

## **Third Order SSF Study and Prayer Week, Alnmouth, 30 September to 4 October 2013**

BROTHER ELIAS by Hugh Beach.

Elias was born around 1180, at Britignano near Assisi, and died at Cortona on 22 April 1253. Variously known as Elias of Cortona and Elias Bonusbaro/Bombarone he was one of the most controversial figures in the early history of the Franciscan Order. He is also, as it happens, one of my heroes - for reasons which will emerge.

Little is known about his earlier years. He is said to have worked in Assisi as a carpet weaver and at teaching children to read. He probably went to Bologna and there learned something of the law. What attracted him to Francis' way of life is unknown. He joined the brothers in 1211, soon after they had taken over the Portiuncola and their numbers had started to increase. He was an energetic, capable man and personally devoted to Francis, sharing his passion for crusading and preaching to the Saracens. He and Masseo were Francis' companions on the abortive expedition against the Moors in 1213 or 1214, which ended with Francis' illness at Santiago da Compostela. Francis, in turn, came to rely on Elias more and more.

In 1217 Elias was chosen to lead a mission to the Holy Land, as 'herald and precursor' of the work which Francis planned. At once he demonstrated his ability and vigour, establishing a new province in circumstances of great difficulty. When Francis followed in 1219 Elias met him at Acre and possibly accompanied him to Damietta. In the following year, when Francis was recalled to Italy, he took Elias with him. Back in Italy Francis was obviously in great distress. The direction of the Order was slipping away from him, into the hands of men who did not share his ideals. In his absence Ugolino di Conti, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia, had made much stricter rules about fasting, imposed a year's novitiate upon all new members and arranged for better accommodation to be provided for the friars. Francis now, in a bold move, invited Ugolino to become Protector of the Order. Then at the Michaelmas Chapter Francis abdicated, concluding that he was not the man to lead a great religious Order. 'Henceforth' he said 'I am dead to you'. The friars were dumbfounded. When asked who should succeed him Francis named Peter of Catania. Peter was an old and trusted friend who had shared the trials and sufferings of the early years and knew exactly what Francis wanted. But Peter died only a few months later, and in March 1221 Francis appointed Elias in his place. Francis then had five more years to live, and though he tried to keep some control over the Order in fact the initiative had passed to Ugolino, the ministers and Elias.

These were years of great expansion, in Italy, France, Germany, Spain and England. It was also a time of growing controversy: for example on questions of poverty, privilege, priesthood and of study. (Francis was opposed to the latter on two grounds. First, that study interferes with absolute poverty because the student must have books to read and quiet places in which to read them. Secondly, that study interferes with humility because the student is bound to be looked up to by the illiterate and simple and cannot take his place among the dregs of society.) Francis devoted himself to providing a definitive version of the Rule. His first attempt was based upon the original Rule that he had shown to Pope Innocent III in 1210, but with 'various customs, admonitions, precepts' and biblical texts woven into it. This was rejected by the General Chapter in 1221. In 1222 Francis tried again, with the help of Brother Leo as secretary. This version was delivered to Elias but apparently 'lost through carelessness'. It was in fact much too strict. A third version, which according to Francis had been 'entirely dictated by Christ', was delivered not to Elias but to Ugolino. Amendments to the draft were then made by Ugolino, by Pope Honorius III himself and by the ministers. This rule was finally adopted by chapter and confirmed by papal bull in November 1223. It remains the official rule of the Order of Friars Minor to this day.

In the remaining years of his life Francis celebrated his famous Christmas midnight mass at Greccio in 1223; received the stigmata at La Verna in 1224; and undertook a number of local preaching journeys riding on a donkey. Early in 1225, with his health getting much worse, he spent two months at San Damiano with Clare, and there he dictated the Canticle of the Sun. He spent the winter of 1225-6 in Siena, and Elias joined him in the spring. Francis was clearly dying and Elias took charge. Realising that attempts might be made to seize Francis, alive or dead, he arranged for an armed guard to escort the litter to Assisi. Lodged in the bishop's palace Francis dictated his Testament: part autobiography, part appeal and very moving. Finally, towards the end of September Francis was taken to the Portiuncula. On the evening of 3 October he asked to be laid naked on the bare earth and there, on the following morning, weary and helpless but full of joy and hope, he died. Elias had been with him constantly and knelt by him at the end.

