

THE BIRTH OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

The pilgrims who go to Assisi are sure to have visited a small oratory, in a narrow alleyway going down from Via del Ceppo della Catena, the street which from Piazza del Comune leads to the Basilica of Santa Chiara. This oratory is known by the name “San Francesco Piccolino”. An inscription upon the archway upon the entrance to the oratory says that the place marks the stable in which Saint Francis was born¹. According to an old legend, Lady Pica could not give birth to Francis in the comfort of the house of Pietro di Bernardone. But when she was taken down to the stable, she joyfully gave birth to the boy Francis. The oratory is supposed to be the place of the stable in which Francis was born and, according to some scholars, it even marks the spot where there was the family house of Pietro di Bernardone.

A few metres away from San Francesco Piccolino one finds the Franciscan church of Chiesa Nuova, built in 1615 upon the remains of a medieval “fondaco”, or storehouse, belonging to a merchant family of Assisi. Chiesa Nuova is also indicated as having been the place where Francis’s family lived².

A brief look at the Franciscan Sources until the mid-14th century presents us with a surprise. Not one of the major legends or compilations of the life of Saint Francis mentions his family house, or the exact date and spot of his birth. The stories surrounding the birth of Saint Francis are the result of late 14th century documents, and the aim is that of portraying Francis as a saint who lived in perfect conformity with Christ in all the moments of his life, from his birth to his death.

We shall start by seeing what the Franciscan Sources say about the birth of Saint Francis, and then we shall have a look at the legends surrounding the circumstances of his birth, and see what was the exact intention of the authors who wrote such legends.

¹ The old gothic inscription reads: *Hoc oratorium fuit bovis: et asini stabulum in quo natus est sanctus Franciscus mundi speculum* (“This oratory was the stable of the ox and ass in which was born Saint Francis, the mirror of the world”). According to Giuseppe Abate, this inscription is very old (1316-1354). Cfr. G. ABATE, *La Casa Natale di S. Francesco e la Topografia di Assisi nella prima metà del secolo XIII*. Estratto dal “Bollettino della Deputazione di Storia Patria per l’Umbria”, Volume LXIII – Fasc. 1 (1966) 5-110.

² The Assisi historian Arnaldo Fortini, author of *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, in five volumes, does not accept either one of these places as the family house of Pietro di Bernardone. He indicates the other end of the Piazza del Comune, in the spot lying between the medieval churches of San Nicolò and San Paolo, at the beginning of Via Portica, as the place where Pietro di Bernardone lived. He proves his assertion by various arguments, the result of his intensive research at the Archives of the Commune and Cathedral of Assisi. According to Fortini this was the area of the town in which the merchants had their houses and shops. To this very day there is still a remnant of a medieval house, which is now in the hands of the Third Order Regular, which is the house indicated by Fortini as the place in which Francis was brought up as a child. Cfr. Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, translated by Helen Moak (New York: Crossroad 1981), 88-91.

The Birth of Saint Francis in the Franciscan Sources until the mid-14th century

Thomas of Celano, who wrote *The Life of Saint Francis* in 1228-29, considered to be the first official biography of the saint, has nothing to say regarding the time or place of the birth of Saint Francis. He simply states: “In the city of Assisi, which is located in the confines of the Spoleto valley, there was a man named Francis”³. Celano is imitating the style of Pope St. Gregory the Great (+604), who wrote the life of Saint Benedict of Norcia (+546) in his *Dialogues*.

In his *Memorial of the Desire of a Soul*, written in 1246-47, Thomas of Celano gives us the first clear indication regarding the birthplace of Saint Francis, and his baptism in the cathedral church font of San Rufino. The baptismal font in which Francis was baptised can still be admired in the cathedral church of Assisi. It is the same font in which Clare of Assisi was baptised in 1193, and in which the emperor Frederick II, when he was three years old, was also baptised. The following is the text of Celano in his second biography of Saint Francis:

“Francis was the name of the servant and friend of the Most High. Divine Providence gave him this name, unique and unusual, that the fame of his ministry should spread even more rapidly throughout the whole world. He was named John by his own mother when, being born again through water and the Holy Spirit, he was changed from a child of wrath into a child of grace. This woman was a friend of all complete integrity, with some of the virtue of Saint Elizabeth, of whom we read in Scripture, she was privileged to resemble and act, both in the name she gave her son and in her prophetic spirit”⁴.

