

## INTRODUCTION

The archive documents concerning the history and spirituality of the Servants of Mary is made up of letters or acts granted by the chanceries of Popes, Cardinals, Bishops and other public authorities, or by acts drawn up and authenticated by notaries. Such documents, precisely dated, have come down to us either in the original in which they were written or in copies by notaries or of a private character but which guarantee the authenticity and the tenor of the Published in, thus allowing us to grasp what, on that date and on that place, had been deliberated. Apart from the chancery formulas in which they were written, often repetitive and predetermined but significant for the choice made between the various formulas available, in their explanation and dispositions, they codify or attest to precise situations or deliberations which themselves, while sometimes subject to various possible interpretations, are essential points for historical research.

It is not the intention of the writers or the originators of such acts to offer elements that can directly serve to outline a complete picture of the spirituality of the friars and of the Order to which they are related. So much so that the documents preserved have come down to us in a casual way by means of various different events which caused the irreparable disappearance of other similar documents and, almost always, the transfer of those that remain from their original archive to another, often public, one. Those remaining do, however, allow us to grasp the concrete reality of the men and the deeds that they show us, in all their eloquent immediacy, witnessing to existing realities or proposals, often highly significant, precisely in the spiritual realm. The elements that they offer us are like solid stone chips or glass pieces of a mosaic that, if placed in a certain order, while not allowing us to see the complete design, do permit us to see a significant outline sketch of it.

The documents presented here are a selection; a considerable number of others have been omitted. Neither are the published ones given in their entirety; that would have made this volume too long: in the choice made, we have tried to be as faithful as possible to the significant parts of the Published ins. References are also given, for each act, not always to the original, even if it is still extant, but to the most recent Published in available and other more recent Documents where one can find the relative documentation.

The documents here given go from a first act of 1245, where in a precise context related to the originators or founders of the Order there appears for the first time, in order to designate a group of holy Florentine men, the title of “Servants of Mary”, up to the papal letter in which, upon the death, during the plague of 1348, of the Prior general Master (a title which here appears for the first time in the Order) Matthew of Città della Pieve, the Avignonese Pope Clement VI designates his successor to be Fra Vitale of Bologna, who was to become, in 1362, Bishop of Ascoli and later of Chieti. This is the first century of the Servite Order (1245/1247-1348), which consisted of four important periods:

\* The origins, in the first 10 years from 1245/1247 to 1256, centered on the group of penitent Servants of Mary, the Seven Holy Founders, and on Monte Senario which they ascended perhaps towards the beginning of 1246;

\*\* The developments of the succeeding 20 years, 1256-1274, shown by the numerical increase and geographical spread which, from central Italy crosses the Apennines and reaches

Germany, by their worship and apostolate in which the Mother of the Lord has a pre-eminent place and by the organizational structure including the erection of the first religious provinces and government concentrated in the hands of the Prior general – now living in Florence – counterbalanced by the annual general chapter; by the compilation of a body of constitutive laws and by a written account of the origins or beginnings of the Order (the *De origine Ordinis*) due to Saint Philip, the outstanding figure of this period;

\*\*\* The difficult 30 years from 1274 to 1304, between the Second Council of Lyons and the approval of Benedict XI, in which the Servite Order while subject to the dispositions taken by the Council to redimension the place in the Church of the new religious orders, often Mendicant, progressively recovers, starting from the first letters sent to individual priories by Honorius IV in 1287, with new additions in 1289, religious professions starting again in 1291, the erection of a new province that of Alemagna and the restructuring of its legal practices (the *Constitutiones anti-quaer*), distinguished by acts of homage to the Blessed Virgin, definitively confirmed in 1804 by Benedict XI who thus canonically re-inserts the Order into the Church.

\*\*\*\* The following 40 years up to the Letter of Reform of Clement VI in 1346 and the Black Death of 1348 and which is distinguished by the notable and progressive numerical and geographical recovery of the Order, especially in the North of the peninsula, which leads to the doubling of its membership and the formation of a fifth province (Venice), and by the constant reformation of its legislation and the composition of a *corpus* of hagiographical *legendae* focusing on and putting forward as models the saints and blessed who followed each other from the origins up to the middle of the 14th century; it is marked, however, above all in some old foundations, by situations of serious lack of observance of regular discipline that, along with conflicts of a personal nature, leads to the rejection of the reforming decrees and the serious crisis of authority that undermines the last ten years of the government of fra Peter of Todi (1334-1344), founder of the province of Venice and creator of Servite hagiography.