

An Amphibious Identity: Apollonio Bianchi between Observance and Humanism

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Introduction

Apollonio Bianchi was a Franciscan Observant preacher, active in the north of Italy, where he died in 1450, the year of Bernardino of Siena's canonization.¹ His profile offers an unusual perspective on the Franciscan Observance in the crucial transition period from the leadership of Bernardino of Siena (d. 1444) to that of Giovanni of Capestrano (d. 1456). The study of Apollonio's life offers a concrete possibility to follow the recent invitation to go 'beyond the dazzle of the halos',² that is to overcome once and for all the long-lasting hagio-mythology of the 'four columns' of the Italian

1 This contribution summarizes and further develops some of the main findings on this friar presented in Pietro Delcorno and Marco Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante: Frate Apollonio Bianchi († 1450)', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Moyen Âge* 134:1 (2022), 127-164. Unless otherwise stated, translations from Latin and Italian texts are mine. This publication is part of the project 'Lenten Sermon Bestsellers: Shaping Society in Late Medieval Europe (1470-1520)' (project number VI.Veni.191H.018) of the Veni research programme financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

2 Letizia Pellegrini, 'Osservanza / osservanze tra continuità e innovazione', in: *Gli studi francescani. Prospettive di ricerca* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2017), 215-234: 225. See also Letizia Pellegrini, 'Observantes de familia', in: *Identità francescane agli inizi del Cinquecento* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2018), 87-120. As introduction to the Italian Franciscan Observance, see *I frati osservanti e la società in Italia nel secolo XV* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2013) and Maria Teresa Dolso, 'L'Osservanza francescana: 'una restaurazione difficile'', *Il Santo* 56 (2016), 7-27.

Franciscan Observance,³ by recovering the complex dynamics and multiple transformations of this movement. A profitable way to achieve this goal is by investigating also less prominent (and even rather obscure) friars, who were never at the forefront of the movement and yet constituted its actual backbone, the rank and file members active on the ground.⁴

However, the case of Apollonio shows us something more. The fragmentary information about his life and his works allows us to see a friar able to address the crowds with spectacular bonfires of vanities while, at the same time, he composed orations, treatises, and letters following the rules of the humanistic rhetoric, addressing princes and cardinals in the most qualifying cultural forms of his time.⁵ Apollonio's consciously hybrid cultural identification was expressed by adopting specific values and discursive practices.⁶ Hence, his profile offers an ideal basis to investigate the multifaceted relationship between Observance and humanism (each of

3 The expression is famously used by friar Mariano of Firenze (d. 1523), in Idem, 'Compendium chronicarum fratrum Minorum', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 3 (1910), 700-715: 707. In Mariano's firmament, the stars are Bernardino of Siena, Giovanni of Capestrano, Alberto of Sarteano, and Giacomo della Marca.

4 Recent studies that go in this direction are: Marco Arosio, *Bartolomeo da Colle di Val d'Elsa, predicatore dell'Osservanza francescana. Uno studio storico-filosofico*, ed. Andrea Nannini (Rome: Aracne, 2017); Pietro Delcorno. 'All'ombra del gigante: il Monte di Pietà nell'azione di Timoteo da Lucca e Michele d'Acqui', in: *Credito e Monti di Pietà tra medioevo ed età moderna: un bilancio storiografico*, ed. Pietro Delcorno and Irene Zavattero (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020), 245-280, and in particular Letizia Pellegrini, *Bernardino Aquilano e la sua Cronaca dell'Osservanza con nuova edizione e traduzione a fronte* (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, 2021), 13-100.

5 An overview of the works of Apollonio is given in Delcorno and Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante', 146. On the socio-cultural relevance of the use of these discursive tools, see Cécile Caby, 'Pratiques humanistes et ordres religieux dans l'Italie du Quattrocento: quelques jalons', in: *L'humanisme à l'épreuve de l'Europe (XVe-XVIe siècle): Histoire d'une transmutation culturelle*, ed. Denis Crouzet et al. (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2019), 197-217, Cécile Caby, 'Discours académiques et renouvellements des formes de la parole publique dans l'ordres mendiants au XVe siècle', in: *Discours académiques. L'éloquence solennelle à l'université entre scolastique et humanisme*, ed. Clémence Revest (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020), 179-226, and Clémence Revest, 'Romam veni': *Humanisme et papauté à la fin du Grand Schisme* (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2021), 318-322. Revest convincingly underlines how humanism as 'révolution rhétorique' was not only a literary or stylistic phenomenon, but first and foremost the affirmation of 'une convention culturelle dominante (en une culture légitime) appuyée sur un modèle rhétorique mis au service du pouvoir et incorporé dans la matrice des imaginaires sociaux' (ivi, 243). On that, see also the contribution by Cécile Caby in the present volume.

6 In this contribution, I use *identification* as «processual, active term» to clarify that *identity* should not be considered as something fixed and to point out «the agents that do the identifying»; see on that Rogers Brubaker & Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond Identity', *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 1-47: 14.

them already a dynamic phenomenon per se, as we know), a relationship that was marked by appropriations and competition, exchanges and tensions.⁷

The main characteristic of Apollonio is precisely this ‘amphibious’ identity/identification, that is, his capacity to feel at home in two environments and to manage different cultural tools.⁸ For other friars belonging to a sort of restricted ‘humanistic aristocracy’ within the Franciscan order, scholars have noted a certain uneasiness when facing the most popular forms of itinerant preaching.⁹ According to the sources available, this tension does not emerge in Apollonio.¹⁰ While the historical sources present Apollonio as a popular preacher, able to adopt flamboyant techniques to get the attention of his audience, his most significant text – the *Libellus de vite pauperis prestantia* (*Booklet about the superiority of poor life*)¹¹ – turns out to be a

7 For an insightful analysis of this relationship, see Cécile Caby, ‘Al di là dell’Umanesimo religioso’: Umanisti e Chiesa nel Quattrocento’, in: *Cultura e desiderio di Dio. L’Umanesimo e le Clarisse dell’Osservanza*, ed. Pietro Messa et al. (Assisi: Porziuncola, 2009), 15-33, and Carlo Delcorno, ‘Apogeo e crisi della predicazione francescana tra Quattro e Cinquecento’, *Studi francescani* 112 (2015), 399-440, in part. 428-438. See also Pietro Delcorno, ‘Quomodo discet 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 & Bert Roest (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 147-184: 158-164.