It seems that Thomas of Celano took this information from an earlier source, which we find in the *Legend of Three Companions*. It comes from the documentary material given to the Minister General Crescentius of Jesi by three of the closest companions of Saint Francis, namely Leo, Rufino and Angelo. The text in the *Legend of Three Companions* is the following:

“Francis was raised in the city of Assisi, which is located in the boundaries of the valley of Spoleto. His mother at first called him John; but when his father, who had been away when he was born, returned from France, he later named him Francis.”⁵

These sources are the only ones we possess in the 13th century, which refer to the birth of Saint Francis. They do not say a great deal according to our contemporary way of noting down dates, places and events. But they do say some important things. These Franciscan authors state that Francis was born in Assisi, that he was baptised by his

³ Thomas of Celano, *Life of Saint Francis* [1C], 1. All references to the Franciscan Sources are those in the three volume series: *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Vol. I The Saint; Vol. II The Founder; Vol. III The Prophet, ed. R.J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, W.J. Short (New City Press, New York, London, Manila 1999-2001).

⁴ Thomas of Celano, *Memorial of the Desire of a Soul* [[2C], 3.

⁵ *Legend of Three Companions* [L3C] 2.

mother when his father was away on a business tour in France, that his mother had wanted to name him Giovanni, but his father changed the boy's name into that of Francesco, which was more of a nickname than a proper name. Basing himself on the mission of John the Baptist, Thomas of Celano compares Francis's mother to Saint Elizabeth, but he does not give us the name of this gentle lady from Piccardy, whom we know was called Lady Pica by the local Assisi people.

When Saint Bonaventure composed the *Minor Legend of Saint Francis*, with the aim of presenting the friars with a liturgical text to read during the octave of the feast of the saint, he refers to the same event of the birth of Francis, but insists more upon the meaning of the mission which the name John implied:

“Francis was born in the city of Assisi in the regions of the Spoleto valley. First called John by his mother, and then Francis by his father, he held on to the name his father gave him, but did not abandon the meaning of the name given by his mother”⁶.

The Birth of Saint Francis according to late medieval legends

The story of the birth of Francis in a stable is a late medieval legend, which does not recur in any of the early Franciscan Sources⁷. It is surprising that the same legend is not to be found in such Sources like the *Acts of Blessed Francis and His Companions* (1331-37) by Ugolino Boniscambi di Monte Santa Maria and their partial translation into the Tuscan dialect, by the anonymous author of the *Fioretti*. It is not even found in two of the late 14th century sources we shall now be considering, namely *The Kinship of Saint Francis* by Arnald of Sarrant (1365) and the *Book of Conformities* by Bartolomeo da Pisa (1385-99). Franciscan scholars, like G. Golubovich, dismiss the story of the stable as pure legend⁸.

Given that the story of the birth of Saint Francis in a stable is a legend, what is the aim of holding on to this story and revering the tiny oratory of San Francesco Piccolino? There is, in fact, an important dimension to the development of this popular devotion towards the birthplace of Saint Francis. Many of the Franciscan Sources of the 13th

⁶ St. Bonaventure, *Minor Legend of St. Francis* [LMn] I,1.

⁷ Arnaldo Fortini, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Vol. II, 21-23, affirms: “La leggenda, inattendibile (chè tale viene oggi generalmente ritenuta), che il Santo sia nato in una stalla, non può essere anteriore alla seconda metà del trecento. Essa è evidentemente ispirata dal desiderio, che si fa più acuto e diffuso nello scorcio di questo stesso secolo, di voler fare della vita di Francesco di Assisi una copia perfetta di quella di Gesù Cristo ... Gli autori che narrano questa leggenda sono tutti posteriori, di molto o di poco, al Pisano. Il codice dell'Anonimo Brussellese, che per la prima volta ne parla, è dal Bollandista Van de Gheyn e dal Prof. Fierens dell'Università di Lovanio attribuito al sec. XIV, mentre il bollandista P. Van Ortroj la giudica del sec. XV. Sembra che esso possa ben essere riportato alla fine del trecento”.

