, pp. 217-218. For Bernardino of Siena's use of *artes praedicandi*, see C. Delcorno, *L' 'Ars praedicandi'*.

<sup>16</sup> See M. Milway, *Forgotten Best-Sellers*, p. 131.

### 3. THE *SERMONES DE SANCTIS* OF ROBERTO CARACCILO: DISPELLING DOUBTS ABOUT THE STIGMATA

Roberto wrote a *sermones de sanctis* collection entitled *Sermones de Laudibus Sanctorum*. It was first published in Naples and Venice in 1489. It is in this collection we find his *De sacris admirandis stigmatibus seraphici Francisci*, that is, his sermon on the stigmata of Francis<sup>17</sup>. The sermon was written sometime between 1482 and 1489<sup>18</sup>. The sermon's theme is: Galatians 6, 17: *I bear the stigmata of the Lord Jesus Christ on my body*<sup>19</sup>. Roberto did not have much to choose from for a biblical *thema*, as this is the only use of the term "stigmata" in the New Testament. What one first notes about Roberto's text is the defensive tone it takes from the outset in order to substantiate the authenticity of the event. André Vauchez has demonstrated that reports of the stigmatic miracle met initially with immediate and vociferous criticism and, in some cases, outright disbelief and hostility. Vauchez clearly illustrated that the validity of this miracle, although papally approved in the early years after Francis' death by Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241), was deemed heretical by some ecclesiastical leaders such as the thirteenth-century Bishop of Olomouc in Bohemia –also known as the Cistercian Robert of England<sup>20</sup>.

The defensive tone of Roberto's sermon, written more than two hundred years after the initial criticisms surrounding the reports of Francis's reception of the five wounds, indicates that hesitation persisted toward accepting this as an authentic miracle. As Jean-Claude Schmitt has argued the notion of "belief" in general was an ongoing activity that was inseparable from doubt<sup>21</sup>; this is clearly demonstrated in the varying perceptions that people held regarding the miracle of the stigmata. Furthermore, some of Roberto's defensiveness can also be explained by the heated debate that raged between the Dominicans and Franciscans in the second half of the fifteenth century regarding the stigmata. In general, Franciscans claimed that only Francis bore the stigmata while the Dominicans argued that numerous people, especially Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), had stigmata<sup>22</sup>. Roberto at once aimed to dispel doubt over the miracle and establish Francis as a rare, indeed unique, example of a stigmatic saint:

God the Father chose Blessed Francis not only because of Francis's evangelical doctrine and his perfection in life, but so with this wondrous sign he would excite the heart of humanity to desire eternal life. This same man for two years bore visibly the picture of the cross on his hands and feet and side. And just as the apostles with great virtue rendered testimony of Jesus Christ's resurrection, so too Francis in himself in his own body demonstrated most splendidly the reawakened Christ. But many

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<sup>17</sup> See Robertus Caraccioli de Licio, *Sermo XLXIII de sanctis admirandis stigmatibus seraphici Francisci*, ff. 149va-153ra.

<sup>18</sup> The sermon contains numerous references to "Sanctus Bonaventura". See for example, Robertus Caraccioli, *Sermo, XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 150va. Bonaventure was canonized in 1482 and the collection was first printed in 1489.

<sup>19</sup> The Vulgate reads: "Ego enim stigmata domini Iesu Christi in corpore meo porto".

<sup>20</sup> A. Vauchez, *The Stigmata of St Francis*, pp. 66-67. This is a translation of A. Vauchez's *Les Stigmates de Saint François et leurs detracteurs*.

<sup>21</sup> J.-C. Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 7. See also J. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion on the intensity of this argument between the Franciscans and Dominicans see C. Muessig, *The Stigmatic Debate*. See also Catherine of Siena, in C. Muessig, G. Ferzoco, B. Kienzle (eds.), *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*.

when they hear these things, either they do not wish to believe it or they have grown used to it as something trivial and not to be wondered at. Wherefore, so that the rarity of such a matter be made known with devotion to the faithful and so that the temerity of the curious is curtailed, I have decreed in this sermon to treat [tractare] the sacred stigmata of Francis<sup>23</sup>.

The sermon proceeds using a clearly organized structure consisting of the aforementioned introduction, three distinct chapters and a conclusion<sup>24</sup>. Each chapter considers an aspect of the “mystery” of the stigmata: chapter one explains the “truth” (*veritas*) of how the stigmata were impressed on Francis’s body; chapter two explains the “sublimity” (*sublimitas*) of the miracle; chapter three considers the “appropriateness” (*congruitas*) of the stigmata regarding the person of Francis, the place it was received and the way it was received via the seraph. The scholastic division of the sermon and Roberto’s aim “to treat” the subject do not mean, however, that it was directed only to learned Franciscans attending *studia* for their religious formation. Many Franciscans upheld strong pedagogical ideals in relation to preaching and teaching; for these Franciscans, education was something for all –and preaching was a tool that could combat ignorance. In this case, Roberto was intent on relaying the meaning and purpose of Francis’s stigmata to the Christian community at large in an accessible and straightforward manner<sup>25</sup>.