8 I borrow this metaphor from Peter Burke, who defined mendicant friars, and in particular preachers, as ‘amphibious or bi-cultural: namely men of the university as well as men of the market-place’, Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* [1978] (Furham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 109.

9 Delcorno, ‘Apogeo e crisi’, 429 speaks of ‘una sorta di aristocrazia umanista’, with reference to friars such as Antonio of Rho, Alberto of Sarteano, and Lorenzo Traversagni. On the cultural shock that preaching in rural areas may have been for the most learned friars, see Caby, ‘Discours académiques’, 215. However, this issue should not be generalized, since several preachers did not refuse to preach in villages and secondary centers, as attested for Giacomo della Marca and Bernardino of Feltre.

10 Likewise, Antonio of Rho (d. 1450/53) recalls in his *Apologia* how he was accustomed to radically change his rhetorical style according to the different audiences, thus to address princes and urban elites with the new humanist rhetoric, while preaching to the people according to the most consolidated pastoral topics; see on this the contribution by Caby in the present volume.

11 The text has been published, without introduction and comment, in Antonio Salvi, ‘Apollonii Bianchi de vite pauperis prestantia’, *Latinitas* 59 (2011), 246-267 (henceforth: Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*). For an extended comment on it, see Delcorno and Falcone, ‘Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante’, which in its appendix publishes large extracts of this work on the basis of Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS Ricc. 779, ff. 334r-344r. The first scholar to call attention to some passages of this text was Remo L. Guidi, *Il dibattito sull'uomo nel Quattrocento: Indagini e dibattiti* (Rome: Tielle Media, 1998), 484, 554, 572, 604. The excerpts are presented without introducing Apollonio nor framing his work properly, as a whole.

sort of manifesto of his own Observant militancy expressed in humanistic forms. Therefore, this text can be compared with other early manifestations of the adoption of the new type of rhetoric for the exaltation of a religious order, such as some of the sermons delivered in the general chapters during the fifteenth century.¹²

In this eulogy of voluntary poverty (indeed, of Franciscan poverty), written between 1441 and 1444, Apollonio suggests a conciliation between religious life and humanism by presenting the Observant preacher as the ultimate outcome of a religious order exalted as the proper home of the *litterarum studia*, a statement all the more significant when placed within the ongoing debate regarding the role of studies within the *fratres de familia*.¹³ To support his own claim, Apollonio indicates as the idealized champions of this form of life and of action within society Bernardino of Siena (d. 1444) and Alberto of Sarteano (d. 1450), both still alive when he wrote his text.

In this contribution, I will first summarize the available information about Apollonio's life and sketch his pastoral action as it is described by a contemporary city chronicle. Next, I will focus on the key aspects of the *Libellus de vite pauperis prestantia*, particularly those connected with the exaltation of the Franciscan order and of its preachers. Finally, I will consider how *studia humanitatis* are praised in another work attributed to Apollonio, namely his *De virtute colenda* (*On the cultivation/practice of virtue*).¹⁴

12 See the contribution by Caby in the present volume, in particular for the analysis of Alberto of Sarteano's sermon at the 1443 Franciscan General Chapter of Padua (on which, see note 40).

13 See 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. Mirko Bereitenstein et al. (Berlin: LIT, 2014), 79-106, and Letizia Pellegrini, 'Tra *sanc-ta 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 & Roberto Lambertini (Rome: Viella, 2014), 33-52.

14 I will not discuss here the reception history of his works, attested by several humanistic miscellanies copied and disseminated even outside Italy; see Delcorno and Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante', 147-149 and 153-159.

An effective preacher: the bonfire in Cuneo

The information about the life of Apollonio Bianchi is scarce and fragmentary, mainly concentrated on the last years of his life, which would not have been particularly long if in the early 1440s he stated that he still lacked the age (as well as the wisdom) to be allowed to discuss in public the possible vices of ecclesiastics.¹⁵ What we know of his life is that he was a citizen of Piacenza, where he spent some time in 1449, and that he died in 1450 at Bobbio in relative proximity of his home town, while he was on his way back from a journey to Rome.¹⁶ Before that journey, at the end of 1449, he had preached during the Advent and Christmas season in Cuneo, while during the Lenten period of 1450, he most probably was in Pinerolo, in the Piedmont area. Apollonio seems to have developed solid links with this north-western area of Italy, since we have also a series of his funeral orations and letters connected with Vercelli, as well as the dedication of one of his treatises, *De virtute colenda*, to the marquis of Monferrato, Giovanni IV Paleologo (d. 1464).¹⁷ This was not the only court with which Apollonio evidently developed contacts. An oration that praises Leonello d'Este (d. 1450) and its accompanying letter to the marquis of Ferrara attest to Apollonio's link with the Estense court, although we do not know in which directions this relationship developed. Still, in this letter Apollonio not only exalts the young marquis as a perfect humanist prince and as disciple of the famous humanist master Guarino of Verona (d. 1460), but the friar declares that he always has put his own *studia litterarum* at the service of the fame of the marquis.¹⁸ By declaring to be able to follow in Guarino's footsteps and to contribute to Leonello's eternal glory with his

15 'Et quamquam hec ita sint, tamen huiusmodi vitiorum genus utrum usui ecclesiasticis viris habeatur minime meum est disserere, quando quidem mihi nec etas sit ut presummam, nec scientia ut ausim, nec dignitas ut debeam, nec auctoritas ut possim de aliorum vitiis et ecclesiasticorum presertim, si qua sunt, hominum tractare', Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*, 264.

