

Royal nobility

A secular itinerary

A secular inspiration

Researching the influence of the idea of royal nobility in the story of Francis of Assisi, doubting especially his biographers, offers the possibility of tracing a "secular itinerary" of his Christian adventure. This is perfectly grasped by Maria Sticco herself, a Missionary of Kingship of Christ at the school of Armida Barelli, not only secular but of *Risorgimento* ideals, and Agostino Gemelli, a socialist and positivist scientist. An expert in literature, Maria Sticco cannot help but observe the influence of the French novel, which emphasized the gentle love of knights, in Franciscan narratives if not precisely in the life of Francis, son of Lady Pica. Maria Sticco, then, cannot but propose a Francis "Herald of the Great King," while, both Barelli and Gemelli avoid an overly sacred Christianity. For them, in fact, Christianity is not that of the defenders of the temporal power of the popes, insensitive to modern aspirations for national autonomy, but rather leaven that transforms the city of man, culture that makes women and men citizens of a kingdom that, of course, cannot be the fascist one, nor the mundane one of the bourgeois and light economy of the *belle époque*. It is another Kingdom that of the herald Francis who proclaims peace and sings creatures, making humanity a universal fraternity. Speaking of Father Gemelli, who had become a Franciscan but had retained the secularity of the scientist, Sticco writes: ""to the chorus of waters, of fire, of earth, of the forgiving, penitent, dying man so well heard by Francis, this twentieth-century friar of his adds the chorus of the workers who freely celebrate God, cooperating in his plans with their labor and toil (Father Gemelli, 346). Today I would like to read with you the Franciscan sources from the perspective of Maria Sticco, Barelli's student and the first to succeed her in the leadership of the Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingdom!

Merchant of noble sentiments

It is with the "charm for nobility" that God wins the desire of the young merchant of Assisi, already unusually inclined to generosity toward the poor. This is demonstrated in rich detail by Thomas of Celano himself, his first biographer. In an Assisi invaded by the new mercantile culture, seduced by pure economic interest, to the point of making itself rigid and even vulgar, Francis distinguished himself by an unusual elegance: a nobility of spirit, rooted in an almost innate, regal generosity. To vanity and especially avarice, which spoils the mercantile culture, Francis contrasts himself by his breadth of spirit, almost a foretaste of that divine irruption, which would later lead him among the lepers to do them mercy.

This is not so much a rancorous critique of mercantile society, but the use of a secular lineage - that of courtly love - designed to interdict the lay Francis - son of Pietro di Bernardone and the parochial Lady Picca - and the whole society, to which he belongs and attract him, elevating him to the point of making him the singer of the supreme Beauty. In short: Francis the merchant, conquered by the great King, becomes his herald, introducing the whole business world, to which he belongs, into the Kingdom of Heaven, into the new cycle. He is the new man *par excellence*, a citizen of another kingdom, as he would later write in the Rule. The first fraternity, witnessed by Thomas of Celano

himself, does not intend, therefore, to demolish mercantile culture, but rather to conquer it from within, through one of its scions. Demonstrating the advantage, even economic, of the passage from avarice, demolisher of the common good, to generosity, which, instead, realizes fraternity with all, the primary, original purpose of the "market," as a place of encounter and exchange:

He was an object of admiration to all, and he endeavored to surpass others in his flamboyant display of vain accomplishments: wit, curiosity practical jokes and foolish talk, song¹s and soft and flowing garments. Since he was very rich, he was not greedy but extravagant, not a hoarder of money but a squanderer of his property, a prudent dealer but a most unreliable steward. He was, nevertheless, a rather kindly person, adaptable and quite affable, even though it made him look foolish. For this reason, more than for anything else, many went over to him, partisans of evil and inciters of crime. Thus, with his crowded procession of misfits he used to strut about impressively in high spirits, making his way through the streets of Babylon. Then the Lord looked down from the heavens and, for the sake of His own name, He removed His own anger far from him, and for His own glory He bridled Francis' mouth so that he would not perish completely.