In establishing “the truth” of the stigmata, Roberto first sets out to build a case for the authenticity of the marks on the Poverello’s body. The five wounds of Francis, he argues, should not be compared to fables like the Minotaur, the Centaur, or, the Pegasus<sup>26</sup>. Disbelievers might say that if ancient myths were made up, why couldn’t Francis’ stigmata also be someone’s invention<sup>27</sup>? The first weapon Roberto uses to combat such attitudes is the listing of various ecclesiastical authorities that explicitly support and recognize Francis’ miraculous reception of the five wounds. In his arsenal of ecclesiastical sources to convince doubters, Roberto first mentions the *Legenda maior* and *Legenda minor* by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274), the Minister General of the Franciscans (1257-1274) and then later Cardinal Bishop of

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<sup>23</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo, XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 150ra: “Elegit pater omnium Deus beatum Franciscum qui non solum euangelica doctrina vitaeque perfectione sed mirabili signo stigmatum excitaret hominum corda ad desiderium eterne vite. Duobus quidem annis picturam crucis in manibus pedibus et latere visibiliter tulit. Et sicut apostoli virtute magna reddebant testimonium resurrectionis Iesu Christi ita Franciscus in seipso in proprio suo corpore Christum resuscitatum luculentissime demonstrabat. Sed plerique dum hec audiunt vel credere nolunt franciscum signo crucifixi fuisse insignitum vel quid leue et non admirandum id asseuerant. Quapropter vt nouitas tante rei cum deuotione fidelibus inotescat reprimatur que temeritas curiosorum in hoc sermone de sacris Francisci stigmatibus tractare decreui”.

<sup>24</sup> For a general discussion of how Roberto generally structured his sermons see O. Visani, *Un imitatore di Bernardino da Siena: Roberto Caracciolo*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>25</sup> This view was held in particular by Bernardino of Siena and other Observant Franciscans. As mentioned earlier Roberto, although he was a Conventual, at one time had counted himself among the Observants. Furthermore, he modeled his preaching style on the Observant Franciscan preacher Bernardino da Siena. For a discussion of the Observant Franciscan view of preaching and education see B. Roest, *Rhetoric of Innovation*, pp. 132-135.

<sup>26</sup> In making this argument Roberto refers to Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*, Book 18, Chapter 13, where these myths and others are discussed as being invented when judges began to rule the Hebrews.

<sup>27</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, ff.149v-153r, at 150rb: “Si igitur ista et alia huius excogitari poterunt, quid mirum inquit increduli si de Francisco aliquis fingendo et mentiundo dixerit quod in manibus pedibus et latere plagas quasi crucifixus habuit?”.

Albano (1273-1274)<sup>28</sup>. After 1266, these two *legendae* became the touchstone for the understanding of Francis's religious character, including the nature of his stigmata. That these *legendae* became the dominant indicator of Franciscan identity is greatly owing to Bonaventure's directive as Minister General to have all other biographies of Francis destroyed<sup>29</sup>. In this sermon, Roberto relied prodigiously upon Bonaventure's *legendae* to make his case for the unusual Franciscan miracle. He also relied on Bonaventure's saintly reputation to assist in the authentication of Francis's stigmata. Bonaventure had been canonized in 1482, only a few short years before the first printed edition of the *Sermones de laudibus*. Roberto himself had given the canonization sermon to celebrate this event. Still fresh in the minds of Roberto's contemporaries, Bonaventure's canonization would no doubt enhance the explanations that he offered on the stigmatization of Francis. And just in case Bonaventure's new status as saint and his past role as cardinal had slipped the mind of Roberto's audience, the consummate preacher reminded them that the former Minister General was called: *Saint Bonaventure, Cardinal Bishop of Albano, a man of outstanding sanctity who wrote elegant legenda about Saint Francis in which he spoke expansively about his stigmata*<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, Bonaventure was thought to be the author of the *Meditationes vita Christi*, one of the top 50 bestsellers of the fifteenth century. Although this work is now recognized as a Pseudo-Bonaventure piece, in the fifteenth century Bonaventure's reputation was no doubt enhanced by his alleged authorship of the *Meditationes*<sup>31</sup>.

