

Which Rhetoric for which Observance? Provisional Investigations in Fifteenth-Century Italy

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Introduction

Among the many discursive forms implemented by religious orders to construct and exalt the prestige and the perfection of their way of life, particularly in competition with others considered less perfect, there is one that has drawn less attention than others. It concerns the preaching addressed in the first instance to order members at the occasion of specific celebrations gathering fellow friars, significant by their number or by their status in the order. Among such ritual occasions that led to one or more speeches, and among the particular moments that would merit further delineation, and which sometimes also involved lay participants, general and provincial chapters will occupy our attention first and foremost.¹ In fact, their function within the religious orders (for their government and the election

1 Translation Bert Roest. On the General Chapter as an institution, the point of departure is Florent Cygler, *Das Generalkapitel im hohen Mittelalter. Cisterzienser, Prämonstratenser, Kartäuser und Cluniazenser*, Vita regularis, 12 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998). For the Dominicans, see Idem, 'L'originalité des «constitutions primitives» dominicaines', *Divus Thomas* 109:2 (2006) [= *L'origine dell'Ordine dei Predicatori e l'Università di Bologna*], 57-80, and G. R. Galbraith, *The Constitution of the Dominican Order, 1216 to 1360* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1905), Chapter 2.

of superiors), and the attendance they generated provided an ideal opportunity to develop a reflection (and ensuring its publicity) on the state of the order and the means of its growth or reform, as well as on its leaders, their role in the orders' good governance, their qualities, and in reverse, their flaws. It is necessary, for the sake of comprehensiveness, to mention the existence of other occasions when such aspects, or some of them, were vocalized, such as visitations, and the ritual reception of superiors or Cardinal Protectors, yet those will not be studied here.

Generally speaking, this type of preaching to fellow order members has been neglected, as particularly for the mendicant orders much more attention has been paid to their preaching to the populace at large, the importance of which in all respects without doubt has justified such preferential treatment. The few exceptions to this nonetheless show the rich potential of this field of research,² notably to investigate how the orders constructed and staged their institutional identity, by privileging certain aspects (modes and mechanisms of government, virtues, illustrious men of the order), and certain choices, thus providing the historian new avenues to understand the complex evolutionary process of Observance in religious orders.

In the context of this contribution, and in the absence of an exhaustive inventory of this type of homiletic performances, I will proceed in a very experimental and provisional manner, by putting forward first of all some initial observations on the essential characteristics of the envisaged source corpus, and following this up in a more in-depth manner with three case studies, chosen equally from Benedictine and from mendicant monastic traditions within fifteenth-century Italy; an essential context considering the issues discussed in this volume, both in terms of the order families in full transformation, and in terms of the oratory practices swept away by the humanist shockwave.

2 See especially Michael Robson, 'Sermons Preached to the Friars Minor in the Thirteenth Century', in: *Franciscans and Preaching: Every Miracle From the Beginning of the World Came About Through Words*, ed. Timothy J. Johnson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 273-298.

Signposts for a history of chapter preaching in religious orders (12th-15th centuries)

Even though chapter preaching is widely attested from the late twelfth century onward, for instance in the Cistercian and Victorine orders, modern scholars do not often pay much attention to it, maybe because it is often not mentioned as such in the personal collections of preachers, or in sermon anthologies that contain specimen of this genre.³ In this regard the classification effort of mendicant friars marks a turning point, which helps, among other things, to isolate within the category of sermons for special occasions those sermons intended for moments related to order governance, and for general and provincial chapter meetings in particular.⁴ The corpus on which I base myself here is distinguished by an additional characteristic pertaining to homiletic tastes and practices at the end of the Middle Ages.

From the thirteenth century onward, under the decisive influence of the mendicant orders, this type of preaching had adopted the dominant form of the *sermo modernus*, notwithstanding some nuances and phenomena of hybridization, on the part of monks in particular.⁵ In fifteenth-century Italy, one can discern instead a clear transformation in favor of new oratory forms promoted by Humanism; a change that can be perceived both in the mendicant orders, and in some monastic orders for which these types of discourse have been preserved. Simply put, counter to the thematic sermons built on the basis of a biblical theme, a speech in the ‘ancient style’ now became preferable, that is to say conform the models of ciceronian rhetoric or the so-called Second Sophistic School, but also, and especially, in imitation of the way in which the great north-Italian masters of rhetoric in the early fifteenth century, such as Gasparino Barzizza or Guarino of

3 For a first foray into this issue, see Johan Belaen, Cécile Caby, and Alexis Charansonnet, ‘Prédication en chapitre général et réforme pontificale de la *vita religiosa* au XIII^e siècle. À propos des sermons aux chapitres généraux des moines noirs d’Eudes de Châteauroux et Jacques de Furnes’, *Revue Mabillon*, n.s. 30 (2019), 37-89.

4 Some examples are given in Cécile Caby, ‘Sienne, 15 août 1462. Prédication en chapitre, ordres mendiants et villes dans l’Italie du Quattrocento’, *Bullettino dell’Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo* 123 (2021), 339-393: 351-352.

5 For convenience sake, I refer for these developments to *The Sermon*, ed. Beverly M. Kienzle, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, 81-83 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

Verona, proposed to apply these models.⁶ This rhetorical transformation of *oratoria sacra* has been underlined and carefully described in a number of pioneering works, such as those of John O'Malley on the preaching at the Roman curia, or those of John McManamon on funerary rhetoric.⁷ Yet neither of these scholars have been interested, or only very occasionally, in the role of the religious orders in this rhetorical transformation, let alone in its reception within these orders themselves. From that viewpoint, the works of Carlo Delcorno on the preaching of Augustinian Hermits, or on Franciscan preaching mark an important turning point, in that they underline the extreme variety and fluidity of mendicant oratory formats in fifteenth-century Italy.⁸

Let us be clear: there was not a global and programmed conversion of the religious orders (or certain orders among them) to the new style that from henceforth triumphed in the world of embassies, in the courts and in certain urban republics (such as Florence), but also at ritual occasions in great urban *studia*, where a number of orators who preached in chapter gatherings no doubt had been trained. It nevertheless remains true that the religious orders very quickly seized the social and political opportunities of this new rhetoric adopted in the principal places of power. Moreover, it was the social capital attached to this humanist rhetoric that caused its quick adoption among an elite of friars, often influential in their order and close to circles of political leadership.⁹ Several among them very explicitly and

6 For a definition of humanist rhetoric in the sense adopted in this article, see Clémence Revest, 'Naissance du cicéronianisme et émergence de l'humanisme comme culture dominante: réflexions pour une histoire de la rhétorique humaniste comme pratique sociale', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Moyen Âge* 125-1 (2013) [<https://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/11192>], with extensive bibliographical references up till 2013.

