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In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son:
The Use of a Biblical Narrative in the Construction of the Religious Identity

1. Introduction[1]

On the 24th of March 1424, Bernardino da Siena, the most famous preacher of his time, began his sermon by saying that he wished to preach on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:19-32) and for that reason deviated from the Gospel reading of that day. It was not a matter of personal taste. He carefully explained why the story of the prodigal son was so important to change the calendar of readings proposed by the liturgy: «This parable is so full of meaning that if there had been nothing else in the Bible to bring the sinners to penitence, it would have been enough».[2] In his perspective, the prodigal son presented in a perfect manner the core message of Lent, namely the conversion of the sinner. Even without addressing any other passages of the Gospel, this parable alone could reach the goal of moving the audience to penitence.

In his judgment on the exceptional value of this biblical narrative, Bernardino was far from isolated. A century before, in 1306, the Dominican Giordano da Pisa had been even more radical in singling out the value of the parable of the prodigal son. He not only stressed that this parable was «the most useful and necessary part of the Gospel for sinners, above all other Gospel texts», but that it was in some way of a different quality: «This parable is full of wisdom, for each of its words has a very deep meaning and one can acquire much wisdom from it; this is not the case with the other Gospel passages!».[3] In coherence with his view, that day he focused completely on a single detail of the story of the prodigal son. Not surprisingly, he stated at the beginning of the sermon that «preaching for an entire Lent period on this parable alone would be good and necessary».[4]

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[1] The first two paragraphs of this paper are a revised version of the part of the document that I submitted for the application at the school "The Dynamic Middle Ages II", and that can be found at this address: http://medieval.hse.ru/Delcorno.

[2] «El vangelo di domani è tanto misterioso che non voglio mi passi […] Tre splendori si dimostrano, tutti sopra al sacro evangelio, ed è tanto pieno di sentenze, che se niuna altra cosa non ci fusse che questo a fare tornare un peccatore o più a penitenza, basterebbe»; Bernardino da Siena, *Le prediche volgari*, ed. C. Cannarozzi, 2 volls. (Pistoia, 1934), vol. 1, pp. 254-255.

[3] «Il quale vangelo è si pieno di sapienza, che non ci ha nulla parola che non se ne potesse trarre molta sapienza. Non è così di tutti gli altri!»; Giordano da Pisa, *Quaresimale fiorentino 1305-1306*, ed. C. Delcorno (Florence, 1974), p. 173.

[4] «Il quale vangelo è tutto pieno di profonda sapienza, onde, disse il lettore [Giordano], non sarebbe sconvenevole a predicare tutta la Quaresima pur di questo, anzi sarebbe buono e necessario»; Giordano da Pisa, *Quaresimale fiorentino*, p. 173.

What Giordano da Pisa suggested (probably in a hyperbolic way) eventually happened in 1494, when the Franciscan Johann Meder preached in Basel an entire Lenten cycle of fifty sermons on the prodigal son.[5] The choice to preach an entire sermon collection on a single parable had no antecedent at that date and put the prodigal son at the level of the major texts of the Christian faith, such as the Creed, the Decalogue, the Pater Noster that were used for a systematic catechesis in preaching.[6]. This remarkable choice of Mader was somehow imitated by another preacher. Fifty years later, in a much changed historical context, that of the harsh confrontation between Lutheran and Catholic positions, another Franciscan, Johann Wild, preached again an entire Lent period on the prodigal son. In that case, he preached in Mainz in 1547 and transformed the parable into the perfect framework for a thorough discussion of grace, sin, free will, and justification. The prodigal son was the perfect biblical story to present the decree on the justification that had been recently approved at the Council of Trent.[7]

Covering a period of 250 years, these four prominent preachers expressed their predilection for the prodigal son as a key narrative to effectively convey a religious message to their audiences. They were just the tip of an iceberg of growing attention given to this parable in pastoral activities that involved not only the clergy but also the laity, as perfectly shown by three different religious plays on this parable written for and repeatedly staged by the Florentine youth brotherhoods during the fifteenth century. Why was this biblical story considered so important? How was it presented to the common people? What was the religious message conveyed through this text? Did this message change during late medieval and early modern period? And if so, in which ways?

