CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

St Francis 'said: "In pictures of God and the blessed Virgin painted on wood, God and the blessed Virgin are honoured and God and the blessed Virgin are held in mind, yet the wood and the painting ascribe nothing to themselves, because they are just wood and paint; so the servant of God is a kind of painting, that is a creature of God in which God is honoured for the sake of his benefits. But he ought to ascribe nothing to himself, just like the wood or the painting, but should render honour and glory to God alone"' (SL 104).

THE SOFT WAX

In a celebrated scene in Eadmer's *Life of St Anselm*, a fellow abbot described to Anselm his difficulties with the child monks. 'They are incorrigible ruffians. We never give over beating them day and night, and they only get worse and worse.' Anselm retorted that his philosophy of education was radically at fault. 'Are they not human? Are they not flesh and blood like you? . . . Consider this. You wish to form them in good habits by blows and chastisement alone. Have you ever seen a goldsmith form his leaves of gold and silver into a beautiful figure with blows alone? I think not . . . In order to mould his leaf into a suitable form he now presses it and strikes it gently with his tool, and now even more gently raises it with careful pressure and gives it shape. So, if you want your boys to be adorned with good habits, you too, besides the pressure of blows, must apply the encouragement and help of fatherly sympathy and gentleness.'[1] The goldsmith created an impression, an image; and elsewhere, we are told that Anselm 'compared the time of youth to a piece of wax of the right consistency for the impress of a seal . . . If it preserves a mean between . . . extremes of hardness and softness, when it is stamped with the seal [matrix], it will receive the image clear and whole.'[2] The goldsmith passed a message to his patrons – and, if his work survived, to posterity; the

[1] Southern 1962/1979, pp. 37–8.
[2] Southern 1962/1979, p. 20. For recent interesting studies on images in history and art see Bolvig and Lindley 2003, pp. 3–44.

man who makes the impression on the seal creates an image which can be recognised from that day to this as the legal signature of a community or a king – and perhaps too by its beauty it may be an expression of the culture of its day.

This book is about the impression Francis made – intentionally and in spite of himself – on contemporaries and on the early generations after his death, and the ways in which he and they expressed it. But the word impression is too faint for our purpose – it tends to suggest a relatively slight impact. So I talk of his image. Unfortunately 'image' has come to be a cult word, and has had all manner of jargon and mystical meaning attached to it. I have avoided jargon and tried to use it in plain, intelligible senses. When his followers listened to him, reflected on the saint and his message – when buildings rose to commemorate him, when figures in glass and precious metals, and stone, and on wood and plaster were created to record his story – what image of the saint appeared?

The modern, intensive study of hagiography has underlined how superficial it is to set it apart as a historical genre on its own – still more, to downgrade it as a kind of fiction, as has often been consciously or semi-consciously done. Eadmer's *Life of St Anselm* is an outstanding work of biography; but many, indeed most, of the numerous saints' lives written in England in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries were houses built on sand – collections of stories and wonders rarely credible or revealing of the identity and character of the saint. Eadmer was an exceptionally gifted biographer who lived for years on terms of intimacy with his hero Anselm. At the other end of the spectrum were the hagiographers who had little or no material of a historical nature to provide even a plausible core to their narratives; the author of the *Life of St Rumwold*, who reputedly died when only three days old, had the most extreme shortage of material.[3]

One fundamental and obvious feature of Eadmer's *Life* is that he was writing about a living saint: Anselm was alive when most of it was written, though it was completed after his death. There has been much discussion in recent years about the kind of saintly life which attracted a cult while the individual lived. Sir Richard Southern drew attention, a generation ago, to the tradition of intimate biography of which Eadmer's was an outstanding early example.[4] It was to be followed by the *First Life of St Bernard*, which was already well under way while Bernard lived. The biographies of St Francis were written after his death, but vivid stories about him soon began to be recorded by people who knew him well.[5] The developing interest in contemporary saints combined with the exigencies of the canonisation process to make a clear and determined emphasis on the need for eyewitness accounts the essence of many narratives of the thirteenth century and later.[6]

This was not new: it can be clearly traced in the Gospel and Epistles of St John – 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with

