

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION.

I.

BLESSED AGNES OF BOHEMIA.

BLESSED Agnes of Bohemia is a figure but slightly known in Franciscan story. Buried in the folios of the *Acta Sanctorum* of the Bollandists under the date prescribed for her remembrance, 6th March, her life-story has been scarcely remembered, and even to Franciscan students she is known only through the occasional references in the sources and especially by the reflected glory of having had four letters addressed to her by Saint Clare. Never before has her life been presented to English readers. For the last twenty years the loving devotion of followers of Saint Francis has directed the searchlight of literary criticism upon the origins of the Franciscan Order. The great aim has been, and still is, to trace patiently back the paths, often tangled and difficult, which lead to those two great figures, Saint Francis and Saint Clare, which have succeeded in casting a spell over the devotion of the Catholic Church: to learn what really is the "Franciscan spirit" and what factors led to the success of the movement which, beginning in Umbria, spread throughout the world and saved the Church. To many, the magnificence of the triple Church of San Francesco, even though it does contain the bones of the Saint, or the glory of Santa Maria degli Angeli, even though it does enshrine the Portiuncula, fail somewhat in their appeal. They know that it is the rugged simplicity of the windswept Carceri, where the spirit of Francis still dwells and the bare austerity of San Damiano, still pervaded by the holiness of Clare, that made the Order of

VOL. VII. I

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the Brothers Minor a power in the world and in the Church. As we go right back into the thirteenth century, we come to the band of faithful disciples surrounding the person of Saint Francis, names written indelibly in the memories of his chroniclers and his friends. So too there are noble women surrounding the person of Saint Clare, and of these none is worthier to be remembered and revered than Blessed Agnes of Bohemia.

Born in 1205 and dying in 1282 after thirty years spent in the world but not of it, and forty-six years spent in religion as a Sister of the Order of Saint Clare, Blessed Agnes was a contemporary of both Saint Francis and Saint Clare. The conversion of Saint Francis had not taken place in the year when she was born: he was still living a life of pleasure. But when at the early age of three she was betrothed to Boheslas, son of the Duke of Silesia, Francis had made the great renunciation; and when at the age of nine years she was betrothed to Henry, the son of the Emperor Frederick II., Clare had already quitted the world and entered her life-long seclusion at San Damiano.

Blessed Agnes came of a stock which was devoted to religion, a stock indeed of which saints were made. One of her ancestors in the royal line of Bohemia, the dynasty known as the Premyslides, was Wenceslas the Holy, known in Christmas story and song as the Good King Wenceslas, who died in 935. It is interesting to see that between the years 1205 and 1227 there lived four royal persons connected with each other by bonds of blood and of marriage, three of whom were destined to be raised to the altars of the Church, and the fourth, Blessed Agnes herself, to be beatified. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, daughter of Andreas II., King of Hungary, was the first cousin of Blessed Agnes. She was born in 1207 at Pressburg and married at the age of fourteen to Louis IV., Landgrave of Thuringia. Her life was a short one. For in 1227, her husband Louis, who was also canonised, died and she was driven from her palace of the Wartburg by her brother-in-law the Regent, Henry Raspe III., on the pretext

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

that she was wasting the estates by her alms. After suffering the greatest austerities she found refuge at Marburg, where she died on 19th November, 1231, and where she is now buried. She was one of the early members of the Third Order. Reference is made to her in the present life on pp. 64, 78. There can be little doubt that the holiness of the life of Saint Elizabeth was a great stimulus to her kinswoman, Agnes, and was one of the factors which led to her own renunciation. Then too there was Saint Hedwig, likewise a kinswoman of Agnes, for she was the sister of the mother of Andreas II., King of Hungary, uncle of Agnes. She also comes into the story of Agnes; for as we are told on page 66, when Agnes was three years old, she was sent to the cloister of Trebnitz in Silesia "and was committed to the charge of a nun named Hedwig, who taught the dear child the faith"; and this Hedwig may safely be identified with the Saint of that name. So amid all the political upheavals and disturbances which rent the Holy Roman Empire in the thirteenth century, amid all the quarrels between Pope and Emperor, lived these four saints, Hedwig, Elizabeth, Louis, and Agnes; and it may be noted that the one of them who was destined to do most for the Church, Blessed Agnes, has never yet been canonised, although popular custom has often described her as "Saint Agnes".