God's Courtship

If the noble, royal generosity of his nature already predisposes Francis to take steps toward conversion, it is, however, the royal courtship of God that prompts his transition from innate broadmindedness to a desire for chivalric deeds. As his inner transformation progresses, in fact, the merchant finds himself increasingly attracted to the courtly virtues of knights. Thus, he decides to leave for Apulia, following a nobleman from Assisi, seduced by the crusade adventure. It is Pope Innocent III himself who has summoned the "men-of-arms" around him, like another King Arthur at the round table. Indeed, he is concerned about the plight of his protégé, Frederick II, still at a young age and therefore unable to defend his kingdom from a truly anarchy of princely powers. Thomas of Celano places at this point the transformation of the merchant into a knight, a chivalry of spirit, consisting of boldness, generosity, magnificence, even to the point of risking one's own life. The virtues of chivalric literature of the Palladians of King Charles, Orlando and Oliviero, constitute as the intermediate stage in the evolution that leads the merchant to become "the herald of the great King," passing for the singer of courtly love:

A certain nobleman from the city of Assisi was furnishing himself on a large scale with military weaponry and, swollen by the wind of empty glory, he asserted solemnly that he was going to Apulia to enrich himself with money and distinction. When Francis heard of this, because he was whimsical and overly daring, he agreed to go with him. Although Francis did not equal him in nobility of birth, he did outrank him in graciousness; and though poorer in wealth, he was richer in generosity.²

The language of a dream

¹ FA: ED. Vol. I, p. 183-184

² FA: ED, Vol. I, p. 185

If it is the adventurous dreams of courtly chivalry that trace the way for Francis, the Lord himself, great King, does not fail to adapt to his language: he offers him to begin experiencing his voice precisely through the enchanted language of night visions. God tiptoes into the chivalric universe: instead of the stacks of clothes, the mark of the merchant workshop, he offers him the dreamlike image of gleaming weapons, destined for the knights of the future noble ruler, the groom of dame poverty, mother of a fraternity of the poor:

The One who has struck him with the rod of justice visited him in a vision during the night in the sweetness of grace. Because he was eager for glory, the Lord exalted and enticed him to its pinnacle. For it seemed to him that his whole house was filled with soldiers' arms: saddles, shields, spears and other equipment. Though delighting for the most part, he silently wondered to himself about its meaning. For he was not accustomed to see such things in his house, but rather stuck of cloth to be sold. He was greatly bewildered at the sudden turn of events and the response that all these arms were to be for him and his soldiers.³

Conversion is not the outcome of an intervention from above, the effect of a mind-blowing and almost imposing irruption, but a long process, made up of ordinary daily life and, above all, respectful of the desires and aspirations of the follower of the High King. In fact, Francis would never leave for Apulia, sensing, as time went on, that his interpretation of the dream was not competently true. The knight's dream, the allure of noble kingship, however, has already matured new decisions in him. He no longer finds himself in the role of the merchant, nor in that of the knight. He intuits that he must sell all his clothes, including the knight's armor. Only then can he buy the precious, rare, truly royal pearl:

Changed in mind but not in body, he now refused to go to Apulia and was anxious to direct his will to God's. Thus, he retired for a short time from the tumult and business of the world and was anxious to keep Jesus Christ in his inmost self. Like an experienced merchant, he concealed the pearl he had found from the eyes of mockers and selling all he had, he tried to buy it secretly.⁴

The gaze of the first companions

In questo processo di trasformazione del futuro cavaliere di madonna povertà, tratteggiato da Tommaso da Celano, interviene con alcune importanti integrazioni la Leggenda dei Tre Compagni, esito dei materiali di "coloro che erano stati con lui", fin dalle origini della fraternità: Rufino, Leone e Angelo. I Compagni di Francesco, infatti, fanno precedere la partenza del cavaliere per la Puglia dalla battaglia di Collestrada, scontro tra nobili e mercanti, cultura nobiliare e cultura mercantile. Il marcante ne esce perdente non tanto sul piano materiale della sconfitta bellica, ma su quello culturale, simbolico e spirituale. È infatti una disfatta che rende malato Francesco, prigioniero per lunghi mesi non solo perché in una cella, legato da pesanti catene: nella reclusione perugina,

³ FA: ED Vol I, p.186

⁴ FA: ED Vol I, p. 187

l'opacità dello sguardo lo costringe a una metamorfosi, che sfocia nella decisione del cavalierato. Si opera così il passaggio dall'identità mercantile a quella cavalleresca dell'amor cortese.