⁸ G. GOLUBOVICH, *La storicità della casa paterna di San Francesco di Assisi, oggi Chiesa Nuova e la popolare leggenda della stalletta*, Firenze 1941, 11ff; L. BRACALONI, *La Chiesa Nuova di San Francesco converso, casa paterna del Santo di Assisi*, Todi 1943, 147ff. Of a contrary opinion, defending the Oratory of San Francesco Piccolino as the historical place of the birth of Saint Francis, are G. ABATE, *La casa dove nacque San Francesco di Assisi nella sua nuova documentazione storica*, Gubbio 1941, 169ff; N. PAPINI, *Storia di San Francesco di Assisi*, Foligno 1825, 174-175.

century, particularly Thomas of Celano and Saint Bonaventure, insist upon the fact that the life of Saint Francis was a perfect mirror of the life of Jesus Christ. Book II of Celano's *Memorial of the Desire of a Soul* starts by presenting Francis as "the holiest mirror of the holiness of the Lord, the image of his perfection". Francis is presented as having Christ-like virtues. Bonaventure goes even further in presenting Francis's life as a spiritual journey into mystical union with Christ crucified⁹.

This theme of Francis being so Christ-like found a further development during the 14th century. Many Franciscan authors began to see Francis's life in the light of a *conformitas*, conformity, to the life of Jesus Christ. This is truly evident in the *Fioretti*, and particularly in two late 14th century sources we shall be now considering, namely Arnald of Sarrant and Bartolomeo da Pisa.

The first source we shall mention here is the work of Arnald of Sarrant, *The Kinship of Saint Francis*, written in 1365. The author is keen on insisting that Francis's life is in direct conformity with that of Jesus Christ, and he introduces a story which is often repeated by other biographers of Saint Francis during the late 14th century, namely, the story of the pilgrim who knocks on the door of the house of Pietro di Bernardone, and asks to see the baby boy Francis and prophesies regarding his mission.

"As we read that Christ was carried by Simeon in his arms and that he also prophesied many things about Christ, thus, on the same day Francis was born, a pilgrim made his way to the door of his family's house seeking alms. When he accepted the alms from a maid's hand, the pilgrim said: 'I must see the child born there today'. At this the maid was horrified, sending him off as a fool, but the pilgrim asserted he would not leave until he had seen the boy. When the maid told Lady Pica, the mother of blessed Francis, she ordered her to show him the child as the pilgrim had said. When she had done this, the pilgrim took him in his arms, and said joyfully and devoutly to the maid: 'Today two children were born in this neighbourhood, one of whom, this one, will be among the better of the world, the other among the worst'. This is clear to all about Francis; many bear witness about the other"¹⁰.

Arnaldo Fortini, the Italian historian of Assisi during the time of Saint Francis, in his *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, quotes a Franciscan 16th century chronicler, Mariano da Firenze, who also presents the story of the pilgrim who comes to see the boy Francis on the day of his birth. Mariano da Firenze notes that the other boy to whom the mysterious pilgrim refers was called Azolino de Navata, although he gives no further information about him. He states that he took this piece of information from the writings of Francesco di Bartolo, a Franciscan friar, author of the *Tractatus de Indulgentiae Portiunculae*, written some time before 1334¹¹. However, there can be other conjectures

⁹ Cfr. N. MUSCAT, *The Life of Saint Francis in the Light of Saint Bonaventure's Theology on the "Verbum Crucifixum"*, (Edizzjoni TAU, Malta 1989).

¹⁰ Arnald of Sarrant, *The Kinship of Saint Francis*, 1,7b. The Latin edition of this work is: Arnaldi de Serranno, *De Cognatione Sancti Francisci*, ed. F. Delorme, *Miscellanea Francescana* 42 (1942) 103-131.

¹¹ A. FORTINI, *Nova Vita di San Francesco*, Vol. II,53-56: "Fra Mariano da Firenze, nella sua Vita di San Francesco, narrando l'episodio del Pellegrino che prese nelle sue braccia il Santo appena nato, scrive: 'Dipoi nella destra parte della spalla con la sua mano l'imprexe el segno della crocie, dicendo: - Oggi in

as to who this mysterious personage might have been. Nor is it possible in any way to know for sure the exact date of the birth of Saint Francis from the Sources at our disposal¹².

