

From: *Makers of the Western Tradition*, ed. J. Kelley
Sowards, 4th ed., vol. 1 (New York: St. Martin's,
1979), pp. 176–197.

St. Francis of Assisi: “God’s Troubador”

1181 or 1182	born
1209	formation of Franciscan order
1219	on crusade to Egypt
1223	revised Franciscan Rule approved by Honorius III
1224	received the stigmata
1226	died



The Bettmann Archive

St. Francis of Assisi was the most popular of all medieval saints. The facts of his life are well known and largely undisputed. He was born in 1181 or 1182, the son of a well-to-do cloth merchant in the little Italian town of Assisi. He spent a perfectly ordinary boyhood, went to the local Latin school—where he was only an indifferent student—but learned French somewhat more eagerly because of the appeal of the popular French troubador songs. He became a leader among the young dandies of the town. In 1202 he took part in one of the interminable little wars between Assisi and nearby Perugia, was taken prisoner, and fell seriously ill after his release.

Shortly afterward, he had the first of several visions that would mark the stages of his spiritual life and began to devote himself to prayer and solitude. In the next five or six years, he became a serious religious. He undertook to restore the ruined chapel of St. Damiano outside the gate of Assisi after hearing a command to do so from the crucifix above the altar. He worked on another chapel nearby that had fallen into disrepair. And he restored the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels in the valley below Assisi—the place that would play such a central role in the early history of his order, the Porziuncola, the first Franciscan church. The unaccustomed hard physical labor of this sort of work would become one of the leading tenets of his personal religion and his future order.

It was at the Porziuncola, on the feast of St. Matthias, February 24,

1208, that he heard a sermon on the text of Matthew 10:9-11, "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food." He had found another leading tenet of the Franciscan order—the renunciation of worldly goods. Francis's eccentric behavior had already alienated him from his family. Now, though only a layman, he began to preach to the townspeople and to assemble a small band of disciples. He and his followers went to Rome and appealed to Pope Innocent III to constitute them a religious order. The pope did so, but with obvious reluctance. Innocent clearly saw how similar the teachings of Francis were to those of heretics like the Cathars who were so troublesome a problem to Innocent and the church at this very time. Like Francis, they advocated poverty, service to the poor and dispossessed, and the imitation of Christ and the apostles. They were thus by their lives and teachings a rebuke to all the wealth and power and all the corruption of the established church. The measure of the pope's reluctance to grant Francis's request is that he gave only a verbal permission to form the order; it was not formally approved until 1223.

Immediately the order began to attract converts, and Francis was somewhat bewildered by the problem of how to organize them. He was a simple man with a simple vision, and he translated it into the First Rule of his order: "The Rule of life of these brothers is this: namely, to live in obedience and chastity, and without property, and to follow the doctrines and footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹ More than by this simple rule, Francis ruled his followers by the force of his own personality and the power of his example. Poverty was for him not a burden to be borne with resignation. It was *Madonna Povertà*, "My Lady Poverty," to be adored and courted. His earliest biographer tells how, on occasion, he would pick up a stick and draw it across his arm like one "playing a viol," in the manner of the jongleurs, singing in French the praises of God: he was "God's troubador." He served the poverty of others with his own and dedicated his life to the helpless, the hopeless, the homeless, the diseased, providing for them what he could, begging, working, praying for them—the purest, simplest, most naive gospel the Christian world had heard for a thousand years.

He sang and preached not only to his brethren and his fellow human beings but to all creatures, the birds and the beasts. All things in nature drew his love. In his moving song the "Praises of the Creatures" or, as it is sometimes called the "Canticle of the Sun," he praises God for "my worshipful brother sun" that "with splendor great, of Thee, most High, signification gives," for "sister moon," "for brother wind," "for sister

¹ *The Writings of Saint Francis of Assisi*, tr. and ed. Father Paschal Robinson (Philadelphia: Dolphin Press, 1906), p. 32.

water, the which is greatly helpful and humble and precious and pure," "for brother fire," and for "our sister, mother earth."²

Francis had all the zeal of the missionary. In 1211 he set out for the Holy Land but was shipwrecked in the Adriatic and forced to return home. A year later he wanted to go to Moslem Spain but was prevented by illness. In 1217 he proposed going to France but was unable to. Cardinal Ugolino, whom the pope had attached to the order to give it some official connection, persuaded Francis that he was needed by the order in Italy. But in 1219 the foreign missions of the order were at last organized. In that same year, Francis himself finally went on crusade, joining the campaign against Damietta in Egypt. We are told that during a truce in the fighting, he actually visited the Sultan of Egypt who generously invited him to visit Jerusalem and the Holy Places of Palestine: there is no record that he went.