In addition to Bonaventure's *legendae*, liturgical hymns celebrating the stigmatization of Francis and papal bulls are evoked by Roberto as clear indicators of the authenticity of the Poverello's five wounds<sup>32</sup>. Popes who receive honorable mention as keen supporters of the miracle are Gregory IX (1227-1241); Alexander IV (1254-1261); Nicholas III (1277-1280); and Benedict XII (1334-1342)<sup>33</sup>. Roberto skillfully follows these references with an exemplum taken from Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* about Pope Gregory IX's own initial doubt of the genuineness of Francis's wounds. In a dream, the pope is confronted by a stern Francis who orders the pontiff to gather up in a cup the blood continuously spurting from the Poverello's side. From that time onwards, we are told, Pope Gregory became a firm believer in the stigmata and rebuked anyone who doubted the wounds<sup>34</sup>.

After establishing the textual authorities, Roberto provides a list of eyewitnesses whose testimonies attest to the truth of the stigmata<sup>35</sup>. Generally,

<sup>28</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 150rb: "Nam sanctus Bonaventura Cardinalis episcopus Albanensis vir eximie sanctitatis legenda sancti Francisci eleganter scripsit in qua diffuse loquitur de stigmatibus illis". Cited in *Legenda Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Legenda Maior*, vol. VIII, pp. 565-579.

<sup>29</sup> For this point and a general overview of Bonaventure's life see S. Botterill, *Bonaventure, Saint*. For a more detailed discussion see F. Uribe, *Il Francesco di Bonaventura*.

<sup>30</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 150rb: "Nam sanctus Bonaventura Cardinalis episcopus Albanensis, vir eximie sanctitatis legendam sancti Francisci eleganter scripsit in qua diffuse loquitur de stigmatibus".

<sup>31</sup> See M. Milway, *Forgotten Best-Sellers*, p. 142.

<sup>32</sup> In the sermon two hymns are mentioned: *Plaude turba paupercola* and *Decus morum, dux Minorum*. For the office of stigmatization of Francis see G.M. Dreves (ed.), *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, pp. 100-102. For the English text of the office of the stigmatization of Francis see R.J. Armstrong et al. (eds.), *The Prophet*, pp. 665-670.

<sup>33</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 150vb.

<sup>34</sup> Bonaventura, *Legenda maior*, p. 550; For the English translation see Bonaventura, *The Major Legend of St Francis* in R.J. Armstrong et al. (eds.), *The Founder*, p. 651.

<sup>35</sup> See M. Bihl, *De Quodam Elencho Assisano*.



eyewitnesses were a vital link in the chain of the validation of miracles. Canonization processes are perhaps the best-known example of where a hierarchy of witnesses was interrogated to provide the details of the lives of potential saints in order to verify their holiness<sup>36</sup>. However, there was no canonization process for Francis as he was declared a saint in 1228 more by acclamation than by procedure, even though formal papal processes were normally required by this time<sup>37</sup>. Hence, any formal assessment of the miracles of Francis did not undergo the usual rigors of papal investigation<sup>38</sup>. But Roberto used Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* and *Legenda minor* as a basis for eyewitness accounts as there are numerous references in these works which allude to people having seen the wounds<sup>39</sup>. Roberto tells us that the immediate inner circle of Francis, including Brothers Illuminato, Leo, Rufino and Pacificus, swore on the Bible that they themselves had seen the stigmata. Also, more than 55 other Franciscan brothers and Clare of Assisi, along with her religious sisters of San Damiano and numerous priests, testified that out of affection and devotion they kissed Francis' wounds. The lay people of Assisi saw the stigmata too; one citizen of Assisi, a doubting but well educated knight named Jerome touched them, upon which he became a staunch believer, strengthening his own faith and those around him<sup>40</sup>.

In some sources, the testimony of eyewitnesses who had seen the wounds is presented as equally as important as the actual moment of stigmatization. For example, a number of late medieval chronicles when referring to Francis's stigmata underline not so much the moment of the miraculous occurrence, but the individuals who saw later and touched the wounds<sup>41</sup>. Thus the inclusion of eyewitnesses was a crucial component in Roberto's evolving argument to validate in the minds of his audience the authenticity of the stigmata. What mattered both in his sermon and in the chronicles was not the witnessing of the actual event, but the reports of individuals who said they saw and touched the wounds; such reports were presented by Roberto

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<sup>36</sup> For further information on canonization processes see A. Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*.

<sup>37</sup> A.M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> For a comprehensive account of the function canonization processes see A. Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 481-534.

<sup>39</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 150vb. The accounts of eyewitnesses taken almost word for word from the following sections of Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, Chapter 13, par. 8, p. 544.

<sup>40</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, 150vb; see Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, Chapter 15, par. 4, p. 548.