Another source of the same story is a work which goes by the name of *A Book of Exemplary Stories* (c. 1280-1310), in which we find the story of the pilgrim who announces the joy of the birth of Saint Francis.

“Brother Nicholas of Assisi recounted the following incident: ‘My father’s house was attached to the house of Blessed Francis. My mother told me this story. When Saint Francis’s mother was resting in her bed after having given him birth, as women are accustomed to do after their labour, with some of the women of the neighbourhood there with her, a pilgrim came to the door as if he were seeking alms. But when he had taken the piece of chicken that Francis’s mother sent out to him, he began to beg with great insistence that he wanted to see the newborn child. The women tried to send him away, but he kept insisting that he would not leave until he had first seen the baby boy. Then Lady Pica, the mother of Saint Francis, said: ‘Take the baby out so he can see it’. As soon as he saw the child, he embraced it, saying: ‘Two babies were born on the same day on this street, this one and another. One of them, this one here, will be one of the best men in the world, the other will be one of the worst’. The passage of the years proved what he said to be true”¹³.

The last source we shall consider among the late 14th century legends is the account of Francis’s birth given in Bartolomeo da Pisa’s *Book of Conformities*, composed between 1385-1399. As the title of this voluminous work, which occupies Volumes 4 and 5 of *Analecta Franciscana* suggests, the aim of the author is to find as many instances as possible of conformity between the life of Jesus Christ and that of Saint

questa via sono nati due fanciulli, uno dei quali è questo che sarà de’ migliori huomini del mondo. Ma l’altro sarà dei più chattivì. Et questo fu uno che si chiamò Azolino de Navata, come scrive maestro Francescho de Assisi, el quale fu uomo pessimo et fecie di molto male’. Questo maestro Francesco di Assisi altri non è che il nostro Francesco di Bartolo da Assisi, autore del famoso *Tractatus de Indulgentia*. È facile pensare che il maestro Francesco, in uno scritto andato perduto, ma che fu noto a fra Mariano da Firenze, abbia riportato questa notizia, appresa al tempo dell’infanzia dei suoi familiari che, per abitare in tale contrada, avevano gelosamente conservato la tradizione che indicava perfino il nome del vicino, la cui vita fu un’antitesi perfetta con quella dell’uomo di Dio”.

¹² According to footnote 4 in Bartolomeo da Pisa’s *Liber de Conformitate (Analecta Franciscana, Vol. IV,1)*, the Quaracchi editors suggest that the birthday of St. Francis is the 26th September 1182, or 1181.

¹³ *Liber Exemplorum Fratrum Minorum Saeculi XIII*, 116, ed. Livarius Oliger, *Antonianum* 2 (1927) 203-276: (p.262-263): “Narravit tibi fr. Nicolaus de Assisio: Domus, inquit, patris mei coniuncta est domui beati Francisci. Referebat autem sic mater mea: Cum quiesceret in lecto post partum mater beati Francisci, ut solent mulieres in puerperio, et vicine mulieres alicue circa eam, ecce peregrinus ad hostium quasi elemosinam petens cum accepisset partem pulli a matre beati Francisci mittente, instare cepit et dicere velle se videre puerulum natum. Et cum repelleretur a mulieribus que ibi erant, cepit asserere quod nullo modo recederet nisi puerulum prius videret. Tunc domina Pica mater: Afferte, inquit, puerum ut videat. Quem complexum etc. dixit hoc modo: Nati sunt duo pueri una die in vico isto, iste et alius. Unus, hic scilicet, erit de melioribus hominibus mundi, alter pessimus erit. Quod revera processu temporis verum esse rerum exitus docuit”. English translation taken from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Vol. III, The Prophet, 800.