16 The information on Apollonio's life is presented and discussed in Delcorno and Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante', 129-138.

17 On these works, see ibidem 137-138 and 144-148.

18 'Quae cum ita sint, mihi omnino persuasi dignissimum esse, ut, si quid mihi facultatis studia litterarum contulere, id totum, vel quantumcumque est, (vel erit si tamen sentiam id te dignum, tibi que approbatum iri) ad honestatem nominis tui et gloriam dicare contendam. Quemadmodum et feci nuperrime et saepissime faciam', Apollonio Bianchi, *Epistola ad Leonellum Estensis*, ed. in Delcorno and Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante', 151.

own writings, Apollonio adopts the forms and system of values of the new culture and shows his self-awareness as a humanist.

While we lack evidence of Apollonio's possible preaching activity in Ferrara, a precious glimpse of his pastoral work is provided by a city chronicle of Cuneo. Tapping into several hagiographical commonplaces, the text depicts an enthralling preaching cycle of friar Apollonio, which is presented as a decisive step for the affirmation of the Observance not only in the city but in the whole Piedmont region.¹⁹ According to the *Cronaca*, in late 1449 Apollonio arrived in Cuneo, where he first preached in the parish church and then, from All Saints to Epiphany, in the (Conventual) Franciscan church of the city.²⁰ The chronicler summarizes the visible, almost tangible effects of Apollonio's sermons:

'He organized the burning of wigs, dice, playing cards, board games, and chessboards as well as of women's *macagnones* [a type of head-gear] in the garden of the friars and pushed people to abandon many useless vanities. Due to his preaching, many young men abandoned the secular life and joined the Observance of saint Francis. Similarly, he led the above-mentioned place of Saint Mary of Angels to the Observance, and it has continued with admirable devotion and holiness until the present day. This was the first friary of the Observance in the whole Piedmont homeland.'²¹

19 The chronicle recalls a previous eremitical settlement of Franciscan Observant friars outside Cuneo. On the evolution of the presence of the Observant friars in this city, see Grado Giovanni Merlo and Roberto Comba, 'Madonna degli Angeli di Cuneo: Il primo santuario dell'Osservanza in Piemonte', in: *Madonna degli Angeli: Defendente Ferrari, Juvarrà e altre testimonianze d'arte a Cuneo*, ed. Walter Canavesio et al. (Cuneo: Agami, 1998), 7-13, and Grado Giovanni Merlo, 'Gli inizi dell'Osservanza minoritica nella regione subalpina', in: *Frate Angelo Carletti osservante nel V centenario della morte (1495-1995)*, ed. Ovidio Capitani et al., *Bollettino della Società per gli Studi Storici, Archeologici ed Artistici della Provincia di Cuneo* 118 (1998), 19-41.

20 'Tunc enim applicuit Cuneum venerandus et excellens predicator frater Appolonius de Blanchis de Placencia, Ordinis Sancti Francisci de Observancia, qui primum predicare cepit in templo Domine Nostre de Bosco, dehinc in ecclesia sancti Francisci nova, in qua illis diebus ceptum est celebrari et transmutatus fuerat corus; ibique predicavit cum elleganti audientia a festo Omnium Sanctorum usque ad Epiphaniam Domini'; *La più antica cronaca di Cuneo, di Giovan Francesco Rebaccini?*, ed. Piero Camilla (Cuneo: SASTE, 1981), 150. I am grateful to Andrea Giraudo who helped me to access a copy of this text.

21 'Capillos mortuos, taxillos, cartullas, tabullerios et schacherios atque machagnonos mulierum fecit comburi in viridario fratrum, et vanitates plurimas supervacuas deponi fecit; multi juvenes seculo renunciarunt sub eius predicationibus et observanciam sancti Francisci intrarunt.

The bonfire of vanities, the recruitment of friars, and the foundation of an Observant house are the milestones of a well-conceived strategy. The ephemeral effects of a spectacular preaching campaign embodied by the bonfire of vanities served to achieve long-lasting results, mainly the foundation of a friary that consolidated the previously precarious presence of the Franciscan Observance in the city.

In a nutshell, we find here the same key elements as those present in the hagiographical descriptions of the actions of Bernardino of Siena. In those very same years, the canonization process of Bernardino focused on his spectacular bonfires, the wave of religious vocations, and the foundation of Observant friaries – all elements used to measure and certify the extraordinary effectiveness of his preaching.²² Arguably, like other contemporary friars, Apollonio consciously imitated Bernardino, who is depicted as a supreme model friar and preacher in his *Libellus de vite pauperis prestantia*.²³

In particular, the public burning of the symbols and tools of sin was a dramatic ritual of purification of the city that characterized Bernardino's main preaching cycles. Staging it required a good dose of planning and a firm grip on the crowd, as well as the support of the local authorities. In the specific case of Apollonio's preaching in Cuneo, which likewise included a bonfire of vanities, the objects mentioned by the chronicle reflect two topics that the friar must have touched upon in his sermons. The burning of dice, cards, and game boards is linked with the fight against gambling, while wigs and headgears connect with the critique on the excesses of luxury, and in particular on alleged female vanity.²⁴ Both are recognizable

Tandem locum predictum sancte Marie de Angelis ad Observanciam reduxit; que usque in presentem diem continuavit mirabili devocione et sanctitate. Et fuit primum zenobium Observancie in tota patria Pedemontana'; *ibidem*, 150.

