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Dear Colleague,

Thanks for your inquiry about my 2008 seminar, “St Francis of Assisi and the Thirteenth Century.” In this rather long letter, I hope to describe the academic work and logistics of the seminar as well as tell you a bit about myself. Please contact me if there are ambiguities or if all your questions are not answered.

From the title, you have no doubt deduced that I am interested in bringing together a group of scholar/teachers to search for St Francis of Assisi in as rich a historical context as possible, to know him as he was understood by his companions and near contemporaries. In order to do this, we shall spend a good deal of time examining the early *vitae* of the saint and other documents that will shed light on our topic. Fortunately, these are gathered together in English as well as in Latin editions. In our discussions, we will use the new 3-volume set of sources in translation published 1999-2001 by New City Press (www.newcitypress.com).

As we examine the sources, we will also struggle to understand the arguments surrounding the so-called Franciscan Question, looking at various claims about the sources’ origins and their relationship to one another. I will also ask participants to become familiar with the tradition of scholarship that has developed since the publication in 1894 of Paul Sabatier’s biography of Francis. However, our emphasis will move us beyond these considerations to ask what and how the sources mean.

In addition to careful examination of written texts, we shall devote a significant part of the seminar’s work to a study of early visual images of St Francis. Since the seminar meets in Italy, we can do much of this in museums and churches. Like the written sources, paintings present a variety of ways of knowing St Francis and his legacy to the friars and to the world. In general, these works of art had a broader audience than Latin texts since most were seen by and even sometimes created for the laity. Hence, we can use them to understand what the friars and their patrons wished that audience to know about Francis and his Order.

Before participants arrive in Italy, I will ask each one to read a modern biography of the saint from a list I will provide. I have found in my previous seminars that this is a good way to bring about stimulating discussion from day 1.

We will have some discussion of popular images of St Francis at the beginning of the 21st century. I am of the opinion that much that is valuable in his legacy is lost or distorted in popular images of the saint that have come from both religious and secular re-creations, including the film “Brother Sun, Sister Moon.” In order to ask what Francis may have to say to our modern world, we must go back to the sources and place him carefully in the world he inhabited. Toward the end of the seminar, we can return to the question of the importance of Francis 800 years later. The seminar is about meticulous scholarship regarding medieval matters

but also about vision in searching for the transcendent value of Francis' life and teachings.

I have been teaching medieval history for 38 years at the State University of New York at Geneseo, a selective liberal arts college in the SUNY system. I did my graduate work at Cornell University in church history with Brian Tierney and have published in the areas of Hussite and monastic history. However, for the last quarter century, I have focused my research almost exclusively on Francis and things Franciscan.

In 1989, I published a short and selective biography of Francis as part of *The Way of the Christian Mystics* series originally published by Michael Glazier and later by the Liturgical Press. A decade later I published two books about early Italian images of Francis. One examines 13th- and early 14th-century images of Francis from Italy that are now in the USA and Canada (*St Francis in America*, Franciscan Press). This project began as a "pocket guide" and ended up being a rather elaborate work with lots of photos. However, my most important contribution to the field is my 1999 book, *Images of St Francis of Assisi*, a catalogue of all early Italian paintings, statues, and stained glass windows of the saint before 1320. It was published by Leo S. Olschki in Florence (www.olschki.it) and contains 245 entries with photographs and an extensive bibliography. I edited and contributed to a book entitled *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy* (Brill, 2005), and I have been asked to do a second volume. With my colleague Ron Herzman, I have made a 12-lecture video and audio course on St Francis for The Teaching Company (www.teach12.com). I also appear as a "talking head" in a documentary about St Francis, "The Reluctant Saint," that was aired in April, 2003 on the Hallmark Channel.

The seminar will be made up of scholars from a variety of disciplines. I hope that we will have historians and art historians as well as specialists in theology/religious studies, literature, and languages. People in other disciplines are invited to apply, and they should include in their essays how their disciplinary expertise will contribute to the seminar's collective. There were six disciplines represented in my 2006 seminar, and there was abundant discussion and cross fertilization.

Knowledge of Latin is important but not necessary. Since much of the scholarship, especially concerning the art, is in Italian, a reading knowledge of Italian is a plus. There is also significant scholarship in German and some in French. Please indicate in your essay your knowledge of any of these or other relevant languages.

The seminar will meet for six weeks, beginning June 25. I apologize for starting in mid-week, but my youngest son Jimmy, who may join us for part of the summer, graduates from high school the previous Saturday; and that event trumps even starting a seminar at the beginning of a week. Although our schedule will be flexible, we will normally meet twice per week but probably three times during the week in Rome (see below). In those sessions, we will discuss common readings, draw on one another's knowledge of important secondary literature, and have presentations by participants.