Francis. Bartolomeo da Pisa does not give us the story of the birth of Saint Francis in the stable. This is very strange, since a story like this would have suited his purposes in an excellent way. It would have been a proof that Francis was born in extreme poverty, just as Christ was born in a manger. But it seems that Bartolomeo did not know about it, or that it was not yet in circulation. Bartolomeo da Pisa, however, gives us the story of the pilgrim who wants to see the new-born Francis:

“The blessed Francis was declared regarding what he would become in the future by means of an angel under the guise of a pilgrim, to his mother and nurse. When blessed Francis was born, a certain pilgrim came to the house of blessed Francis, and after having asked for alms, he requested to see the new-born child. When the nurse did not accept, upon the command of Lady Pica, the mother of blessed Francis, the child was taken out and offered to the pilgrim. He embraced him, and while marking his right shoulder with the sign of the cross, told those who were standing by: ‘In this street today two boys have been born, this one and another one. This one will be among the best men in the world, whereas the other one among the worst’. He also told them to take good care of blessed Francis to protect him from the snares of the devil. As soon as he said this the same pilgrim disappeared”¹⁴.

In another section of the *Book of Conformities*, Bartolomeo repeats the same episode, by comparing the pilgrim who embraces Francis to the old man Simeon, who comes in the temple to meet Mary and Joseph who present the child Jesus to God:

“Now we declare the fourth fruit and conformity of the second part, namely: Francis who is embraced. Indeed, our blessed father Francis, although not in the beginning of his appearance and birth in this world, was filled and perfected with grace and virtues, but in a second time after his birth, that is when he lived in the grace of religious life, he appeared in front of the world as one who professed poverty, the form of penance, a harbinger of truth, a mirror of sanctity, an exemplar of evangelical perfection, a title of purity, a man of penance in his flesh, and shining with all kinds of virtue. According to what Scripture says, which is without any doubt, in God’s eyes blessed Francis was predestined and was always enrobed with grace and virtue. In his birth he wanted to be similar to the Lord in his birth, that is, because as soon as blessed Francis was born, after some time had elapsed, God pleased to show the birth of blessed Francis by sending his holy angel, so that his boy would be touched by the holy Magi, would be accepted in the arms of Simeon, and the future of Francis would be announced in a clear way by Simeon and Anna. It is because of this principal cause that we introduce this second part, that is, Francis who is embraced like Christ and offered to be seen and

¹⁴ Bartholomaeo de Pisa, *De Conformitate Vitae Beati Francisci ad Vitam Domini Iesu*, Liber I, *Analecta Franciscana*, IV, 56: “Beatus Franciscus declaratus fuit per angelum in specie peregrini suae matri et nutrici, qualis esset futurus; nam, beato Francisco nato, peregrinus quidam ad domum patris beati Francisci accessit, et petita eleemosyna, puerum natum petiit videre, et cum nutrix nollet, mandato dominae Picae, matris beati Francisci, puerum ipsum eidem peregrino videndum obtulit, qui ipsum amplexatus benedixit et, ut dicitur in humero dextro signum crucis impressit et tunc dixit astantibus: ‘In vico isto hodie nati sunt duo pueri, iste et unus alius. Iste erit de melioribus hominibus de mundo, sed alius de peioribus’; et dixit, quod beatus Franciscus propter insidias diaboli bene custodiretur, quo dicto statim ipse peregrinus disparuit”. The English translations of Bartolomeo da Pisa’s text are mine.

embraced. According to what an old Legend says, brother Nicholas of Assisi, guardian of Spoleto, was told by his mother, the lady Margaret, who was a well-known neighbour of blessed Francis's mother, and who referred this devoutly to him as his mother, on the day in which blessed Francis was born, an angel under the guise of a certain pilgrim came to the door of the house of blessed Francis, and he was insisting with the maidservant that she show him the boy Francis whom he wanted to see and touch. But the maidservant was afraid to do this, and he continued to insist, until the mother of blessed Francis commanded that the boy should be taken out to the pilgrim, who accepted him in his bosom, embracing and kissing him. He marked him with the sign of the cross on his right shoulder and said: 'Today in this street two boys have been born; this Francis and another child. One will be among the best men in the world, the other one among the worst'. Then he admonished them to protect very much the infant Francis against the snares of the devils who were very disturbed by his birth and were planning to harm him in many ways. As soon as he had said these words he immediately vanished and was not seen any more in the town of Assisi. Thus Christ appeared in the embrace of the blessed Francis and in the vision and offering into the hands of another person, so that it came to happen that just as the blessed Mary offered Jesus into the hands of the Magi who were searching for him, the mother of blessed Francis offered him in the arms of the pilgrim who was asking to see him; and just as Simeon predicted many things which were to happen to Jesus in the future, in the same way the angel under the guise of a pilgrim announced the future of Francis to his mother. It is evident, therefore, that in this second part these things indicate Francis's conformity to Christ"¹⁵.