2. Research topic

Within the research project "Religious orders and religious identity formation in late medieval and early modern Europe", led by Dr. Bert Roest, my research aims to investigate the formation of a lay religious identity through the pastoral activities that were promoted in particular by the main religious orders. My dissertation focuses on the techniques of «normative centring»[8] in

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[5] See P. Delcorno, *Un sermonario illustrato nella Basilea del Narrenschiff. Il Quadragesimale novum de filio prodigo (1495) di Johann Meder*, in «Franciscan Studies», 68 (2010), 215-258.

[6] See J. Hanska, *Sermones quadragesimales. Birth and Development of a Genre*, in «Il Santo», 52 (2012), pp. 107-127.

[7] See J. Frymire, *The Primacy of the Postils: Catholics, Protestants and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 354-358.

[8] See B. Hamm, *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety*, ed. R.J. Bast (Leiden, 2004).

catechistic texts and in conjunction with the emphasis on religious instruction within a homiletic context.[9]. In order to navigate such a vast research field, I have chosen the parable of the prodigal son as a catalyst that permits to closely analyse both the nuances of a multi-faceted religious message and the plurality of media that were adopted to shape and convey it. Three major strategic reasons underpin the choice of the prodigal son as focus of my research.

First, in late medieval pastoral mission, the parable of the prodigal son was used to convey not solely a set of doctrinal or moral ideas, but a complete religious identity. In fact, the people were asked to identify with the main character of the story. Therefore, this parable was considered an invaluable narrative framework to present and shape the religious self, especially of the laity. This story - or better, its continuous re-elaborations - could embody the basic elements of the Christian life and was considered as a sort of narrative catechism, particularly in the penitential interpretation that dominated its late medieval exegesis and, even more, its presentation to the people. As Johann Wild put it, it was the perfect mirror in which one could see one's own life depicted and that would help the audience to repent its sins and return to God. Indeed, the parable was often presented as a narrative of self-understanding in which the main message was: «You are the prodigal son, you have to do penitence an return to God». And yet, in the pastoral uses of this biblical text, the profile of this prodigal son was not always the same. It rather shifted, depending on the priorities of those who adopted the story to convey their religious message, as the religious conflict of the early sixteenth century perfectly show.

This leads us to the second aspect, the dynamic of continuity and change in interpreting and using this parable. The late medieval interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son, like many other passages of the Gospel, was shaped by a long reception history. To correctly evaluate the late medieval presentations of the parable, the comparison with the previous exegetical and pastoral tradition is methodologically strategic. In fact, it gives us a solid basis for understanding what was new during those centuries and, on the contrary, what continued to be repeated as part of a dynamic heritage.

The third reason for choosing the prodigal son pertains to the lively debate on this parable during the sixteenth century. Although the significant differences in late medieval interpretations of the parable have to be carefully evaluated, such interpretations largely privileged its penitential reading. In sermons on the prodigal son, the preachers put a different stress on the human efforts

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[9] See B. Roest, *Franciscan Literature of Religious Instruction Before the Council of Trent* (Leiden, 2004) and J. Hanska, *Sermones quadragesimales.*

or the grace of God, on the inner relationship with God or the necessity of the mediation of the clergy. Still, the focus was not on theological discussions, but rather on the exhortation to do penitence in its codified sequence of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. This was a sort of «late medieval consensus» on the parable. This message became controversial during the Reformation period, as the Lutheran Johann Brentz perfectly summarized in his commentary on this parable: «Haec est praecipua controversia nostri temporis de religione [...] quomodo agenda fit poenitentia».[10] It is not a coincidence that, in 1519, in his dispute with Luther, the catholic theologian Johann Eck started the discussion about the penitential process by using as his first argument the traditional reading of the conversion of the prodigal son as a process shaped by fear and love of God. Eck was defending not only a theological position, but also a pastoral tradition that used to mix the fear of damnation with the description of the merciful love of God. In their discussion of the prodigal son, Luther and Eck were indeed discussing the true identity of the perfect believer. In fact, the only point on which they agreed was that «the prodigal son embodies the model penitent proposed by Christ», as Eck said.[11] From that moment onwards, each side tried to include the prodigal son in its own religious discourses, breaking the previous unanimous reading. The study of this parable therefore permits also to face central issues discussed in the sixteenth century and, most importantly, to tackle in which ways these ideas were disseminated to common people.