In order that the life-story of Blessed Agnes may be understood, something must be said as to its historical setting. If there had been nothing else to lend interest to her life, that interest would have been found in her contact with the Emperor Frederick II., who first sought her in marriage for his son, Henry, and then later for himself. The figure of Frederick, with its strange fascination and its inconsistency, threw a glamour over his own generation and has commanded the interest and curiosity of subsequent centuries. Who can tell to what extent Frederick's career might have been altered, if his suit had been successful and if Agnes had become his wife? How often during the troublous years which followed Blessed Agnes's entry into the Order of Saint Clare must

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 BLESSED AGNES OF BOHEMIA

she have thanked God that she had the courage to refuse the hand of the great enemy of the Church, thrice excommunicated, *malleus Romanae ecclesiae*, as Petrarch called him!

Blessed Agnes was the daughter of Premysl Ottocar I., who ascended the throne of Bohemia in 1197. Her mother was Constantia, sister of Andreas II., King of Hungary. At that time Bohemia lay outside the Empire. Ottocar died in 1230, and was succeeded by his son Wenceslas I., brother of Blessed Agnes. It was during his reign, viz. in 1233, that Frederick II., after the death of his second wife Yolanda, sought Agnes in marriage. At the same time she was wooed by Henry III., King of England. Agnes, however, had already made a firm resolve to enter the Order of Saint Clare and succeeded in obtaining the intervention of the Pope, Gregory IX., who, although nominally reconciled to the Emperor Frederick in 1230, probably felt no great regret at the frustration of his suit. In 1253 Wenceslas I. died and was succeeded by his son, Ottocar II., who in 1260 defeated Bela IV., King of Hungary, at the battle of Kressenbrunn and raised the power and influence of Bohemia to its height. Ottocar extended the rule of Bohemia to the shores of the Adriatic and Carinthia; Istria and even parts of Northern Italy came under his sway. But it was not for long. Rudolph, Count of Hapsburg, was elected King of the Romans in 1273 and claimed part of the territories acquired by Ottocar as vacant fiefs of the Empire. Ultimately Ottocar, deserted by the nobility of Bohemia, was deprived by Rudolph of all lands except Bohemia and Moravia. In 1278 Ottocar made a final attempt to retrieve his failing fortunes by invading the Austrian duchies, but he was overthrown and slain in battle at Durnkrut. Reference will be found to this event in the life of Blessed Agnes, page 110, where it is related how she had a vision showing the coming defeat and the death of her brother's son.

Such was the historical atmosphere in which Blessed Agnes lived her life. Comparatively little did the political movements around and outside her convent walls affect her. The references to historical figures which do occur in the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

versions of her life here published are but slight, and yet it may be observed that practically every historical reference that does occur can be verified from other sources as in general accurate.

It is, however, as a Franciscan of the first generation and as one who took a leading part in keeping alive the spirit and ideals of the Founder of the Order during the half-century which followed his death, that Blessed Agnes deserves most to be remembered. It is indeed a matter for some surprise that one, who for twenty years was a friend and correspondent of Saint Clare herself and who was intimately associated with Saint Clare in the long struggle with the Holy See for the confirmation of the Rule and the cherished privilege of Poverty, should be so slightly known to Franciscan students. The reason has been perhaps the comparative scantiness and inaccessibility of the materials of her life-story.

If one comes to the reading of the life of Blessed Agnes after reading the second life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano, or the Legend of Saint Bonaventura, one cannot fail to notice at once the difference. We are back in the old atmosphere of the early days of the Order; there is the freshness and naïveté and austerity of the Portiuncula and of San Damiano. There is the spirit and the ideals of Francis and Clare. There is the passionate devotion to the Lady Poverty, which we look for in vain in the later Franciscans. There is the persistent refusal to compromise the primitive simplicity of the new vocation. Throughout the whole life it is impossible to point to a single incident or statement and say "That is not in accordance with the Testament of Saint Francis," or "That is inconsistent with the Testament of Saint Clare". It is not many Franciscan documents of which this could be said. When Blessed Agnes resolves to enter the Order of Saint Clare, she sends for the Brothers Minor to ask what she must do to give effect to her purpose. "Then the Brothers told her the Rule of Saint Clare, which was that whosoever would enter the Order of Saint Clare should, according to the command of the Holy Gospel, 'sell all that he hath and give to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 BLESSED AGNES OF BOHEMIA

the poor'." There is the same ring about this as about the conversion of Bernard of Quintavalle. Then again there is the primitive care for the lepers. "For lepers and the sick brothers before the cloister and for other sick folk too she would care specially, with as great devotion and piety as if she were doing so for God Himself." Most significant is her refusal to allow her cloister to hold or to inherit property. "He (the Cardinal-Protector) sent her his letter and besought her most earnestly and counselled her with fatherly sincerity that she and her cloister should hold and inherit property by reason of the widespread want and need of the land. . . . This she withstood with steadfast mind and soul, saying that she would sooner die of want and poverty than be parted from Holy Poverty." We pass to a more detailed consideration of the long struggle for the Privilege of Poverty.