In the meantime the Franciscan order had grown incredibly. In 1212 Francis had approved an order of nuns, proposed by a noblewoman of Assisi, Sta. Clara. In 1221 he would create a third order, a lay order of Brothers and Sisters of Penance. By this time the administrative problems of the order had grown far beyond Francis's interest in or capacity to deal with them. He withdrew more and more from its affairs to practice increasing severities. He was more and more often ill. In the midst of a forty-day fast during the late summer of 1224, Francis received another vision, of the crucified Christ, and following this there appeared on his own frail body the wounds of Christ, the stigmata.

Francis had almost worn himself out: he apologized to his body, the poor ass that he had so burdened with penance. He had contracted an eye ailment in the Near East and was almost totally blind. With death approaching, he withdrew to a solitary hut of reeds near St. Damiano's chapel, prepared for him by Sta. Clara with her own hands. The poor blind saint, ravaged by disease and crawling with vermin, is said to have added to his "Canticle of the Sun," just days before his death, "Praised be my Lord for our sister the bodily death, from the which no living man can flee . . . blessed are those who shall find themselves in Thy most holy will."³ He died October 3, 1226. Two years later he was canonized.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 152-53.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

The Little Flowers of St. Francis

There is no lack of contemporary sources for the life and deeds of St. Francis. Long before his death, it had been clear that he was destined to be a saint. Stories about him and scraps of biographical information were in wide circulation. Even some of Francis's own writings survived, most notably the "Canticle of the Sun," some prayers and offices, rules and regulations, and pastoral letters. Many of them are of disputed authenticity, and most are heavily edited by other hands. His earliest biography was written shortly after his death by one of the brothers Francis himself had brought into the order, Thomas of Celano. In 1247 Thomas prepared a second Life, much expanded and containing also the miracles following Francis's death. He was constrained to do this by the growing factionalism in the Franciscan Order. Thomas supported the party of the Spirituali, those who wished to continue to adhere closely to Francis's own rules and example. For his second Life, Thomas of Celano solicited a large collection of stories about St. Francis from brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo—the closest companions of his last few years. These stories exist in a variety of versions as well as in Thomas's second Life.

Between 1260 and 1262, an official Life or Legend of St. Francis was written by St. Bonaventura at the request of the General Chapter of the Franciscans of Narbonne. Bonaventura, who was already serving as the general of the Franciscan order, not only undertook to compress and edit the earlier biographical material but also wished to compose the increasing differences between the factions within the order. Thus much of the charm and vivacity and most of the intimate personal quality of the earlier materials were flattened out and made prosaic.

The charm, vivacity, and intimacy of those earlier biographical materials are probably best seen in two works, The Mirror of Perfection, recollections made by Brother Leo, and the most famous of all Franciscan memorabilia, the Fioretti or Little Flowers of St. Francis. Though both these works were only written down in the early fourteenth century, they reflect the authentic tradition of St. Francis and his time. Most of the same anecdotes and incidents that occur in the lives of St. Francis are also to be found here, embroidered by devotion but genuine in substance and true to the spirit of St. Francis and to the tradition of the Spirituali who treasured them.

We turn now to the account of several typical incidents in St. Francis's life from The Little Flowers of St. Francis.

THE FIRST COMPANION of St. Francis was Brother Bernard of Assisi, who was converted in the following way: St. Francis had not yet taken the