22 See articles 12 and 14 (bonfires of vanities), 15 (vocations of new friars), and 16 (foundation of convents) in the canonization process, published in *Il processo di canonizzazione di Bernardino da Siena (1445-1450)*, ed. Letizia Pellegrini (Grottaferrata: Quaracchi, 2009), 331-332.

23 For what concerns the bonfire of vanities, beyond those organized by Bernardino of Siena, among the earliest examples known to me are those promoted by Giacomo Primadizzi (Forlì 1427) and Sante Boncor (Venice 1450); references to the sources and further bibliography on the bonfire of vanity are provided in Delcorno and Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante', 132-133.

24 On preaching against gambling, see Lorenzo Turchi, 'Perdo et venco': la predicazione osservante sul gioco nel '400', *Antoniano* 93 (2018), 655-670, and Gherardo Ortalli, *Barattieri. Il gioco d'azzardo fra economia ed etica. Secoli XIII-XV* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 208-215. On the sermons against (female) vanities see Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, *Gli inganni delle apparenze. Disciplina di vesti e ornamenti alla fine del Medioevo* (Turin: Scriptorium, 1996), and

topics of the moral and social proposal promoted by Italian Observant preachers.²⁵ This suggests that Apollonio shared this pastoral and cultural horizon, and contributed to its affirmation within society.

According to the *Cronaca*, the *pars destruens* about (social) sins was accompanied by a persuasive discourse on the superiority of the Franciscan life, a type of sermon (and personal testimony) able to attract numerous vocations. When successful, as in this case, the message had lasting – and at time destabilizing – effects in an urban context.²⁶ We do not have Apollonio's sermons about this or other topics. Yet, transfigured in a different form, a discourse on the excellence of the Franciscan life and on the role of the Observance – with its heroes and its own mythology – can be found in the *Libellus*. This text allows us to grasp some of the themes that Apollonio may have developed also in his preaching.

The eulogy of poverty: the superiority of the Franciscan life

The exaltation of both poverty and culture is at the core of the *Libellus de vite pauperis prestantia*, a text dedicated to Cardinal Gerardo Landriani (d. 1445), a powerful prelate, well introduced in humanist networks. In his dedicatory letter, Apollonio declares to have sufficient familiarity with Landriani to put their relationship in the sphere of friendship.²⁷ In this treatise, Apollonio illustrates how voluntary poverty represents the highest

Federica Boldrini, *Per la storia delle leggi suntuarie in Italia nei secoli XV-XVI: Il 'Tractatus de ornatu mulierum' di Orfeo Cancellieri* (Modena: Monduzzi, 2019).

25 As an insightful introduction, see Carlo Delcorno, 'L'Osservanza francescana e il rinnovamento della predicazione', in: *I frati osservanti*, 3-53.

26 The disruptive consequences that the tumultuous recruitment of new friars supported by the action and example of charismatic preachers may have caused in some social contexts are shown by the clash in Milan between Bernardino of Siena and Amedeo Landi; see Marina Benedetti, 'Per quisti ribaldi fray se disfa il mondo'. Il contrasto tra Bernardino da Siena e Amedeo Landi', in: *Francescani e politica nelle autonomie cittadine dell'Italia basso-medievale*, ed. Isa Lori Sanfilippo & Roberto Lambertini (Rome: ISIME, 2017), 299-312 and Pietro Delcorno, 'Et zostrabo tecum'. Lo scontro tra Bernardino da Siena e Amedeo Landi: Note sull'edizione dei processi milanesi', *Il Santo* 62 (2022), 325-358. The surviving documentation of the inquisitorial processes that followed this episode are edited in Marina Benedetti and Tiziana Danelli, *Contro frate Bernardino da Siena: processi al maestro Amedeo Landi (Milano 1437-1447)* (Milan: Milano University Press, 2021).

27 See a rich profile in Elisabetta Canobbio, 'Landriani, Gerardo', in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 63 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2004), 518-523. Unfortunately, Apollonio did not specify any detail of his relationship with Landriani.

good and the best path to a blessed life. Starting from classical examples of detachment from worldly goods, the text gradually turns into an exaltation of the superiority of the Franciscan *forma vitae*. Therefore, the treatise must be read also as a clear statement of Apollonio's proud belonging to a religious group that he describes as unparalleled in the history of salvation and in contemporary society.

Without analyzing the whole *Libellus*, I call the attention to key passages of this rather elaborated work. When the text exalts the apostolic life as the 'most beautiful and excellent form of life' ('pulchrior queve prestantior vivendi institutio'), Apollonio points out that many tried to be *imitatores* of the incomparable example of the apostles, yet without being able to match it. Neither the regulators of the religious life such as Basil, Jerome, Augustine, Benedict, Bernard, and Dominic, nor the great hermits of the past were able to match that model. Instead, the *pauperrimus* Francis of Assisi 'not only equaled the apostles, but in some way even surpassed them' ('ut non modo apostolis equandus sit, sed etiam quodammodo anteponeendus').²⁸

The object of admiration is not only Francis as 'homo novus' and 'alter Christus' (well-known hagiographical themes), but also the 'new family of men who, naked, carry the naked cross under the rule of Francis', as Apollonio says with a strategic use of the present tense.²⁹ With a significant claim about the perpetual novelty of the Franciscan life, Apollonio adds that, as in apostolic times the Christian religion elicited admiration among the Gentiles, thus the *Ordo Francisci* excited and continues to excite admiration among Christians.³⁰ The Franciscans are hailed as 'true

28 Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*, 256. For the expressions that exalt saint Francis, see note 30.