II.

"THE PRIVILEGE OF POVERTY."

One of the most interesting and at the same time one of the most obscure topics in Franciscan studies must naturally be the investigation of the successive stages in the development of the Rules of the Three Orders. This subject, so far as it relates to the First Order and to the Third Order, must lie outside the scope of this study. But perhaps the prime importance of the study of the life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia lies in the contribution which it makes to our knowledge of the intricate negotiations with the Holy See which led up to the final confirmation of the Rule of Saint Clare by Innocent IV. on 9th August, 1253. Much has been written on this subject recently, but it would appear that the contribution made by Blessed Agnes to the ultimate issue has been largely overlooked. An examination of the life of Blessed Agnes and more especially of the numerous papal bulls addressed to her by Gregory IX. and Innocent IV. will give ground for the statement that she must have played no small or unimportant part in the long controversy from which Saint Clare emerged triumphant.

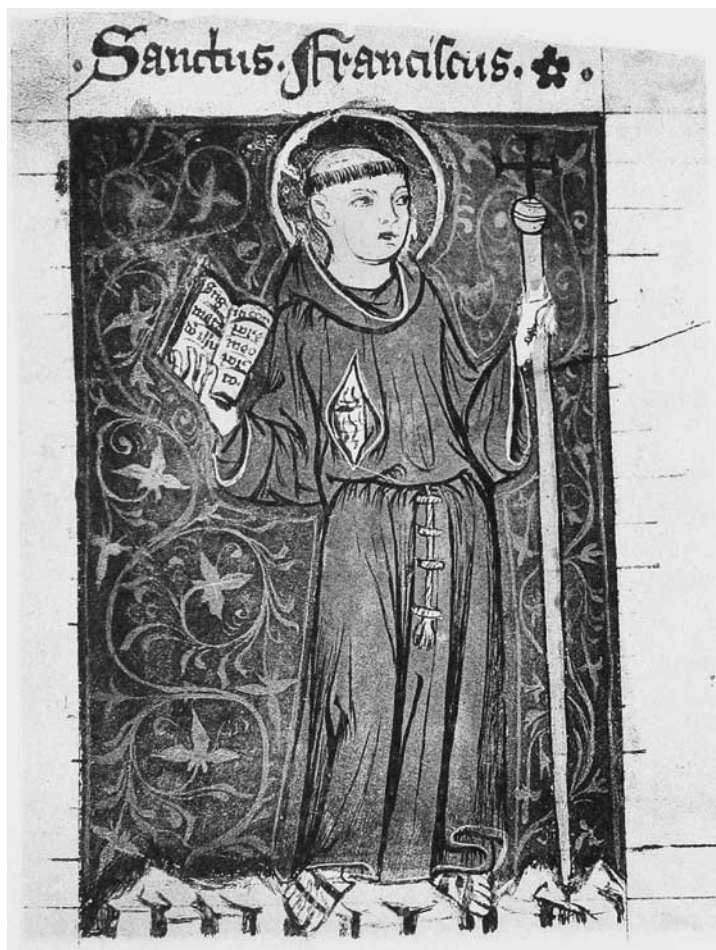
Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)



SAINT FRANCIS

(From MS. M.281 Royal Library, Dresden.)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

7

In order to state the issues clearly, it will be necessary to recapitulate briefly¹ the events relating to the Rule of Saint Clare, prior to 1234, the date when Blessed Agnes entered the Order.

It was in 1212 that Clare first made her great renunciation and embraced the life of absolute poverty, and in the following year that she was placed by Saint Francis in San Damiano. At that time the newly-formed community of the Poor Ladies had no Rule, but lived as far as possible according to the original Rule of the Friars Minor as approved by Innocent III. In 1215 she obtained from Innocent III. the same "privilege of poverty" which that pontiff had granted to Francis.² Reference is made to this oral grant in the Testament of Saint Clare: "*Solicita fui a Domino Papa Innocentio, sub cujus tempore coepimus . . . nostram professionem sanctissimae paupertatis, quam et Patri nostro promisimus, eorum privilegiis facere corroborari*". The essential feature of the "Privilege of Poverty" was that it implied that she and her Sisters were not to be obliged to hold property.

In 1218 Ugolino, Bishop of Ostia, obtained authority from Honorius III. by the bull *Litterae tuae*³ (7th August, 1218) to receive estates for the purpose of building religious houses for virgins who wished to enter the religious life. As a natural

¹ For this recapitulation use has been made largely of Father Cuthbert's admirable Introduction to Mrs. Balfour's *Life and Legend of the Lady Saint Clare*, 1910, and of Père Livarius Oligier's articles, "De Origine Regularum Ordinis S. Clarae," in the *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, tom. v., fasc. II. and III., An. 1912.