7 John O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome. Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450-1521* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979); John M. MacManamon, *Funeral Oratory and the Cultural Ideals of Italian Humanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 1989). I would like to add to this: Lucia Gualdo Rosa, 'Ciceroniano o cristiano? A proposito dell'orazione "de morte christi" di Tommaso Fedra Inghirami', *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 34A (1985) [= *Roma humanistica. Studia in honorem Rev. i adm. Dni Dni Iosaei Ruysschaert*], 52-64.

8 Carlo Delcorno, 'La predicazione agostiniana (sec. XIII-XV)', in: *Gli Agostiniani a Venezia e la chiesa di Santo Stefano* (Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 1997), 87-108; Idem, 'Apogeo e crisi della predicazione francescana tra Quattro e Cinquecento', *Studi francescani* 112 (2015), 399-440.

9 Cécile Caby, 'Pratiques humanistes et ordres religieux dans l'Italie du Quattrocento: quelques jalons', in: *L'humanisme à l'épreuve de l'Europe (XV^e-XVI^e siècle)*, ed. Denis Crouzet, Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, Philippe Desan, and Clémence Revest (Ceyzérieu: Champs Vallon, 2019), 197-

quickly exhibited their understanding of the diversity of genres of public speech made available to them, and the full potential offered by the use of epideictic rhetoric, now dominant at ceremonial occasions. As early as 1419, in answer to a letter by the Augustinian Hermit Andrea Biglia (d. 1435), which voiced complaints about the *surdibus auribus* reception of the speech he had pronounced at the papal court of Martin V, and which he had attached to the letter, the Padua Humanist Sicco Polenton did not hesitate to identify the eloquence of the brother with the art of Cicero, due to which there was no reason to be surprised that it had not succeeded to seduce a public keen on a genre of preaching *allegationibus plenum*.¹⁰

Reflecting a few years later (before 1430) on his oratory activities in the *Apology* written in his own defense at the behest of the Franciscan Minister General Antonio Massa, Antonio of Rho recalls how he pronounced:

‘...many speeches whether in praise of saints, or at the occasion of patrician burial ceremonies, notably some for the very clement Prince Filippo Maria, Duke of the Milanese, and the Insubri [Lombards], whom I have praised with my eulogies, often in the presence of his senate or in the assemblies of the foremost citizens of that city (...) In these speeches I have avoided word divisions along the style of some our friars, as well as subdivisions and fragments of passages, out of fear to fatigue ears habituated to Cicero. I have also avoided cantilenas that are called rhythms, and which to me sound as if one has in his ears the timid cymbals of young Etrurian girls, or the bells of beggars (...)’¹¹

217; Eadem, ‘Discours académiques et renouvellements des formes de l’éloquence publique dans les ordres mendiants au XV^e siècle’, in: *Discours académiques. L’éloquence solennelle à l’université entre scolastique et humanisme*, ed. Clemence Revest (Paris: Garnier, 2020), 179-226.

10 ‘Denique ex fine orationis deprehendi, quam surdis auribus auditus sis, qua de re non mirum in modum mirer, cum exoraveris apud homines, quos amplius capatum illud sermonis genus allegationibus plenum, quam Ciceronis ars oblectet.’ Sicco Polenton, *La Catinia, le orazioni e le epistole*, ed. Arnaldo Segarizzi (Bergamo: Istituto italiano d’Arti grafiche, 1899), 97-99: 97. Biglia pronounced his speech between February (when the pope arrived in Florence) and early July 1419, whereas Polenton’s reply to Biglia’s letter dates from 15 July of that year.

11 Antonio da Rho, *Apologia. Orazioni*, ed. Lombardi Giuseppe (Rome: Centro internazionale di Studi Umanistici, 1982), 92-97.

Several lines further down, he describes how he also spoke:

‘..in churches in the manner of religious and, mounted on the pulpit, preached to women and little people. I persuaded them to do penitence for their faults, I glorified virtues, I explained where crimes have been punished and where those who deserve it have been graced and enjoyed eternal life (...)’¹²

Others, who did not feel ready to face this new genre, and yet were aware of its social value, preferred to resort to professional rhetors who could furnish them with their know-how for particular public occasions. There is nothing surprising about the fact that one orator could compose a speech to be performed by another, as mendicant friars had already for a long time shown themselves to be experts in this type of service. The fact that they had to address themselves in turn to specialists of humanist rhetoric, and even more to lay people, underlines the added value and the indispensable character this new type of eloquence had acquired in ceremonial contexts. To limit ourselves to a well-known example, let us recall that Gasparino Barzizza was employed at several junctures by religious people to write for their usage speeches that respected the fashionable stylistic canon: this was particularly the case with respect to a sermon on Saint Francis,¹³ composed to be performed by a friar.¹⁴

Yet by the mid fifteenth-century, the orders could be sure to find within their own ranks orators capable to conform themselves to this new mode of oratory, which provided them with a calling card (and admittedly not the only one) to approach the leading elites, without which their establishments could neither develop themselves nor survive.¹⁵ Hence humanist

12 Ibidem.

13 *Gasparini Barzizii Bergomatis et Guiniforti filii opera*, ed. Giuseppe Alessandro Furietti (Rome: apud Jo. Mariam Salvioni Typographum Vaticanum in archigymnasio Sapientiae, 1723) I, 45-50. On the speech-writing role of Barzizza, see Clémence Revest, ‘Les discours de Gasparino Barzizza et la diffusion du style cicéronien dans la première moitié du x^e siècle. Premiers aperçus’, *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome - Moyen Âge* 128:1 (2016) [<https://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/2996>].

14 See O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 84-85, and Revest, ‘Naissance du cicéronianisme’, the text corresponding with the footnotes 84-87. The manuscript Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, MS 1139, says that this speech on Saint Francis had been delivered ‘a fratre sui ordinis’ (ff. 79v-82r).