29 'Mira res certe est novus atque genus hominum eorum qui Francisci sub regulis nudi nudam baiulant crucem', *ibidem*, 256. On this spiritual common place, see Franco Mormando, 'Nudus nudum Christum sequi': The Franciscans and Differing Interpretations of Male Nakedness in Fifteenth-Century Italy', *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 33 (2008), 171-197.

30 The whole passage about Francis of Assisi is worth to be considered, also as example of the style of the text, which often proceeds with a series of rhetorical questions: 'Ita, inquam, sanctissime semper religiosissimeque sese habuit in omnibus, ut non tam unus ex apostolis, quam alter, ut ita loquar, Christus videretur e celo in terram venisse, qui novas rursus regulas vite hominum generi daret. An non nova instituta noveque vivendi norme a Francisco tradite sunt, quando quidem non minus apud christianos admirationis habuerit ordo Francisci et habeat in dies quam tum apud gentes christiana habuisset religio? An non novus homo Franciscus, quem sibi homo factus Deus Christus Iesus et quidem multipliciter assimilavit? An non magna est

masters of evangelical philosophy' ('veri evangelice phylosophye doctores'), and poverty is presented as teacher of wisdom, genetrix of virtue, leader and handmaiden of good arts, and mother of temperance.³¹

Next, the *Libellus* exalts the Franciscan life as the most beneficial for humankind, the utmost praise of God, and the greatest honor of the Church. We find here a crescendo of rhetorical questions that well summarize Apollonio's idealized (and ideological) vision of the Franciscan Observance.

'Therefore, where does faith, where does piety, where does justice, where do all virtues, either divine or human, flourish everyday more? Where do all good arts, all honest education, all literary studies, where do all of these thrive more prominently than in the most excellent order of Friars Minor? And indeed, who can be more clever in debating any type of subject? Who are more fervent in exhorting to virtue? Who are more biting in diverting from vices? Who are more harsh in rejecting the dishonesty of heretics? Who are more magnificent in expanding the Christian faith by preaching than the men of this order who performed and still perform [all this]?'³²

In this programmatic paragraph, the Franciscan primacy in the virtues is joined by a primacy in the *artes*, particularly in 'omnium litterarum studia', claiming that in no other place wisdom abounds more than in the Franciscan order. This cultural excellence, however, is clearly connected with a multifaceted pastoral and social engagement that includes the ability to dispute, exhort to virtue, turn away from vices, fight against heresies, and – to top it all – the ability to spread Christian faith through preaching. In all these tasks, no one has surpassed what the Franciscan friars accom-

novitas, cum is qui erat et cupidissimus glorie inglorius et avidissimus honoris inhonoratus et deditissimus opulentie inops rerum omnium ultro quidem atque sponte efficitur sua', Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*, 256.

31 'Est enim paupertas sapientie magistra, virtutis parens, bonarum artium comes atque adiutrix, ac mater frugalitatis', ibidem, 257.

32 'Ubi enim fides? Ubi pietas? Ubi iustitia? Ubi omnes virtutes et divine et humane quotidie magis florescunt? Ubi omnes bone artes, omnes honeste discipline, omnium litterarum studia? Ubi ipsa demum sapientia viget excellentius quam fratrum prestantissimo in ordine Minorum? Etenim quis in omni rerum genere disputare subtilius? Quis cohortari ad virtutem ardentius? Quis acrius a vitiis revocare? Quis confutare heresum improbitatem asperius? Quis magnificentius amplificare christianam fidem predicando potest quam huiusce ordinis factitarunt viri et factitant?', ibidem, 265. Part of this passage was quoted in Guidi, *Il dibattito sull'uomo*, 554.

plished and still do, as Apollonio says using again very significantly the present tense.

We find here Apollonio's awareness of the importance of his role as a preacher (including its repressive dimension), and of the way in which the Franciscan cultural formation must be ultimately oriented to this mission.³³ The model of a well-educated friar is here close to the position promoted by Bernardino of Siena and then codified by Giovanni of Capestrano, who forcefully advocated for the primacy of pastoral engagement – and in particular of effective preaching – as proper for the Observance and as the ultimate goal of any cultural commitment.³⁴ Within this conceptual framework, Apollonio expressed a distinct perspective, since he included the *studia humanitatis* as part of the ideal training of a friar. Still, his text allows us to see how these ideas were appropriated and disseminated also by friars who did not belong to the inner circle of the leaders of the Observance, but certainly were not outside the debate that animated the *fratres de familia* in those years. One just needs to think of the letter *De studio promovendo*, sent in 1444 by Giovanni of Capestrano, who was the general vicar of the Cismontane Observance at the time. This letter aimed precisely to overcome the hostility of many Observant friars to the renewed centrality of education in the mission and identity of the Franciscan order. Giovanni of Capestrano had clearly affirmed these elements already in the 1443 constitutions, which presented preaching as the panacea for all pastoral challenges and, on that basis, advocated for the necessity of a solid education within the order.³⁵ The fact that the *studium litterarum* was still an object of contention at the Observant general chapter in 1455, at least

33 This position fits well in a tradition that considered preaching as the 'cornerstone of the Franciscan educational project'. See Bert Roest, *A History of Franciscan Education (c. 1210-1517)* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 272-324.

