

Medieval Italy

Texts in Translation

Edited by

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89. OPICINO DE CANISTRIS CONFESSIONS OF A PARISH PRIEST (1336)

Translated from Latin by Victoria Morse

Opicino de Canistris (1296–ca. 1354) was a parish priest, manuscript illuminator, and religious writer from Pavia, a small city in Lombardy. Opicino wrote the autobiographical notes translated here in Avignon, most likely in 1336, after he had fled Pavia for political reasons and had taken up the position of writing-clerk in the papal Penitentiary, the office that absolved penitents of those sins that only the pope could forgive. The work takes the form of notes entered into a circular calendar, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists, centered on a drawing of the Virgin Mary, and overlaid on a sketch map of northern Italy.¹ It is one drawing (fol. 11r) in a series of fifty-two, done in ink on parchment. The overall purpose of the manuscript has been debated, but it seems fundamentally to aim at making visible the structures of the Christian spiritual universe against the backdrop of the physical world, expressed by various forms of maps, calendars, and other schematic drawings. At a personal level, Opicino's autobiographical writings present him as a former sinner who was reformed by divine intervention; the illness recorded in the text translated here marks the beginning of this conversion experience.

The account of Opicino's life is sometimes cryptic, because he wrote not a connected narrative but rather a series of "entries" inserted into a temporal framework which often obscures connections and developments. In addition, he tended (like many contemporaries) to couch ideas in biblical phrases or the language of prophecy. Nevertheless, several dominant themes emerge. Crucial background to his life is the ongoing struggle between the Guelf and Ghibelline factions in northern Italy and especially the attempts of Ghibelline Milan, under the leadership of the Visconti family, to annex Pavia, which had been an independent city state until this period. Above all, however, Opicino was interested in tracing his development as a priest, and in doing so he offers a unique portrait of the education and concerns of a member of the parish clergy, a group notoriously difficult for modern historians to know except at the driest institutional level. In notes that should probably be understood more as a confession than as autobiography in the modern sense, Opicino recounted the stages of his education in the urban schools of Pavia and the nearby towns of Lomello, Bassignana, and (farther afield) Biella. He was especially concerned to explain the course of his education and eventual ordination to the priesthood and how these were affected by his family's economic and political problems. This text underscores the importance, by the early fourteenth century, of schools run by individual masters where clerics and lay students alike would receive a basic education, although other evidence suggests that apprenticeship was also a common route to the priesthood. Singing was a crucial area of study, along with basic literacy

1. For this reason the formatting of the translation that follows has numerous breaks. These are maintained to enable the reader to perceive the original circular structure. The headings here are by Opicino.

[1301: no entry]

1302 (January) In this year Christ the Lord was shown to me crucified by my grandmother, in order that I might believe that he was the true lord, and from then on I have never believed otherwise.

BOYHOOD

1303 (January) I was told the time of my age, on what day and at what hour I was born. Since I was forced to attend the schools, I was able to learn nothing.

1304 (January) Sent back to Biella and forced to return to the schools, I barely learned to read or sound out words.
(End of April) I played childishly with my younger sister, although I ought to have been rebuked. In that place [Biella] I was confirmed with her by the bishop of Vercelli.

1305 (January) When I returned home [to Pavia], my intellect was wondrously opened—which would have been unbelievable to many people, if there had not been witnesses. Yet I still was learning against my will.

(End of April) I was not able to resist childish vices, and I liked the leisure of feast days better than studying my letters.

11 November The adversity of my house began in Biella.

1306 (January) I began to understand how the years of the Lord should be computed.

2 September I was made a cleric by our bishop solely on the basis of my patrimony.

1307 (January) I was admonished in a dream to study harder.

mid-February I changed masters many times. At that time I heard hardly anyone swearing by the body or blood of Christ, as thousands do now each day in vain. Already at that time, they were beginning to consider Christ's gospels worthless, so that they inclined me little by little to utter so great a sacrilege.⁶

(October) We were transferred to the town of Bassignana.

11 November I was sent to a school of grammar at Lomello.

1308 I changed to the school of this same master in Bassignana. There, because I learned miraculously without effort and was compelled to teach others, I devoted more attention to drawing images.