3. Structure of the dissertation
On the basis of this research prospective, the provisional index of my dissertation is this:

Introduction
1: Patristic and Medieval commentaries on the Prodigal Son Parable (III-XIV century)
2: The voice of the common preacher: Late medieval model sermon collections (XIII-XV century)
3: Fifteenth-century Italian preaching: From Bernardino da Siena to Savonarola
4: The layman, the woman, and the priest: Three Florentine dramas on the Prodigal Son
5: Johann Meder's *Quadragesimale novum de filio prodigo* (Basel 1494)

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[10] Johannes Brentz, *Pericopae Evangeliorum* (Frankfurt a.M., 1556), p. 348.

[11] *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883-2009), vol. 2, p. 359.

6: At the centre of the debate: sixteenth-century preaching on the prodigal son (1519-1550)

7: Johann Wild's *Die Parabel oder Gleichnuss dem verlorenen Son* (Mainz 1547)

Conclusion

4. Sermons as late medieval mass communication

Since preaching is one of the main sources that I am investigating, in the second part of this paper I briefly discuss the value of sermons as historical source and the methodology that I am using in my research. I though that this could be of some utility for a fruitful discussion in our training school, since it gathers scholars coming from quite different research fields.

During the late Middle Ages, preaching was the most pervasive medium of religious instruction and the cornerstone of the pastoral project of religious acculturation promoted in particular by the mendicant religious orders.[12] In this perspective, the guidelines developed in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council, which imposed the obligation of annual confession, provided the key element of an encompassing pastoral strategy.[13] Within this renewed pastoral effort, preaching has to be considered the most prominent mass-medium of those centuries, as David d'Avray has convincingly argued.[14] He summarises this point by saying that the diffusion of «stereotyped material from model sermon books and booklets by preachers to lay listeners all over Europe can fairly be described as a kind of mass communication», in fact these sermon collections tell us «the common-places that would have recurred incessantly in different combination in popular preaching», since they were designed for routine sermons.[15] Moreover, following the diffusion of printing, and for a long time thereafter, preaching remained the most effective medium of dissemination of religious ideas within a system of religious persuasion that adopted a

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[12] See B. Roest, *A History of Franciscan Education (c. 1210-1517)* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 272-324.

[13] See *A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages (1200-1500)*, ed. RJ. Stansbury (Leiden, 2010), which pointed out in the introduction that «the late Middle Ages witnessed a vibrant attempt, essentially on the heals of Lateran IV, to make those ideals [of pastoral care] a reality» (p. 1). See also R. Rusconi, *L'ordine dei peccati. La confessione tra Medioevo ed età moderna* (Bologna, 2002). While annual confession was a milestone of the Church's prescriptive agenda, on the other hand, scholars invite to not overestimate the actual practice of confession among the common people before the Council of Trent; see for instance O. Niccoli, *La vita religiosa nell'Italia moderna. Secoli XV-XVIII* (Rome, 2008) and the overview in *A New History of Penance*, ed. A. Firey (Leiden, 2008).

[14] See in particular D. d'Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars: Sermons Diffused from Paris before 1300* (Oxford, 1985), and D. d'Avray, *Medieval Marriage Sermons: Mass Communication in a Culture without Print* (Oxford, 2001).

[15] D. d'Avray, *Printing, Mass Communication, and Religious Reformation: the Middle Ages and After*, in *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300-1700*, ed. J.C. Crick and A. Walsham (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 50-70.

multiplicity of media.[16] In his recent *The Primacy of the Postils*, John Frymire, does not hesitate to define the model sermon collections as «the most important genre for the dissemination of ideas in early modern Germany».[17]

The medieval and early modern output of written sermons was massive, both in manuscript format and as printed editions. Addressing this kind of sources, one can follow two main directions that, broadly speaking, might be described as a quantitative and a qualitative approach. This distinction, which is rather artificial, might be useful to understand the different characteristics among different types of sermons and to pinpoint a fruitful methodology in addressing them.