In this process of transformation of the future knight of Lady poverty, sketched by Thomas of Celano's *Legend of the Three Companions* intervenes with some important additions, the outcome of the materials of "those who had been with him," from the origins of the fraternity: Rufino, Leone and Angelo. The Companions of Francis, in fact, precede the knight's departure for Apulia by the Battle of Collestrada, a clash between nobles and merchants, noble culture and merchant culture. The merchant comes out the loser not so much on the material level of war defeat, but on the cultural, symbolic and spiritual level. It is indeed a defeat that makes Francis ill, a prisoner for long months not only because he is in a cell, bound by heavy chains: in the Perugian confinement, the opacity of his gaze forces him to a metamorphosis, which results in the decision of knighthood. Thus goes the transition from mercantile identity to the chivalric identity of courtly love.

The reversal is depicted with the scene of Francis making a gift of his sumptuous dress to a fallen nobleman. And it is only part of a reproduction of the episode of Martin of Tour, narrated by Sulpicius Severus, which presents the gift of the cloak to the poor. For in the Legend of the Three Companions, Francis performs not only a gesture of charity toward a poor, cold man, but an act of restoring fallen nobility. The exact opposite of the Battle of Collestrada, an attempt to suppress the nobility, now deemed useless, harmful to the process of social evolution, propelled by haughty merchant power. Now, however, the merchant lies dissatisfied, recognizing the insubstantiality of his goals: he is in search of a royal nobility, directing his quest toward ways other than economic success.

Indeed, even the very first lines of the Legend of the Three Companions makes no secret of a nobility that contrasts with the prosaic nature of the merchant, identifying it with feminine parochial courtesy:

When he grew up, endowed with clever natural abilities, he pursued his father's profession, that of a merchant. He was, however, vastly different from his father. [...] his parents often reprimanded him, telling him that he spent so much money on himself and others that he seemed to be the son of some great prince rather than their son. [...] When neighbors commented on his extravagance, his mother replied: 'What do you think of my son? He will still be a son of God through grace.' [...] He was lavish ...spending money on expensive clothes that his social position warranted.⁵

For the Three Companions, the generous handout made to the fallen nobleman would set Francis up for an even more radical conversion. Another nobility, another royalty, lay ahead for him. In the dream of Spoleto, recounted by the Legend of the Companions, reworded by the first biographer, the message of the Most High good Lord becomes clearer: "Who can be more useful to you: the master or the servant?" He answered, "The master." The other resumed, "Why then do you forsake the master to follow the servant, and the prince for the subject?" The king of parties, the generous

⁵ FA:ED Vol. II p. 68

merchant of Assisi, the aspirant to the nobility of knighthood begins to understand which is the Kingdom of his deepest aspirations, the one that totally fills his desire:

A few days after he returned to Assisi, one evening his friends chose him to be in charge so that, according to his whim, he would pay their expenses. He made arrangements for a sumptuous banquet, as he had done often in the past. When they left the house bloated, his friends walked ahead of him, singing throughout the city. Holding in his hand the scepter of his office as their leader, he fell slightly behind them. He was not singing but preoccupied. Suddenly he was visited by the Lord who filled his heart with so much tenderness that he was unable to speak or move. He could only feel and hear this marvelous tenderness; it left him so estranged from any sensation that, as he himself said later, even if he had been completely cut to pieces, he would not have been able to move. When his companions glanced back and saw him so removed from them, they went back surprised at seeing him already changed into another man. They asked him: "What were you thinking about that you did not follow us? Were you perhaps thinking about taking a wife?" He answered in an unequivocal voice: "You are right! I was thinking about taking a wife more noble, wealthier and more beautiful than you have ever seen."⁶

The enchantment of Lady Poverty

The language of the poor cantors remains for a while the hymn of Francis' transformation. While already hinting at the outcome of the kingship of *Domina paupertatae*, the elegy of courtly love of a Francis asking for alms in French also returns in the next episode of the pilgrimage to Rome. This is followed by the gesture of the troubadour asking a poor man to exchange clothes for a day. From the previous bestowal of the precious garments on the fallen nobleman, we move on to the poor man, but only for a brief moment: a kind of dress rehearsal for the transformation of the body, which takes place in the next episode, that of the leper. Here the ideals of the merchant of Collestrada, closed in the defense of class interests, are drowned forever in the mercy-heart to the wretched, and another sweetness, coming from the royal nobility of God, now kindles his desire for light: "High and glorious God enlighten the darkness of my heart..."