[3] Southern 1962/1979 and Southern 1963; Love 1996, pp. cxl–clxiv, 91–115.
[4] Southern 1963, pp. 329–36; cf. Brooke 1967, pp. 179–81. For the tradition of intimate biography in the thirteenth century, see Kleinberg 1992; Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Szell 1991.
[5] See pp. 41–2 and ch. 6.
[6] From Innocent III's time on, the popes were insistent on eyewitness evidence: see below, pp. 36–8, 167, 274.

our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life . . . declare we unto you' (1 John 1. 1–3) – words which echoed down the centuries, constantly reappearing in historical narratives and the testimony of witnesses in and out of canonisation processes. While it is the case that the love of truth was a feeble thing in the minds of many who used these phrases, in many more it was not – and it would be quite false to make general statements about the truthfulness of thirteenth-century historical writers based on a few examples of forgers and liars. Eadmer's words – 'it is a shocking thing for anyone knowingly to write what is false in sacred histories. For the soul of the writer is slain every time they are read or listened to, since in the things which he has falsely written he tells abominable lies to all his readers'[7] – would have found echoes in the minds of many of the authors quoted in this book. In every age for which we have sufficient testimony, including the present, the standards of truthfulness have been infinitely various – but some or many have been faithful witnesses to what they have heard and seen.[8]

THE IMAGE

A saint who was also the founder of an Order had traditionally been remembered in three ways: in a pious biography or a series of them; in the rule and way of life of his Order; and in his relics. Yet it was curiously rare for a founder to be equally honoured in all three ways. St Robert of Molesme, the founder of the Cistercians, had much less impact on the Order and the Church than St Bernard; and Bernard himself was rather an inspiration than a role model, for some of his characteristic activities – his frequent travels, his political involvement, his preaching of the Second Crusade – were at variance with the spirit of the *Carta Caritatis*. Bernard was recorded in his biographies and above all in his own writings; much less in his relics.[9] St Norbert, founder of the Premonstratensians, was a missionary as much as a canon regular; and his Order was effectively taken out of his hands after his translation to the see of Magdeburg. St Gilbert of Sempringham had an excellent Life written about him; his Order followed closely the prescriptions anyway of his later years; and his relics made Sempringham a centre for pilgrimages and miracles.[10] But it was a modest Order and a modest centre: Gilbert and the Gilbertines were no match for Francis and the friars. Francis's own contemporary, St Dominic, seems deliberately to have avoided the personality cult: though a remarkable and sometimes impulsive religious leader, he sank his personality in the Order, which became, not a way of life consciously imitating Dominic, but an Order following the

[7] Southern 1962/1979, p. 149. But even Eadmer, sadly, had his lapses. Later on, in his *Historia Novorum*, he added copies of the Canterbury forgeries, and it is very unlikely that he believed in their innocence (C. Brooke 1971, pp. 113–14; Southern 1958, pp. 225–6). Kleinberg 1992 discusses the realistic accounts of living saints in late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century lives which emphasise what was especially striking or eccentric about them; most compelling is his account of Peter of Dacia's Life of Christina of Stommeln, in which these effects seem to have been enhanced by invention (see esp. ibid. pp. 50–3, 64–70, 96–8).

[8] The most faithful, needless to say, can be misled or can misremember. The categories in the text must inevitably be over-simple.

[9] See C. Brooke 2006, chs. 9, 13 and Postscript.

[10] For Norbert, see Brooke 1975, pp. 58–9 and refs.; for Gilbert, Foreville and Keir 1987; Golding 1995.

Rule of St Augustine and the Constitutions devised by the various committees called General Chapters.[11]

Francis was remembered in ways both conventional and unconventional. His own writings were copied and circulated, his life was written several times over, his Rule was studied by all his followers and interpreted in their actions and constitutions and in several remarkable commentaries. Although there was minimal relic cult in the conventional sense, the place of his burial was a very grand pilgrimage centre – as it still is.