¹⁵ Bartholomaeo de Pisa, *De Conformitate Vitae*, Liber I, *Analecta Franciscana*, IV, 108-109: "Restat nunc declaranda secunda pars IV fructus et conformitatis, scilicet: Franciscus amplexatur. Quia enim beatus pater noster Franciscus, etsi non in initio sui ortus et nativitatis in mundum, fuerit gratia et virtutibus plenus ac perfectus, sed in secundo ortu et nativitate, videlicet in esse gratiae et religionis, quando mundo apparuit paupertatis professor, poenitentiae forma, veritatis praecox, sanctitatis speculum, evangelicae perfectionis exemplar, pudicitiae titulus, carnis macerator et omni virtute conspicuus, attamen, quia scriptura aliquando dicit esse, quod in proximo fiendum est indubie, ac in Dei prospectu beatus Franciscus et praedestinatione, gratia et virtutibus semper fuerit amictus, idcirco in primo ortu et nativitate Deus voluit sibi, videlicet beato Francisco parum ante iam nato, fieri, quod fiendum erat temporis in processu, et hoc per angelum suum, qui ortum beati Francisci Deo placitum ostenderet, ipsum puerum ut sancti Magi tangeret, in suis ulnis acciperet ut Simeon, et quid facturus esset Franciscus ut Simeon et Anna clarius reseraret. Et hac ex causa principaliter ponitur haec secunda pars, scilicet Franciscus ad instar Christi est traditus ad videndum et amplexandum. Ut enim Legenda pandit antique, et frater Nicolaus de Assisio, guardianus post Spoleti, habuit a domina Margarita sua matre, vicina et nota matri beati Francisci, matre referente et pedissequa beati Francisci, ipso die, quo natus fuit beatus Franciscus, ad ostium domus beati Francisci quidam advenit angelus in specie peregrine, petens instanter a famula, ut puer Franciscus eidem ad videndum et tangendum exhiberetur. Sed cum famula timeret hoc agere, ac ille in rogatu persisteret, tandem mandato matris beati Francisci peregrino Franciscus est oblatus, qui eum in suis ulnis accipiens, stringens et osculans, eius humeris in parte dextra crucem impressit dixitque: 'Hodie in isto vico nati sunt duo pueri, hic Franciscus et alius; hic erit de melioribus hominibus de mundo, et alius erit de peioribus'. Demum praedixit infantulum Franciscum magna custodia gubernandum propter insidias daemonum, qui de eius ortu turbati ad necandum eum multas insidias praepararent eidem; atque his dictis, statim disparuit, nullibi in dicta Assisii civitate amplius visus. Quibus apparet Christum beato Francisco in amplexu et visione et datione in manibus alterius, ut factum est de ipso, sibi voluisse similari, ut sicut beata Maria Iesum tradidit Mago quaerenti, sic mater beati Francisci dedit cum peregrine petenti; et sicut Simeon plura de Iesu et circa eum futuris dixit, sic et de Francisco angelus in specie peregrine matri reseravit. Patet ergo, ad quid haec conformitas ad Christum pro secunda parte sit posita".

The birth of Saint Francis is seen against the background of the birth of Jesus by Bartolomeo, who also presents the episode of the angels joyfully announcing the happy event, just like the angels did in Bethlehem:

“Many were the ones who rejoiced in the birth of Francis, and the holy angels also rejoiced in his birth both in nature and in grace. As they had rejoiced greatly in the birth of Christ, so it is holy to believe that the same thing happened in the birth of Francis”¹⁶.