15 On the links between (especially Observant) preaching and politics, see Roberto Rusconi, “Predicò in piazza”; politica e predicazione nell’Umbria del ‘400”, now included in: Idem,

rhetoric penetrated the preaching collections of some of these friars, as well as anonymous collections composed by or for a friar, if not a convent. Quite often the actual innovation is not so much in the typology of speech formats, which retained the principal categories of the great collections from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries while modernizing them (funerary sermons, marriage sermons, thanksgiving speeches, academic speeches, eulogies of saints or princes, etc.), but in the form of the *oratio* adopted in a sometimes systematic fashion. The manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana, Plut. 89 sup 27, copied in Siena by a Dominican of the local friary, is utterly emblematic in this regard. In this manuscript are copied in a cursive humanist hand various pieces by universally popular authors in this type of rhetorical collections, other pieces that refer back to a Siennese and Tuscan context, but above all a series of anonymous discourses composed between 1435 and 1462 that cover the different formats of *oratoria sacra* (speeches *coram papa*, for the ritual reception of visiting high-ranking ecclesiastics, for the feast of saints, or solemn liturgical feasts, and for university ceremonies).¹⁶

The most successful discourses circulated at times in rhetorical collections without links to the orders, but typical of the rise of the humanist movement, as even so many master pieces acknowledged to be worthy to circulate among more frequently copied antique or humanist models. Hence, the speech composed for the Dominican provincial chapter of Ancona in 1455 by the Sicilian Dominican Gregorio of Prestomarco (fl. 1451-1474), who had received his formation in Venice and Padua prior to a successful career in his order, is known by a unique surviving copy included in a humanist collection dedicated to the town of Ancona, which had been the topic of particular praise in the discourse of this Friar

Immagini dei predicatori e della predicazione in Italia alla fine del Medioevo (Spoleto: CISAM, 2016), 141-186; Rosa Maria Dessì, 'La prophétie, l'Évangile et l'État. La prédication en Italie au XV^e et au début du XVI^e siècle', in: *La parole du prédicateur. V^e-XV^e siècle*, ed. Rosa Maria Dessì and Michel Lauwers (Nice: Z'édicions, 1997), 395-444, and the studies by Letizia Pellegrini, such as 'Tra la piazza e il Palazzo. Predicazione e pratiche di governo nell'Italia del Quattrocento', in: *I frati osservanti e la società in Italia nel secolo XV* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2013), 109-133; Eadem, 'Prédication et politique dans la péninsule italienne au XV^e siècle', in: *Preaching and Political Society: From Late Antiquity to the End of the Middle Ages / Depuis l'Antiquité tardive jusqu'à la fin du Moyen Âge*, ed. Franco Morenzoni (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 311-329. See also the upcoming study of Pietro Delcorno on the Franciscain Apollonio Bianchi.

16 For a more detailed description of this manuscript (esp. with regard to academic sermons), see Caby, 'Discours académiques', 199-203.

Preacher.¹⁷ Moreover, some of such celebratory speeches – and those held in chapter meetings of religious orders figure prominently in that category – could be copied in small manuscripts or incunable imprints, destined for wider circulation or to be given as a present, as is occasionally attested by the addition of dedications to prelates or rulers.

In the mendicant orders, chapter meetings most often took place in towns housing the larger order friaries. In the fifteenth century, following the return of the papacy to Rome and the end of the papal schism, it often concerned towns in central and northern Italy, which welcomed such gatherings with pomp and circumstance, deploying all the mechanisms of civic religion. Hence it is not surprising that, in this context, some of the speeches held in chapter – as we just saw in the example concerning Ancona – took the form of a eulogy of the town or its ruler, two speech forms that in fact were in the avant-garde of the humanist oratory revolution.¹⁸

This is invaluable source material to elucidate a new episode in the relations between mendicant orders and towns (both communes and those with dynastic rulership), all the more important as it is precisely there that a large part of the struggle for influence between different Observant and non-Observant factions within the orders played out. While ready to be discovered, I will not touch upon this category of eulogist chapter speeches here, as both the order and its observant status tend to disappear behind the thanksgiving addressed to the town and its elites, honoring them for their festive reception of such a large assembly of friars. Instead, I want to dwell on another category of chapter speeches, that focused predominantly and explicitly on the order, its good governance, or rather its reform, or alternatively the election of its leader and his officers. This is a category that, counter to the former, is also present in monasticism of the Benedictine

17 Cited from Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 3630, ff. 55v-61v (*Oratio fr. Gregorii Siculi Siracusani, sacrarum litterarum bachalarii Paduani, predicatorum ordinis, habita Anconi* [sic] *in ecclesia cathedrali VI Kl. Iunias M^oCCCC^oLV, tempore capituli ad laudem*). On this manuscript, which is an anthology about Ancona realised within the circle of Antonio Costanzi da Fano (1436-1490), see ultimately Felicia Toscano, 'La scrittura latina e greca di Antonio Costanzi da Fano, con osservazioni sul manoscritto Vat. Lat. 3630', in: *Miscellanea Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae XXV*, Studi e Testi, 534 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2019), 433-467.

18 Cécile Caby, 'L'Italie des chapitres. Prédication en chapitre et éloge de villes dans les ordres mendiants de l'Italie du Quattrocento', upcoming in *Comptes-Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* (2024).

tradition, notably the Camaldolese and Olivetan branches, thereby providing opportunities for comparison.

Protecting and glorifying the order: Chapter speech and self-representation of religious orders during the Observant age

A. Unity or Observance, which priority? A Franciscan dilemma

Let us begin deliberately with an order, that of the Friars Minor, in which reform attempts gave rise to constant tensions, profound differences about the functioning of order government, and finally, to the division of the order into different families.¹⁹ In the background of this tormented history, propaganda was in full swing, giving rise to a considerable body of polemical texts of a different nature: juridical treatises or questions, hagiographical and historical writings, and, naturally, preaching. In this context, chapter preaching provided a privileged occasion of propaganda in favor of one or another way to claim the heritage of Saint Francis. This propaganda was aimed both at the friars present and at the ecclesiastical and lay elites that took part in the public sessions of such chapter meetings (often during great celebratory speeches), the support of whom was absolutely essential for competing order factions.

In 1443, under the pontificate of Eugenius IV, at a moment when the arguments of the ‘terrible war’ that would break out between competing order factions during the subsequent decade were solidifying, a general chapter for all friars was convened at Padua, gathering a large number of participants. The chapter took place under the direction of Alberto of Sarteano, who had been appointed Vicar General of the order by Pope Eugenius IV after the untimely death of the Minister General in February 1442.²⁰ Alberto was also provincial of the Venice province, and it was in

19 See on these vicissitudes Mario Fois, ‘I papi e l’osservanza minoritica’, in: *Il rinnovamento del francescanesimo : l’Osservanza* (Assisi: Centro di studi francescani, 1985), 31-105; Pacifico Stella, *Leone X e la definitiva divisione dell’ordine dei minori (OMin.): la bolla Ite vos (29 maggio 1517)* (Grottaferrata: Collegio San Bonaventura, 2001); the collective volume *I frati osservanti e la società in Italia nel secolo XV* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2013) and the studies of Letizia Pellegrini, in particular: ‘*Observantes de familia*’, in: *Identità francescane agli inizi del Cinquecento* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2018), 87-120; Eadem, ‘Osservanza / osservanze tra continuità e innovazione’, in: *Gli studi francescani. Prospettive di ricerca* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2017), 215-234.

