Some years ago, I had to report on a new edition - excellent, by the way - of [2] the Mirror of Perfection; more exactly the version of the text known as the Major Mirror of Perfection. As I read through the list of the twenty-six manuscripts on which the edition was based, I was astounded: two thirds of these manuscripts also transmitted another famous Franciscan legend, [3] the Legend of the Three Companions. [4] By comparing the two editors’ stemmata codicum (the family trees that trace back from the preserved witnesses to the archetype and original of each of the texts), I could be sure that these two legends had in fact travelled through the centuries as a single textual file, following a single transmission path.

These two texts - the Legend of the Three Companions and the Major Mirror of Perfection - take us back to the origins of the whirlwind that have stirred up studies on Francis of Assisi for one hundred and twenty-five years: the “Franciscan question”. In 1894, when he published his Life of St. Francis of Assisi, Paul Sabatier devoted a fundamental section to the “Critical Study of the Sources”. In his opinion, the official legends, those of Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure, presented a standardized, watered-down version of the Poverello, whose historical truth was better sought from his closest companions, especially in the Legend of the Three Companions. But this text portrayed a relatively peaceful saint who was submissive to the Roman Catholic Church. Hence Sabatier's hypothesis: the Legend of the Three Companions had been censored by cutting its most disturbing elements. [5] A stroke of genius: four years later, in 1898, Sabatier published a compilation, the Major Mirror of Perfection, which he believed pre-dated Francis’ canonization. [6] According to Sabatier, this text was written by Brother Leo and contained the passages eliminated from the Legend of the Three Companions. We now know that this Mirror of Perfection was written very much later, but the opposition between official legends and the testimonies of the companions has long left its mark on
scholars’ minds and it took decades to restore, for example, the historical value of the legends by Thomas of Celano.

Today, one hundred and twenty-five years after the initial thunderclap, it can be said that the “Franciscan question” - in the most technical sense, it means the discovery, the edition and the genealogy of Franciscan legends - has been broadly resolved by approaches that combined philology and history. So, what answer can we give to the question underlying this session of our International Conference “The Future of Franciscan Studies: Visions to Pursue”? What future? What paths?

In the wake of Paul Sabatier - as I have just said - the main part of the research on the historical existence of Francis of Assisi consisted of discovering, editing, contextualizing texts and determining their interrelationships. Most of the research has therefore focused on the notion of text, whether it was the writings about Francis - his biographies - or the writings by Francis - his own works. But let’s return to Paul Sabatier and his discovery of the Mirror of Perfection published in 1898. In the manuscript that served as the basis for his edition, [7] manuscript 1743 of the Bibliothèque Mazarine of Paris, as in four of the other five witnesses he summarily described, the Mirror of Perfection was systematically linked to the Legend of the three companions. In light of such a reality, the idea that the Legend of the Three Companions had been mutilated became absurd: imagine a censor cutting a huge piece of its source - to make it disappear, one can suppose - and then copying scrupulously both the censored part and the mutilated text within a single volume. But rather than the codicological observation, Paul Sabatier preferred his ideological approach: the real Francis must have been a victim of the Roman Church and its supporters. I therefore propose, for the future, a research track that favors codicology over ideology.

By codicology, we mean the study of codices, manuscript volumes, in their entirety: not only the texts they transmit, but also their materials, their format, their layout, their writing, their level of care, their ornamentation, their binding, their cost, their circulation, their preservation, etc. I do not oppose in any way the study of texts - philology - and the study of manuscripts - codicology. These two disciplines are totally complementary and both can contribute to shedding light on the Franciscan question.

As for the study of texts, there is still work to be done. I never believed that the time for the discovery of Franciscan legends was over and, in 2015, the reappearance of [8] the so-called Rediscovered Life of Thomas de Celano reinforced my conviction. Where can we find new Franciscan legends? The answer is simple: first and foremost in the breviaries, more precisely in the readings of matins of the various offices dedicated to St. Francis. Some of the manuscript
collections of public libraries - I am not even talking about private collections - are not catalogued or are not adequately catalogued. But, in any case, it is very rare that a cataloguer details the *incipit* of any reading from the sanctoral proper. It is necessary to go and see the manuscripts, one by one, Franciscan breviaries as well as non-Franciscan. Often, we will find Bonaventure’s *Minor Legend*, [9] but not always and that’s where the research will become exciting.

For the time being, almost all known Franciscan legends have been published, but not always in a stemmatic way, in this double movement which consists of going up to the model common to the whole tradition of a text and in going down the stemma, to follow its diffusion. Not having a stemmatic edition means, on the one hand, not knowing if the text we are reading is the result of a rigorous critical approach, or of the publisher’s lexical and stylistic preferences; on the other hand, not being able to follow the circulation of the text in space and time. Unfortunately the *First Life* of Thomas de Celano, the *Legend for use in the choir*, the *Life of Saint Francis* of Julian of Speyer, and the *Acts of Blessed Francis and his companions* - the Latin ancestor of the *Fioretti* - do not have a stemmatic edition to date. The same can be said of the *Legend of Saint Clare* by Thomas de Celano.

