

“Praeco sum Magni Regis!”

Rachel Fulton Brown, Santuario della Verna, 5 luglio 2025

I am honored to be asked to speak to you about Francis’s “Office of the Passion” and his “praises to be said at all hours.”

SLIDE This “office” was first published by Luke Wadding under the title by which we know it now: SLIDE *Officium Passionis Dominicae*. But, as I hope to show, Francis’s prayer in this office is, in fact, somewhat more complicated than Wadding’s title implies.

Other scholars have suggested alternative titles that are a bit closer to what Francis seems to have intended:

- “Officium in honorem Domini nostri Jesu Christ” (Marianus of Florence, d. 1523),
- “Geste of the Great King” (Laurent Gallant, 2001).
- “Psalms of the Mystery of Christ” (André Vauchez, 2009).

SLIDE But the oldest copy of the office, in Assisi Ms. 338, has no title, only a rubric outlining the way in which Francis used to say his psalms. **Handout, no. 1.**

The structure is somewhat complicated for one of Francis’s prayers, but it is still relatively simple compared with the Divine Office on which it is modeled.

SLIDE As Francis said his psalms, each “hour” of the liturgical day (Compline, Matins, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, and Vespers) would include:

- The Our Father, with Francis’s elaboration
- The Praises to be said at all hours, with a prayer
- An antiphon for the Virgin Mary
- Three psalms, followed by the same antiphon
- A concluding prayer

Relatively simple—until we get to the psalms.

SLIDE For his “office,” Francis composed fifteen psalms:

- seven for the Triduum, which he also said weekdays during Ordinary Time after Pentecost, Christmas and Lent;
- eight for Sundays and the seasons of Easter, Advent, and Christmas.

SLIDE That makes fifteen psalms in all, distributed throughout the hours of the day and seasons of the year, which you would think is complicated enough—until we get to the *texts* of the psalms.

SLIDE **Handout no. 2** This is the psalm that Francis composed for Compline, said on Holy Thursday. Look at the marginal notations in Wadding’s edition: what do you notice?

SLIDE “Francis’s psalm” is actually a pastiche, patchwork, or montage of other psalms: in this case, verses taken and rearranged from seven of the scriptural psalms, with elements added from the Gospels of Matthew and John.

What was Francis doing here? Notice how the psalm is in the first person and talks about “my enemies,” “my holy Father,” “my friends and neighbors,” “my God.” Who is speaking here?

SLIDE Obviously, given the hour at which Francis said this psalm, Christ. This was the psalm Francis said at the hour of Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane; the hour that began his suffering—here, in the comic, imagined by John Henry Newman, as he prepared himself to take on the sins of the world.

By speaking the words of the psalms, Francis was putting himself in the place of Christ, sharing with him his mental anguish expressed in the words of the psalm:

“O God, I have declared to Thee my life; Thou has set my tears in Thy sight. All my enemies have devised evils against me: they have consulted together. And they have repaid me evil for good: and hatred for my love. Instead of making me a return of love they detracted me: but I gave myself to prayer.”

Clearly, this is the Voice of Christ crying out to the Father, ventriloquized by Francis through the words of the psalms.

But here’s our first question: how did Francis know to use *these* psalms for this meditation on Our Lord’s mental anguish? How did he know which psalms to take verses from? Would you know which ones to use, if you were to put together a series of meditations on the passion?

SLIDE Answer: because his psalter told him these were the psalms spoken by Christ.

What is Francis famous for? “Following in the footprints (*vestigia*) of Christ” (1 Peter 2:21) and carrying out the Gospel “to the letter.”

My argument: he did the *same thing* with the psalms. He took what he read in his psalter *to the letter*, and if the psalm said, *Vox Christi*, he took that literally.

SLIDE Accordingly, the first seven psalms in Francis’s office take us through the events of the Passion, marked according to hours of the liturgical day: from the prayer in Gethsemane on Thursday night, through the trials before the Sanhedrin (midnight) and Pilate (9am) to the crucifixion (noon) and death of Christ on the Cross (3pm).

This would seem, indeed, to be “an office of the Passion,” as Wadding titled it.