6. In a note at the margin, Opicino clarifies that he (and others) began to swear by the Gospels.

- 1309 Mid-February At this time I began for the first time to go to confession with shame.
(May) In the town of Bassignana, I heard for the first time the modern diabolical names of the factions, which were named differently at that time.⁷
- 1310 22 August Near the town of Bassignana I was placed for a time in charge of the tolls from the bridge over the Po river.
(October) I was sent back to the school of this same master in Pavia, our hometown.

ADOLESCENCE

- 1311 (May) I was sent to the school for writing, of which art I have retained a modest amount.
1 June A great conflict arose in the city when the Emperor Henry [VII] was near Brescia.⁸ As my age increased, so did my wickedness; I was already bound by many vices.
(October) I was sent back to the town of Bassignana, when the emperor returned to Pavia.⁹
Beg. of November I returned to Pavia, having been sick for three months with a quartan fever.
- 1312 (January) I was sent to the school of another master in grammar and logic.
- 1313 May I was sent to school for singing, not voluntarily but against my will, and therefore I took little care over this art.
- 1314 Mid-February At this time, since merciful judgment upon my house grew strong, I was forced to leave the schools entirely.
May I heard a little of the art of medicine [see #77]. Many times I was sent during the night to guard the city walls [see #14.4],
Beg. July I began to teach the son of a certain count from Germany who was captive there [in Pavia] with his father.
15 August At this time I was forced to stay with the wife of the then lord of this city who was a captive in Milan to teach their daughters letters, and I made very little progress with them. Willingly,
- 1315 (January) Out of my zeal for the wretched faction which is called

7. This may refer to the gradual adoption of the terms Guelf and Ghibelline in place of more local names for the factions.

8. Siege of Brescia, 19 May–5 September.

9. 6–15 October 1311.

“the church faction,” I involved myself knowingly in many illicit activities but stopped short of bloodshed and sacrilegious blows. Although some of them were excommunicate and all were under interdict, I associated with them except in crime.

(May) I began to learn the art of playing musical instruments for the purpose of instructing these daughters. I learned a modest amount, I profited them very little.

8 October When the city was captured by the opposing faction, after I accompanied that lady on that night in secret to [the monastery of Santa Maria de] Josapath, I never saw her or her children again. I remained with another lord.

1316 18 January I journeyed to the city of Genoa with my entire house, some members sooner, some later. I stayed for a modest time with someone to instruct their children.

End of April For several months I lived with a certain master in the grammatical arts for a share of the profit.

June I was still struggling with the flesh; many times I was conquered with my own consent.

8 July Outside the adversity of my house was increasing.

3 September A definition of the last judgment was revealed to me in my dreams. From that time on the mercy of the Lord began to restrain me from vices. I began to learn how to illuminate books for my own sustenance and that of my family. Amid the labors of this job I snatched moments to study the theological books that I received for illumination.

1317 (January) Little by little I gathered the spirit of the divine words to my memory. Already at this time in that peaceful Genoa, I had cast our diabolical factions into oblivion.

5 May My brother, a very simple fellow not yet at puberty, was killed by accident. I was patient, I moved on easily.

3 September Everything went wrong in my father’s hands, both in his person and in his affairs.

26 October When my father died, I perhaps would have bound myself to the religious life with my brothers, if an alien country had not restrained me with affection for my widowed mother.

1318 (January) From that day on I began to open my inner eyes to the reason of the faith.

11 April I returned from Genoa to Pavia with my mother, brother, and my sisters, from adversity to adversity. I found my homeland

bound by sentences of excommunication and interdict, just as it still is.¹⁰ During this twofold adversity in both my homeland and my affairs, I lived by the labor of my hands and was comforted internally in spirit. Little by little I began to say the hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

October I was promoted while still a simple cleric to a chaplaincy in the cathedral church. There I was received as a pauper and, supported by the lords [the canons], I learned the office of this church. In vain I went to Milan to receive orders.

1319 January I would not have been able to live on the income that I was to receive without the support of the lords. I began to hear decretals [study canon law] in Pavia

2/3 March I received the four minor orders in Bologna from its bishop.

End of March I received the subdiaconate and the diaconate from the bishop of Bobbio between Milan and Lodi.