4.1. Model sermon collections

What can be depicted as a quantitative approach tries to define which sermon collections were the most widespread in a certain period or area, so to consider their probable impact on the dissemination of ideas. The driving concept behind this approach is that the most successful model sermon collections, at first copied in hundreds of manuscripts and subsequently printed in thousands of incunabula, embody «the voice of a common mendicant preacher» and unfold those standard contents that ordinary people could have heard in ordinary preaching, year after year, with durable effects on their mentality. This methodology has firstly been proposed by David d'Avray, who has spoken of «the drip-drip method of inculcating beliefs».[18] Jussi Hanska has adopted this perspective with promising results, investigating the social ethos of the mendicant preaching through the analysis of a corpus of 35 sermons on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus that encompasses the main thirteenth- and fourteenth-century best-seller sermon collections all over Europe.[19] This kind of approach has also been adopted with positive results for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century printed sermon collections. A case in point is the study of Anne Thayer, who has analysed the characteristics of the most widespread late medieval

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[16] See A. Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 10-39.

[17] J. Frymire, *The Primacy of the Postils*, p. 1.

[18] D'Avray, *Method in the Study of Medieval Sermons*, in *Modern Questions about Medieval Sermons*, ed. N. Bériou and D. d'Avray (Spoleto, 1994), pp. 3-29: 9.

[19] J. Hanska, '*And the Rich Man also Died; and He Was Buried in Hell'. The Social Ethos in Mendicant Sermons* (Helsinki, 1997).

penitential sermons.[20] Other scholars have mapped the most diffused sixteenth-century sermon collections in France, German lands and Italian area.[21]

Studying the determinant contribution of preaching in the familiarity with and elaboration on a biblical text, it is hard to overestimate the relevance of the most popular model sermon collections. These model sermons were often used for centuries, all over Europe, by entire generations of preachers who drew on them (sometimes with creativity, more often with repetitiveness) to build the right sermons for their congregations. This enormously multiplied the impact of these texts. They usually did not have the depth of the treatises of the most renowned masters of theology, but deeply influenced - with a century-long slow process - the construction of a shared religious mentality in the European society. Indeed, between classroom and pulpit there was a solid link, and sermons can be seen «as a link between the universities and daily parish life».[22] The role that a theologian such as Thomas Aquinas had in unfolding the potentialities of Lenten preaching as best period of the year to develop a systematic program of religious instruction both for the laity and for the less experienced friars, reminds us that the distinction between the vertexes of scholastic theology and the content of popular preaching should not be overemphasized.[23] Speaking of the elaboration and diffusion of a «public theology» in Florence, Peter Howard points out that «the voice of a prominent preacher from the pulpit was only the articulation of what was being debated more generally within the *studia* of the city and disseminated more broadly by work-a-day preachers around the city», acknowledging in this way the mediation role of preaching and the negotiation of religious culture by clergy and laity.[24] The richness of the fifteenth-century Florentine case is rather unique and can be directly extended only to cities that presented a comparable presence of a university or religious orders *studia* (for instance Paris, Bologna, Padua).[25] Nevertheless, with different degrees, this remains true not only

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[20] See A.T. Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching and the Coming of the Reformation* (Aldershot, 2002).

[21] Beside the study of Frymire, see L. Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (Oxford, 1992) and E. Michleson, *The Pulpit and the Press in Reformation Italy* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

[22] R.M. Rentner, *Ambrosius Spiera: A Fifteenth-Century Italian Preacher and Scholar*, in «Church History», 43/4 (1974), pp. 448-459: 448.

[23] See S. Vecchio, *Le prediche e l'istruzione religiosa*, in *La predicazione dei frati dalla metà del '200 alla fine del '300* (Spoleto, 1995), pp. 301-335.

[24] P. Howard, *'Doctrine, when Preached, Is Entirely Civic': The Generation of Public Theology and the Role of the Studia of Florence*, in *Communities of Learning: Networks and the Shaping of Intellectual Identity in Europe*, *1100-1500*, ed. C.J. Mews and J.N. Crossley (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 293-314: 303.

