

ORDO FRATRUM
MINORUM

Isabella of France

a minor sister
in the footsteps
of St Francis

Br. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM
General Minister
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A centenary in the Franciscan centenaries

The year 2025 will mark the eighth centenary of the birth of Isabella of France (1225-2025), a princess belonging to one of the most influential families of royal blood in the history of Christianity, the Capetian family, who consciously and with determination chose the path of “the highest humility”¹, following the example of the Virgin Mary. Thanks to the most recent studies, Isabella emerges as an eloquent and significant figure in mediaeval Franciscan female history and holiness. A woman of piety and intense charity, she clothed herself with the pearls of honesty, wisdom in interpreting, moderation in power, and foresight in abundance². A younger sister of Louis IX, a Franciscan tertiary saint, she remained in the shadow of her brother’s sanctity for almost three centuries after his death, even though she had already enjoyed a widespread reputation for holiness during her lifetime: it was not until 1521 that Leo X counted her among the saints, with the title of blessed.

The eighth anniversary of her birth enriches the various memories of the Franciscan centenaries we are celebrating because the rediscovery of the pages of her life and faith, little known until a few decades ago, colour the Franciscan heritage of the first centuries with new shades. It is in fact rendered precious by the reception of Franciscan ideals by this woman, of royal origin, who, without “leaving the world” to belong to the Second Order as Agnes of Prague did, and differing from the penitential model of Elizabeth of Hungary, knew how to “*devoutly burn in Christ*”³, giving life to an unprecedented reality, that of the Order of the *Sorores minores inclusae*. Inserting herself fully within the first steps of female Franciscanism, Isabella of France brings to light a vision and a free, conscious, dynamic and reasoned reception of Franciscanism; a desire to follow Christ and make herself an instrument of his grace while remaining “with modesty”⁴ in her own state of life, that of royalty, embracing the values of Francis of Assisi; an ability to enter into dialogue with the world of the male Franciscan Order and the papal curia to the point of obtaining the approval of a new Rule that encompasses an understanding of Franciscan mendicant spirituality, which then spread throughout Europe through the monasteries that embraced it.

¹ ALEXANDER IV, *Benedicata filia tu*, Anagni, 12 June 1256. All sources relating to the blessed Isabella have been published in the volume *Isabelle de France soeur de saint Louis. Une princesse mineure*, par Jacques Dalarun, Sean L. Field, Jean-Baptiste Lebigue, et Anne-Françoise Leurquin-Labie avec la collaboration d’Annie Dufour, Fabien Guilloux, Xavier Héлары et Dominique Poirel, Paris, Éditions Franciscaines, 2014. Translation into Italian *Isabella of France sister of Saint Louis. Fonti e documenti sulla fondatrice delle Sorelle minori*, edited by Jacques Dalarun, Sean L. Field, Marco Bartoli, Padua, Editrici Francescane, 2023.

² Cf. GILBERT OF TOURNAI, *Letter to Lady Isabella*, 1253-1255, n. 41.

³ INNOCENT IV, *Sanctae virginitatis propositum*, Assisi, 22 July 1253.

⁴ Cf. GILBERT OF TOURNAI, *Letter to Lady Isabella*, 1253-1255, n. 40.



The path of Isabella's life

The *Life of Isabella*, written thirteen years after her death, in lively tones, by a woman intimately close to her, Agnes de Harcourt, her lady-in-waiting and later abbess of the monastery founded in Longchamp by the princess herself, allows us access, with the due caution that one must have before hagiographic texts, to her historical events, the traits of her personality, and some elements of her faith journey

Fifth of the six children of Louis VIII and Blanche of Castile, Elisabeth known as Isabella was born in March 1225. Over the years, the events of the Capetian dynasty were marked by the premature death of Louis VIII and the political action and rule of his two sons, Louis IX and Charles of Anjou, later King of Sicily.

Beautiful in all her person, clear in her affections, cultured and erudite, especially in her knowledge of the Latin language and Sacred Scripture, a lover since childhood of privacy and silence, expert in spinning and embroidering even sacred ornaments as was typical of the nobility of the time, Isabella nurtured a love for prayer, the inner life, asceticism and austerity of life, and was more concerned with 'destroying sin and imprinting virtue in herself and others'⁵ than with attending court parties. In fact, although Queen Blanche had instilled in her not only the principles of Christian life and solidarity with the poor but also the dream of a future like her own, that of a royal wife and Christian mother, Isabella did not hesitate to show other desires and intentions.

Around 1243, at the age of eighteen, the attempts for a family plan of marriage between her and the son of Emperor Frederick II, Conrad IV of Sweden failed; in fact, did not want to consent to a carnal marriage because she had chosen our Lord Jesus Christ as her eternal spouse⁶. Isabella was so persevering and persuaded of this intention that not even pressure from Pope Innocent IV was needed to dissuade her from this conviction, which, in a way, also had profound effects on the political history of Europe. An illness that struck towards the end of 1243 affected her already fragile health and this probably made it easier for Isabella to convince her mother and her family of her desire to lead a celibate life. Hagiographic descriptions fix a radical outward change of life in this illness⁷. Isabella from that moment onwards began to devote herself to a humbler life, less sumptuous and entirely anchored in prayer

⁵ AGNES OF HARCOURT, *Life of the Blessed Isabella of France*, n. 2.