There are many and varied visible and tangible links with Francis, which can help in providing insights and stimulating the imagination. Assisi is still evocative. He will have been baptised in the cathedral of San Rufino[12] (Plate 11). The font is still there. Outside its west door two Romanesque lions crouch, each with a man's body between his front paws, the head in his mouth (Plate 1). One day, while we were contemplating them, a girl on her way in paused to pat one of the lions and murmured 'buon appetito'. Perhaps Francis as a boy did the same. The actual wooden crucifix painted by an anonymous Umbrian artist in the late twelfth century, which Francis saw and venerated and which spoke to him in the semi-derelict church of San Damiano, situated outside the city walls a little way further down the slopes of Monte Subasio, has survived all vicisitudes (Plate 3). Entrusted to St Clare and her tiny community by St Francis when he installed them in San Damiano, it can be seen today in Santa Chiara. This fragile cross is a remarkable symbol of continuity, immediately linking the world in which Francis grew up with our own day. The Carceri, higher up the mountain slopes, still manages to retain something of the atmosphere of remoteness which drew Francis and his companions to retire there for periods of solitary prayer (Plate 2).

Two specimens of Francis' own handwriting survive, both preserved by his close companion, brother Leo. The first is a small piece of parchment, 10 × 13.5 cm, with Francis' *Laudes* – his *Praises* of God – on one side, and his blessing of brother Leo with the Tau cross inscribed on the other. Brother Leo kept this treasured blessing carefully folded inside his tunic. The folds are still there to see, for before he died Leo annotated (and so authenticated) his blessing, explaining that the *Praises* were written at La Verna after Francis had received the stigmata – that is, in 1224[13] (Plate 12). It seems likely that Leo himself gave it to the Basilica, among whose treasures it is preserved, encased in a reliquary, the most authentic visible relic of the saint before his body was rediscovered in the nineteenth century.[14] Francis's brief letter to Leo, now in the Cappella delle Reliquie in Spoleto Cathedral, was formerly in the possession of the Franciscan house of San Simone in Spoleto, where it is recorded in the early seventeenth century: after the suppression of the house in the early nineteenth century it came into the possession of the archbishop of Spoleto, who deposited it in the cathedral in 1902.[15] The breviary St Francis used for daily worship carries a rubric telling us that brothers Angelo and

[11] Brooke 1975, pp. 100–5; C. Brooke 1971, ch. 11.
[12] Sabatier 1893/4, p. 3, pointed out that all the children of Assisi were baptised in the cathedral. This was the custom in Italian cities (C. Brooke 1999, pp. 31–2, 77, 93–4).
[13] Langeli 2000, pp. 30–41; SL Frontispiece; cf. pp. 109, 403.
[14] See p. 356; Langeli 2000, pp. 17–19. It was certainly there in 1338.
[15] Langeli 2000, pp. 19–21.

Plate 1 Assisi, Cathedral of San Rufino, one of the lions outside the west door (Photo C. N. L. Brooke).

Leo gave it to St Clare's successor, the abbess Benedetta, after the community moved to Santa Chiara; and there it remained till 1997, when – following the earthquake – the community and its treasure sought a safer home in the convent of Monteripido di Perugia.[16] The breviary is largely in Leo's hand and is the most substantial surviving relic of one of Francis' closest friends. But that is not all. A manuscript at Messina contains the earliest surviving text of the Testament of St Clare and a copy of the Rule of St Clare of 1253 – in both of which the scribe seems to have used a certain freedom. In 2000 Bartoli Langeli, in a brilliant detective exercise, showed that its binding incorporated a draft written by a notary active in Assisi in the 1270s and 1280s – and he argued that

[16] Langeli 2000, p. 83; cf. pp. 8–9. It must have been deposited well after 1253, but before Leo's death c.1271.

Plate 2 The Carceri above Assisi: the cell traditionally ascribed to brother Leo (Photo R. B. Brooke).

the manuscript itself was written by Leo.[17] It forms a further, intriguing and impressive link between Leo and St Clare.

DAWN?

When I first began to study St Francis I was under the impression that he appeared, not out of a clear sky, since storm clouds were lowering, but as the dawn of a new day, bringing a change in the weather, a burst of sunshine. The likening of Francis to the sun, and to associated images of light, found public expression less than two years after his death, which occurred during the night of 3–4 October 1226. His friend and

[17] Langeli 2000, pp. 104–29.