20 See on this chapter Pierre Santoni, ‘Albert de Sarteano observant et humaniste envoyé pontifical à Jérusalem et au Caire’, *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome, Moyen Âge-Temps Modernes*

the latter capacity that he, as he was well-known for his oratory talent, was charged to present the chapter's opening speech. His address, or at least the version that has come down to us,²¹ had little in common with the style of the *sermo modernus* still widely used by the friars. It was a discourse – defined in the peroration as *moralem magis quam aut acutam aut exultantem aut eruditam orationem* – that conformed quite comprehensively to humanist models, both with regard to its structure (three parts preceded by an *exordium* in the shape of a *captatio benevolentiae*), and with regard to its style and its choice and use of examples from classical antiquity.

Alberto had had many opportunities to master this rhetoric, particularly through his acquaintance with Guarino of Verona and via humanist networks in Northern Italy familiar to him.²² The main subject of his speech is determined by the principal mission of the general chapter, namely the election of a new Minister General, or in other words a good pastor for the order as a whole. Initially, the orator applies himself to describe the potential candidate as a man of probity, who can become a guardian and a common father in service of the common good of the order.²³ He lists a series of virtues indispensable for a unifying governance

86:1 (1974), 165-211: 202-206; Lorenzo Di Fonzo, 'Sisto IV. Carriera scolastica e integrazioni biografiche (1414-84)', *Miscellanea Franciscana*, 86 (1986), 1-491: 126-131; Stella, *Leone X e la definitiva* divisione, 133-135, as well as the chronicle of Bernardino Aquilano, now accessible in a remarkable new edition by Letizia Pellegrini: *Bernardino Aquilano e la sua Cronaca dell'Osservanza, con nuova edizione e traduzione a fronte*, ed. Letizia Pellegrini (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, 2021), 150-155.

21 Bertalot Ludwig, *Initia Humanistica Latina*, Vol. II/1-2, *Prosa* (Tübingen, 1990-2004), n° 17313; Alberto da Sarteano, *Opera omnia*, ed. Franciscus Harold (Rome: Apud Ioannem Baptistam Bussottum, 1688), *Oratio* III, 149-155.

22 A point of departure for information on the preacher remains the slightly dated entry of Enrico Cerulli, 'Berdini Alberto', *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 8 (1966), 800-804 (the entries of the DBI are also available online, see: <https://www.treccani.it/biografico/index.html>), the information of which can be updated thanks to Daniele Solvi, 'La missione di Alberto da Sarteano in Egitto (1439-1441) e una lettera di Eugenio IV al sultano', *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia* 72 (2018), 435-456. For his preaching, see Delcorno, 'Apogeo e crisi della predicazione franciscana', 460-461, and 467, who mentions the speech *De sanctissimo Eucharistie sermone*, pronounced at the occasion of the 1422 provincial chapter of the Saint Anthony province. Cf. Bertalot, *Initia Humanistica*, II, n° 2853; Alberto da Sarteano, *Opera omnia*, *Oratio* I, 117-136.

23 See on this theme for instance Florent Coste, 'Le silence des agneaux. La normativité pastorale à la lumière de la prédication mendicante sur le Bon Pasteur (Jean 10, 11) aux XIII^e et XIV^e siècles', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, Moyen Âge*, 129:1 (2017) [<https://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/3509>], and Bénédicte Sère, 'Bonus pastor animam suam dat pro ovibus suis (Jn 10, 11). Le thème du Bon Pasteur au cœur des débats du Grand Schisme', in: *Apprendre, produire, se conduire: le modèle au Moyen Âge*, Congrès de la SHMESp, 45 (Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2015), 125-139.

practice – an argumentative thread that runs throughout Alberto's entire discourse – conversely ruling out tyrannical domination common to lay princely rule. Invoking the authority of Saint Dominic, 'brother in Christ of our father Saint Francis', he underlines the dangers of power without flexibility, which would lead to division. The second part is devoted to the means to arrive at such an election of the right candidate (*de adiumentis mediis*), namely the spiritual weapons of charity and peace. He recalls once more the immense task at hand – appointing a *pater communis, pastor ovium Evangelicarum* –, warns against the perils resulting from a bad choice, and invokes as a counter to this once again the importance of charity, peace, concord, truth and unity proclaimed by the institution of the order. These elements constitute the milk with which the Church nourishes its newborn, and the bread with which she nourishes her children. Is it not proof that even the barbarians, who were unaware of the Christian virtues, nevertheless pursued the virtues of peace, concord, friendship, unity, and charity? A case in point – adds the orator – was Scipio Africanus, who had become the object of attention in a recent controversy between Poggio Bracciolini and Guarino.²⁴

The third and final part is a type of glorification of the order and its brothers, *progenies Franciscanorum*, or *proles Minorum*, surpassed by no other order, as its diffusion testifies. Alberto calls upon the chapter participants to set their sight on the blessings of divine providence bestowed on them, their predecessors and their saints. Furthermore, he invokes Saint Francis, and he invites Saint Anthony, who is honored by the local friars and the town of Padua, to join his brethren and to preside himself over the chapter meeting (*huic capitulo nostro praesideas, illud regas*). Thus, by virtue of Anthony's saintly relics, the chapter participants can depart joyfully whereas they had arrived distressed by insurmountable difficulties. He finally exhorts the participants to straighten up and to save their order from disaster and infamy, and to enhance its glory by restoring and rebuilding it. Repeating his exhortations to choose a saintly, peaceful, clement, prudent and just man, Alberto of Sarteano slips in before his conclusion a reference to Pope Eugenius IV, to whom, he says, the friars' choice will

24 Recently studied in Davide Canfora, *La controversia di Poggio Bracciolini e Guarino Veronese su Cesare e Scipione* (Florence: Olschki, 2001).

cause either grief or joy. Contrary to these papal wishes, at the end of a heated chapter, where, if we can believe Bernardino Aquilano (who was admittedly very partial to Alberto), participants even came to blows, the chapter electors (among whom were no representatives of friars *de familia*), did not choose the Vicar General. Instead, they appointed the Milanese friar Antonio Rusconi, who incidentally had received the support of the Duke of Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti.²⁵

There survives another speech, pronounced during yet another very large general chapter, gathered at Rome under papal tutelage during Pentecost 1458.²⁶ Calixtus III (1455-1458), whose pontificate marked another curial stage in the war that pitted the *fratres de familia* and the remainder of the order, actually controlled the chapter from start to finish. Following the death of Minister General Giacomo Boscaglini of Mozzanica, who had been elected at Bologna during Pentecost 1454,²⁷ the pope organized the appointment of a Vicar General of his choice, namely Giacomo Sarzuela, and secured the transfer of the chapter's meeting place, initially planned for Venice, to Rome. These are all maneuvers that Observant sources, notably Bernardino of Fossa, did not fail to recognize as a pontifical strategy to impose his own candidate.²⁸

The chapter's opening speech was pronounced on 20 May 1458 by a certain friar Antonio Conti of Prato.²⁹ This little-known character, unquestionably a confidant of the deceased Minister General and of the

25 Sara Fasoli, *Perseveranti nella regolare osservanza. I predicatori osservanti nel ducato di Milano (secc. XV-XVI)* (Milan: Biblioteca francescana, 2011), 32; Eadem, 'Rusconi (Rusca) Antonio', *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 89 (2017). For clarity's sake and according to common historiographical usage, I will use anachronistically the term 'Conventuals' for members of Franciscan order who did not join the Observant family (*fratres de familia* or Observants).