⁶ Cf. *Life of Blessed Isabella of France*, n. 6-7.

⁷ Cf. *Life of Blessed Isabella of France*, n. 9.



Her existence continued at the Capetian royal palace, but in a rather unusual way: she was a woman of the Court, who also took an interest in and took part in her brothers' endeavours and projects, so much so that she sent knights overseas in support of Louis IX's crusade, but progressing in the spiritual life she expressed her royalty by remaining united with "*Christ the King from the flower of virginity*"⁸ and at the same time putting "*into practice the words of the Gospel*"⁹ according to the same rituals that characterised both the monastic female religious life and that of the penitential movement. Isabella, in fact, did not agree to marry, but neither did she agree to become a nun: she devoted herself to divine prayer; she underwent fasts and abstinences; cared for the sick by visiting them and caring for the salvation of their souls; she fed the poor with her own hands.¹⁰

She persevered in the virginal state but had no canonical ties. This merely informal character of her condition was frowned upon by the Church. There are no traces that can testify today that she received the title 'consecrated virgin'; it is certain, in any case, that Innocent IV, observing her so resolute, changed his mind compared to ten years earlier when he had urged her not to deprecate marriage, so much so that on the 22nd July 1253 he authorised the 'imitator of angelic purity'¹¹ to live the 'project of holy virginity'¹², urging her however to pronounce a vow. Three years later, in 1256, Alexander IV with the letter *Benedicta filia tu*, reconfirmed in praise the choice of Isabella's virginity, "royal virgin" next to Mary "Queen of virgins"¹³.

The reading of a work by Gilbert of Tournai, a Franciscan theologian, prompted Isabella in 1254 to embrace the life purpose of the Assisate, moving away from the traditional family closeness to the Cistercian Order and being the first to enter relations and relationships with the Friars Minor, who willingly cultivated them because they represented a link with the Capetian Court. In the same year, Innocent IV granted her request that the Friars Minor could be her confessors, confirming a concrete 'turn' towards Franciscan piety that she had assumed.

In 1255, whilst St Clare of Assisi was being canonised, Isabella undertook the foundation of a monastery in the Franciscan line. She would have wished to erect a hospital for the poor or to build an abbey for Franciscan Sisters, but in consultation with her Franciscan confessor, a Master of Theology at Notre-Dame in Paris, she opted for the building of a monastery, where charity could still be exercised alongside the praise of God. She did this in Longchamp, with the support of the royal family, who took part in the auspicious ceremony with the laying, by Louis IX, of

⁸ ALBERT SUERBEER, *History of the translation of St. Edmund*.

⁹ *Life of Blessed Isabella of France*, n. 18.

¹⁰ *Life of Blessed Isabella of France*, nn. 17-19.

¹¹ INNOCENT IV, *Sanctae virginitatis propositum*,

¹² *Life of Blessed Isabella of France*, n. 2.

¹³ ALEXANDER IV, *Benedicata filia tu*.



the foundation stone of what was to become the first foundation of other monasteries, and which took the name *Monastery of the Sisters of the Order of the Humble Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary Glorious*.

In truth, Isabella's intention was not only to build a new monastery, but to help create a new rule, which would entail the extension in time and space of what was lived at Longchamp. With the support of Alexander IV, who in *Benedicta filia tua* assured him blessings in his desires, and in editorial dialogue with the Parisian Friars Minor master's in theology, including Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, then Minister General, William of Meliton, Geoffrey of Vierson and Eudes of Riguid and others, she set herself, with sufficient competence, to the task of editing the text.

His life project was not based on that of the virgin Clare of Assisi and differed especially in relation to the question of poverty. Instead, it started from the Rule of Innocent IV of 1247 and was very similar to the *forma vitae* for the Order of San Damiano of Gregory IX, but introduced many changes, including that of perpetual enclosure. The drafting of this Rule, its approval on 10 February 1259 by Alexander IV, its revision to accentuate the link with the Franciscan Order and its identity, its subsequent approval by Urban IV in 1263 and then its diffusion in a number of monasteries in France, England and Italy, speak to us and reveal something of the peculiar existence of this small but significant fragment of the rich and varied Franciscan female polyphony.