Bartolomeo da Pisa then goes on to create a complex comparison between Francis and John the Baptist, with regards to the conformity of their lives with that of Jesus Christ. He seems to comment upon the comparison which Thomas of Celano makes in *The Memorial of the Desire of a Soul*, in which he also compares Lady Pica to Elizabeth:

“The mother of blessed Francis, who was called Lady Pica, was filled with present and future joy and gladness, because she was shining with good examples and with virtues, just like another Elizabeth. She was enlightened by the divine Spirit when she bore blessed Francis, and she knew that for her son, not only would she be joyful like Elizabeth in his birth, but she also named him John in holy baptism, so that she would signify that her son, the blessed Francis, would be similar to John the Baptist and be conformed to him in many ways. Just as Francis was made similar to the Son of Mary, Jesus Christ, he was also similar in a stronger way to John the Baptist. Blessed Francis, in fact, was found to be similar to John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the precursor of Christ, Francis was the preacher and the standard-bearer of Christ, in a way that he exceeded John the Baptist. John the Baptist was a preacher of penance, Francis was the preacher and the founder and legislator of the Order of Penance. In this respect Francis came before John, because he converted many persons in many places where he preached penance. Whereas John only preached within the confines of the Jewish people, Francis preached with his brothers in the whole world, and founded three Orders, the Minors, the Sisters and the brethren of Penance. John despised everything and retreated in the desert, Francis left all his belongings in front of the bishop, he did not want to possess anything in this world, and he always looked for solitary and deserted places with all his heart. John converted many when he preached penance for over two years, while Francis converted many when he preached in continuation for eighteen years. John accepted the preaching of the word of penance from the Lord, while Francis accepted to preach penance by the command of God and the lord Pope. The future of John was announced to his father by the angel and he was declared a prophet by the Holy Spirit, whereas Francis was declared a prophet by the Lord Jesus Christ. By means of an angel under the guise of a pilgrim he was declared a prophet to his mother and to the neighbours, who admired her for her son, that is, the blessed Francis, when they heard the future grace which was announced in him. John was named by his mother, Francis was named John by his mother during baptism. John prophesied in his mother’s womb and after his birth,

¹⁶ Bartholomaeo de Pisa, *De Conformitate Vitae*, Liber I, *Analecta Franciscana*, IV, 97: “Sunt plerique de Francisci ortu in praesenti laetificati, et gaudentes de eius ortu in esse naturae et gratiae laetati sunt sancti angeli; sicut enim in Christi ortu tripudium magnum gessere, sic pie credendum est factum in beati Francisci nativitate”.

Francis prophesied in the womb, that is, in the prison of Perugia where he was confined, when with great joy he announced his future in the world with a prophetic spirit. John was the friend of the bridegroom, Francis was similar to Christ. John admonished the sinners, Francis was the fear of the wicked, especially of the nobles of Perugia, to whom he predicted their expulsion from the city because of their sins, as is clear in the other Legends ... John gathered a group of disciples around him, Francis gathered holy men as his brothers. John had a most singular life, Francis ate little food, only that which was necessary to sustain his body, and during one Lent he only ate half a loaf of bread. John excelled in sanctity in this world, Francis was confirmed in an excellent way by Christ through his stigmata. John was taken up in the order of the seraphs, Francis was placed in the same order and occupied the throne of Lucifer. All this shows that Francis was conformed to John, while his mother, enlightened by the divine Spirit called him John, and like Elizabeth rejoiced in his conception and birth”¹⁷.