34 Beside the literature indicated in note 13, see Roest, *A History of Franciscan Education*, 153-171 and Delcorno, 'Quomodo discet sine docente?', 150-158. See also Pietro Maranesi, *Nescientes litteras: l'ammonezione della Regola francescana e la questione degli studi nell'Ordine (sec. XIII-XVI)* (Rome: Istituto storico dei Cappuccini, 2000), 207-290, with a useful collection of sources gathered in its appendix. Most recently, on the practical and crucial theme of access to and possession of books, see René Hernández, *Franciscan Books and Their Readers: Friars and Manuscripts in Late Medieval Italy* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2022).

35 For Giovanni's letter see Aniceto Chiappini, 'S. Ioannis de Capistrano Sermones duo ad Studentes et Epistola circularis de studio promovendo inter Observantes', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 11 (1918), 97-131. The passage of the 1443 constitutions is quoted and commented in Delcorno, 'Quomodo discet sine docente?', 152.

according to the tendentious testimony of Bernardino Aquilano, confirms that the position expressed by Apollonio was all but obvious.³⁶

Overall, the key goal of the *Libellus* is to praise the superiority of the Franciscan way of life. Getting closer to the end of his text, to further prove this point Apollonio presents two contemporary champions (or living saints) of the Observance. The first is Bernardino of Siena, who is indicated with the classicizing and sophisticated terms of *pater patratus* and *archipredicator*.³⁷ The description of Bernardino's fame shows how several themes later consolidated by the hagiography were already circulating when he was still alive (as he is clearly indicated here). The *Libellus* underlines Bernardino's reputation for having revived the Christian faith everywhere, and the function of his model sermons, which Bernardino consciously produced as a way to teach his style of preaching.

'So that what I say does not seem to come from affection more than from truth, (...) I cannot but claim the name of him who among Christians has the best and most excellent reputation among all the people of this age, that is the name of that most religious *pater patratus* Bernardino of Siena, who as the most egregious arch-preacher has revived the Christians' faith, which was almost perishing, who day and night, on earth and at sea, everywhere has announced by declamation all that is necessary to salvation, who moreover, has painstakingly codified and still codifies every day his way of preach-

36 While friar Serafino of Gaeta advocated for the *studium litterarum* within the Observance, Bernardino Aquilano – claiming to express the view of all other friars – rebutted that the *fratres de familia* did not need it, since God was providing them with the vocation of learned men, while they have to focus on the spiritual and devotional life within the Order. See Pellegrini, *Bernardino Aquilano*, 170–171.

37 Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*, 265. The first expression probably alludes to the function in ancient Rome of the head of the sacerdotal college of *fetiales* in formally declaring war on enemies, as a sort of ambassador (see Titus Livius, *Ab Urbe condita*, I, 24), but also in presiding over pacts and as pacifier, according to the translation provided by Plutarch; see Federico Santangelo, 'The Fetials and Their Ius', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 51 (2008), 63–93, and J.H. Richardson, 'The Pater Patratus on a Roman Gold Stater', *Hermes* 136:4 (2008), 415–425 (I am grateful to Ketty Iannantuono for these references). Apollonio's use may be closer to the latter meaning, perhaps consciously connecting with the occurrence of this terminology in the writings of some contemporary humanists, such as Leonardo Bruni, who defines Guarino of Verona 'tanquam pater patratus' in a letter written in 1440; see Guarino Veronese, *Epistolario*, ed. Remigio Sabbadini, 3 vols. (Venice: a spese della Società, 1915–1919) II, 404.

ing in many volumes of books, so to provide with great care not only for those who are present now, but also for all the posterity.³⁸

The second friar mentioned as universally praised by his contemporaries is Alberto of Sarteano, who had a great reputation both for his humanistic and theological culture and for his diplomatic role in Egypt, which was crucial for the participation of the Copts at the Council of Florence and the signing of the union bull of 1442.³⁹ In the same year, Pope Eugenius IV nominated Alberto general vicar of the Franciscan order, with the aim to get him elected as minister general during the next general chapter, a scheme that failed spectacularly at the tumultuous chapter held in Padua the following year.⁴⁰ The choice to place Alberto as a conclusive model in Apollonio's *Libellus* is as significant as are the words used in praising him.

‘...the most excellent brother, rather father Alberto. He, who is called of Sarteano, acted admirably not only among the Christians, yet also among Ethiopians and barbarians as well as the infidels.

38 ‘At hec ne ex affectu potius quam ex veritate deprompta esse videantur, facere equidem nequeo (...) quin isthic usurpem nomen illius de quo apud christianos melior vel optima omnium qui agunt evum opinio habetur, illius, inquam, religiosissimi patris patrati Berardini Senensis, qui utpote archipredicator egregius fidem christianorum prope defunctam suscitavit, qui dies et noctes, qui terra et mari, qui ubique quod omnium pertinet ad salutem declamando adnuntiavit, qui denique permulta librorum volumina suo genere dicendi elucubravisset atque etiam elucubrat quotidie, ita ut non solum iis qui sunt praesentes, sed omni quoque posteritati summopere consular’, Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*, 265. On Bernardino, see *A Companion on Bernardino of Siena*, ed. Letizia Pellegrini (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

39 A comprehensive profile of this important friar is still lacking, yet a good entry point is provided in 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* 86:1 (1974), 165-211 and 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 (2019), 435-456. On friar Alberto’s relationship with the humanism, see Daniele Solvi, ‘Sapientiae amatores’: Alberto da Sarteano e gli antichi’, in: *Dulcis labor: Studi offerti a Maria Luisa Chirico*, ed. Claudio Buongiovanni et al. (Santa Maria Capua Vetere: DilBec Books, 2022), 237-247. Solvi points out that Alberto’s epistolary, while advocating for the importance of the *studia humanitatis*, connects the references to classics to key concepts of the Observant pastoral and social engagement – in a way thus not too distant from Apollonio.