And yet, there are two things to note:

- One: The sheer complexity of the composition. The pastiche of psalms for each of Francis’s psalms is unlike anything which Francis himself might have encountered in the tradition, even if he knew the tradition of commentary on the psalms, which we can be almost completely certain he did not. Laurent Gallant calls Francis’s office a

“unique masterpiece of devotional prayer” in both structure and content for which there is no precedent in the tradition. It is an anomaly, just like Francis himself.

- Two: SLIDE The other eight psalms have nothing to do with Christ’s suffering; they are psalms of prayer and praise, as are, in fact, psalms III (for Prime) and VII (for Vespers) in the first seven.

SLIDE **Why did Francis say this office?** How we answer this question affects everything we think we know about his inspiration and purpose in following in the footprints of Christ and living out the Gospel “to the letter.”

SLIDE One option, perhaps most obvious: Francis performed his “office” as an expression of his “foolishness” before God. It has a clearly performative quality: speaking in the first person of Christ, like taking on a role as an actor. *BUT: What role, and what kind of actor? And why use the psalms?*

SLIDE **Handout no. 3** We know the role that Francis gave himself from his biographer Thomas of Celano. Once while Francis was traveling in the forest and singing praises to the Lord in French, he was attacked by thieves, who asked who he was. He answered: “*Praeco sum magni Regis!*” “I am the herald of the Great King!”

So perhaps Francis meant he was an image of John the Baptist, heralding the coming of Christ. And, indeed, the *Legend of the Three Companions* later suggested his original name was John. But Francis had been singing in French, and Thomas of Celano said nothing in this anecdote about Francis’s following in the footsteps of John.

What kind of “herald” was he? Some things we know about Francis: **Handout nos. 4-5:**

- Before his conversion, he was a consummate reveler: as the son of a merchant, he had learned the basics of Latin, but what he loved most were the stories that he encountered in French—thus, allegedly, the name that his father gave him: “*Francesco,*” aka “*Frenchie.*”
- Francis loved singing, especially in French, and he was so popular among his contemporaries that they elected him as “lord” or “king” of their revels, despite the fact that he was not a nobleman, but merely a merchant’s son.

- These revels involved dressing up and dancing through the streets of the town for both religious and secular feasts, including enacting parodies of sacred events, like the dance of Salome for the feast of the Baptist.
- But the French songs that Francis loved singing were not about merchants or baptists, but about knights, specifically, Charlemagne, Roland, Oliver, King Arthur, Lancelot, and the knights of the Table Round.

Francis is famous for taking the texts of the Scriptures literally. Why should this imaginative young man who loved singing and dancing have done anything different with the stories he loved to sing?

SLIDE **Handout no. 6:** Charlemagne, Roland, Oliver, and the knights of King Arthur's Round Table were not the only characters Francis would have known from the courtly romances and chansons de geste. He would also have encountered the herald.

And what was the herald's role in these stories? To identify the knights from their coats-of-arms SLIDE and announce them to the tournament spectators.

Even more to the point: properly dressed, the herald would himself wear his lord's coat-of-arms, thus transforming himself through his clothing "into a living symbol of his lord's arms and honor" (Gouiran).

SLIDE This, I would suggest, is the context in which we should read Francis's dream of seeing the palace filled with arms, famously depicted by Giotto in the Upper Basilica at Assisi.

SLIDE **Handout no. 7-8:** "Because he was eager for glory, the Lord exalted and enticed him to its pinnacle. For it seemed to him that his whole house was filled with soldiers' arms: saddles, shields, spears and other equipment." At which Francis "decided to become a knight."

But, of course, he never made it to Apulia to become a knight, because he fell ill and had another dream, in which a voice asked him:

SLIDE **Handout no. 9:** “Who can do more good for you? The lord or the servant?” Obviously, the lord. “Then why are you abandoning the lord for the servant, the patron for the client?” To which Francis replied: “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

Which brings us to our primary question, once again: **Why did Francis put so much emphasis on the psalms in his personal prayers?**

Handout no. 10 Because it was in the psalms where Francis learned his role as herald of the Great King; as Thomas of Celano put it, with the gift of the Lord’s arms he became “like a second David” that he might “liberate Israel”—that is, the people of God—“from the long-standing abuse of its enemies.”

Our problem is to understand how Francis could have gotten this impression of his role as herald and the Lord he should serve *from the psalms*. Particularly given that this is not the way most Christians read them today.

Like Francis’s performance of the Nativity at Greccio, this is something I need to show you; it is impossible to convey solely in words.