religious habit, though he had renounced the world, and had so given himself to penance and mortification that many looked upon him as on one out of his mind. He was scoffed at as a madman, was rejected and despised by his relations and by strangers, who threw stones and mud at him when he passed; yet he went on his way, accepting these insults as patiently as if he had been deaf and dumb. Then Bernard of Assisi, one of the richest and most learned nobles of the city, began to consider deeply the conduct of St. Francis; how utterly he despised the world, how patiently he suffered injuries, and how his faith remained firm, though he had been for two years an object of contempt and rejected by all. He began to think and say within himself, "It is evident that this brother must have received great graces from God"; and so resolved to invite him to sup and to sleep in his house. St. Francis having accepted the invitation, Bernard, who was resolved to contemplate the sanctity of his guest, ordered a bed to be prepared for him in his own room, where a lamp burned all night. Now St. Francis, in order to conceal his sanctity, so soon as he entered the room, threw himself upon the bed, pretending to fall asleep. Bernard likewise soon after went to bed, and began to snore as if sleeping soundly. On this, St. Francis, thinking that Bernard was really fast asleep, got up and began to pray. Raising his hands and eyes to heaven, he exclaimed, with great devotion and fervour, "My God! my God!" at the same time weeping bitterly; and thus he remained on his knees all night, repeating with great love and fervour the words, "My God! my God!" and none others.

And this he did because, being enlightened by the Holy Spirit, he contemplated and admired the divine majesty of God, who deigned to take pity on the perishing world, and to save not only the soul of Francis, his poor little one, but those of many others also through his means. For, being enlightened by the Holy Ghost, he foresaw the great things which God would deign to accomplish through him and through his Order; and considering his insufficiency and unworthiness, he prayed and called upon the Lord, through his power and wisdom, to supply, help and accomplish that which of himself he could not do.

Then Bernard, seeing by the light of the lamp the devout actions of St. Francis and the expression of his countenance, and devoutly considering the words he uttered, was touched by the Holy Spirit, and resolved to change his life. Next morning, therefore, he called St. Francis, and thus addressed him: "Brother Francis, I am disposed in heart wholly to leave the world, and to obey thee in all things as thou shalt command me." At these words, St. Francis rejoiced in spirit and said:

Bernard, a resolution such as thou speakest of is so difficult and so great an act, that we must take counsel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and pray to him that he may be pleased to show us what is his will, and may teach us to follow it. Let us then go together to the Bishop's palace,

where we shall find a good priest who will say Mass for us. We will then remain in prayer till the third hour, imploring the Lord to point out to us the way he wishes us to select, and to this intent we will open the Missal three times.

And when Bernard answered that he was well pleased with this proposal, they set out together, heard Mass, and after they had remained in prayer till the time fixed, the priest, at the request of St. Francis, took the Missal, then, having made the sign of the holy cross, he opened it three times, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first place which he lit upon was at the answer of Christ to the young man who asked of him the way to perfection: *If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell all that thou hast and give to the poor, and come, follow me.* The second time he opened at the words which the Saviour addressed to the Apostles when he sent them forth to preach the Word of Truth: *Take nothing with you for your journey: neither staff, nor scrip, nor bread, nor money;* wishing to teach them thereby to commit the care of their lives to him, and give all their thoughts to the preaching of the Holy Gospel. When the Missal was opened a third time they came upon these words: *If any one will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.*

Then St. Francis, turning to Bernard, said: "This is the advice that the Lord has given us; go and do as thou hast heard; and blessed be the Lord Jesus Christ who has pointed out to thee the way of his angelic life." Upon this, Bernard went and sold all that he had. Now he was very rich, and with great joy he distributed his wealth to widows, to orphans, to prisoners, to monasteries, to hospitals, and to pilgrims, in all which St. Francis assisted him with prudence and fidelity. . . .

The wonderful servant and follower of Christ, St. Francis, wishing to be in all things conformed to his Master—who, as the Gospel tells, sent his disciples two by two into all the cities and lands whither he intended to go to prepare the way for him—after he had assembled his twelve companions, sent them forth two by two into the world to preach. In order to set them an example of holy obedience, he first began to act himself like the Saviour Jesus Christ. Wherefore, having sent his companions to divers parts of the world, he took with him Brother Masseo, and set out towards the province of France. On arriving in a certain town, being very hungry, they went, according to the Rule, begging their bread for the love of God. St. Francis took one street, and Brother Masseo the other. St. Francis, being a little man, with a mean exterior, did not attract much attention, and gathered only a few bits of dry bread, whereas Brother Masseo, being tall and good-looking, received many large pieces of bread, with several whole loaves. When they had ended their task of begging, they met on a spot outside the city where there was a beautiful fountain and a large