<sup>41</sup> Here are a few examples of chronicles that underline the significance of eyewitness accounts: Thomas Ebendorfer, *Chronica pontificum Romanorum*, p. 421: "Hic canonisavit sanctam Claram Assisi multis miraculis clarificatam, que et asseruit se vidisse stigmata Christi in corpore beati Francisci"; Joannes de Winterthur (Joannes Vitoduranus, ca. 1302-1348), *Die Chronik des Johannes von Winterthur*, F. Baethgen, C. Brunn (eds.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*: "Anno MCCXXX beatus Franciscus contuens in aere seraphim in cruce ex tunc in palmis latere et pedibus effigiem plagarum Christi tulit usque ad felicem exitum suum, multis utriusque sexus videntibus illa in eo Christi stigmata" p. 4.; Thomas Paviensis (Thomas Tusci, ca. 1212-ca. 1284), *Thomae Tusci Gesta Imperatorum et Pontificum*, E. Ehrenfeuchter (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, p. 492. "Hic est ille Pacificus, qui corpore beatissimi viri Francisci adhuc in carne viventis sacra illa stigmata omni mundo miranda videre promeruit. Hic ille Pacificus est, qui laterale vulnus in parte quadam deceptione pia sed devotione per maxima contrectavit. Hic ille Pacificus est, qui adhuc deditus vanitati duos gladios sibi connexos ad modum crucis de ore patris sanctissimi predicantis exire conspexit, quo miraculo territus est conversus et Francisci factus est imitator precipuus. Non igitur magnum fuit si crucem nuci connatam invenit, qui amator vehemens crucis fuit".

as sound evidence. However, to underline that the wounds were divinely impressed, Roberto adds that various cures occurred among sick individuals and livestock when they came in contact with Francis's stigmata –sure proof that the wounds were made by the hand of God and not man<sup>42</sup>.

#### 4. THE MIRACULOUS PROCESS: VALIDATING THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE STIGMATA

The next step in Roberto's pastoral lecture on the stigmatization shifts from trying to prove the reality of the stigmata to a discussion of the actual miraculous process of Francis's reception of the five wounds. Benedicta Ward has noted that the tendency to dissect the miraculous process emerges in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. This development of investigating the validity of miracles existed side by side with another understanding of the miraculous which was held by monastic communities, especially within the Cistercian order. Cistercians were not concerned with proofs for miracles, rather they thought of miracles as learning experiences normally sparked by visions or contemplation that led to the transformation of a person into a more Christ-like individual. Thus, while some skeptics concerned themselves with a clear discussion regarding the causes of miracles, for the Cistercians what mattered was not physical evidence that a miracle actually occurred, but interior improvement of the self. In essence, the primary importance of Cistercian miracle collections was their didactic nature that encouraged moral perfection<sup>43</sup>. As we will see, Roberto's sermon indicates both his concern to establish the soundness of the miracle and to demonstrate that Francis had undergone an interior transformation toward a more perfect self.

Roberto is keen to demonstrate to skeptics how the miracle of the stigmatization might have occurred. But he is also equally eager to discount theories which he held to be worthless. Roberto's first step to scrutinize the miraculous event was an attempt to dismantle a widely held theory on Francis' stigmatization with which he disagreed. Some theologians and preachers had posited that Francis's stigmata were brought on by his vigorous imagination whereby the saint perfectly recalled the passion of Christ to the point that he transformed his body into the object of his contemplation, that is, Christ crucified. In other words, some held that because Francis had mediated upon Christ's suffering so intently, through the power of his mind he was able to bring about the appearance of the wounds on his body. Thus, the stigmata were effected through natural causes. The idea that flesh could be transformed into the object of its imagination had its theoretical foundation in a number of sources, such as Augustine's *Against Julian*, and in Avicenna's writings on the soul and imagination. However, the use of this theory to explain the stigmatization was made in a sermon by Jacopo da Varazze (d. 1298), the Dominican preacher and author of the *Legenda aurea*<sup>44</sup>. Jacopo da Varazze's hypothesis implied that the reception of the stigmata

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<sup>42</sup> These miracles included the warding off of plague and the rescue of individuals from certain death. Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 150ra-rb. They are found in Bonaventure, *Legenda minor*, Chapter 6, lections, 4-6, p. 574. The power of wounds of holy men to heal can be seen as early as the sixth century when the wounds of stylite monks, which occurred through years of extreme ascetic punishment, were thought to cure the sick. See C. Cremonesi, *The Meaning of Illness* in F. Jullien, M.-J. Pierre (eds.), *Monachismes d'orient*.