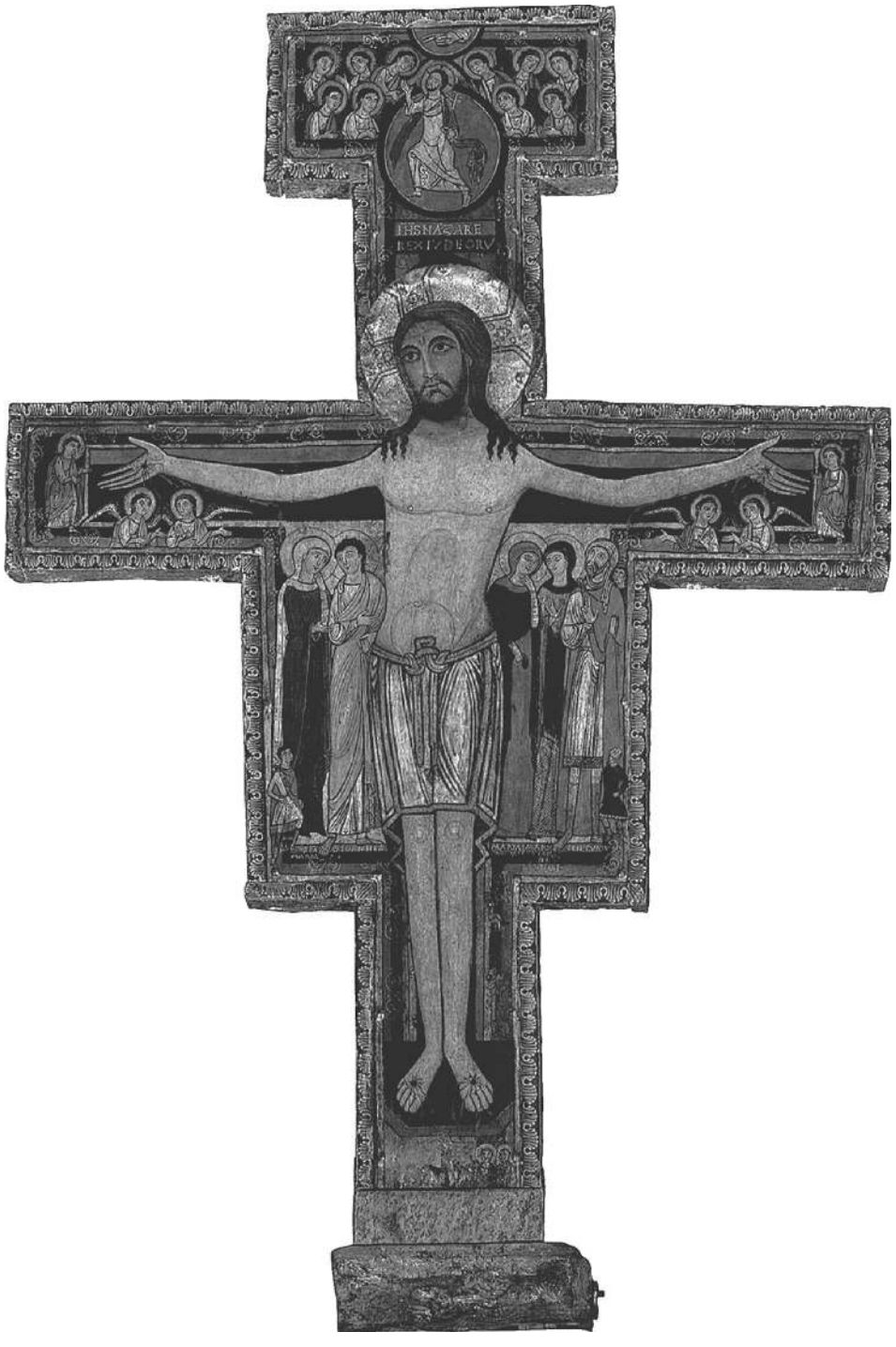

Plate 3 The crucifix from San Damiano, now in Santa Chiara, Assisi (© www.Assisi.de. Photo Gerhard Ruf).

patron Pope Gregory IX took as the text for his sermon on the solemn occasion of his official canonisation ceremony, held at Assisi on 16 July 1228:

like the morning star among the clouds,
like the moon at the full,
like the sun shining on the Temple of the Most High.[18]

St Bonaventure elaborated the theme in the preface to his official *Life* of the saint, written between 1260 and 1263. 'By the glorious splendour of his life and teaching, Francis shone like the day-star amid the clouds, and by the brilliance which radiated from him he guided those who live in darkness . . . to the light. Like the rainbow that lights up the clouds with sudden glory, he bore in his own body the pledge of God's covenant [that is, the marks of Christ's wounds on the Cross, the stigmata], bringing the good news of peace and salvation to men, like a true Angel of peace.'[19]

Some of these images were taken up by Dante in a famous passage in the *Paradiso*, in which St Thomas Aquinas honours Francis:

From a mountain slope [facing Perugia]
was born into the world a sun,
even as our sun rises from the Ganges.
Therefore let no-one, speaking of that place,
say 'Ascesi' [Assisi] – the word falls short –
but 'Oriente', if he would correctly speak.