These legends sometimes circulate together, sometimes associated with writings of Francis, sometimes with other Franciscan texts as well as heterogeneous ones; we will call them the “travelling companions” of a given text. This is the point where the consideration of the entire manuscript - and not only the text in which we are more specifically interested - is fundamental, because these encounters are highly significant and sweep away many ideological prejudices. The *Assisi Compilation* is only known by one witness, [10] manuscript 1046 of the Biblioteca comunale Augusta of Perugia, where it is preceded by a flood of pontifical bulls and the *Major Legend* of Bonaventure. The *Compilation* itself combines excerpts from Thomas de Celano’s *Memorial* with a mass of episodes gathered by Francis’ companions, especially Brother Leo. In manuscript C.4 of the Library of the University of Uppsala, there are both - but here separately - a *Compilation* of the memories of the companions very close to the *Assisi Compilation* and the *Memorial* of Thomas de Celano, deprived of the episodes already present in the *Compilation*. In manuscript 1 of the Pontificia Università Antonianum, there are the *Major Legend*, excerpts from the *Memorial* and memories of the companions, while in [11] manuscript 1/73 of the Collegio Sant'Isidoro, a large number of Francis’ writings and various texts attributed to Leo, including a so-called *Minor Mirror of Perfection*, are followed by excerpts from the *Major Legend*. 
So we can see that the distinction between official legends and testimonies of the companions is challenged by codicological reality. I do not deny that this distinction is valid and important for clarifying the circumstances in which a given legend was written. But to believe that they are two hermetically opposed blocks, to believe - as Paul Sabatier would have liked - that they corresponded to two factions among the Friars Minor is a denial of reality. Before the tensions became more evident in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, with the frontal conflict between Spirituals and the Community, it is very difficult to get an idea of the currents that may have crossed the Order. I will take just one example: Anthony of Padua has often been presented as the other face of Franciscanism and it has been pointed out that he never mentioned Francis in his many sermons; from there to deduce a kind of political opposition among the Friars minor, was only a small step. It was only thanks to [12] the Rediscovered Life that we finally learned that the story of the chapter in Provence - an episode that depicts Francis and Anthony and could seem to oppose them - was in fact told to Thomas de Celano by Anthony himself, so he did not fail to mention Francis.

A first recension of the manuscripts containing Franciscan legends subsequent to Bonaventure was published in 1967 by Sophronius Clasen, but the book, which is difficult to use, had little impact and, in addition, the author eliminated non-Franciscan “travelling companions”, which was obviously wrong. The Società internazionale di studi francescani has launched a project to identify, describe and reproduce Franciscan manuscripts, Iter franciscanum, which already includes more than 1600 items. But in fact, at least initially, the coordinated study of about ten manuscripts, with online reproduction and full transcription of the texts, would make it possible to lay new foundations for research on the writings and life of Francis of Assisi. Great scholars - such as Luigi Pellegrini, Attilio Bartoli Langeli, Felice Accrocca, Aleksander Horowski - have illuminated Franciscan monuments such as [13] manuscript 338 of the Biblioteca Comunale of Assisi, manuscript 1046 of Perugia, manuscript C.4 of Uppsala. Manuscript NAL 3245 recently acquired by the Bibliothèque nationale de France - which contains the Rediscovered Life, Franciscan writings, excerpts from Anthony of Padua’s sermons and all kinds of anthologies - is fully accessible online and we have dedicated an international conference to it, the Proceedings of which are going to be published. Various manuscripts of the Collegio Sant’Isidoro, including manuscript 1/73, still require systematic study and online publication. I take the opportunity of my presence in England to suggest a new study and a complete transcription of manuscript lat. theol. d. 23 from the Bodleian Library in Oxford, known as the “Little manuscript”. It includes the Regula non bullata and the Regula bullata, the commentaries on the latter by several Popes, John Peckham, Bonaventure, the four
masters, Peter of John Olivi, a first version of the *Acts of Blessed Francis*, memories of the companions that could have served as materials for the *Memorial*, both in its biographical part and for the *Treatise of Miracles*, and a second version of the *Acts of Blessed Francis*.

What is the benefit of following such research tracks? To know Franciscan writings and legends better is obviously to know Francis better. I am convinced that the different legends are in part the product of different trends and moments in the history of the Order. But I am also convinced that, at least for the oldest of them, the biographies reflect various facets of the complex personality of Francis himself; it is in this sense that we can affirm that “the Franciscan question is the question of Francis”. To take into account the plurality of texts present in the same codex is not only to raise on a new, non- ideological basis the question of the sensitivities present in the Order over time, but also to give ourselves the means to better understand, through the presence of non-Franciscan texts, the interactions between the Friars Minor, the whole Church and medieval society.

Finally, the manuscript is a total object. Much more than ceramics or coins, which are the delights of archaeologists, it reflects a state of culture, a degree of economic development and a multiplicity of social practices over the long term. It is enough to juxtapose, on the same scale, [14] an autograph of Francis and the bull that confirms his Rule to understand materially, physically the paradox of the Franciscan experience. It is enough to put side by side [15] the tiny manuscript NAL 3245 and the exemplar of the Minor Legend preserved in Assisi to understand the vertiginous evolution of the Order of Friars Minor in its first decades. The printed text is an abstraction. The manuscripts are the reality from which it has been abstracted. Rediscovering the physicality, the materiality, we might even say the carnality of Franciscan texts is a perspective that fits perfectly with the object of Franciscan studies: Francis, the saint par excellence of the incarnation.