26 I have not yet located any surviving speeches connected with the chapter of Milan from the previous year. On the general chapter of Rome, see Di Fonzo, 'Sisto IV', 233, 237-242; Stella, *Leone X e la definitiva divisione*, 154.

27 On this Minister General and his government, the point of departure is Anna Morisi Guerra, 'Boscaglini, Giacomo', *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 13 (1971), 166-167.

28 See, for instance, *Bernardino Aquilano e la sua Cronaca*, ed. Pellegrini, 230-237. Bernardino stresses the abundance of gifts the pope bestowed on the chapter. However, one wants to interpret these rewards, a unequivocal and countable trace of them is found in Cesare Cenci, 'Documenta vaticana ad franciscales spectantia ann. 1385-1492. Pars IV: documenta vaticana ann. 1447-1458', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 93 (2000), 217-243.

29 This speech, listed in Bertalot, *Initia Humanistica*, II, n° 4088, has survived (under benefit of inventory) in two manuscript versions, of which I prepare a critical edition: Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS II.I.201, ff. 65-70; Erfurt-Gotha, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek, MS Ch. B. 239, ff. 167r-171v.

future Minister General Francesco della Rovere, and hence quite favorable to the 'Conventual' community of the order, very clearly stood out for his humanistic oratory talents.³⁰ He put this rhetorical skill to work at the Araceli in front of his order's chapter participants, the Cardinals and Pope Calixtus III.³¹ From the start, the orator puts his discourse under the sign of the emotion generated by the rapid succession of deaths of three Ministers General, without doubt a sign of divine wrath and of the storm the order had passed through. After engaging in a bitter lamentation, the orator yields the floor to the order itself (*mater nostra religio*), which he imagines to appear to him under the features of a venerable bereaved and grieving matron, who bemoans her ungrateful children. It forms the start of a long rant that follows the list of complaints of this mother betrayed by her sons forgetful of their vocation, their profession, their origin, and the life of their founders. Conversely, the old woman, *figura* of the order, describes what would make her happy, in particular the return of all friars to obedience to their common father Saint Francis, as a single body.

Following an ultimate appeal to choose the Minister General without giving in to passions, nor to personal preferences, and by not pursuing individual benefits but the common good, the mother figure disappears out of the orator's sight, marking a return to the present and the reality of the election. The orator then sketches a portrait of the future Minister General, based all the way on an anaphoric deployment of the verb *eligite*, followed by a description of the virtues of the ideal elected person, or, by negation,

30 I only have been able to collect very limited information on this historical figure, who without doubt should be identified with the brother Anthony who is mentioned as a scribe of the Minister General Giacomo di Mozzanica in the accounting book of the Bologna friary for the 7th of February, 1454 (Bologna, Archiginnasio, MS B 492, f. 68 cit. in *Chartularium studii Bononiensis S. Francisci (saec. XIII-XVI)*, ed. Celestino Piana, *Analecta Franciscana*, 11 (Quaracchi-Florence: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1970), 314). Additional information has to be derived from a few biographical allusions in his *orationes* conserved in the manuscript Erfurt-Gotha, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek, MS Ch. B. 239, ff. 108r-199v (*passim*). In an upcoming publication, I will come back to this collection, the oratory production, and the humanistic style of this friar originating from Prato.

31 The manuscript witness Erfurt-Gotha, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek, MS Ch. B. 239 is dated by the same hand that copied the majority of the speeches of the same orator: 'Habito Rome 1458 XX^a maii, per scribam meum magistrum Antonium Contes de Prato in electione generalis ministri magistri Iacobi Sarzuelle. Transcripta ibidem XX^a decembris 1460 in Sancto Salvatore de Unda, tempore quo ibidem pro ordine procuravi'. The order procurator who resided *ex officio* at San Salvatore in Onda could be Francesco della Rovere, who held that function between ca. September 1450 and September 1461. Cf. Di Fonzo, 'Sisto IV', 258-259.

the vices such a person had to shed. The peroration of this long speech is intertwined with an invocation to Saint Francis, *comunem omnium nostrorum patrem*, and to the Holy Spirit, so that they together may deign to inspire the voters just as efficaciously as Pope Calixtus had been, by choosing the Catalan friar Jaime Zarzuela as their leader. The subsequent exclusion of the friars *de familia* from the voting procedure assured the election of this Catalan friar, yet at the same time the Observants gained the right to vote their own Vicar General. The friars *de familia* defended henceforth first and foremost the autonomy of their way of life. To reuse the very insightful terms of a (hostile) comment on the papal bull *Illius cuius in pace*, a bull of compromise that Calixtus III had issued two years earlier: 'they hardly care about the Minister General, but have recourse to princes, lords and the common people' ('de generali ministro minime curant, sed ad principes, dominos et populum recursum habent...').³² Yet their victory was still far from certain, and the main stage was still occupied by the Conventuals, for whom the only valid observance was the one that respected order unity. These same Conventuals cemented their position by claiming to be the exclusive heirs of the order founder.

In yet another sermon, which cannot be contextualized and maybe was just a model sermon for the election of a minister, the same orator proposed an exposition of some sort on the three Franciscan vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. This exposition introduced an exhortation to choose a good pastor, not unlike the capitular discourse from 1458.³³ The chosen hierarchy of the Franciscan vows alluded to is not without significance, for it is to obedience, mentioned in the first place, that the orator attributes the power of the order's dissemination throughout the world: 'Could our Seraphic Francis, the general of our army, have gathered in a single profession soldiers from so many different nations, without putting first the capacity

32 Letizia Pellegrini, 'Le linee della ricerca', in: *Fratres de familia. Gli insediamenti dell'Osservanza minoritica nella penisola italiana (sec. XIV-XV)*, ed. Letizia Pellegrini and Gian Maria Varanini, *Quaderni di storia religiosa*, 18 (Verona: Cierre, 2011), 9-25: 13; Fois, 'I papi e l'osservanza minoritica', 71-76 (for the politics of Calixtus III).