[25] See, for instance, N. Bériou, *L'avènement des maîtres de la Parole. La prédication à Paris au XIIIe siècle*, 2 volls. (Paris, 1998) and E. Fontana, *Frati, libri e insegnamento nella provincia minoritica di S. Antonio (secoli XIII-XIV)* (Padua, 2012).

for the main cities, but also for secondary centers and, at least in some cases, even for some rural areas that were reached by ordinary preachers, who presented and popularized the mediation between scholastic theology and pastoral needs that had been elaborated elsewhere, in vibrant theological centers like Paris. Indeed, an analysis that would specifically tackle the characteristics of the religious life in rural areas or in those regions that the sixteenth-century Jesuits would call «our Indies» opens a different scenario and, above all, would require instruments of investigation different from those that I have selected and that are mainly useful for the urban context or at least for those villages that were reached by ordinary preachers or that occasionally saw the passage of some of the famous preachers like Vicent Ferrer, Bernardino da Siena, or Bernardino da Feltre, who did not refuse to preach also in villages during their itinerant mission.[26] In this research, the urban setting constitutes the dominant historical and cultural framework for my research. However, this distinction is not absolute but indeed rich of nuances, and documents on the major fifteenth-century preachers or on countryside parishes show that preaching was far from an exclusively urban phenomenon.[27]

I provide some data on the diffusion of two model sermon collections. This should be helpful in realising the dimension of the phenomenon. The first are the *Sermones quadragesimales* of Iacopo da Varazze (d. 1298), a Dominican friar and later Archbishop of Genoa, author of the famous *Legenda Aurea* and of extraordinarily successful model sermon collections. Among the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century *sermones quadragesimales*, Iacopo da Varazze's collection, composed between 1277 and 1286, has no rival in terms of number of manuscripts and their geographical diffusion. In fact, this collection has survived in more than 300 manuscripts.[28] This impressive number becomes even more striking when compared with other collections of *sermones quadragesimales* composed before 1350, which at maximum survive in about 30 manuscripts.[29] Whereas these are still remarkable numbers considering that survivors are only a

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[26] For what concerns the Italian area, see as useful introduction P. Camporesi, *Cultura popolare e cultura d'élite fra medioevo ed età moderna*, in *Storia d'Italia. 4: Intellettuali e potere*, ed. C. Vivanti (Turin, 1981), pp. 79-157, and the updated overview in *Religione delle campagne*, ed. M.C. Rossi, «Quaderni di storia religiosa», 14 (2007).

[27] See for instance E. Lemeneva, *Preaching in a Rural Parish Community in Thirteenth-Century Styria*, in «Medieval Sermon Studies», 47 (2003), pp. 21-32 and J. Frymire, *The Primacy*, pp. 10-25.

[28] For the list of manuscripts that contain this text and their geographical distribution, see Iacopo da Varazze, *Sermones Quadragesimales*, ed. G.P. Maggioni (Florence, 2005).

[29] See J. Hanska, *Sermones quadragesimales*, pp. 116-117.

small portion of the much larger number that once existed[30], it exhibits even more the outstanding position held by Iacopo's collection among the Lenten model sermon collections from this period. Moreover, Iacopo's collection had a lasting influence, since it was also repeatedly printed, with seven editions alone in the fifteenth century, and many more in the centuries thereafter. For instance, within Italy alone, the editor Giovanni Battista Somasco printed (and evidently sold) this collection four times between 1571 and 1589 in Venice, proving that Iacopo's sermons were still an appealing product for the market in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, more than three centuries after their composition.