stone, on which each placed what he had collected. St. Francis, seeing that the pieces of bread which Brother Masseo had collected were much larger and better than those he had received, rejoiced greatly, and said: "O Brother Masseo, we are not worthy of this great treasure"; and he repeated these words several times. At this Brother Masseo answered: "Father, how canst thou talk of a treasure where there is so much poverty, and indeed a lack of all things? for we have neither cloth, nor knife, nor dish, nor table, nor house to eat in, nor servant or maid to wait upon us." St. Francis answered. "This is indeed the reason why I account it a great treasure, because man has had no hand in it, but all has been given to us by divine Providence, as we clearly see in this bread of charity, this beautiful table of stone, and this so clear fountain. Wherefore let us beg of God to make us love with all our hearts the treasure of holy poverty." Having spoken thus, they returned thanks; and when they had refreshed themselves with the bread and water, they rose and went on their way to France. . . .

On another occasion taking with him Brother Masseo and Brother Agnolo, both holy men, St. Francis let himself be guided by the Spirit of God, without considering the road he took. They soon arrived at a town called Savurniano, where St. Francis began to preach, first ordering the swallows, who were calling, to keep silence until he had finished; and the swallows obeyed his voice. He preached with such fervour, that the inhabitants of the town wished to follow him out of devotion; but St. Francis would not allow them, saying: "Be not in such haste, and leave not your homes. I will tell you what you must do to save your souls." Thereupon he founded the Third Order for the salvation of all; and leaving them much consoled and well disposed to do penance, he departed thence, and reached a spot between Cannaiolo and Bevagno. And as he went on his way, with great fervour, St. Francis lifted up his eyes, and saw on some trees by the wayside a great multitude of birds; and being much surprised, he said to his companions, "Wait for me here by the way, whilst I go and preach to my little sisters the birds"; and entering into the field, he began to preach to the birds which were on the ground, and suddenly all those also on the trees came round him, and all listened while St. Francis preached to them, and did not fly away until he had given them his blessing. And Brother Masseo related afterwards to Brother James of Massa how St. Francis went among them and even touched them with his garments, and how none of them moved. Now the substance of the sermon was this:

My little sisters the birds, ye owe much to God, your Creator, and ye ought to sing his praise at all times and in all places, because he has given you liberty to fly about into all places; and though ye neither spin nor sew, he has given you a twofold and a threefold clothing for yourselves and for your offspring. Two of all your species he sent into the Ark with Noe that you might not be lost to the world; besides

which, he feeds you, though ye neither sow nor reap. He has given you fountains and rivers to quench your thirst, mountains and valleys in which to take refuge, and trees in which to build your nests; so that your Creator loves you much, having thus favoured you with such bounties. Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.

As he said these words, all the birds began to open their beaks, to stretch their necks, to spread their wings, and reverently to bow their heads to the ground, endeavouring by their motions and by their songs to manifest their joy to St. Francis. And the saint rejoiced with them. He wondered to see such a multitude of birds, and was charmed with their beautiful variety, with their attention and familiarity, for all which he devoutly gave thanks to the Creator. Having finished his sermon, St. Francis made the sign of the cross, and gave them leave to fly away. Then all those birds rose up into the air, singing most sweetly; and, following the sign of the cross, which St. Francis had made, they divided themselves into four companies. One company flew towards the east, another towards the west, one towards the south, and one towards the north; each company as it went singing most wonderfully; signifying thereby, that as St. Francis, the bearer of the Cross of Christ, had preached to them and made upon them the sign of the cross, after which they had divided among themselves the four parts of the world, so the preaching of the Cross of Christ, renewed by St. Francis, would be carried by him and by his brethren over all the world, and that the humble friars, like little birds, should possess nothing in this world, but should cast all the care of their lives on the providence of God. . . .

At the time when St. Francis was living in the city of Gubbio, a large wolf appeared in the neighbourhood, so terrible and so fierce, that he not only devoured other animals, but made a prey of men also; and since he often approached the town, all the people were in great alarm, and used to go about armed, as if going to battle. Notwithstanding these precautions, if any of the inhabitants ever met him alone, he was sure to be devoured, as all defence was useless: and, through fear of the wolf, they dared not go beyond the city walls. St. Francis, feeling great compassion for the people of Gubbio, resolved to go and meet the wolf, though all advised him not to do so. Making the sign of the holy cross, and putting all his confidence in God, he went forth from the city, taking his brethren with him; but these fearing to go any farther, St. Francis bent his steps alone toward the spot where the wolf was known to be, while many people followed at a distance, and witnessed the miracle. The wolf, seeing all this multitude, ran towards St. Francis with his jaws wide open. As he approached, the saint, making the sign of the cross, cried out: "Come hither, brother wolf; I command thee, in the name of Christ, neither to

harm me nor anybody else." Marvellous to tell, no sooner had St. Francis made the sign of the cross, than the terrible wolf, closing his jaws, stopped running, and coming up to St. Francis, lay down at his feet as meekly as a lamb. And the saint thus addressed him:

Brother wolf, thou hast done much evil in this land, destroying and killing the creatures of God without his permission; yea, not animals only hast thou destroyed, but thou hast even dared to devour men, made after the image of God; for which thing thou art worthy of being hanged like a robber and a murderer. All men cry out against thee, the dogs pursue thee, and all the inhabitants of this city are thy enemies; but I will make peace between them and thee, O brother wolf, if so be thou no more offend them, and they shall forgive thee all thy past offences, and neither men nor dogs shall pursue thee any more.

Having listened to these words, the wolf bowed his head, and, by the movements of his body, his tail, and his eyes, made signs that he agreed to what St. Francis said. On this St. Francis added:

As thou art willing to make this peace, I promise thee that thou shalt be fed every day by the inhabitants of this land so long as thou shalt live among them; thou shalt no longer suffer hunger, as it is hunger which has made thee do so much evil; but if I obtain all this for thee, thou must promise, on thy side, never again to attack any animal or any human being: dost thou make this promise?

Then the wolf, bowing his head, made a sign that he consented. Said St. Francis again: "Brother wolf, wilt thou pledge thy faith that I may trust to this thy promise?" and putting out his hand he received the pledge of the wolf; for the latter lifted up his paw and placed it familiarly in the hand of St. Francis, giving him thereby the only pledge which was in his power. Then said St. Francis, addressing him again: "Brother wolf, I command thee, in the name of Christ, to follow me immediately, without hesitation or doubting, that we may go together to ratify this peace which we have concluded in the name of God"; and the wolf, obeying him, walked by his side as meekly as a lamb, to the great astonishment of all the people. Now, the news of this most wonderful miracle spreading quickly through the town, all the inhabitants, both men and women, small and great, young and old, flocked to the market-place to see St. Francis and the wolf. All the people being assembled, the saint got up to preach, saying, amongst other things, how for our sins God permits such calamities, and how much greater and more dangerous are the flames of hell, which last for ever, than the rage of a wolf, which can kill the body only; and how much we ought to dread the jaws of hell, if the jaws of so small an animal as a wolf can make a whole city tremble through fear. The sermon being ended, St. Francis added these words: "Listen, my brethren: the wolf who is here

before you has promised and pledged his faith that he consents to make peace with you all, and no more to offend you in aught, and you must promise to give him each day his necessary food; to which, if you consent, I promise in his name that he will most faithfully observe the compact." Then all the people promised with one voice to feed the wolf to the end of his days. . . .

The Apostle of Nature

EDWARD A. ARMSTRONG

What emerges most strikingly from the contemporary sources of St. Francis is his love of nature and his devotion to poverty. The many incidents demonstrating St. Francis's love of nature in the biographical sources have usually been repeated either as charming tales or as pieces of the hagiographic tradition that surrounds all the information about him. Edward A. Armstrong has attempted, however, to look at St. Francis's love of nature as a phenomenon in itself. His book Saint Francis: Nature Mystic, from which the following selection is excerpted, is one of the most important modern interpretive works on St. Francis. Armstrong sets his love of nature in the larger Christian tradition rather than treating it as an isolated case. He sees Francis's love of nature as part of his love of humanity and his adoration of God, the creator of all things, including the natural world and its creatures.

DESPITE THE WELL-INTENTIONED but misguided efforts of Celano and Bonaventura, writing with an eye to satisfying authority and popular demand, we are able to discern the lineaments of Saint Francis through the rosy mists of hagiographical adulation. Although our primary purpose has been neither to subject the Lives to critical scrutiny nor to attempt another biography of the saint, we have seen that when exploring one facet of his personality—his attitude toward nature—we have had to take into consideration the bias and propagandist aims of the biographers. Thus, by discounting a good deal of adventitious matter and evaluating anew what

remains, we have been able to come closer to the Little Poor Man. On the one hand he has been presented as a figure of superhuman, indeed even, at times, supernatural sanctity, wielding magical power, and on the other as an ascetic subjecting himself and his companions to disciplines so harsh as to savour of mental disorder. These exaggerations tend to cancel out one another.