33 Erfurt-Gotha, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek, MS Chart. B. 239, ff. 157r-161r. Signaled in Bertalot, *Initia Humanistica*, II, n° 14044. A modern hand has added the title *Sermo de tribus votis regule ordinis minorum et de electione futuri pastoris generalis aut ministri provincialis*. I will come back to this sermon at another occasion.

to obey?³⁴ The vow of poverty is touched upon last, and the orator presents it first and foremost as an object of contemplation and praise, staying far away from the divisive debates over its definition.

B. The order of Augustinian Hermits, or the peaceful illusion of a continuous history

The second example that I want to discuss briefly, is taken from the order of Augustinian Hermits, in which unity was somehow maintained, notwithstanding the institutional tensions triggered by the birth of Observant congregations in ways similar to those that ripped apart the order of Friars Minor. Among others, Carlo Delcorno has stressed the role of Augustine as model and acclaimed founder of the Augustinian Hermits, which as such was a papal creation from the mid thirteenth century. He also has pointed at the fluidity of rhetorical forms applied by the Augustinian friars, and notably their early adoption of humanist eloquence.³⁵ We can in fact credit Andrea Biglia for the composition of one of the first general chapter sermons that adopted a humanist rhetoric, pronounced at the occasion of the Augustinian general chapter of Bologna from 1425.³⁶ The speech, presented in the form of an admonition on the order's discipline, must have had some resonance, since at least one copy of it, adapted for another mendicant order, is found in what is probably a Dominican sermon collection originating from the Marches (Rimini, Cesena, Forlì).³⁷

Within the same Augustinian order consideration might be given to the speech of Paracleto Malvezzi for the chapter of Tolentino and the election of the order General that took place there in May 1459,³⁸ but

34 Erfurt-Gotha, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek, Chart. B. 239, f. 157v: 'Potuisset dux exercitus nostri, seraficus Franciscus, tot diversarum nationum copias unum in votum congregare, eorum mentes flectere, ad labores gravissimos perpeti, ad queque aspera substinendum impellere, omnia pericula agredi et fortissimo animo substinere, nisi ad hec omnia perferenda obediencie facultas intercessisset?'

35 Delcorno, 'La predicazione agostiniana', passim.

36 Andrea Biglia, *De disciplina ordinis ammonitio habita in capitulo Bononiensi*, edited in Joseph C. Schnaubelt & Karl A. Gersbach, 'Sermon of Andrea Biglia, OSA, to the General Chapter of Bologna, 1425: *De Disciplina Ordinis Ammonitio*', *Analecta Augustiniana*, 47 (2004), 5-51.

37 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Canon. Misc. 55, ff. 15r-23r (cf. Bertalot, *Initia Humanistica* II, 12626): sine nomine, *oratio in capitulo generali*. This copy was unknown to the editors of the text (see previous note).

38 *Fratris Paracliti Cornetani in capitulo generali Tolentini celebrato de eligendo priore generali*: Yale, Univ. Library, MS 188, ff. 104r-110r (not yet consulted). On the preacher, see Claudia

above all to the intense production of speeches for general chapters by the future General Ambrogio Massari (1432-1485).³⁹ The latter's two rhetorical anthologies conserve in fact a speech on the election of a new General for the general chapter of Bologna in 1470,⁴⁰ and another one for an unidentified provincial chapter.⁴¹

Yet it is another speech, composed by the Augustinian friar Basilio of Riva (1444-1505) for the 1468 Modena chapter of the Observant congregation of Lombardy that I would like to focus on. Having entered the order in 1462, Basilio was still a young recruit when the chapter took place. His performance must have been remarkable considering the speech invitations that he received afterwards, which made him one of the prominent mouthpieces of the congregation.⁴² At the Modena chapter, gathered on

Corfiati, 'Paraceto da Corneto', *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 81 (2014), 279-281, and Paraceto Malvezzi da Corneto, *Bucolicum Carmen ad Pium II Papam*, ed. Claudia Corfiati (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2016), both of which refer to older studies. The chapter of Tolentine chose Alessandro Oliva of Sassoferrato (Gabriele Raponi, *Il cardinale agostiniano A. Oliva da Sassoferrato, 1407-1463* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1965) [a re-issue of articles that appeared in *Analecta Agostiniana* 25 (1962), 89-143; 26 (1963), 194-293; 27 (1964), 59-166]; Roberta Monetti, 'Oliva, Alessandro', *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 79 (2013), 208-210 [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alessandro-oliva_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/].

39 On Ambrogio Massari and his oratory production, see: Cécile Caby, 'Ambrogio Massari da Cora, percorso biografico e prassi culturale', in: *La carriera di un uomo di curia nella Roma del Quattrocento. Ambrogio Massari da Cori, agostiniano. Cultura umanistica e committenza artistica*, ed. Carla Frova, Raimondo Michetti and Domenico Palombi (Rome: Viella, 2008), 23-67; Eadem, 'Les discours de laudibus theologie de l'Augustin Ambrogio Massari pour le Studium de Pérouse', *Annali di storia delle università italiane* 18 (2014), 75-89; Eadem, 'Médecine et astrologie dans deux anthologies rhétoriques mendiantes de la fin du XV^e siècle. L'*Oratio de laudibus medicinae* et le *Principium in legendam astrologiam* d'Ambrogio Massari de Cori († 1485)', in: *Les Savoirs dans les ordres mendiants en Italie (XIIIe-XVe siècle)*, ed. Joël Chandelier and Aurélien Robert (Rome: École française de Rome, 2023), 518-530.

40 Bertalot, *Initia Humanistica Latina* II, n° 1507. Modena, Biblioteca Estense, MS Lat. 894, ff. 54r-63v (*Oratio de creando novo generali in generali capitulo Bononie, anno Domini millesimo quadringentesimo septuagesimo celebrato habita*), and Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 5621, ff. 89v-97r (*Ambrosii Chorani ordinis divi Augustini de eligendo novo generali Bononie in generali capitulo, anno Domini millesimo CCCC^oLXX^o celebrato*).

41 Incipit: *Prestantissimi patres, quamquam mihi semper frequens conspectus vester multo iocundissimus et hic locus adagendum amplissimus*: Modena, Bibl. Estense, MS Lat. 894, ff. 197v-208v.