During the fifteenth century, many new model sermon collections were written and enjoyed an unprecedented diffusion through printing. Among the collections for Lent, I mention here - as second example - the *Quadragesimale* written by Conrad Grütsch (or Gritsch), a Franciscan Conventual Friar of the Upper Germany province, lecturer in theology, who wrote these sermons between 1440 and 1444. His collection firstly had a considerable success in manuscript format and subsequently knew a striking diffusion in print under the name of his younger brother, Johann Grütsch, who was a secular cleric and doctor in canon law at Basel.[31] Since 1474, with 24 editions in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, almost one per year, and at least other 10 at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Grütsch's *Quadragesimale* became a real best-seller, with no less than 15.000 copies in circulation. However, its dissemination varied according to different geographic and cultural areas. During the fifteenth century, this *Quadragesimale* was in fact printed almost in each German city (Augsburg, Cologne, Nurnberg, Reutlingen, Strasbourg, Ulm), had numerous editions in France (seven edition in Lyon alone), but only a single edition in Italy (Venice, 1495). This is not an isolated case. Studying the Latin sermon collections printed between 1470 and 1520, Anne Thayer has pointed out a sort of impermeability - if not of diffidence - of the Italian market for the model sermon collections from other parts of Europe, which very rarely were re-printed in the Peninsula. On the contrary, the Latin sermon collection written in Italy easily crossed the Alps and were repeatedly printed in the rest of Europe.[32] Nevertheless, also considering this relevant difference, it is difficult to overestimate the impact of a text like that of Grütsch on the religious culture of the time, although it remains arduous to

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[30] This point has been re-asserted, considering the specific nature of these texts, in D. d'Avray, *Printing, Mass Communication,* p. 50.

[31] See B. Roest, *Franciscan Literature*, pp. 109-110.

[32] See A. Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching and the Coming of the Reformation*, pp. 32-40.

exactly pinpoint how these books were concretely used by single preachers in their actual sermons. These fifteenth-century model sermon collections were in fact working tools, well-organised compact encyclopaedia on every fundamental theological and moral issue, with elaborated and detailed indexes (sometimes with thousands of entries) that expedited the possibility to shape and re-shape new sermons according to the actual needs of the users. Many copies of these incunabula bear the signs of the intense activity of their owners: underlining, brackets, glosses, personal annotations witness the way in which ordinary preachers appropriated these model sermons to present them to their congregations. Among other things, it is even possible to find, in the last page of one of these collections the owner's handwritten notes on a medical prescription for the recovery of the voice in the case one lost it.[33] The voice, after all, was the real preacher's irreplaceable tool. All the other instruments, including the most effective and useful model sermon collections, had no power without the voice of the preacher that addressed a specific audience. To recover not the actual voice of the preacher, but an echo of it, we have to move on to another type of sources, the *reportationes*, which opens the field for what I have labelled as a qualitative approach to the complex phenomenon of preaching.

4.2. *Reportationes*

The model sermon collections provide us with a meaningful scenario of ordinary preaching in the long period discussed in my research and unfold to us what people used to attending sermons not only could presumably listen to, but also gradually assimilate, year after year. However, the very nature of model sermons, written for the use of other preachers, and aiming to be useful in all possible situations (a goal that they apparently attained, based on their striking dissemination), make that they do not easily permit a reconstruction of the historical context of individual sermons, in order to go beyond the text and obtain a glimpse of preaching as a religious and social event. Although preaching as a singular event in which there was an actual interaction between preacher and audience remains something that we cannot recover completely, as for any other form of *performance*, it is possible to approach it using so-called *reportationes*: i.e. the notes on specific sermons taken by someone during preaching or in the immediate aftermath.[34]

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[33] See O. Visani, *Roberto Caracciolo e i sermonari del secondo Quattrocento*, in «Franciscana», 1 (1999), pp. 275-317: 306.

[34] See R. Rusconi, *Reportatio*, in *Dal pulpito alla navata. La predicazione medievale nella sua recezione da parte degli ascoltatori (secc. XIII-XV)*, in «Medioevo e Rinascimento», n.s., 3 (1989), pp. 7-36. See also B.M. Kienzle, *Medieval Sermons and Their Performance: Theory and Record*, in *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Muessig (Leiden,

An example of *reportationes* are the sermons on the prodigal son preached by Giordano da Pisa and Bernardino da Siena that I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and for which we know the exact day and place, the specific preacher and audience, and the actual historical context in which they were performed. This type of texts passes down to us an echo of the living voice of preachers who, in those times were able, with their charisma, to attract, entertain, and (sometimes) convince or move large crowds of people.[35] This permits to have further insight in the ability of the «masters of the word», a word that was first of all an oral word.[36] Yet, as a closer study of *reportationes* shows, the nature of this kind of texts is rather complex. They are not neutral transcriptions of what was preached (and it remains questionable to what extent this was possible). Instead, even when the *reportator* claims to have faithfully taken notes, and to reproduce the sermon word by word, the resulting *reportatio* structurally embodies the subjective point of view of a single person in the audience, with his or her specific understanding (or misunderstanding), and with his or her choice on what was important enough to be noted and what could be left out or only summarized.