<sup>43</sup> See B. Ward, *Miracles in the Middle Ages*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>44</sup> See Jacobus da Voragine, *Sermo 3: De stigmatibus sancti Francisci*, vol. II, pp. 322-323.



was not a supernatural event because it was carried out through the natural powers of the imagination. Roberto, on the other hand, aimed to establish that the reception of the stigmata was a pure work of divine omnipotence surpassing the bounds of the natural<sup>45</sup>.

To counter Jacopo's argument, which was widely known<sup>46</sup>, and to explicate that the stigmatization was entirely effected through divine agency, Roberto relies on the authority of Thomas Aquinas, ironically (and possibly deliberately) another Dominican. In particular, he turns to the *Summa theologiae* 3.13.3, where it is argued that the imagination can alter the interior disposition of the person, that is the heart, by leading individuals to act in certain ways. But imagination, Thomas continues, in no way is able to transmute the shape of a hand or foot as it has no natural relation to parts of the body. Roberto, concludes, therefore, it would be impossible for Francis' imagination to cause the stigmata as it would have no relation to his exterior body and hence would be unable to change its form<sup>47</sup>. At the core of the stigmatization, was a larger debate of the nature of the miracle: some theologians argued that the role of human imagination with God's assistance could effect the five wounds, while others posited that it was a stupendous incident transcending any connection with the natural world<sup>48</sup>.

Roberto relies on Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* to describe how the nails that pierced the Poverello's hands and feet were actually made from Francis' flesh and bones, although having the appearance of real nails:

The heads of these appeared on the inner side of the hands and the upper side of the feet and their points on the opposite sides. The heads of the nails in his hands and feet were round and their points, which were hammered and bent back, emerged and stuck out from the flesh. The bent part of the nails on the bottom of his feet were so prominent and extended so far out that they did not allow the sole of his feet to touch the ground<sup>49</sup>.

The nails made of the saint's flesh and their unusual protrusion from the saint's hands and feet lead Roberto to conclude that they could only be made by divine power<sup>50</sup>. It is also posited that the stigmatization had to be a miracle because Francis would otherwise not be able to endure the severe pain in both body and

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<sup>45</sup> For further discussion see C. Muessig, *The Stigmata Debate in Theology*, pp. 484-486. Jacopo da Varazze's thesis was quickly adopted by other preachers. For example Giordano da Pisa in a sermon preached on 30 November 1304 discusses the possibility of the mind transforming the body into a stigmatic reality. See S. Serventi (ed.), *Giordano da Pisa, Avventuale fiorentino 1304*, pp. 112-113, and C. Muessig, *The Stigmata Debate*, p. 486, where I discuss this in more detail.

<sup>46</sup> C. Muessig, *The Stigmata Debate*, pp. 484-487 and p. 495, note 36.

<sup>47</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 151ra.

<sup>48</sup> See A. Boureau, *Miracle, volonté et imagination*.

<sup>49</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, 151vb: "In manibus eius et pedibus apparere ceperunt signa clauorum ipsorum capitibus in interiori parte manuum et superiori pedum apparentibus, et eorum acuminibus existentibus ex aduerso. Erantque clauorum capita in manibus et pedibus rotunda et nigra, ipsa vero acumina oblonga, retorta et reperiussa, que de ipsa carne surgentia, carnem reliquam excedebant. Siquidem reperiussa ipsa clauorum sub pedibus adeo prominens erat et extra protensa, ut non solum plantas solo libere applicari non sineret". Bonaventure, *Legenda minor*, Chapter 6, Lectio 3, p. 576. Translation from Bonaventure, *The Minor Legend of St Francis*, Chapter 6, Lesson 3, p. 710.

<sup>50</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 151vb: "virtute divina mirifice fabre facti".

mind resulting from the constant flow of blood and his vivid memory of the Lord's passion<sup>51</sup>.

Roberto not only articulated a clear analysis of the process of the miracle of stigmatization, but he also pushed the argument further by attempting to demonstrate that Francis's reception of the five wounds of Christ was among the greatest of God's wondrous acts. To address this point Roberto employs verbatim another argument by Thomas Aquinas, this time from the *Summa theologiae* 1.105.8. Here, Thomas posited that a thing is called a miracle by comparison with the power of nature which it surpasses. Nature can be surpassed in regard to substance, such as the glorification of the human body. These observations provided in the *Summa theologiae* give Roberto ample support to claim that the stigmatization is among the greatest of all miracles because the sudden transformation of bone, blood and sinew into the stigmata as shown in the nails of the hands and feet of Francis demonstrated the great power of the divine in that the body acted beyond its nature. Furthermore, in this transformation Francis's body was glorified by taking on the wounds of Christ. Roberto concludes:

The stigmatization of Francis is a work of such quality that nature did not effect it, nor is it able to effect it; it seems because of the substance of the deed, it is counted among the greatest miracles of God<sup>52</sup>.