¹⁷ Bartholomaeo de Pisa, *De Conformitate Vitae*, Liber I, *Analecta Franciscana*, IV, 98-99: “De praesenti et futuro gaudium habuit et laetitiam mater ipsius beati Francisci, domina Pica vocata, quae morum praeclaritate et virtute praeclara, velut altera Elisabeth, spiritu irradiata divino, cum beatum Franciscum genuisset, sciens fienda per filium, non solum laetata ut Elisabeth est in eius ortu, sed ipsum Ioannem in sacro baptismo vocavit dans intelligere beatum Franciscum puerum filium suum Ioanni Baptistae similandum in pluribus et conformandum. Si enim beatus Franciscus similis factus est Filio Mariae, Iesu Christo, a fortiori Ioanni Baptistae; beatus enim Franciscus Ioanni similis reperitur Baptistae; nam Ioannes Baptista praecursor Christi, Franciscus praedicator et signifer Christi, quo ipsum Ioannem excedit; Ioannes poenitentiae praedicator, Franciscus et praedicator et ordinis poenitentiae institutor et ordinator, et quoad hoc Franciscus Ioannem praecedit, quia plures convertit et in pluribus locis per se et suos poenitentiam praedicavit, quia Ioannes in Iudaeae gremio, umbilico et populo, Franciscus cum suis in toto mundo, ac tres ordines poenitentiales instituit, Minorum, Sororum et fratrum de poenitentia; Ioannes omnia deseruit et ad desertum perrexit, Franciscus omnia coram episcopo dimisit, nihil mundi habere voluit, et loca solitaria et deserta toto affectu semper quaesivit; convertit multos per duos annos et parum plus Ioannes praedicando ad poenitentiam, convertit plures Franciscus per annos decem et octo continue praedicando; verbum de poenitentia accepit Ioannes a Domino praedicanda, accepit Franciscus de poenitentia praedicanda a Deo mandatum et domino papa; Ioannes, qualis esset futurus, per angelum patri et Spiritu sancto per prophetas fuit declaratus, Franciscus a prophetis fuit declaratus et a Domino Iesu Christo, ut dictum est supra conformitate et fructu I, per angelum fuit matri declaratus et famulae in specie peregrini...Ioannes matrem intercessive Spiritu sancto prophetico replevit, Francisco Deus matrem suam prophetam fecit, quae admirantibus vicinis de filio suo, scilicet beato Francisco, cum futurum gratiae filium praedixit; Ioannes sic est vocatus a matre, Franciscus in baptismo Ioannes est a sua matre vocatus; Ioannes in utero et extra prophetavit, Franciscus in utero, id est in carcere apud Perusium captus, cum gaudio se magnum futurum in mundo praedixit et spiritu prophetico claruit; Ioannes amicus sponsi, Franciscus similis Christo; Ioannes obiurgator peccatorum, Franciscus detestator pravorum, patet in nobilibus de Perusio, quorum praedixit explusionem ob peccata, et patet de aliis in Legenda...Ioannes congregator discipulorum, Franciscus aggregator fratrum hominum sanctorum; Ioannes vita singularissimus, Franciscus in victu parcissimus, utpote, qui ex sumebat sustentationem naturae, et in una quadragesima de duobus panibus medietatem sumsit unius; Ioannes mundo singularissimus sanctitate, Franciscus excellentissimus ad Christum prae aliis stigmatizationis confirmate; Ioannes in ordine seraphico sublimatus, Franciscus in ipso ordine in sede luciferi collocatus. Sic ergo praefatis quia Franciscus Ioanni conformis, mater eius divino spiritu illuminata eum vocavit Ioannem, ac velut Elisabeth in cuius nativitate et ortu laetata est”.

This brief look at the Franciscan Sources of the 13th century and the later Sources of the 14th century, which abound in legendary elements, can help us to understand the real meaning of the birth of Saint Francis. It would be unwise to dismiss legendary connotations to the story of the birth of Saint Francis as pure creations of devout fantasy. As we have seen, they are based upon a sincere wish to see Francis's life in true and perfect conformity with the life of Jesus Christ, and also with that of John the Baptist. A visit to a holy place is not only aimed at revering the exact spot in which a historical fact has occurred. It also aims at revering the memory of the holy place and what it stands for. To make a simple but pertinent example: if one goes to the Holy Land, he would stop and pray at such holy sites as Nazareth, Capharnaum, Mount Thabor, Bethlehem, the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, the Cenaculum and the Basilica of Gethsemani, in Jerusalem, and believe with all his heart that they mark the very spots where the Christological mystery he meditates upon occurred. Indeed, archaeological research has confirmed many a time that these are the *ipsissima loca*, the very same places, which mark the sacred mysteries of Christ. But if one stops to pray on the Mount of Beatitudes, he knows he is standing on the area where Jesus must have taught the crowds, but that the exact location is unknown. This does not diminish in any way the value of prayer and celebration of the mystery.

The same thing can happen to a pilgrim who goes to follow the footsteps of Francis of Assisi. Many of the Franciscan places are well-documented and certain regards historical truth. This is not the case with regards to the place where Francis was born and the house in which he was brought up. But it does not mean that we have to dismiss these holy places as pure inventions of devotion. They are definitely not the historical places, there is definitely no early proof of their existence, the documents which speak about Francis's birth are very late in coming. Keeping all this in mind, we can safely revere the birthplace of Saint Francis in any one of the places which are indicated by these late Franciscan Sources, and we can understand the genuine intentions of the authors who handed down to us the pious legends we have quoted.