42 On Observant congregations in the Order of Augustian Hermits, and the Lombard congregation in particular, see: Katherine Walsh, 'The Observance: Sources for a History of the Observant Reform Movement in the Order of Augustinian Friars in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 31 (1977), 40-67; Giancarlo Andenna, 'Aspetti politici della presenza degli Osservanti in Lombardia in età sforzesca', in: *Ordini religiosi e società politica in Italia e Germania nei secoli XIV e XV*, ed. Giorgio Chittolini and Kaspar Elm, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2001), 331-372.

the third Sunday after Easter, his discourse unfolds from the start as a eulogy of the order of Augustinian Hermits.⁴³ The *narratio* kicks off by announcing the two characteristics that set this order apart in dignity: namely (1) the excellent lifestyle of its founders and the perseverance which the order had demonstrated in imitating them without falling in decline (ff. 72r-73b); and (2) the wealth of privileges bestowed on the order. In what follows the speech develops as a eulogy of the order's eremitical origins (ff. 74r-76v), and the paternity of Augustine of Hippo as its *fundator et institutor*, settling in passing the debate over this issue with the Regular Canons (ff. 77r-80r). The orator then devotes himself to the historical development of the order, which was spared any suspicion of degeneration. It is against this background that he inserts a procession of the order's saints and their miraculous power (ff. 83r-84v), followed by another parade of its doctors (ff. 84v-85v), authentic jewels of the order, also because by and large they were the order's Priors General, whose names from Giles of Rome (d. 1316) to Paolo Veneto (d. 1449) are ticked off without additional details.⁴⁴ He then puts on display for the appreciation of the audience the number of churches, friaries and *studia*, as well as the order's privileges (ff. 85v-86r). Before concluding, the orator pretends to apologize for dwelling on one of the most unique and remarkable members of the order that God recently gave rise to in Lombardy, namely the Observant Lombard congregation (f. 86v). Indeed, the congregation has extended the branches of its renown in various order provinces all the way up to Modena, the city that the speaker briefly eulogizes, and that is privileged to receive within its walls such a gathering – i.e., the friars' chapter – worthy of the Roman Sen-

43 Bergamo, Biblioteca civica Angelo Mai, MS 264 (A 86), ff. 72r-89r: Basilius de Ripa, *Oratio in capitulo Mutinensi habita 1468* ; Inc. *Si ea tantummodo attenderem, optimi patres, quæ materia impresentiarum susceptæ gravitatem altitudinem gravitatemque commendant...* See L. Sq., 'Basilius de Ripa', in : *CALMA*, now on line [<http://www.mirabileweb.it/calma/basilius-de-ripa-n-1444-ca-m-1505/161>]. On the chapter, see Donato Calvi, *Delle memorie istoriche della Congregazione Osservante di Lombardia dell'Ordine Eremitano di S. Agostino* (Milan, 1669), 102. The scholar does not mention the speech, which he must have known very well and uses elsewhere as a reservoir of hagiographical references (*Ibidem*, 24, 35, 48).

44 It would be worthwhile to return to these lists, in particular to compare them with those compiled by Ambrogio Massari in the second part (*de sanctis ac beatis huius sacratissimi ordinis* ff. 112v-115v) of his *Defensorium ordinis heremitarum s. Augustini* (Rome: Georgius Herolt, 1482) [ISTC ic00877000], but also in the speech for the election of the Prior General at the chapter of Bologna in 1470 (Modena, Bibl. Estense, MS Lat. 894, ff. 47r-56v: 53v-54v ; Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 5621, ff. 89v-97r : 94v-95v).

ate (f. 87v). The speech subsequently touches upon a gallery of illustrious men from the Lombard congregation, far superior by their holiness to the Ancients (f. 88v), and this then leads to the final peroration (ff. 88v-89r).

This eulogy gathers the order in its complete chronological development since its Augustinian foundation, and the recent Observant congregation features in it as a linear and peaceful progression, and it is a presentation in which all tensions or divisions were as if erased by the benefits of epideictic oratory. It amounts to a strategy of negating ruptures, in line with a period in which the Lombard Observance no longer had to fight for its own existence, and in line with an order where Observant congregations more or less had found an institutional bedding.⁴⁵

C. *Monteoliveto, or observance without Observance*

The order of Monteoliveto was founded in the mid fourteenth century as a compromise solution for the institutionalization of various, in some cases very radical regular reform movements. Faced by the juridical constraints of an institutionalization under the rule of Saint Benedict,⁴⁶ the general chapter saw itself quite precociously as an essential platform of Olivetan identity, therewith proposing a collegial alternative to the abbatial government of the Benedictine rule. Beyond the customary mandate of the general chapter as a body of government and the level where the *ius proprium* of religious orders was formulated, the Olivetan general chapter, usually convening at Monteoliveto, had the task to elect or to reconfirm the Abbot General. In the new order this was a fixed-term appointment, in patent contradiction with the text of the Benedictine rule, yet in accordance with the reformatory tendencies at the end of the Middle Ages.⁴⁷

45 All things considered, it is possible to link this reading with the one adopted by Letizia Pellegrini in her comparison of the chronicle of Bernardino of Fossa and the *Specchio de l'Ordine Minore* of Giacomo Oddi. See Pellegrini, *Bernardino Aquilano e la sua Cronaca*, ed. Pellegrini, 71-72.

46 For a recent revision of the context of the origins of the order, see Michele Pellegrini, 'La conversione di frate Bernardo. Realtà e memoria delle origini olivetane nella Toscana del primo Trecento', in: *Monte Oliveto 1319-2019. Convegno di studio per il VII centenario di fondazione dell'Abbazia*, ed. Giancarlo Andenna and Mauro Tagliabue, Italia Benedettina, 45 (Cesena: Badia di Santa Maria del Monte, 2020), 29-70.

47 For these aspects and what follows, see: Cécile Caby, 'Ad pinguisimum montem olivarum devenistis: predicare in capitolo generale a Monte Oliveto nel Quattrocento', in: *Convegno di studio per il VII centenario di fondazione dell'Abbazia, Monte Oliveto Maggiore, 9-10 maggio 2019* (Cesena: Badia Santa Maria del Monte, 2022), 121-141.

The preaching taking place during such chapter meetings is exceptionally well-documented, both by the order customaries, and by the registration, in any case from 1455 onward, of the sermon texts themselves in a three-volume *Liber sermonum*, the first of which covers the years 1455 to 1599.⁴⁸ For the fifteenth century, the registered texts are all in Latin, and they use a classicist language and style in conformation with a humanist rhetorical structure, with the exception of the first one, which has a hybrid structure. The orators, all members of the order at the beginning of their career, originated for the most part from elite families in north-Italian towns, such as Ferrara, Verona, Bologna or Milan, where this type of rhetoric had been in use since the beginning of the century.