ONE: Thomas alluded to King David’s role as giant-killer in describing Francis as “like a second David,” but in the psalters, David appears under a rather different guise: SLIDE as harpist SLIDE or minstrel or SLIDE, if you will, troubadour.

Particularly in Italy, SLIDE psalters showed David not simply playing his music, but playing his music before the Ark of the Lord, SLIDE that same Ark which the Lord used as his footstool in the Temple as seen by Ezekiel and John.

TWO: And who was this Lord sung about by David in the psalms? The psalters were also clear.

SLIDE He sits enthroned upon the cherubim, fire flaming from his face and filling the heavens with thunder and lightning. *Note cruciform halo on the figure in the roundel.*

SLIDE He subdues the peoples under his feet and delivers his servants from their enemies.

SLIDE His voice is the voice of power, and his magnificence and power are in the clouds.

SLIDE At the crucifixion, he was surrounded by fat bulls and lions, poured out like water and all his bones scattered, but the creatures of heaven and earth all sing his praise, for he spoke, and they were made; he commanded, and they were created.

SLIDE He tramples on the asp and the basilisk, the lion and the dragon, and has given his angels charge over his servants and sent the wicked away; it is, therefore, good to give praise to the Lord and sing his name upon the psaltery of ten strings and upon the harp.

SLIDE He is the king of glory who has broken the gates of hell and entered into his Temple again.

Not all psalters were as extensive in their illustrations as the Stuttgart psalter, but these cycles of images were standard throughout the medieval West, particularly in the Empire and Italy.

SLIDE For example, in this glossed psalter made in the late eleventh or early twelfth century in the region around Umbria and Rome, David appears at the beginning as prophet and king, with scribes to take down his lyrics and a band of musicians to accompany his song, while a juggler provides additional entertainment.

SLIDE In the prayers, the Virgin Mary appears supported by a court of saints, while at Psalm 41, Jesus feasts with his apostles at a round table and Judas betrays him with a kiss. (The title reads: “Vox penitentium et festinantium ad fontes aquarum.”)

SLIDE At Psalm 71, the Lamb of God reigns, coming down like rain upon the fleece and as showers falling gently on the whole earth, his name blessed and the whole earth filled with his majesty, while at Psalm 89 he becomes a refuge, showing forth his justice in his mercy.

SLIDE At Psalm 106, the Voice of Christ speaks concerning the Jews who abandoned the Lord in their prosperity and cried to him when they were in adversity, but—as the illustrations made clear—Christ broke down the Gates of Hell to rescue his servants from the dragons.

SLIDE Although drawing on a long Western tradition, the images in the Italian psalters likewise have clear resonances with Orthodox iconography, particularly the Harrowing of Hell, as shown here in the psalter made for Queen Melisende in Jerusalem—unsurprisingly,

given the great military venture of Francis's day, bringing Latin artists into contact with the East.

Again, it's complicated! And yet, from Francis's perspective, it was as simple as reading a book, and taking what he read—and saw—literally.

SLIDE This, I would suggest, is **the way Francis read his psalter**: as a book of songs telling the deeds of the Great King, in whose place he put himself, much as he had imagined himself before his conversion as a Carolingian or Arthurian knight.

Handout no. 14: This suggestion is not as far fetched as it might seem, given the way in which Francis responded to one of the friar's request for a psalter: by chiding him about preferring to want only to sing praises of the knights, rather than following them into battle.

It also helps us understand the way Francis enacted his role as herald bearing his king's coat-of-arms: again, it was right there in the book.

SLIDE Utrecht Psalter SLIDE Eadwine Psalter SLIDE Aethelstan Psalter—all showing the Arms of Christ. **Handout nos. 15-16**

SLIDE Francis was even said to have had a horn, which he used, SLIDE much like a herald or "second Roland," to call the people to come "render praise and thanksgiving to the Almighty Lord" (Letter to the Leaders of Peoples).

Inscription on the Oliphant: "With this bell, Saint Francis gathered the people together for preaching and with these batons he imposed silence on them."

I get it; you're skeptical.

SLIDE [Chaucer at the tournament table] To really convince you that Francis would have had access to this level of imagery, I need to show you—and not just on a slide.

SLIDE If I am to be an effective herald for Francis, clearly, I need a scroll!