Roberto could not prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the miracle had taken place, as miracles were the works of God not man, thus its exact nature was impossible to articulate<sup>53</sup>. The only thing a witness could do was validate perceptions of what was believed to be miraculous. For example at the canonization process of Bernardino of Siena (1447), the *magister* and *medicus* Pax Antonii de Aquila testified that he kissed the corpse of Bernardino and that it did not emit any foul odor, validating claims that the great preacher's body was indicating signs of sanctity<sup>54</sup>. In a like manner, Roberto did all he could do as a preacher and theologian to established that what happened to Francis of Assisi was none other than a miracle, whether the audience believed it or not was a matter of faith<sup>55</sup>.

After discussing the supernatural quality of the event, Roberto leads the argument away from the power of the miracle toward the implications that it had for Francis in the unfolding of Christian history. Roberto is careful to show that Francis is not similar to Christ in nature, but when compared to others he had a superior similitude to Christ in the very fact that he bore the stigmata in his body. This is based

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<sup>51</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 151vb: "Ostendimus quod stigmata Francisci fuerunt miraculosa ratione vite non enim potuisset per naturam vivere duobus annis beatus Franciscus plagatus in quinque locis spasmosis ex quibus continuo fluebat et sanguinis cum dolore vehementissimo non solum corporis immo et cordis ex memoria passionis dominice".

<sup>52</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 152ra: "Cum ita que stigmatizatio Francisci sit opus tale quale neque natura fecit neque facere potest videret quod propter substantiam facti sit connumeranda inter maxima miracula Dei".

<sup>53</sup> See Troilus Malvetius, *Tractatus*, XIV, f. 101v and 102v: "witness testimony relies upon the senses natural to man; but since a miracle is beyond nature, man cannot testify to it. Rather, a witness testifying about miracle is not describing it as a miracle (*non deponit de eo, prout est miraculum*), but is testifying about that from which it can be shown to be a miracle (*sed prout ex eo probatur miraculum*)", as cited and translated in R.C. Finucane, *Authorizing the Supernatural*, p. 299, note 37.

<sup>54</sup> C. Piana, *I processi de canonizzazione*; Bonaventure, *Legenda Doctoris Seraphici*, vol. V, pp. 402, 405, and 407. See also J. Ziegler, *Practitioners and Saints*.

<sup>55</sup> For a consideration of how miracles were viewed in the Middle Ages see S. Justice, *Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?*

on a belief held by Roberto—as well as a number of Franciscans—that only Francis had ever borne the miraculous signs of Christ's wounds on his body<sup>56</sup>. Furthermore, the geographical location where the miracle happened is likened to a sacred place equal to those found in the Bible; like Moses who received the law on Mount Sinai, and like Christ who on Mount Tabor was transfigured, Francis received the sign of the passion on Mount La Verna<sup>57</sup>. Roberto indicates that La Verna has a distinct, supernatural quality about it owing to a momentous event in the history of Christianity:

On Mount La Verna the sign of the passion was fixed onto Francis. As this mountain indeed is separated from the others, it is important to note that Francis was entirely alone from the honor of worldly company. And being elevated, it is also important to point out that blessed Francis was elevated to the contemplation of divine things and the love of heavenly goods. This mountain is opened up in several places where it seems that it was cut rather violently and that this was not naturally made. It is possible that these rocks were cut the very moment when Jesus the son of God was suffering on the cross<sup>58</sup>.

This passage has strong resonances with the *Vitae Beati Francisci ad Vitam Domini Iesu* by the Franciscan Bartholomeo da Pisa (d. 1401), a colossal work which draws copious parallels between the lives of Francis and Jesus. Referring to Matthew 27, 51, Bartholomeo conjectures that the rocks that were split upon Jesus's death included the rocks at La Verna, which were ripped to create the perfect setting for the stigmatization of Francis<sup>59</sup>. This creates a strong typological connection between the events surrounding Francis's stigmatization and the life of Christ as narrated in the New Testament.

Although it is not explicitly stated in the sermon, the implication of Francis's stigmatization makes him superior to other saints for Roberto leaves no doubt that Francis had been deified. He makes abundant use of Bonaventuran texts which allude to the deification of the Poverello<sup>60</sup>. Relying on the *Legenda minor*,

<sup>56</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLVIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 152rb: "Est similitudo corporalis in manibus pedibus et latere miraculose signatis, et hoc usque nunc convenit soli Francisco".