The topics raised in these speeches are sometimes determined by the composition of the attending public (not only prelates, but also simple monks: in this time period one for each member community), and sometimes by the objective of the gathering: the reform of the order, and more immediately, the election or the reconfirmation of the mandate of the Abbot General. Based on this, we find a recurrent structure in the speeches, which consists of first addressing the prelates, and then the other participants, to illustrate the virtues and the competences of both groups separately, but also to caution them against the vices that threaten these different groups, and by consequence, the order as a whole. In this context sometimes also surfaces the topic of *scientia* and the studies of the friars, which otherwise commonly pops up in discussions about order reform.⁴⁹

Many speeches explicitly address the issue of the election of the Abbot General: every other chapter is in fact devoted to it, whereas the others – barring exceptional circumstances, such as the death of the Abbot General in charge – are convoked to (re)confirm the Abbot in charge after the two first years of his mandate. It is a practice that the orators in

48 Archivio dell'Abbazia di Monte Oliveto maggiore (from now on AMOM), *Liber sermonum* I.

49 For the Franciscans, see: Letizia Pellegrini, 'Tra *sancta rusticitas* e *humanae litterae*: La formazione culturale dei frati nell'Osservanza italiana del Quattrocento', in: *Osservanza francescana e cultura tra Quattrocento e primo Cinquecento: Italia e Ungheria a confronto*, ed. Francesca Bartolacci and Roberto Lambertini (Rome: Viella, 2014), 33-52 and Bert Roest, 'Sub *humilitatis titulo sacram scientiam abhorrentes*: Franciscan Observants and the Quest for Education', in: *Rules and Observance. Devising Forms of Communal Life*, ed. M. Breitenstein et al. (Berlin: LIT, 2014), 79-106. More broadly: Pietro Delcorno, 'Quomodo discit sine docente? Observant efforts towards Education and Pastoral Care', in: *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*, ed. James Mixson and Bert Roest (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 147-184.

fact paint in eulogist terms, conversely stigmatizing the drawbacks of the for-life appointments responsible for the decline of other monastic orders. This was an extremely topical issue in the monastic world of the fifteenth century, not least because of the direct relationship between the for-life appointments of abbots and the phenomenon of the commendatory abbot. In 1492 the chapter orator, seeking to reap the admiration of his audience, compared the mon CH010 ks of Monte Oliveto with the Old Testament patriarchs, who lived in tents, without a fixed abode, just as the Olivetan monks, thanks to the *annuas mutationes familiarum* of the latter.⁵⁰ Finally, in the course of their speeches, the orators tend to build up and expound on the central aspects of the Olivetan memorial identity, including a glorification of Monte Oliveto and particularly its name, its privileged connection with the Virgin and with the illustrious men of the order family.

Sermon by sermon the Olivetan reform constructed its self-representation around the claim of its exclusive incarnation of monastic Observance. Hence, the orator preaching at the chapter of 1486, following a praise of the growth of the congregation, acclaims its exceptional fidelity to the primitive virtues of *simplicitas, continentia, paupertas, austeritas* and *rigor*. Far better, the congregation had to do nothing more than to reinforce the *regularis sacrosancta observatio*. Nevertheless, many dangers were looming, notably the vice of ambition that had destructed so many towns, republics and congregations. It suffices, continues the orator, to open one's eyes and to look at the most famous regular congregations, such as those of Camaldoli, Vallombrosa, or Cervara, all of which now had fallen into decadence!⁵¹ In the chapter speech of 1488, the comparison with other monastic congregations – this time not mentioned by name – is again used to illustrate the superiority of Monte Oliveto, which merits to be called 'the fertile mountain where God lives willingly'.⁵²

50 AMOM, *Liber sermonum* I, c. 38: 'Illi etiam beati viri in tabernaculis commorati sunt, vos per annuas mutationes familiarum quas facitis, ostenditis velut in tabernaculis degentes, ostenditis in terris neque aliquid proprium habendum esse illi qui divinę philosophię studet, sed semper promovendum non tam de loco ad locum, quam de scientia inferiorum ad scientiam perfectorum'.

51 AMOM, *Liber sermonum* I, cc. 64-70. See Caby, 'Ad pinguiissimum montem olivarum devenistis', 137-138.

52 AMOM, *Liber sermonum* I, c. 54: 'Sed ecce iam mundus congregationibus plenus est, quę (ni fallor) religioni debitam ac competentem vitam vivunt. Inter quas nostram Montis Oliveti tenuisse impręsentiarumque (aliarum pace dixerim) reor tenere principatum. Quapropter dicere

Concluding remarks

The sample discussed in this article is no doubt too limited to support any definite and unequivocal conclusions. Nevertheless, it seems already possible to acknowledge how humanist rhetoric, due to its specific characteristics – in particular its ceremonial and eulogist dimensions – helped in staging the orders and their religious observance, founded on a common base of representations. This concerned, first of all, a common base of binary oppositions, in themselves rather stale, but which some recurrent rhetorical effects were able to rehabilitate: on the one side a set of virtues – in particular obedience, unity and concord – associated with good superiors and virtuous subjects worthy of praise, and the description of which should engender admiration; on the other side a group of vices – notably *divisio* – associated with bad superiors and/or rebellious subjects, deserving instead *vituperatio*. Second, it concerned a common foundation of historical proofs, supported by continuities and ruptures in the orders' development, the praise of a golden age of origin (a kind of *mos maiorum* acclimated to a regular context), illustrious order members of the past, but also of the present, and optionally the treatment of polemical and divisive topics and the deploration of the misfortunes of the times (the practice of creating commendatory abbots in the world of monks, and the competition and divisions between multiple factions in the bosom of the mendicant orders).

In this respect, the adoption of humanist oratory practices (as well as other humanist practices, such as the iconic genres of the dialogue or the lives of illustrious men) functioned for the religious orders, or at least for specific groups within them, as a socially efficacious instrument in service of affirmative strategies for a model of religious life that claimed – often in a polemic fashion – the conservation or reactivation of the original *propositum* and its perfection, whether or not this model subsequently triumphed in the guise of an institutionalized Observant movement. These were tools of distinction for ecclesiastical elites, but also for lay elites, capa-

audeo Montem istum vere pinguissimum, in quo beneplacitum est Deo habitare [Psalm 67:16], in quo etiam bonum est nobis esse, si vos, patres conscripti et fratres devotissimi, nullam legem, nullas constitutiones, nullos denique optimos mores a maioribus observatos violatum iri decreveritis, et insuper si quæ religionem augent et conservant, a nostro non erunt collegio aliena'. For other examples, see Caby, 'Ad pinguissimum montem olivarum devenistis', 137-138.

ble of appreciation of this new type of public speech, and in the position to favor those who wielded it. They very often were the tools of the winners of the moment, that is to say of those whose political and social skills (of which the rhetorical devices examined in this paper were a part) contributed (permanently or only temporarily) to relegate others to the necessarily condemnable category of destroyers of unity, or worse still, opponents of perfection.