EXULTET ROLL/SLIDE Good thing I have one! No worries, this is a facsimile found for me by Facsimile Finder. It is a replica of the oldest known roll of its kind, made in Benevento in the late 10th century (AD 981-987).

SLIDE This roll is one of 28 extant such rolls, most made in Southern Italy between the 10th and 14th centuries. It contains the text of the blessing for the Paschal candle, sung at the Vigil on the Saturday before Easter Sunday.

SLIDE The rolls themselves illustrate how they would have been used: as the deacon (here, labelled “Levita,” Levite) sang the chant, he would unfurl the scroll over the pulpit, so that the people could see the illustrations to go with the chant.

SLIDE The chant takes its title from its opening phrase: “Let the angelic host of heaven exult, let the divine ministers exult: and let the trumpet of salvation sound aloud the triumph of our mighty King!”

SLIDE Before he began singing, the deacon “though unworthy to be numbered among the Levites” prayed for the assistance of his brothers that God might fill him with “his light unshadowed” that he might sing the praises of the candle. **Handout no. 13:** NB This is the way Thomas described Francis, about to sing before the creche at Greccio.

SLIDE The blessing on the candle included a prayer for the bees who had made the wax: “On this, your night of grace, O holy Father, accept this candle, a solemn offering, the work of bees and of your servants’ hands, an evening sacrifice of praise, this gift from your most holy Church.”

SLIDE Most important for our purposes: the chant told the story of Christ’s victory over Hell and his liberation of the people held captive by death and sin: “This is the night when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld!”

SLIDE It is also possibly significant for our understanding of Francis’s self-conceptualization as “herald of the Great King” that the candle with which the deacon identified himself through this performance would itself be “pierced” with five grains of incense, pressed into its wax in sign of its service to the Lord.

Certainly, it would help explain the association of the seraph with the Crucified at Francis's reception of the stigmata here at LaVerna. **Handout no. 16** I would be interested to know what you think!

SLIDE Seven times a day, Francis turned his voice to the praise of the Great King. As he told the thieves when they asked who he was, he saw himself first and foremost as a herald—lifting up his powerful, pleasant, clear, and musical voice in praise of his Lord, whose arms he bore.

By the seventeenth century, when Luke Wadding published the text of his “office,” Francis was primarily associated with devotion to Christ in his passion, thus the title that Wadding gave the whole collection of psalms. But Francis himself was not focused solely or even, arguably, primarily on Christ's suffering—contrary to the emphasis later given to his experience here, at LaVerna, in becoming a living tabard for his King.

Rather, as he made clear in the praises that he sang every hour in preface to the psalms, Francis saw himself primarily as singing the great deeds of his Lord, the same Lord he encountered in the psalms, enthroned on the cherubim and breaking down the gates of Hell.

This was the Lord as Francis knew and praised him, the Great King, the Creator of heaven and earth, maker of creatures and great Hero of men.

Even better: this was the Lord whom Francis and his contemporaries would have seen every time they lifted their eyes up in prayer, saying:

SLIDE “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was and who is to come.”
[Gero/Taüll]

SLIDE “Worthy art Thou, O Lord, our God, to receive praise and glory and honor and benediction.” [Trastevere]

SLIDE “The Lamb that was slain is worthy to receive power and divinity and wisdom and strength and honor and benediction.” [Spoleto]

SLIDE “Let us bless the Father and Son with the Holy Ghost.” [Lucca]

SLIDE “All you works of the Lord, bless the Lord.” [Lucca close up]

SLIDE “Give praise to God all you His servants and you that fear Him, little and great.”
[Santa Maria Maggiore]

SLIDE “Let the heavens and earth praise Him, the Glorious: and every creature which is in heaven and on earth and under the earth, in the seas and all that are in them.” [Florence]

SLIDE “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.” [Pisa]—Note asp and lion under his feet, citing Psalm 90.

SLIDE “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”
[Assisi]

SLIDE “Let us praise and exalt Him above all forever.” [Gentile]

There are two sides to Gentile’s standard SLIDE, as there should be: for the reception of the stigmata was simply one side of the praise of the Lord who kept his mother at his side, for whom Francis also acted as herald. SLIDE But to understand why every hour began with the antiphon to the Virgin Mary would take us out of time, and into eternity, so we must stop here.

SLIDE Any questions?

SLIDE Thank you!