In the biography of Thomas of Celano, the final abandonment of commercial culture is, on the other hand, dramatized through the knight's final journey to Foligno to sell cloth and turn it into money, then abandoned with a contemptuous gesture in the far corner of the window at the back of the church of S. Damiano. It is the businessman who, repentant, now values money as if it were stones: just so he would have written in his Rule. Francis is ready for the clash with the Father and the definitive repudiation of mercantile civilization. The chivalric nobility became the conductor of this change. Indeed, it would remain a point of reference for language about the new kingship, the heavenly one, as we read in the elegy of poverty, inserted in the same Rule:

⁶ FA: ED Vol II, p. 71-72

*This is the sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue. Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living.*⁷

«Questa è la sublimità dell'altissima povertà quella che ha costituito voi, fratelli miei carissimi, eredi e re del regno dei cieli, vi ha fatto poveri di cose e ricchi di virtù. Questa sia la vostra parte di eredità, quella che conduce fino alla terra dei viventi» (RegNb 6, 6).

The kingship that nurtured the merchant's desire until it led him to an encounter with the leper, the excluded from the mercantile and political system of the time, becomes emblematic of another citizenship, one that gives access to the land of the living.

What, then, was the reason that convinced Armida Barelli and Agostino Gemelli to include the term kingship in the very name of the secular institute they founded? Also underlying in their reasoning is the proposal of an alternative to the political and economic power exercised at that time by the liberal state first, and then, by the fascist state. In fact, the first name chosen for the nascent women's institute, "Franciscan Tertiaries of the Social Kingdom of the Sacred Heart of Jesus," was intended to affirm the right of Christians to associate, to form an ecclesial community: to be church. For liberal doctrine, on the other hand, religion was to be only a private affair, without any public manifestation. Any organizational, institutional support was considered the exclusive prerogative of state power. The other mode of association was the socialist one, which suppressed the value of the person in his or her individual rights, even admitting the use of violence if necessary for social change, which had as its goal the satisfaction of economic needs alone.

In the first decades of the liberal state, even in response to the unilateral decision to suppress the Papal States, Catholics had practiced complete abstention from political life. Only World War I had created an opportunity for Italian Catholics to feel themselves citizens and even patriots of a nation that did not recognize Catholics' right to have their own political thought, their own idea of society. After the war, Italian Catholics faced, therefore, first the socialist proposal, which Gemelli had experienced firsthand, then the fascist imposition of an ethical state, which wanted to direct not only the institutions, but the conscience itself, to the point of creating its own religion.

It was at this point that Pope Pius XI, who was very close to both Barelli and Gemelli, a supporter of the Catholic University, with his encyclical *Quas Primas* (December 1925) formulated the doctrine of kingship, the basis of the institute's new name, which in 1928, on the initiative of Pius XI himself, would become "Missionaries of the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ." The doctrine of kingship allows Christians to affirm a political, social and even anthropological alternative to both socialism and fascism. If Christ is not only priest, but also king, this means that belonging to him entitles one to exercise political responsibility and at the same time demands commitment to the building of a kingdom, which will also have temporal, historical and not only eschatological characteristics. It was not, however, a solely political exercise. Rather, for Barelli and Gemelli, it is above all, cultural, social,

⁷ FA: ED Vol I, p. 103

labor and educational as the very project of the Catholic University, which was intended to offer a culture to Catholics and bring Catholics back into culture, a true alternative to the fascist vision.