Elias again took control, being the only person with any sort of authority. His first task was to bury the body. He chose the little church of St. Georgio as a temporary resting place (where Francis had been to school and where he preached his first sermons), the body remaining under close guard. His next act was to tell the world of Francis' death. He did this by letter, a copy of which survives. This said nothing of Francis' last days, but described in detail the stigmata, which until then had been kept secret. Elias had long regarded Francis as a saint and hoped for an early canonisation. He no doubt felt that the miracle of the stigmata would help to garner popular support.

Meanwhile preparations were in hand for a Chapter General, to be held at Pentecost 1227, of which the main purpose was to elect a Minister General. In the event John of Parenti was elected, a Florentine lawyer who had also joined the order in the early days and had served with distinction as Provincial Minister in Spain. It may be that Elias deliberately did not stand. At all events the result was to leave him free for the next five years to concentrate on building a shrine for Francis at Assisi. He was determined that this should become one of the great centres of pilgrimage, on a par with Compostela, Jerusalem and Rome, bringing to Assisi fame and wealth untold.

A site was chosen to the north-west of the town, where the ground slopes steeply and there is a single isolated rocky outcrop. In March 1228 a man called Simon Puzzarelli presented this plot of land to Elias. A month later pope Gregory IX (as Ugolino had become in the previous year) issued a bull announcing that a great church was to be built and exhorting the faithful to contribute. Work began immediately. A vast platform was made on which the foundations could be set, for what was intended to be one of the noblest churches in Christendom. In July pope Gregory attended in person, both to lay the foundation-stone of the new church and to canonize Francis. The canonization took place in the church of San Georgio and was attended by large crowds including cardinals, bishops, abbots and the King of Jerusalem. The pope preached on the text 'He was as the morning star in the midst of a cloud' (Ecclus 1:6), a *Te deum* was sung and a mass said in the crypt where the body lay. Finally the pope invited one of the friars, Thomas of Celano, to write an official life of the saint.

Gregory then left, leaving Elias to supervise the building. Money had begun to pour in, but the design was ambitious and constant appeals were needed. In February 1229 the pope issued another bull, ordering all prelates to support the cult of the saint, while Elias continued to badger the provincial ministers for more money. There were to be two churches, one for the friars and one for the laity and a convent big enough to house more than a hundred friars. Due to lack of space the churches were built one on top of the other: a dark church below, modelled on the crusaders' fortress-churches that Elias had known in the Levant, and a light and airy church above. The whole complex was designed for protection as well as for public worship.

In the summer of 1230 the lower church was almost finished and preparations were made to transfer the body from San Georgio. Large crowds assembled, including many bishops, and more than two thousand friars from all over the world. Hopes ran high for a great and noble ceremony, but they were rudely disappointed. Elias, afraid that the body might be stolen or torn to bits, had arranged for a secret burial a few days earlier. So when the procession took place there was no body, to the great indignation of the crowd. When the

General Chapter met after the 'translation' the brothers were in angry mood. Elias departed to a hermitage where he let his hair and beard grow and showed other signs of penitence; and the order had peace for a time.

By 1232 the Order was entering a new phase. Francis had founded his brotherhood on the three principles of poverty, simplicity and humility. After his death the centre of gravity moved towards those who believed that the Order should develop in other ways. As Bishop John Moorman puts it 'poverty gave place to security, simplicity to learning and humility to privilege'. The growth of the scholastic movement in the universities, the increased privileges accorded to the friars vis-à-vis the secular clergy and the vast sums of money collected for the basilica at Assisi were all symptoms of a new age. John of Parenti was growing old and a younger man was needed. The work on the basilica was so far advanced that Elias could give his undivided attention to the affairs of the Order. Now in his early fifties, he decided that the time had come for him to take control. A General Chapter was summoned for Whitsuntide and Elias was duly elected Minister General.