Studying the Lives with discernment, and not infrequently finding it necessary to read between the lines, Francis comes before us as a warm and lovable personality. In fairness to the early biographers, we must recognize that, apart from the pressures to which they were subjected, it was no easy task to depict him faithfully. His outlook included piety and gaiety, contrition and exuberance, adventurousness and severe self-discipline, ecstatic love of nature and absolute devotion to God. High-ranking clergy and scholars who had never kissed lepers nor felt tender concern for worms could not readily understand him.

Enough remains in the records to show that he retained much of the joviality, delight in beautiful things, and pleasure in music of his unregenerate days, as we might expect, for conversion does not revolutionize a personality but gives it new orientation and ardour. Celano remarked (1 *Cel.* 51): "He had by grace become simple though he was not so by nature." This is no more than a half truth, though a valuable one. As a youth he indulged in the distractions of other young men, but he was, and remained, whatever the diverse aspects of his personality, essentially a simple soul. Single-minded devotion to Christ gave unity to his life. Clothing himself like Sister Lark he set aside the parti-coloured garments that had astonished and amused the citizens of Assisi and made his own the gay flowers of field and forest; instead of ribald *canzoni* he sang the glory of God and taught his companions to sing Christ into men's hearts. God's troubadour, the birds were his choristers, and for him Lady Poverty was more deserving of homage than any knight's *belle dame*. Inspired by the Gospel injunctions, enthralled by tales and songs of high romance, his heart kindled by the crusading ardour of the age, he set forth in utmost humility to live as nearly as he could the life of Christ and to bring the world to His allegiance. All this, although already stressed in these pages and by many earlier writers, needs repetition here lest it should seem that in scrutinizing the natural history in the Legend we have lost sight of the saint. He was not a naturalist but a man whose loving sympathy for all aspects of Creation invigorated his insight, pioneering the way for poets, artists, and scientists. In his Discourse on Perfect Joy he emphasized that bliss does not lie in understanding "the qualities of the birds, and of fishes, and of animals, and of men, and of trees, and stones, and roots and waters" but in knowing how to "suffer patiently with joy and gladness" (*Fioretti* 8). A saint, indeed, but as such the inheritor of a tradition of enjoyment of Creation as God's handiwork stretching back to Old Testament times and

shining forth in the Gospels and Christ's exhortation, "Consider the lilies . . ." (Matt. vi. 28; Luke xii. 27). More than a millennium of Christian concern for the creatures of field and forest crystallized in his Legend and reached its consummation in the *épopée* of stories told about him and in his own Canticle of Brother Sun, commonly called the Canticle of the Sun. . . .

The ideas that found expression in the Canticle of the Sun had long been maturing in the saint's mind. Celano (1 *Cel.* 116) remarks that "many a time as he was walking on his way meditating and singing of Jesus, did he forget whither he was going, and invite all the elements to praise Jesus." It is recorded that in 1213, years before his illness at St. Damian's, he caused a tiny chapel to be erected between San Gemini and Porcaria and arranged for the following sentences to be inscribed on the antependium above the altar: "All who fear the Lord, praise Him! Praise the Lord, heaven and earth! Praise Him, all rivers! All creatures, praise the Lord! All birds of heaven, praise the Lord." . . .

The *Mirror of Perfection* (118) tells us that Francis "composed certain Praises of the Lord for His creatures, to incite the hearts of those who should hear them to the praise of God, and that the Lord Himself should be praised by men in His creatures" and that he wished "to make to His praise and to our consolation and to the edification of our neighbour a new Praise of the creatures of the Lord." He was wont to say "we ought specially to praise the Creator Himself for these (sunlight and fire) and the other creatures which we daily use." The *Mirror* also quotes him as remarking: "Every creature cries aloud, 'God made me for thee, O man.'" Thus the emphasis is somewhat utilitarian. Thankfulness for benefits conferred is given more prominence than in Celano's account of Francis's rapturous enjoyment of Creation. His picture of the Poverello, is, as we have seen, of one so entranced by God's manifestation of Himself in His creatures that, losing himself in worship, he finds himself singing to His glory together with all Creation. This picture seems more authentic than any in which the magnifying of God is represented as less evident in the saint's thought than man's convenience.