All participants will have research projects that they will have described in their applications to the seminar. Of course, focus may change during the course of the seminar, but everyone needs to begin with a research plan. I am defining "research" very broadly. For some, the research next summer may be for an article, chapter of a book, or book. It may be linked to research well underway. Some may wish to add a Franciscan dimension to research on related medieval topics; two examples would be Chaucer and late medieval mysticism. I have had participants do projects about more modern Franciscan topics, finding a grounding in the earliest sources an important part of understanding their work. For others, their research may lead to the development of a new course, a course revision, or a new piece of an existing course. I expect

that all projects will involve some use of the visual resources as well as written texts.

All participants will make presentations to the seminar and ultimately produce a written piece. Although the bulk of those oral presentations will probably come in the last two weeks of the seminar, I am hopeful that those participants who are already engaged in related research will present their work in progress during the early phases of the seminar.

As director, I will meet with each participant both formally and informally during the six weeks of the seminar. Initial one-on-one meetings to discuss individual projects will take place during the first week. Of course, formal or informal conversations about individual projects will take place virtually every day.

Our seminar meets in three different places in Italy. For the first week, we shall be at the Collegio San Lorenzo da Brindisi outside Rome. We will be rather cloistered, and our meals will be taken together there. This will be the most intense week for meetings and research. The library at the Collegio is, in my opinion, the best library of Franciscan studies in the world. There is limited bus service into Rome for those who might want to use libraries and archives there. We will travel into Rome for a day of visiting monuments in "Franciscan Rome."

For weeks 2, 3, and 4, we will be situated in Siena. I have chosen to meet in "la più bella delle città" (from the city's official song) for several reasons. First, there are more early paintings and statues of Francis in Siena than any other city save Assisi. Second, it is an easy commute from Siena to Florence and its art and libraries. Third, Siena is a much more pleasant and manageable place to live than Florence. Fourth, Siena as a provincial capital is a transportation hub for visiting many smaller towns and villages in southern Tuscany, several of which have significant works of Franciscan art. Fifth, Siena was the home of San Bernardino, the most important interpreter of Francis in the fifteenth century. In addition, I must also confess that I have an apartment in Siena and have made it the hub for my research for a quarter century. And, we will be in Siena for the Palio, the great festival that culminates in a horse race around the Piazza del Campo! While in Siena, participants will have access to the civic library and the university library, both of which are good for basic research. The Archivio di Stato will also be open. I will arrange for everyone to have a reader's card for the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. I have worked there for a quarter century and find it unsurpassed as a research facility for Italian art history. Its catalogue is online (www.khi.fi.it). Of course, all of the other libraries and archives in Florence are available to participants. Florence is a 75-minute bus ride from Siena (about \$15 round trip).

For the final two weeks, we will be in Assisi. We will have access to the library of the Sacro Convento; in fact, our seminar will meet inside the Sacro Convento. There is also a municipal library in Assisi, and Perugia is only about a half hour away by bus.

We shall make extensive use of the churches and museums of Siena and Assisi. We will of course journey to Florence as a group and also take a private coach trip to see Franciscan art in Pistoia and Pescia. From Assisi, we will all visit Perugia by public transportation.

Siena has numerous Internet shops, and there are several in Assisi. I strongly urge everyone to bring a laptop computer. There are hookups in the major libraries and in the Collegio San Lorenzo da Brindisi. More importantly, one can write any time of the day or night with a laptop, while Internet shops have limited hours and sometimes hordes of people waiting to check their email. They are fine for email but not for the kind of writing participants will be doing. Many colleges have loaner programs for faculty, so you may wish to ask your technology gurus about borrowing a laptop if you do not own one.

For our week near Rome, we will all stay in cells built for friars, and we will take our meals there. These are comfortable and have modern conveniences including private baths. Spouses are welcome that week, but it is not an appropriate place for small children. I can help make special arrangements if necessary, but children would really be bored there, I think. At least mine would!

For my previous seminar participants, I have booked rooms in Siena in an establishment run by Dominican sisters. They are simple singles and doubles with private baths and great views. The facilities are immaculate, and they are a 6-minute walk from the Piazza del Campo. I have a good lead on apartments within the walls that may be available at reasonable prices. By the time participants are selected, we will know precisely what housing options are available. Of course, participants are free to seek their own accommodations. However, I do not want participants to commute to the seminar from Florence or from anywhere else.

In Assisi, we have reserved rooms in small, 2-star hotels with private baths. Our housing “headquarters” will be the hotel La Fortezza near the Piazza del Comune.

Siena and Assisi have a range of restaurants from the “mom and pop trattoria” to elegant *ristoranti*. There are of course grocery stores and “fast food” options. There are laundromats in Siena but not Assisi. The easiest way to change money is by using ATM machines. As I have mentioned, it is easy to get from Siena to numerous towns and villages in the countryside by public transportation. San Gimignano is less than hour away. Small cities such as Montalcino and Pienza are an easy day trip as are the monasteries of Sant’ Antimo, Monte Olivetto Maggiore, and San Galgano. There is frequent bus service to Florence and Arezzo, and even Bologna is only two hours by bus. Assisi is not a transportation hub, but cities such as Perugia, Cortona, and Spoleto are easy trips; so is the Lago di Trasimeno.