It is a tribute to Elias that Bishop John Moorman, in his 'History of the Franciscan Order' (OUP 1968) devotes a whole chapter to his time as Minister General - from 1232 to 1239. Elias' aim was to make the friars minor the most renowned body in the church, and Assisi a centre of pilgrimage for the whole world. He pursued a policy which had been laid down by Pope Gregory in a bull two years earlier, of making the Order more static and secure. He wanted to increase the status of the Minister General so as to prevent power falling into the hands of a small group of priests and academics; and to make Assisi rather than Rome or Paris the spiritual home of the friars. To curb the power of the Provincial Ministers he created new provinces. At the time of his appointment there were six provinces in Italy and eleven 'beyond the mountains'. In 1239 the numbers had risen to sixteen in each case. Since each province was represented at General Chapter by the Minister and one guardian, and since the Minister General appointed all the Provincial Ministers, this meant that he controlled half the chapter. The Rule allowed for a General Chapter every three years; but for the last six years of his tenure Elias chose not to call one, preferring to keep decision-making in his own hands. He also made much use of 'visitors' - personal representatives with power to excommunicate anyone who dared to conceal anything, and reporting all misdemeanours to Elias himself. Needless to say these were greatly distrusted and disliked. Another move was to promote lay friars to senior positions, such as guardians and ministers, when there were plenty of priests available. In these ways he aroused great opposition, both among the early disciples of Francis and the academics who affected to despise Elias as an ignorant layman.

But it was mainly Elias' lifestyle that undid him. One chronicler gives a vivid picture of the worldly Minister General living *splendide, delitiose et pompaticae*. He travelled very little except to the houses of the great and then on horseback, accompanied by a retinue on similarly well-favoured mounts. In his own quarters he was attended by valets in livery and he kept an excellent cook. This luxurious life-style led to a general feeling among friars that Elias was not only an oppressive ruler but also not a good man. He consistently broke the rule and even claimed that he was not bound by it. The ideals of Francis were being dragged down and the Order suffered. The first moves against him were taken by two Paris academics, but the lead soon passed to an English friar, Haymo of Faversham. By this time the pope was fully aware of what was happening. Complaints had reached him from various sides, including one from Robert Grossteste Bishop of Lincoln (famous as a statesman, scholastic philosopher, and theologian) who warned him that the weaker brethren were deserting the order and if nothing was done it would disintegrate. As Elias was unwilling to summon a General Chapter, Gregory ordered one to be held in Rome under his own presidency at Whitsun 1239. Haymo and others declared that Elias was unfit to lead the Order. To this Elias replied with vigour, but the pope intervened. He spoke kindly of what Elias had done in the past but said that now he had proved unacceptable to a large part of the Order and would be relieved of his office.

By this time Elias' crowning achievement in Assisi was effectively complete. It is now generally agreed that Elias himself was inspirer, designer and director of the whole enterprise. The Lower Church had been virtually finished in 1230 when Francis' body was interred there. Work continued steadily and by 1236 the Upper Church was finished; (though not quite in the form we see it today because in 1253 the pope demanded that the church be made more beautiful and ornate. The friars then built an inner ceiling with pointed vaults and clustered columns). Meanwhile the convent was being built, and the campanile at least was completed during this time because two of the bells have inscriptions dating to 1239. And Elias started to have the church adorned with frescoes. Giunta Pisano began work in the Lower Church on a great crucifix which Elias had commissioned. From then onwards many leading artists added to the splendour of the church, Cimabue, Giotto and Simone Martini among others, with the overwhelming effect that we see today.

The whole structure marked a turning point in the development of Italian architecture, the Upper Church being their first example of the Gothic style. It became exactly what Elias intended - one of the great churches of Christendom, and the goal of pilgrims from all over the world. And yet there could be no more heart-breaking paradox. The body which Francis had treated with such disdain had become a relic so precious that the greatest care had to be taken of it. Where Francis had resisted the simplest of buildings to house his brothers

Elias had created a magnificent convent as a home for the friars tending the shrine. And while Francis had forbidden his companions so much as to touch money, Elias, backed by the pope, had spared no effort to raise the vast sums needed for the building. According to one chronicler, Elias ‘variis modis coepit pecuniam extorquere’. The last word speaks for itself. As another wrote ‘the church was the tomb of the Mendicant and the cradle of the renaissance’.