However, as it is difficult even in our own thought to separate these two attitudes, it is academic to regard them as set against one another in the minds of men of the thirteenth century and we are justified in regarding the poem as voicing an intense personal experience of God's goodness in providing for man and placing him in so magnificent and friendly a setting. Adoration and thanksgiving mingle in the manner of themes in a musical harmony. In these closing years, months, or days of the saint's life, he approaches ever closer to a unitive experience of Christ and Creation. He is overwhelmed by the realization of God's bounty and the beauty and

beneficence of which He is the Author. The morning stars sing together, and the sons of God shout for joy.

The Canticle of the Creatures of God epitomizes what Francis had been exemplifying ever since his conversion. Because God has granted us so much, we should gratefully treat all Creation with reverential delight and compassion. In connexion with a reference to his ablutions, we are told: "After fire, he most singularly loved water" because it symbolized penitence and the soul-cleansing of baptism (*Spec. Perf.* 118). . . .

The Canticle as originally composed was concerned with the natural world, using the term in a rather narrow sense, but the saint added to it later a thanksgiving for God's gifts of insight and moral order—for all that makes for peace. When a dispute arose between the Bishop and the Podestà of Assisi,⁴ Francis bade two friars go to the piazza in front of the bishop's palace, where nineteen years earlier he had given back his clothes to his father,⁵ and there sing the Canticle of the Creatures of God with this additional verse:

Be praised, my Lord, for those who for Thy love forgive,
Contented unavenged in quiet to live.
Blest those who in the way of peace are found—
By Thee, O Lord most High, they shall be crowned.

The happy outcome was that in front of a great concourse Bishop and Podestà embraced and kissed each other (*Spec. Perf.* 101; *Leg. Ant.* 44). As quoted in the *Mirror of Perfection* the verse praises God not only for those who pardon for love of Him but also for all who endure sickness and tribulation with faith and fortitude. Francis had always seen the hand of God in suffering and regarded it as a challenge, not merely to be endured but to be triumphed over. His sufferings had been his "sisters" (2 *Cel.* 212) [and] he had sought to live as Christ's contemporary, sharing His humiliation and agony. He was very far from considering death an evil or an anomaly in God's world. When he had been told that he had but a short time to live, he stretched out his hands and cried: "Then be welcome Sister Death!" (2 *Cel.* 217). He sang:

⁴ The Podestà was a hired official of a medieval Italian town, usually from some other town and always an experienced administrator. He was employed for a specified period of time—usually a year—and entrusted with the juridical and civil administration of the commune.—Ed.

⁵ This is the famous incident that marks the beginning of Francis's public ministry. His father had quarreled with him and hailed him before the bishop, charging that he was ungrateful for his father's benefactions to him. Thereupon Francis stripped off his clothes, as symbolic of his father's gifts to him, and returned them on the spot. The astonished bishop quickly threw an old robe over his nakedness.—Ed.

Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Bodily Death,
 From whom none can escape that has drawn breath.
 "Woe to those dying in mortal sin!" He saith.
 Blest those who find that in Thy Holy Will
 The second Death to them will bring no ill.
 [Spec. Perf. 120, 123]

It was as the devoted disciple of Christ that succeeding generations rightly honoured Saint Francis. Dante exalted him over the Doctors of the Church and the founders of the monastic Orders as the most perfect imitator of Christ (*Paradiso* xxxii. 34–36). In the *Paradiso* Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, speaks in eulogy of him as a sun born into the world at Assisi "where a fertile slope hangs from a hill," a place that, because of the light and warmth he brought to the world, might be called a new East. There he wedded Lady Poverty. . . . Their harmony and joyous bearing made love, wonder, and gentle looks arouse holy thoughts, and so the world gains courage to believe that holiness, wonder, love, and joy may dwell together in harmony. This is the saint, declares Saint Thomas, whose achievement can best be sung in heaven's glory.