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 152vb.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 152vb: "In monte Alverne consignatus fuit signis passionis Franciscus. Ille si quidem mons separatus est ab aliis ad innuendum quod Franciscus penitus fuit alienus ab honore munda-norum. Est insuper elevatus ad significandum quod Beatus Franciscus elevatus erat ad contempla-tionem divinorum et amorem bonorum celestium. Et ad hoc ille mons in plerisque locis apertus vbi scissure videntur quasi violenter non naturaliter facte possibile esset ut tempore illo ita eveniret quod petre ille scisse sunt patiente in cruce Iesu filio Dei".

<sup>59</sup> Bartolomeo da Pisa (also known as Bartolomeo de Rinonich), *De Conformitate Vitae Beati Francisci*, p. 387. "Mons iste Alvernae a Deo fuit beato Francisco praeparatus ut in ipso stigmatiza-retur. Hic mons altitudine est procerus; est enim valde altus et a corruptione aeris mundus et sincerus, ab aliis montibus totaliter separatus, et passionis Christi signis specialiter praedotatus. Nam tempore passionis ut patet in Evangelio petrae scissae; quod singulari modo in monte isto apparet. Nam divisus est a capite usque deorsum. Partes eius, ut patet cernentibus, scilicet saxa, ab invicem sunt divisa. Et praefata Omnia impressioni stigmatum fuerunt apta. Eius altitudo correspondet mentali elevatione, quae exigitur in tali stigmatizatione". See also O. Schmucki, *The Stigmata of St Francis of Assisi*, p. 162.

<sup>60</sup> The term deification is ambiguous. From the twelfth century onward, Bernard of Clairvaux had the greatest influence in shaping the meaning of this term, which was the conformity of the human person through Christ not via nature but through love. For an excellent treatment of the term and its theological meaning in the medieval western tradition see S. Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*.

Roberto explains that the Poverello was interiorly inflamed by the “seraphic ardor”, liquefied by the fire of love and then impressed with the likeness of Christ crucified<sup>61</sup>. It is worth noting that Roberto’s role model, Bernardino of Siena, in his sermon on the Poverello’s stigmata described Francis as being deified<sup>62</sup>. Furthermore, Roberto explains the seraphic mode in which Christ appeared to Francis in order to stigmatize him as apposite:

And nobody should be troubled by the apparition of Christ, who wished to be seen at once in the seraphic species and also as the crucified one, as an apparition of this kind suits such a mystery. Indeed, in this new way Francis had to be crucified and thus he had to be inflamed with seraphic love<sup>63</sup>.

In this regard, like the Cistercians who looked at inner transformation as an indicator of the miraculous, Roberto emphasizes that Francis had been changed interiorly as a result of the stigmatization. However, although the very title of the sermon refers to Francis as *seraphic*, nowhere in the sermon does one detect the apocalyptic associations that Bonaventure made between Francis and the Angel of the Sixth Seal of the Apocalypse<sup>64</sup>. Nor does he echo Bernardino of Siena, who claimed that Francis belonged to the seraphic order after the stigmatization<sup>65</sup>. However, Roberto does present Christ’s appearance to Francis as historically significant in his association with the event to New Testament accounts of the resurrected Christ. He puts it on a par to an apostolic occurrence whereby he integrates Francis’ vision into a cluster of biblical examples such as the disciples who met Christ as a pilgrim on the road to Emmaus (*cf.* Luke 24, 13-27), Mary Magdalene who encountered Christ thinking him to be a gardener (*cf.* John 20, 15), Stephen who saw him in the sky standing on the right hand side of God (*cf.* Acts 7, 55) and Paul who experienced him as a bright light on the road to Damascus (*cf.* Acts 9, 3). Francis follows in this list as one who loved Christ so much that the Lord appeared to Francis in a crucified form<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 153ra: “Disparens igitur visio post archanum ac familiare colloquium mentem ipsius seraphico interius inflammavit ardore carne vero crucifixo conformi exterius insignivit effigie tanquam si ad ignis liquefactiva virtutem preambulum sigillativa quedam esset impressio subsequuta”. This corresponds verbatim to Bonaventure, *Legenda minor*, Chapter 6, Lectio 2, p. 576. For an English translation see, Bonaventure, *The Minor Legend of St Francis*, Chapter 6, Lesson 2, p. 710.

<sup>62</sup> Bernardino da Siena, *Sermo LIX: De Stigmatibus*, p. 211, lines 8-10: “Quia igitur corpus beati Francisci fuit sic figuratum specie crucifixi, signum est quod caro illius fuit purissima et anima quasi puritate deificata”.