'Ascesi' was the Tuscan form of Assisi in Dante's day; and 'ascesi' was also Tuscan for 'I have risen, ascended.' The Orient – the east of the world – signifies the sunrise. The word is also reminiscent of Luke 1. 78, where Zacharias speaks of 'the tender mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring from on high ('oriens ex alto') hath visited us'.[20]

'Nacque al mondo un sole' – the image of the sun, and of the dawn, was fostered by his own Order, the Friars Minor, and taken up by poets and artists.

But was St Francis so original? He certainly claimed to be doing something new, directly inspired by God and the literal reading of the Gospel. In his Testament, which is in effect his autobiography, he asserted boldly and simply: 'no one showed me what I ought to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I ought to live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel'.[21] Again, in a collection of stories about him attributed to one of his close companions, brother Leo, Francis is reported as saying emphatically and publicly to Cardinal Hugolino, later Pope Gregory IX, and the friars assembled in General Chapter: 'My brothers! My brothers! God has called me by the way of simplicity

[18] *1 Cel.* 125. The text is taken from Ecclesiasticus 50. 6–7 (Jerusalem Bible).
[19] Bonav., Prologue, 1, in *AF* X, 557–8 (trans. by B. Fahy in Habig 1979, pp. 631–2). Cf. Ecclesiasticus 50. 8: 'Like the rainbow gleaming against brilliant clouds'; and for the image of the Angel, Revelation 7. 12. Cf. the opening of the Prologue (c. 1) of *3 Soc.*: 'Resplendent as the dawn and as the morning star, or even as the rising sun, setting the world alight . . . Francis was seen to rise as a new kind of star' (trans. N. de Robeck in Habig 1979, p. 889).
[20] Dante, *Paradiso*, canto XI, 49–54. For the text and interpretation, see Petrocchi 1994, p. 179 and note to line 53: 'Non v'ha dubbio che si debba leggere Ascesi, come hanno i codici; la forma Asisi appartiene a manoscritti dell'area settentrionale.' See also Sinclair 1958, p. 170 n. 5; Singleton 1975, p. 198.
[21] Esser 1976, p. 439; cf. Brooke 1975, pp. 24–5, 117–19, esp. 117.

and shown me the way of simplicity. I do not want you to name any Rule to me, not St Augustine's, nor St Bernard's, nor St Benedict's. The Lord said to me that he wished that I should be a new-born simpleton in the world.'[22] But what was new about his message and his way of life? If we turn the cold eye of analysis on to the ideas and principles and activities which made up the new dawn, cannot we find them, one and all, among his predecessors and contemporaries? Has not the charm of his personality, and the brilliant propaganda of his disciples, bemused us into converting a colourful patchwork quilt of old pieces into a newly woven cloak of many colours?

The very heart of his message and his way of life lies in a quotation from the Gospel – 'If you would be perfect'. The pursuit of perfection – formidable as the challenge seems to ordinary mortals – has always been a central theme of the religious life. The most fundamental of the Conferences of John Cassian, in which the ethos of eastern monasticism was interpreted to the west in the early fifth century, was on perfection.[23] As for the Gospel, it is true that the Latin of the Vulgate prevented the illiterate from actually reading it and vernacular versions were liable to be investigated as potentially heretical. But Italian lay folk, like Francis, were often literate, and the Bible was the medieval school book *par excellence*. The child learnt his letters from the Psalter, and the Bible was used in the teaching of the liberal arts, being studied as part of the syllabus in schools and universities. In the twelfth century a professor of theology was called a 'master of the sacred page' and could take an exalted view of his vocation. A revival and enlargement of biblical study was one of the main features of the twelfth-century Renaissance, and its most remarkable element was a renewed interest in the literal meaning of Scripture – whose effect we see passing into popular consciousness very clearly in Francis' own life and teaching.[24]

He looked in the Gospel for evidence of the life of the apostles; and this, so far from being original, was the most predictable thing a pious man born in the twelfth century could do. The eleventh and twelfth centuries had seen a great blossoming of forms of the religious life, both old and new; some of them to our mind, somewhat bizarre, like the Orders of Knights. In the fervour of discussion and argument these movements raised, certain points formed the constant themes, the clichés of twelfth-century religion.