Isabella would have wished, along with the Sisters of the abbey, for the title of the Order to be that of *Sorores Minores*, but the request was initially rejected by Alexander IV so that they would not be confused with 13th century female penitential groups that lived without a rule and without ties to the Order. This resulted in a commitment to a revision of the Rule of 1259 because, for Isabella, the title of *Sorores Minores*, corresponding to that of *Fratrum Minorum*, centred the identity of the new foundation and her vision of Franciscan women's life. The title of *sisters* clearly contained a strong symbolic charge: it was for Isabella a return to the origins of the movement, when brothers and sisters probably worked side by side, and emphasised a relationship of spiritual equality. The title of *minores* summed up the idea of a Franciscan identity centred on humility. It corresponded for Isabella to the highest degree of Francis' poverty. Not, therefore, poverty as an end and material, but poverty of spirit, that is, the choice to renounce one's own condition in order to identify with the lowest degree of the social scale, unlike even one's own condition in life. Moreover, the very dedication of the monastery to the *Humility of the Virgin* conveys the essential trait of Isabella's spirituality: poverty is to have a low sense of self, admitting, for this, property in common. In the revised Rule, approved in 1263, the papal see gave its *placet*, but added the title of *reclusae* to *Sorores Minores*, because this was the only form of religious life approved for women.



Isabella lived the last years of her life near the monastery. It was not until her death on 23 February 1270 that her remains were placed in the abbey. Although there are no sources to testify that she made her profession before her death, the Order always venerated her as a Virgin of the Second Order.

An evangelical, meek and humble life

With the liturgy we can affirm that Blessed Isabella by her example strengthens us, by her teachings she teaches us, and by her intercession she protects us. To her we entrust us all as we seek to gather from her life some indications that can help us on our personal and community journey.

Isabella's life is a school of evangelical following in the footsteps of the Master who invites us to learn from Him *meekness and humility of heart* (Mt 11:29). The custody of her own littleness, despite her condition and living environment, was the secret that made Isabella open to the pursuit of what was truly worthwhile and forged in her every other virtue. The certainty that she was not enough for herself did not take the form of passivity and weakness of thought but was fully combined in her with openness to novelty and commitment; sweetness and nobility of heart did not make her accommodating or bent on her own interests. Isabella reminds us that it is possible to overcome the main preoccupation that stiffens the human heart, that of appearing, of demonstrating, of holding back, of defending, and that the legacy that humility and meekness deliver are those of mercy, fraternity and of being bearers not of one's own light, but of the salvation that comes only from God.

In these years, then, in which various Franciscan centenaries are celebrated, her figure shows us that truly in Saint Francis we see come true the words of Jesus that those who follow in his footsteps *bear fruit and fruit that remains* (cf. Jn 15:16): Isabella places herself in the posterity of the Assisian, but at the same time gives rise to 'new things', a community of women and a movement of people that expanded beyond the borders of France. In the sterility that currently characterises society and various countries her generativity, faithful and at the same time creative, is an incentive for each one of us to collaborate with the Holy Spirit, who is Lord and giver of life, to understand and make our own his own fruitfulness.

In the middle of the 13th century, the Friars Minor, especially in Paris, were involved in a growing conflict with the secular clergy and, at times, in their desire to present the Franciscan charism, they absolutized some aspects of it, especially poverty, making it the object of an apologia that even reached the point of rhetoric. Instead, Isabella focused on how central minority was, so much so that she committed all her energies so that the community she founded would be dedi-



cated to the humility of Mary and its members would be called the lesser Sisters. This in no way meant an estrangement from reality, but an even greater focus on the poor, as shown for example in the episode of the headdress she made:

Spinning, she had woven a headdress with her own hands. The holy King Louis, her brother, asked her for it and begged her very kindly to give it to him, saying that he would put it on his head at night. She did not want to give it to him, as I, Sister Agnes of Harcourt, who was present, heard from her mouth and with my own ears. She answered the king and said: 'I propose that it be given to Our Lord, for it is the first one I have ever spun'. He begged her and said: 'Sister, I beg you to spin another one for me to have'. She answered: 'I will do it gladly, if I spin some more'. And he secretly sent this head-dress to a poor woman who was bedridden because of her great weakness and whom he faithfully visited every day, with gifts from his table and special dishes.¹⁴

A small episode that might appear as derisory in the face of the great problems of humanity, but which reminds us that wars, injustice, social imbalances and whatnot are nothing but the fruits of structures of sin. If we want not only weapons to fall silent, but above all concord to speak, structures of peace made up of the concatenation of works, words and intentions like those performed by Isabella of France are necessary.

Isabella's affection was all-encompassing, directed not to an idea, not even of minority, but to the One who made Himself last and small for us, the Lord Jesus, and this involved, according to the biblical dictate, mind, heart and strength; thus, when she drafted the Rule she consulted various theologians, including St. Bonaventure. This is a precise indication to overcome many polarisations and one-sidedness's, ranging from rationalism to the primacy of emotionalism, and to opt, instead, for an integral and integrated formation that involves mind and heart, faith and reason, thought and life.

¹⁴ *Life of Blessed Isabella of France*, n. 20.



May the living memory of her life as a woman, who interpreted in an original way the intuition of Francis and Clare of Assisi, continue to inspire us in this time in which it continues to be possible to live the Gospel of the Lord.

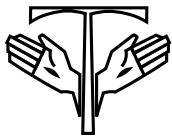
Fraternally



Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM

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General Minister

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ORDO FRATRUM
MINORUM

Curia Generalis
Via di S. Maria Mediatrice, 25
00165 Roma, Italia
www.ofm.org