<sup>63</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 153ra: “Nec titubare quispiam debet de apparitionem Christi qui in specie seraphi et veluti crucifixus videri voluit quam huiusmodi apparitio conveniebat tali mysterio. Novo quippe modo crucifigendus erat Franciscus atque ardore seraphico debebat inflammar”.

<sup>64</sup> Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, prol. I, p. 504. See also D. Burr, *Mendicant Readings of the Apocalypse*, p. 97.

<sup>65</sup> Bernardino da Siena, *Sermo LIX: De Stigmatibus*, p. 207, lines 2-5.

<sup>66</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 153ra: “Discipuli euntes in Emaus viderunt illum in specie peregrine, et Magdalena quasi hortulanum inspexit et Stephanus veluti stantem a dextris Dei agnovit, et Paulus ingenti lumine decoratus intuitus est ita Franciscus regem celorum et dominum glorie veluti crucifixum sibi apparentem adoravit”.

The words *alter Christus* sometimes used in Franciscan sources to describe Francis are not explicitly used by Roberto<sup>67</sup>. In fact, the sermon does not discuss in any deep detail Francis' qualities<sup>68</sup>. Roberto does, nevertheless, suggest that astounding holiness and saintliness were recognized as belonging to Francis as result of his five wounds:

O happy eyes of Blessed Francis that merited still in this mortal life to rejoice in such a vision. O ears of Blessed Francis that alertly heard the calling of the Redeemer of the world. O body of Francis, replete in every elegance, in which miraculously the wounds of Christ were renewed. These stigmata are therefore to be venerated as the mirror of immortality, the hope of future life, the reaffirmer of faith and the most valid testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ. These stigmata Francis proffers; he shows them to Christ while interceding for the faithful. For the Mother of God shows her heart and breasts, the Son his side and wounds, and Francis his holy stigmata. To those seeking and invoking him, he bestows desired favors and, finally, grace in present and future glory. Amen<sup>69</sup>.

As this quote reveals, Roberto presented part of the miraculous aspect of the stigmata as its signifying power because it reminded and thus reinforced the miracle of Christ's Resurrection. The function of a miracle as a sign leading individuals to strengthen their faith had a long tradition<sup>70</sup>. But in the case of Francis's stigmatization, we see this miracle not only presented as something to enhance faith in the wonders of Christianity, but also as an indicator of Francis's power as an intercessor. Roberto clearly made Francis's mercy comparable to that of Mary and Jesus<sup>71</sup>. Francis's wounds, therefore, not only functioned to remind the viewer of the power of Christ, but they underlined the supremacy of Francis over other saints. Therefore, Roberto's sermon endeavored to dispel not only the doubt surrounding the unusual miracle of the stigmatization, but also to accentuate the implications of the miracle itself whereby Francis, through the honor of his five wounds, was *princeps* of saints on a par with the Virgin Mary and second only to Christ.

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<sup>67</sup> Although the concept was implied in Bonaventure's *legenda*, he never used the words *alter Christus* as a description of Francis. The concept was articulated in the fourteenth-century *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius* and completely developed by Bartholmeo da Pisa in his *De Conformitate*. For further discussion see H.W. van Os, *St Francis of Assisi*.

<sup>68</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo LXV, De tribus excellentis beati Francisci*, ff. 153rb-157ra. But it should be noted that Francis' saintly merits are discussed in the next sermon in the *Laudibus* collection.

<sup>69</sup> Robertus Caracciolus, *Sermo XLIII, De sacris stigmatibus*, f. 153ra: "O felices oculi qui meruerunt adhuc in hac ita mortali tali visione gaudere. O aures beati Francisci que a redemptore mundi vigilanter vocari se perceperunt. O corpus omni mundicia repletum in quo mirabiliter Christi vulnera sunt renovata. Hec igitur sunt illa stigmata speculum immortalitatis spes vite future refirmitas fidei et Domini nostri Iesu Christi validissimum testimonium, hec sunt colenda. Hec sunt que Franciscus offert, ostendit Christo dum pro fidelibus intercedit. Mater quidem Dei ostendit pectus et ubera, Filius latus et vulnera, et Franciscus sua sacra stigmata. Quibus intervenientibus eum invocantibus impetrat exoptata beneficia et tandem gratiam in presenti et in future gloriam. Amen".

<sup>70</sup> See R. Garland, *Miracles in the Greek*, p. 94.

<sup>71</sup> The lines: "Mater ostendit filio pectus et ubera. Filius ostendit patri latus et uulnera", appear in Ernaldus Bonaevallensis, *Libellus de laudibus Beatae Mariae virginis* PL 189, col. 1726C-D. Ernaldus Bonaevallensis, also known as Arnald of Bonneval, was a twelfth-century Cistercian abbot.

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