There will be numerous concerts in Siena during our stay. However, the big cultural attraction will be the Palio. I am a member of one of the *contrade* of Siena (Viva l’Onda); and if we run on July 2, I will be an unabashed partisan. Assisi is smaller and quieter than Siena, but there are visiting musical groups that perform in the Basilica a couple of times per week.

Each participant will receive a stipend of \$4200. It will be paid in full before the beginning of the seminar. Given the strength of the euro, this amount will not be sufficient to allow seminar members to break even for the summer. Participants must make their own transportation plans. Of course, I will provide information about flights. We have a good travel agency in Geneseo that is experienced in getting people to Italy cheaply, and I will gladly connect participants with it. Of course, they will be welcome to use their own agents or the Internet.

I encourage seminar participants to bring their families. The NEH strictly forbids any visitors to the seminar sessions, but family members are free to participate in all of our site visits and social events. If you have small children, I suggest that you consider the restricted environment we will be living in for a week at the Collegio San Lorenzo da Brindisi outside Rome.

My assistant and I can help to make housing arrangements for family members if we know precise plans at the time participants are selected (just before the end of March). Participants are expected to arrive in Rome on Wednesday, June 25. The last seminar meeting will be in Assisi on Wednesday, August 6.

I’ve told you a bit about my scholarly work, but let me introduce myself to you on a more personal level. I have lived in the village of Geneseo, NY for 38 years. Geneseo is located in

western New York (Buffalo Bills country) about 25 miles south of Rochester. I am single and have three adopted sons, who range in age from 35 to 42. In addition to my sons, I have been the official or unofficial guardian for eight other kids whom I count as sons. One, Jimmy Huynh, is a 17-year-old high school senior.

The wildest adventure of my life was in 1998 when I was a candidate for the US Congress in NY's 27th District. It was an open seat race, and I took a leave of absence from teaching in order to be a full time candidate. Although outspent by a ratio of more than 15 to 1, I received 43% of the vote and had the time of my life. I carried the Franciscan vote overwhelmingly!

My administrative assistant is my friend and former student Brad Franco. Brad graduated from SUNY Geneseo in 2002 and wrote a brilliant honors thesis on the frescoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. As an undergraduate, he did two study abroad programs in Siena. At present he is working on his PhD dissertation at Syracuse University. His research is focused on the bishops of Siena in the 14th century. He served as my assistant for a course I taught last winter for three weeks in Siena, and he will be a valuable resource to you and a godsend to me during the seminar. Brad was married last August and spent part of his honeymoon in Siena. I hope that his wife will join us for at least part of the time.

On this website is all necessary application information. Please note that your completed application must be postmarked no later than March 1, 2008. It should be mailed to the following address:

William R. Cook
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SUNY Geneseo
1 College Circle
Geneseo, NY 14454-1401

Your application cannot be sent as a fax or an email attachment. The committee that will consider your application is especially interested in your essay. I urge you not to make it a rehash of your *cv*. Instead, it should focus on why you are interested in *this* seminar and *this* topic. You should demonstrate that you have the qualifications to do the work of the seminar and be a contributor to the intellectual community that will form while we are together in Italy. If you will not be teaching courses that include Francis and the thirteenth century, you will need to make the case for the value of this seminar to your professional and intellectual development. The essay should deal with academic but also personal matters that you think will be relevant to the selection committee.

In the essay, you need to describe a research project. If you are already engaged in research related to the seminar topic, explain how this seminar will deepen or broaden your work. If you have not worked in this area before, suggest an area of research on St Francis that you wish to pursue. Of course, it will be possible to adapt or even change topics between now and the time the seminar begins; but the more specific you can be, the better my committee can make its selections. Remember that the research project can be oriented toward your department's and institution's curriculum.

I am particularly interested that you make the case for studying St Francis of Assisi in context. It is easy to understand why any rational person would like to spend the summer in Italy

mostly at someone else's expense. However, I am interested in why you want to study *St Francis* there. I want the sort of applicant who would seriously consider applying to a seminar on this topic if it were being held in Geneseo, NY or Indianapolis, IN (my home town).

I know that this letter is quite long, but I wanted to try to touch all the main bases. Of course, you may have specific questions that are not answered here. Do not hesitate to contact me by phone (585 243-3139) or email (fransem@geneseo.edu). I will try to return calls and emails promptly. I will be away from Geneseo for several brief periods before the application deadline, so allow a few days for me to respond. I hope that you will apply for my seminar. Studying Francis in Italy is a profound and joyful experience. I wish you success in the application process and hope to greet you in Rome on June 25.

Pace e bene,
William R. (call me Bill) Cook
Distinguished Teaching Professor of History