² The question whether it was Innocent III. or Innocent IV. who gave a verbal grant of "poverty" to Saint Clare is a much disputed one. Oligier, after reviewing the evidence, sums up in favour of the view that Innocent III. did make such a grant in 1215; but he bases it mainly upon the reference in the *Legend of Saint Clare*, not on that in her Testament. In this connection the passage in the Berlin MS. [Fol. 192r.] is very puzzling. This MS. clearly attributes the grant to Innocent IV.: but yet it states that the rule was granted "when S. Clare began the order," and also the sentence, "*da schrib ir der babst mit seiner selb hand die erst form vnd mas der regel*," sounds like a reminiscence of a similar passage in the *Legend of Saint Clare* where it is applied to Innocent III. For further discussion of this passage, see p. 25.

³ Sbaralea, "Bullarium Franciscanum," vol. i., 1.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

consequence he himself drew up a Rule, containing provisions for the government of the religious houses coming within his control, and these provisions came to be known as the Hugoline Constitutions. They were not in any sense Franciscan, either in spirit or in form. They were indeed Benedictine, for they definitely placed the houses upon which they were imposed within the Benedictine Order. The constitutions contain the following words:—

“Regulam Beatissimi Benedicti, in qua virtutum perfectio et summa discretio noscitur instituta, quae et a sanctis Patribus a principio devote suscepta est, et ab Ecclesia Romana venerabiliter approbata, vobis concedimus observandam in omnibus, in quibus eidem vivendi formulae vobis a Nobis traditae, cum adhuc essemus in minori officio constituti, contraria minime comprobatur.”

The importance of this was that they were opposed on the most fundamental issue to the Privilege of Poverty, for they deliberately made provision by which property could be held in common and inherited by each house. Ugolino, refusing to recognise the verbal grant made to Saint Clare by Innocent III. and fortified by the bull of Honorius III., *Sacrosancta Romana Ecclesia*¹ (9th December, 1219), which specifically mentions the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, imposed this new Rule upon Saint Clare and her Sisters. This happened while Saint Francis was absent in the East on his missionary tour. Saint Francis returned in 1219, and doubtless by his aid Ugolino was prevailed upon to withdraw his constitutions so far as they affected the most vital question, the Privilege of Poverty, or the freedom from the obligation to hold possessions; while it would appear that in other respects the practices imposed by the Constitutions of 1219, such as perpetual enclosure, perpetual silence and fasting, were tacitly accepted and remained in force not only at San Damiano, but also in the other houses of Poor Clares which were springing up.

¹ Sbaralea, “*Bullarium Franciscanum*,” vol. i., 3.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01760-2 - Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia

Walter W. Seton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

Ugolino did not however extend his concession to these other houses and they continued to be governed by the Constitutions, without any safeguard of the Privilege of Poverty. In 1228, shortly after the canonisation of Saint Francis, Ugolino, who had by that time been raised to the Pontificate as Gregory IX., in response to the earnest pleadings of Saint Clare granted to her in a letter of 17th September, 1228, the privilege for which she sought. This was, however, entirely a personal privilege restricted to her and to the Sisters of San Damiano.

We come now to the part taken by Blessed Agnes in the long struggle, which had for its object and aim to secure to all the Houses of Poor Clares recognition as part of the Franciscan Order and, in consequence, as participators with the Friars Minor and with the Poor Clares of San Damiano in the Privilege of Poverty.

It can scarcely be doubted that it was at Pentecost, 1234, that Blessed Agnes entered the Convent at Prag, which she had herself founded. The arguments for this date will be discussed in connection with other points of chronology relating to her.¹

The Convent of Poor Ladies of Prag was then at its foundation in 1234, when Blessed Agnes was installed as Abbess, in precisely the same position as San Damiano had been in 1218, that is to say, it was, formally at all events, under the Hugoline Constitutions, its inmates were regarded by the Holy See as Benedictines, it had not the Privilege of Poverty and so was compelled to receive possessions. How unwelcome this position must have been to Blessed Agnes herself and still more so to Saint Clare can be judged by all that followed and by references in the Life.

On 18th May, 1235, Gregory IX. issued a bull, *Cum relicta seculi vanitate*,² to Blessed Agnes and the Poor Ladies of Prag, providing that the revenues of the Hospital of Saint Francis at Prag were to be devoted perpetually to their main-

¹ See pages 45-51.

² Sbaralea, "Bullarium Franciscanum," vol. i., 156.