The doctrine of kingship in the magisterium of Pius IX offers Gemini the opportunity to translate into contemporary language the Franciscan tradition of the primacy of Christ: Christ the King seated on the royal throne of the cross, who pours forth from his side the water of life and the blood of love is the unifying center of all things. Everything begins from him everything is oriented to him. He is Francis' "my God and my everything." He is the God in all things, for they all find meaning in him, whom the Francis of the Canticle recognizes in every creature, calling them sister and brother. It is this same Canticle that Gemini would have liked to actualize, as recalled by Sticco, by adding the stanza with the workers' song, because he recognized in work a sacred value, the value of a true liturgy. If Christ is king and not just priest, then there is no separation between sacred and profane, God and nature, heaven and earth, then everything is sacred: every affair, every reality, every fragment of existence: politics and economics, science and the whole of history. It is in this image of universal kingship that Gemini recognizes the doctrine of the convergence in one of all things, professed by Bonaventure and Scotus. It is through it that he sees the possibility of healing the laceration, which makes his soul bleed, that between science and faith, religion and life, piety and culture.

Love for the crucified leads Scotus, like St. John the Evangelist and St. Paul already, to the exaltation of Christ the center and king of the universe. This admirable conception immediately gives the Franciscan tone to life, for it perspectives nature, history, and human affairs in a sacred light as of creatures and events destined, even if rebellious, for the triumph of the one Mediator and makes every man a worker and soldier, voluntary or forced, of his divine Kingdom, for the universe is created says Ramon Lullo to be Christian not for anything else (Gemelli, *Francescanesimo*, 446)

Armida, too, sees in Pius XI's Kingship, filtered through the Franciscan vision, the possibility of an all-encompassing Christian commitment:

Bisogna rifare i medici cattolici, non si deve imprecare contro la stampa perché vi sono libri e giornali immorali; bisogna invece formare i giornalisti e gli scrittori cattolici; è assurdo desiderare l'ignoranza solo perché in certe scuole, da certe cattedre, si insegna l'errore e il disprezzo per la religione: è meglio tirar su nuove generazioni di maestri e di professori cattolici [...] far trionfare Cristo nella società, nel popolo, nella vita di ogni giorno, nel giornale, nel libro, nella clinica, nell'aula giudiziaria, nella scuola e magari nelle strade («Osservatore Romano», 28/29 marzo 1937).

Catholic doctors must be re, one must not curse the press because there are immoral books and newspapers; instead, Catholic journalists and writers must be trained; it is absurd to desire ignorance just because in certain schools, from certain chairs, error and contempt for religion are taught: it is better to bring up new generations of Catholic teachers and professors [...] to make Christ triumph in society, in the people, in everyday life, in the newspaper, in the book, in the clinic, in the courtroom, in the school and perhaps in the

streets. (Newspaper *'Osservatorio Romano'*, published by the Vatican Press, issue 28/29 March 1937)

Hence also a secularity that becomes consecration. To affirm that Christ is king is to say that God does not just inhabit the temple but is also interested in what lies beyond the fanum, the front of the temple. For Armida, who wants the Catholic University even more than Gemelli, and convinces Count Lombardo to finance a cultural work and not just welfare works, God actually came out of the temple to make himself the creative Word of everything that exists, to ask the human being to guard the garden entrusted to him, as if to continue his creative work. That is why there can be no human activity that is not a liturgy, no work that is not sacred, science that is not participation in divine genius.

The flesh of the Word was already ready from creation for the act of incarnation in which God, who was, becomes and learns to be in time, in history, in the century. The carpenter's son, growing in age and grace thus demonstrates how the century is God's dwelling place, how history is his body because, as Gemini reiterates, Christ is head of the church called to be sacrament of unity of the whole human race. And so, Armida intuitively perfectly that, when the urgency to do politics arises, one does politics, which is not a dirty thing! So what if it is?

The institute, in fact, had not yet been approved yet the courageous Elder Sister, acted for the good of the country: "The first five months of 1946 the Missionaries all were spears broken for the preparation of the June 2 elections... Missionaries by vocation are hidden leaven in the masses and in the campaign they acted as simple citizens and in the garb given to them by their social responsibilities (Our Story)

And did Jesus not soil himself, led to Pilate with the accusation that he had made himself king of the Jews: questioned by him about this kingship, he explains that yes!, he is king, but not in the manner of the powerful; that his kingship is willing to have his heart ripped open. If kingship is equal to secularity: it is accepting the confrontation with Pilate, then the consecration, wrought by this secularity, is delivery to history to all history to every history; it is the yes to a spear that can be directed against the heart and pierce it.