First, the attempt to pursue the apostolic life. This could involve the effort to discover what the life of the apostles had been like, and imitate it; or (perhaps more commonly), it meant choosing a congenial mode of the contemporary ascetic, religious scene, and claiming for it apostolic authority. In searching the New Testament for evidence of the life of the apostles Francis did what numerous religious leaders of the previous century had done before him. The second point of discussion and argument was the nature of religious and apostolic poverty. Monks had always been sworn to personal poverty, and it had long caused unease among some of them, and even more among their critics, that monks who were individually poor could be members of exceedingly rich monasteries. This came to be seen as a really unhappy paradox by many reformers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries; and poverty lay at the heart of many religious

[22] SL 114; cf. ibid. pp. 57–66. [23] Pichery 1955–8, II, no. XI, pp. 100–20.
[24] Smalley 1952, pp. xiv–xviii, 196–263.

movements, orthodox and heretical. Waldo, the founder of the Waldensians, was a rich merchant of Lyon, who abandoned his wealth for a life of poverty and preaching. In many ways his movement in its origin was extraordinarily similar to Francis', himself a merchant's son, reacting against the materialistic values and questionable ethics of his environment. Waldo eventually became a 'heretic', that is to say he left the Catholic church, and his followers now constitute by far the oldest surviving Protestant communion.[25] But many of his like remained orthodox, or returned to orthodoxy, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and more than one of these groups won patronage from Pope Innocent III. In embracing poverty Francis was following a very well worn path. There was indeed a special emphasis, an uncompromising rigour, not previously corporately sustained. He had appreciated something of the ambiguities in other religious orders, and insisted that in his Order poverty was to be absolute, corporate as well as individual. The buildings in which the friars lodged, and the sites on which those buildings stood, were not in any circumstances to belong to them, to be their property. They were to own nothing. Money they were not even allowed to handle. There was a new edge to Francis' poverty – but the basic idea was conventional, and the notion that the apostles had been proto-Franciscans in their attitude to money owed more to twelfth-century tradition than to the New Testament.

Then there was heresy. Francis reiterated his obedience to the pope, and firmly excluded all taint of heresy from his Order. But he did not explicitly confront the problem in the way that St Dominic did at first. One of the surprising features of his own writings and the numerous stories and biographies is that heretics very rarely figure in them; little is said of heresy or its dangers. Yet his insistence in his Testament on submission to priests, and his constant awareness from the earliest days of the vital importance of papal approval, underline his own attitude. What makes the silence of the sources so odd is that he lived in an area riddled with heretics: a Cathar bishop presided in the valley of Spoleto in his youth, and Innocent III thought a podestà, or mayor, of Assisi was a Cathar.[26] This silence must mean that Francis was not enamoured of apologetic propaganda; that he believed that the way to counter heresy was to preach, and behave, the opposite. And he was by conviction and temperament as far removed from the Cathars as a man could be. They taught that the material world is wholly evil. Francis called on the birds, and in his Canticle of brother Sun, on the whole of Creation, to bear witness that the visible world is good, that it is God's world and should worship its Creator. He also believed in sin and hell and the need for repentance – his Third Order, aimed to cater for those who remained at home, comprised the brothers and sisters of penitence – but his fervent preaching that the world was God's world may have been as powerful as the Inquisition in undermining the Cathar churches in the thirteenth century.

In his relations with women Francis faced a problem very familiar to the religious leaders of the previous century. Robert of Arbrissel had resolved the many-sided religious inspiration of the late eleventh century by remaining himself part-time popular

[25] On Waldo, see Selge 1967; Brooke 1975, pp. 71–4, 148–52; Lambert 1992, ch. 5.
[26] C. Brooke 1970, pp. 62–3; Esser 1958, esp. p. 239; Borst 1953, pp. 231ff.