(May) When I heard the decretals, I understood almost nothing except the divine things.

27 May I first sang the Gospel.¹¹

15 August I sang the Gospel a second time.

2 December I began the *Book in Verse on the Parables of Christ*.

End of December/

1320 (January) I went in vain to Milan to be ordained priest.

27 February I was transferred to the diocese of Piacenza for the occasion, and I received the priesthood in Parma through its bishop.

30 March I sang my first mass in the church of Pavia. I began to baptize.

(July) I published my *Treatise on the Ten Commandments*, amid the labors of my hands by which I was living. . . .¹²

YOUTH

1321 (October) Sometimes I learned decretals, sometimes theology more by listening than by reading. My conscience began to be plagued by many inextricable scruples which would continue for many years. Nonetheless, I continued in my divine studies.

10. The details of Pavia's interdict remain somewhat unclear; the city's final absolution did not take place until 1341.

11. To sing the Gospel was one of the duties of a deacon.

12. I have omitted a short section on the technicalities of the interdict.

- 1322 (January) I was busy with many treatises on divine matters.
8 October While passing through Pavia, Fra Agostino [Gazotto] of the order of Preachers, the most pious man, having been transferred from the bishopric of Zagreb to that of Lucera, saw and admonished me with the greatest kindness and praised works of my writing.
- 1323 5 February I received the care of another's parish for a time with a license but without income.
21 October I was elected to the chaplaincy of San Rafaelo in the church of San Giovanni in Borgo, which I renounced after a short time. I was elected to the parish of Santa Maria Capella and, once confirmed by order of the bishop, I entered into my office. At first, I began to preach there immediately. In this church I found many contradictions, on account of which I wounded my conscience sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes violently, sometimes out of fear. Truly it would take too long to speak of these things. Meanwhile I thought about divine matters and wrote many books and treatises. From the income of this church I never received more than ten or eight florins, since I had no church except that one. I completed the *Book on the Lord's Passion According to the Four Evangelists* and thought much about that material.
- [1325–27: no entries]
- 1328 11 July I left Pavia, went to Tortona, then Valenza and Alexandria; I stayed for a time in Valenza.¹³
3 August On this day I was judged to be dead on account of illness. I recovered. Supported like a pauper, I preached in Valenza and learned the sacraments, some of which I did not know because of the sentence of our interdict.
- 1329 (January) In Valenza, I compiled a small work on the poverty of Christ. I published a small book in meter on the virtues of Christ.
mid-February I corrected the small work on the poverty of Christ; I finished the *Lamentations of the Virgin Mary*.
April I first came to Avignon in tremendous poverty. For a month I worked on the illumination of a book of a certain protonotary of the pope. After that I begged with the poor clerics. (June) After a general absolution by the penitentiaries, Pope John XXII received

13. These were nearby towns in the hands of the papal forces fighting against the Ghibelline powers of northern Italy.

and saw the aforementioned book, although he did not know I was present.

(3 June) He provided for me.¹⁴ I returned to Valenza with the *Book on the Preeminence of Spiritual Rule* which I had already started in Avignon.¹⁵

8 September I completed that second book of [spiritual] rule.

September End I returned again to the curia.

10 October I appeared before the lord pope, who looked upon me kindly.

24 October On this day I transcribed the corrected copy of this book, which I had promised to give to the lord pope. He again provided for me in the future. Amid the strains of poverty, after the aforementioned absolutions [earlier in 1329] my conscience became much more subtle.¹⁶

PERFECT AGE

1330 (January) Since affliction was piled upon affliction, I abstained entirely from divine offices, since I received nothing from the Penitentiaries nor from the Major Penitentiary.

5 March Finally, after some difficulties, I was absolved by the chamberlain of the Lord Pope. In the meantime I completed a *Treatise on the Lord's Prayer*.

(May) Several times I had supplications carried to the Lord Pope and several times he ordered that I appear before him, but nothing was done about it. I was present three times at masses and sermons of the Lord Pope in the cathedral at different times.

24 August I made a brief [written] confession of my sins.

13 September In a dream, I saw a terrifying vision of the sacrament of the eucharist. I wrote the *Book Describing Pavia*. In the midst of my distress, the Lord Pope received the *Book on the Preeminence of Spiritual Rule* which I sent to him.