Elias had another fourteen years to live. It is to his credit that he had always kept on good terms with the Poor Clares and enjoyed visiting them in their convents. These visits had been strictly controlled since 1223, but as Minister General Elias had felt free to go whenever he liked. After his deposition he continued to visit the Clares at Cortona. This was a clear breach of the rules and the new Minister General, Albert of Pisa, ordered him to stop. Elias refused and in anger went to Arezzo, to the court of the emperor Frederick II. This brought him under the general excommunication which had been pronounced against everyone who consorted with the emperor, and in 1240 Gregory added a personal excommunication against Elias himself. This caused consternation among the friars, who were horrified at the scandal inflicted on the Order. Elias had known Frederick for some time, having in earlier years served as papal legate to the imperial court at Cremona. He now joined the Emperor's army, riding on a magnificent charger at the sieges of Faenza and Ravenna. He was later sent as ambassador to the eastern emperor at Constantinople and returned home in 1241 laden with gifts, including a portion of the ‘true cross’ which remains at Cortona to this day. Though attempts were made both in 1244 and 1248 to effect a reconciliation Elias remained far from penitent. It was not until the spring of 1253 that he changed his mind. Falling ill, and realising that he was soon to die, he made his confession to the archpriest of Cortona and on Holy Saturday he was absolved. He received communion on Easter Monday and died the next day, 22 April 1253.

Elias had the misfortune to be called to a position of great responsibility at a time when the Order was undergoing rapid change and no one knew what shape it was to take. Of his ability there was no doubt. Clare herself was a great admirer. Writing to Agnes of Bohemia she said: ‘If you need advice follow that of Brother Elias, our Minister General. Be sure to heed his counsels more than those of anyone else and hold them as the most precious you can receive.’ Bernard of Bessa, secretary to St. Bonaventure, who knew the Order well, wrote of Elias that ‘he excelled in human wisdom to such a degree that it was difficult to find his equal in Italy’. In Thomas of Celano’s *First Life*, written in 1229, he says that Elias was ‘he whom Francis had chosen for himself in place of a mother, and made the father of the other brethren’; he was the ‘good son’ who looked after the father and received his special blessing when he was dying. But by the time of the *Second Life* written in 1247 Elias had been air-brushed out of the story.

Elias had an unhappy life. He had neither the qualities nor the ideals to identify himself with the inner circle of Francis' early friends. Nor had he the education that would have put him among the academics. So he became a lonely and misunderstood figure. Striving at first for an ideal - the glorification of his master - he ended by fighting for himself, his position, his rights, his justification. Finally he was undone by the classic defects of the powerful: arrogance and self-indulgence.

Why then were Francis and Elias so close during the last fifteen years of the saint's life? Here, to finish with, is a fascinating speculation. It is recorded in the annals of Assisi that the consul for the year 1198 was named *Bonus Baro*. This man led the army of Assisi at the battle of Collestrada in 1202 and as such would have been Francis' commander. The historian Salimbene of Parma, writing in the early 1280s, says of Elias (who received him into the Order), '*et vocabatur in saeculo Bonusbaro*'. It is just possible that these referred to one and the same person. If so, it would explain much that seems mysterious. Comradeship in battle forms a bond like none other, even when that battle ends in defeat. This would explain the extraordinary trust and confidence that Francis placed in a man so unlike himself. It would explain the devotion with which Elias served Francis, not least in his final days. We shall never know. But the fact remains that Elias, a misfit in the Order and the man whom everyone complained about, was not without greatness. And what Sabatier calls the 'proud, rich, powerful' church at Assisi stands as a monument to the man who built it as well as to the saint whose body it contains.

*I have not referenced this essay because almost all the material is derived, or can be inferred from Bishop John Moorman's magisterial 'History of the Franciscan Order', OUP 1968.*