An aspect that enriches this historical sources even more are the paratextual remarks of the *reportator*, who sometimes not only took note of the preacher's words, but also of his tone of voice, his pausing, his gestures, his showing of objects or images to the audience (crosses, relics, skulls, paintings, banners). Moreover, a *reportator* could register some reactions in the audience (crying, weeping, miraculous heeling) or describe in detail, as a chronicler, those processions or bonfires of vanities that were associated with preaching. To be more precise, these rituals were part of late medieval preaching as a dynamic socio-religious event that presupposed - in different forms - an active participation of the audience, which was a real co-protagonist.[37] It is not necessary to further insist on the precious nature (and the limits) of the *reportationes* as historical documents on late medieval religious culture. This type of texts has been rightly defined «in some way a collective work», i.e. the result of a collaboration between preacher and listener.[38]

2002), pp. 89-124.

[35] See *Charisma and Religious Authority: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Preaching (1200-1500)*, ed. K.L. Jansen and M. Rubin (Turnhout, 2010).

[36] See N. Bériou, *L'avènement des maîtres de la Parole*.

[37] See M.G. Muzzarelli, *Pescatori di uomini. Predicatori e piazze alla fine del Medioevo* (Bologna, 2005).

[38] Z. Zafarana, *Bernardino nella storia della predicazione popolare*, in *Bernardino predicatore nella società del suo tempo* (Todi, 1976), pp. 39-70.

This becomes particularly apparent when we have different *reportationes* of the same sermon, highlighting the cultural differences and distinct choices of each *reportator*.[39]

It might be helpful to make explicit that the distinction between model sermons and *reportationes* should not draw attention away from the continuous and multiform interaction between these texts, which are not rigidly separated. They represent two kinds of sources on the same phenomenon, late medieval preaching, and permit us to approach it from different points of view. Beside those famous preachers who at that time really provided «the best show in town»[40], and who usually could be and did the object of the attention of the *reportatores*, the hard core of the ordinary program of religious instruction was represented by a less flashy form of preaching: the ordinary sermons preached by less famous friars or priests and displayed in daily pastoral practice. The contents of this preaching are well represented by the model sermon collections, written to match the religious expectation of the ordinary clergy. Moreover, there was a circularity between actual preaching and model sermon collections. The latter often resulted from the re-elaboration by a prominent preacher of his personal notes and experiences, in order to make them available to other preachers. Moreover, in some cases it is possible to compare the *reportationes* of a sermon with the model sermon produced by the preacher at a later date, as in the case of Bernardino da Siena, or to see how the same scheme of a sermon (the model) was adapted to different audiences in different years by the same preacher, like in the case of Vicent Ferrer.[41] Combining the two approaches, namely the study of the most successful model sermon collections and some *reportationes*, not only gives a more rich perception of preaching, but also permits to partially verify in which ways the model sermons where used in the pulpit. Therefore, the study of these different sources gives access to preaching from different angles and allows a cross check on it. Using a metaphor, this permits to listen to late medieval preaching in a form that remains always indirect and incomplete, but is also somehow polyphonic.

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[39] C. Delcorno, *La diffrazione del testo omiletico. Osservazioni sulle doppie «reportationes» delle prediche bernardiniane* (1989), in Id., *'Quasi quidam cantus'. Studi sulla predicazione medievale* (Florence, 2009), pp. 243-261.

[40] N. Ben-Aryeh Debby, *Renaissance Florence in the Rhetoric of Two Popular Preachers: Giovanni Dominici (1356-1419) and Bernardino da Siena (1380-1444)* (Turnhout, 2001), p. 1.

[41] See P. Delcorno, '*Faré per manera que vàlgue per molts'. I sermoni di Vicent Ferrer sulla parabola di Lazzaro e il ricco epulone*, in «Erebea», 1 (2011), pp. 203-230.