14. The pope granted him the future expectation of a benefice in Pavia, but no immediate income.

15. This work is extant and has been partially published in *Unbekannte kirchenpolitische Streitschriften aus der Zeit Ludwigs des Bayern (1327–1354)*, ed. Richard Scholz, vol. 2 (Rome: Loescher, 1914), 89–104.

16. Opicino never explains what sin he had committed that necessitated absolution by the Penitentiary. Comments in one of his other works suggest that he may have committed simony by complying with local custom and making a payment upon taking up his benefice in Pavia.

- 4 December The Lord Pope provided me with my present office [as a writing-clerk in the Penitentiary]. It came into my heart
1331 (January) to make images of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. When I was received in the writing office [of the Penitentiary] an accusation was raised against me. The same thing happened, in Pavia, to my younger sister concerning her reception in a noble monastery to which the Lord Pope had provided her. For my case there were about fourteen witnesses. For several years this case was maintained against me with scarcely a break except perhaps for a three-year period. Anything that I acquire beyond decent food and clothing I spend on this kind of business. Aside from my position I have no other patrimony. I have only a poor parish: when I was resident there I repeatedly suffered Egyptian servitude; in absentia I receive nothing, but it provides for a certain vicar in my stead. My sister, fearing to enter the monastery from which she was blocked, was received into another with no charge.
- 1332 12 November I completed the *Book of the Seven Prayers of the Virgin Mary*.
- 1333 1 February I finished the *Book of the Promotions of the Virgin Mary*.
- 1334 17 January In obedience to the Lord Pope, I worked at his palace for a month with my colleagues.
31 March On this day came the illness. After I had received the necessary sacraments, I lay as if dead for a third of the month. Coming back to life, I found myself paralyzed in my limbs. I believe that I improved because of the testimony of obedience to the keys [of Saint Peter].
3 June On this day, after vespers, I saw with my servant a certain vase in the clouds.¹⁷ I was still mute and weak on my right [side] from the illness and I miraculously lost a large part of my literal memory.
15 August On this night, I saw in my sleep the Virgin Mary sitting sadly on the ground with her son in her lap. After this tribulation, she restored to me through her merits as to Job from the loss of spiritual wealth which I had prodigally dissipated from adolescence not more letters but double the spirit.
4 December On this day Pope John XXII passed away.

17. This vision refers to that in Acts 10:11.

THE YEAR OF EXPECTATION¹⁸

- 1335 8 January Consecration of the Lord Pope Benedict XII.
 1 February From this time on I gradually turned aside from our
 office because of the weakness of our right hand which was, in spiri-
 tual work, stronger than before. From this time on, I made all these
 images with this right hand without any human aid.
 25 April My mother passed from this world.
 20 May My true weaning: when I learned of my mother's death.
 18 December The Lord Pope

THE YEAR OF RETRIBUTION

- 1336 (January) Benedict XII justly and fittingly suspended us from our
 vain expectation.¹⁹
 1 March The first complaint against me has been once again
 revived and truly burdens me with expenses.
 (May) Although my literal knowledge has been lost, spiritual
 knowledge was restored to me twice over. My right hand is weak
 in temporal affairs, but strong in spiritual ones.
 1 June On this day the work of this vessel has been completed.

*One of the marginal notes continues Opicino's assessment of his spiritual develop-
 ment and its relationship to his early education.*

After I had been made a cleric without the title of a church and with only a secular patrimony, I lived in secular fashion among secular concerns. Had the grace of God not withdrawn me from them, I would have remained in these miseries. I became accustomed to lies. I never took pleasure in the divine offices. Gradually I began to go to listen to preaching and I willingly heard about the divine scriptures from the secular masters in the schools. I felt distaste for grammar and greater boredom for logic. I took pleasure in learning the art of composing letters with masters and especially in verses and rhythms without masters. Likewise, I took pleasure in hearing fables, in reciting them, in reading in books in the Italian and French vernacular, and in translating into these idioms from Latin letters.

18. The initial "headings" refer to the standard ages of human life, but the last two appear to be inventions of Opicino's, referring to the events of his life.

19. Benedict canceled the expected benefices granted by his predecessor.