40 On the 1443 general chapter, see Pacifico Stella, *Leone X e la definitiva divisione dell’Ordine dei Minori (OMin): la bolla Ite vos (29 maggio 1517)* (Grottaferrata: Quaracchi, 2001), 133-135, and the vivid (and tendentious, as always) description provided by the chronicle of Bernardino Aquilano, available in Pellegrini, *Bernardino Aquilano e la sua Cronaca*, 150-155. On the important opening sermon that friar Alberto preached in Padua, adopting a humanist rhetoric, see the contribution by Caby in the present volume.

Therefore, I want everyone to know that these very things were obtained not through physical strength nor the abundance of weapons, yet through the strength and power of speech. Indeed, [Alberto] of Sarteano has such great ingenuity, equal elegance, non-minor fluidity that truly he is so skillful in both Latin and Greek that, if you hear him speaking Greek, you would assume he does not know Latin, and if you hear him speaking Latin, that he does not know Greek. Likewise in other languages and writings he possesses identical skills.⁴¹

If Bernardino revived the faith of Christians as a great preacher *ad intra*, Alberto is exalted for his triumphs *ad extra*, for the diplomatic and political mission carried out successfully – also in this case, according to Apollonio – thanks to his oratory, the ‘*potentia dicendi*’. As orator, he is also praised for his elegance and command of both Latin and Greek, in full conformity with the words that Apollonio uses elsewhere to praise Alberto’s teacher, the renowned humanist Guarino of Verona.⁴²

The *Libellus* ends with an idealized exaltation of the Franciscan life. The biblical promise ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:3) refers here properly to the (Observant) Franciscans. It closes a text that, while starting with general remarks about the frugality of ancient philosophers and rulers, gradually turns to a powerful praise of the superiority of the *forma vitae* of the friars. This perfect model of religious life was established (or even better, according to the text, brought on earth) by Francis of Assisi and now is embodied (and rejuvenated) by Bernardino of Siena and Alberto of Sarteano, and by Apollonio himself, who claims to ‘speak as an expert among that most joyful company of poor’.⁴³

41 ‘Ratio eque par me abducit a commendatione magnorum illorum virorum Minorumque factorum que, ut aiunt, prestantissimus frater imo pater Albertus, is qui Sarcianensis dicitur, non modo inter christianos, verum et inter Ethiope et barbaros quousque et infideles mirabiliter gessit. Hinc tamen velim quisque sciat has ipsas res non viribus corporum aut armorum copiis, sed vi atque potentia dicendi confectas fuisse. Etenim Sarcianensi huic grave ingenium inest, par elegantia, non minor dissertitudo, quippe qui lingue et grece et latine adeo peritus est ut si grece loqui audias, nescire latinum putares, si latine, grecum ignorare crederes. In aliis item linguis litterisque identidem se habet’, Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*, 266.

42 ‘Habes etenim imprimis dissertissimum illum quidem et grece et latine lingue peritissimum Guarinum...’, Apollonio Bianchi, *Epistola ad Leonellum Estensis*, 151.

43 ‘Fateor ergo tamquam expertus in his letissimis collegiis pauperum’, Apollonio Bianchi, *De vite pauperis prestantia*, 266.

Before turning briefly to a second work of Apollonio, it is important to note that, beside the contents of this text, equally illustrative of his mindset is that this proud claim of Franciscan excellence is written by abandoning the forms of the scholastic treatise and by adopting instead the style of humanistic oratory. This is visible in the syntax, which often imitates the Ciceronian style,⁴⁴ in the epideictic oratory consisting of exaltations and expressions of admiration (and to a lesser extent of *vituperatio*), in the frequent use of preterition and anaphoric questions, in the refined lexical choices (as *pater patratus*), and the insistence on concepts such as oratorical elegance or eternal fame.⁴⁵ Together with the predilection for classical references (and even more than that),⁴⁶ these choices characterize the text, and distinguish it from other contemporary works on Franciscan identity.

This rhetorical form makes the *Libellus* a manifesto not only of the possible encounter between humanist culture and Franciscan Observance, but – at least in the intentions of its author – also of the role that the friars must play in a broader process of cultural renewal. In this perspective, this text is the symbol of Apollonio's twofold self-identification, as an Observant friar and as a member of the *res publica litteratum*.

***Studia humanitatis* as path towards a virtuous life**

While I do not discuss here neither structure and aims of *De virtute colenda*, nor the reason why this treatise can safely be attributed to Apollonio Bianchi, I recall only a key passage of this text, which reinforces the cultural position we found expressed in the *Libellus de vite pauperis prestantia*.⁴⁷ The treatise is a broad (and at times confusing, at least in its overall structure) reflection on the *studium* of virtue as the only path to a blessed

44 At time, Apollonio literally copied the syntax of some sentence by Cicero; see Delcorno and Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante', 144 and 151. On the importance of writing 'à la manière de Cicéron' and on the key role of figures such as Gasparino Barzizza (d. 1431) in this cultural process, see Revest, 'Romam veni', 237-297 and the contribution by Caby in the present volume.

45 On these features, see also the contribution by Caby in the present volume.

46 The accumulation of classical quotations or *exempla* per se may be a reaction to humanism more than an actual participation in its cultural horizon, as pointed out by Delcorno, 'Apogeo e crisi', 429 and Remo L. Guidi, 'Non si è Umanisti perché si citano di continuo i classici: il caso di fra' Bernardino Busti', *La Rassegna della letteratura italiana* 126 (2021), 335-365.

47 On this text, its dissemination, and the attribution to Apollonio, see Delcorno and Falcone, 'Tra prassi umanistica e autocoscienza osservante', 144-148.

life and eternal fame. As such, it presents itself as the ‘art of good living’ (*ars bene vivendi*).⁴⁸

The most compelling passage of a text otherwise quite monotonous in its learned references is where the author underlines the necessity and the benefits of the *studia humanitatis*. He states that ‘in them there is both the elegance of behavior, the most beautiful and ordered form of life, the excellence of speaking and acting with great knowledge and pertinence, no less joy, equal decorum, greater and more splendid glory; in fact, they [the *studia humanitatis*] suit so much human nature and they bring such delight to the soul that we seem close to the blessed life’. And he adds that, among other things, the *studia humanitatis* ‘expel every error and ignorance’, show how to live according to truth and wisdom, ‘teach reason to cultivate virtue’, and have the power to transform the soul.⁴⁹

Later on in the text, after exalting the power of eloquence and praising rhetoric as a precious treasure for the common good of society, Apollonio magnifies once again the *studia humanitatis* with a string of rhetorical questions:

‘What activities underpin human lives most beautifully? The *studia humanitatis*! Through what can one most easily acquire the immortality of glory? Through the *studium humanitatis*! What do we seek more, or which soul harbors doubts about whether we must apply ourselves to so many and so splendid studies, when no ordered form of life, no expertise of knowledge, no art without them can rightly deserve to be joyful and praiseworthy?’⁵⁰

48 Antonio Salvi, ‘Apollonii Bianchi de virtute colenda’, *Latinitas* 59 (2011), 321-357: 330. Also in this case, the text has been published without any introduction or comments.

49 ‘Quod si omnem doctrinam capessere nequimus enitendum est omnino ut studia percipiamus ea que humanitatis vocantur. Est enim in his et morum elegantia, pulchior et compositor vivendi institutio, et dicendi agendique scientior peritiorque prestantia, non minor iucunditas, par decus, maior nonnunquam et splendidior gloria, maxime autem sunt hominum nature propria et tantam animi oblectationem afferunt ut proximi ad beatam vitam videamur. Primum quidem pellunt errorem omnem atque ignorantiam, tum lumen veri videndi exhibent, tum probande sapientie, tum virtutis colende rationem edocent, postremo, quod omnium est magnificissimum atque splendidissimum, mortalium animos ex sede et statu potis sunt movere ad odium, ad iram, ad amorem, ad commiserationem et clementiam’, *ibidem*, 334.

50 ‘Que enim pulcherrime vitam hominum instituunt? Studia humanitatis! Quid per quod glorie immortalitas solet facillime acquiri? Ob studium humanitatis! Quid igitur percunctamur aut quousque animus est in dubio utrumne tantis tamque preclaris debeamus incumbere studiis,

The definition of the *studia humanitatis* remains elusive in the text, yet – assuming that he is its author – this vagueness does not diminish the value of Apollonio's speaking openly in their favor and in defining this type of education as a privileged path to the blessed life and as a way to provide people with the necessary tools to reject errors and to embrace truth and virtue. Does this discourse apply also to friars? This treatise does not have any reference to the Franciscan life. One may wonder to what extent these affirmations were intended by Apollonio primarily as a sort of pass to distinguish himself and to be well received in humanist circles or at courts. Still, finding this type of affirmation as part of the self-fashioning of a mid-fifteenth-century Franciscan Observant friar remains important, – even more so considering the inner debate in the order that I have already recalled.

Conclusion

The same friar who included pyrotechnic bonfires of vanities in his preaching cycles was able in his writings to master forms and themes belonging to humanist discursive culture. While many points about Apollonio remain elusive, his network of relationships and his writings highlight the complex interplay between humanistic culture and mendicant orders in the midst of the fifteenth century. Going beyond the small group of better known 'humanist friars', a figure like Apollonio shows how humanist practices were rapidly gaining space among some of the friars, who recognized the usefulness of these distinctive cultural and social features. This phenomenon confirms that humanist eloquence was gaining momentum by attracting growing sectors of the professionals of public oratory. At the same time, we find in the *Libellus* an active appropriation of these rhetorical tools by a friar able to use this type of discourse to promote the social and cultural project of the Observance. And when the pastoral mission required it, he had no problem in embracing the contemporary novelties represented by the dramatic form of preaching proposed by Bernardino of Siena, without much recourse to humanist rhetorical finery, with its focus on socio-

quando quidem nullum vivendi genus, sciendi nulla peritia, nulla ars sine iis iocunda esse laudarique posse iure mereatur?', *ibidem*, 335.

religious topics and its spectacular collective rituals. The hybridization between these two worlds was perhaps not particularly sophisticated, yet in this case quite conscious and effective. Overall, in his texts Apollonio deliberately presents himself both as a lover of the *studia humanitatis* and as a proud member of the Franciscan family.

Within the debate about poverty and the role of studies in the Franciscan order, the *Libellus de vite pauperis prestantia* shows how a culturally equipped but not prominent friar positioned himself on strategic issues to define the profile of the Observance, in particular in relation to the forms of eloquence necessary for an effective presence in society. Bernardino of Siena's model of oratory, although admired and arguably imitated on the pulpit by Apollonio himself, should not overshadow how other forms of public oratory found space within the same Observance. Several friars (how many remains an open question for scholars) were fully aware that mastering different forms of eloquence had become a priority in the complex social and cultural Italian landscape. The profile and ideas of a friar like Apollonio thus shed lights on these dynamics, allowing us to look at them in a certain sense not from the center but from the periphery. This is a viewpoint equally essential to understand the unfolding of complex and changing socio-cultural issues, such as the affirmation of humanistic practices and the processes of re-definition of the Franciscan Observant mission and identity.