Dante, with unerring inspiration, singles out wonder as among the saint's most striking and commendable virtues. It underlies his whole attitude to nature. Wonder naturally leads to worship. He looked at the sunrise, the woods, fields, and vineyards, he listened to the birds and streams, he savoured the perfumes of flowers in an ecstasy of wonder, and his heart-strings vibrated to immemorial melodies: "O Lord how great are Thy works! and Thy thoughts are very deep" (Psalm xcii. 5); "Great and marvellous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty" (Psalm cxxxix. 14; Rev. xv. 3); "O Lord how manifold are Thy works; in wisdom hast Thou made them all; the earth is full of Thy riches" (Psalm civ. 24). This song of the soul is indeed old but ever new. Of the Franciscan Roger Bacon it has been said: "He was a man consumed with wonder at the mechanism of the Universe," and in our time the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin referred to his faith being "inspired and supported by his inability to contain his sense of wonder."

It is not within our present scope to review or evaluate how Saint Francis's influence affected later generations. We cannot expect to be able to distinguish clearly between trends of his time and the effect of his personal influence in directing them into paths which they would not otherwise have followed nor to estimate the influence of his simplicity, integrity, and piety on generations of faithful folk; but certainly his tenderness for nature, manifested in his taking notice of and caring for humble and sometimes despised living things, ultimately affected visual art, literature, and science. Perhaps our familiarity with reproductions of the fresco in the Upper Church at Assisi of Francis preaching to the birds tends to dull

our realization of how novel was such a representation showing a saint concerned for the welfare of birds, delineated so carefully that it is possible to identify some of the species. Franciscan birds show unwonted docility but they belong among trees, not libraries. Here, for all who walked or worshiped in Assisi throughout the centuries was inspiration to compassion together with encouragement to observe. Attention was no longer concentrated on mythical creatures or morals drawn from their imaginary qualities. A path had been opened out which others followed. "Chose étrange!" said Renan, "ce sordide mendiant fut le père de l'art italien."⁶

Enthralled by the beauty and mystery of Creation, he believed and showed that love of God, love of man, and love of nature were not only compatible with one another but the natural, divinely purposed state of humanity. The love and joy resulting from devotion to God and the creatures of God should augment love and enjoyment each of the others because all is of God. He did not separate the interests of God, man, and nature, as we do, to our detriment spiritually and the earth's impoverishment. It is a measure of how materialistically minded we have become that conservationists' arguments for the preservation of the earth's flora and fauna are so often based on self-interest, the need to preserve plants and animals for man's use and enjoyment. The argument is valid and cogent so far as it goes, but implies an impoverished concept of man, for he alone is able to look beyond personal and social advantage and cherish heavenly ideals.

The Poor Little Man of God

JOHN HOLLAND SMITH

When St. Francis's contemporaries spoke of him, it was usually as poverello—the term that is often rendered as "the poor little man of God." The word literally means beggar, but the Italian diminutive jangles with other overtones of meaning when referring to St. Francis. It refers

⁶ "A strange thing that this poor little mendicant should be the father of Italian art."—ED.

to his humility, his unworthiness in his own eyes. It refers to the childlike simplicity that is among his most endearing qualities. It even refers to his small physical stature. But most of all it refers to the devotion to poverty that was absolutely central to everything Francis did, thought, or advocated. Brother Leo tells a revealing tale in this regard. On one of his preaching missions through the provinces, one day Francis happened to meet a very poor man. "This man's poverty puts us to shame," he said, "and much rebukes our poverty." His companions asked, "In what way, brother?" And he replied, "It is a great shame to me when I find anyone who is poorer than I, as I have chosen holy poverty for my lady and for my bodily and spiritual delights and riches, and this voice has resounded through the whole world saying that I have professed poverty before God and men. Therefore I ought to be ashamed when I find any man who is poorer than I."⁷

In the following selection from John Holland Smith's *Francis of Assisi*, one of the best modern biographies of St. Francis, he takes us back to the origin of the Franciscan order and of Francis's own religious commitment and of his commitment to poverty. He sets it in the context of the scriptural tradition and the troubled society of western Europe at the opening of the thirteenth century. Smith gives us an insight also into the toughness that "the poor little man of God" must have had in addition to his traditional and more saintly attributes.

FRANCIS SOON ATTRACTED attention, and acquired his first follower, Brother Bernard (I Celano 1, 24). This forced him to amplify his over-simple rule of life. He did so by adding two more texts to the charge of the Apostles which had been his original inspiration. Significantly, the two he chose were: "If thou wouldst be perfect, sell all" (the very passage which had moved Peter Waldo to make himself the first Poor Man) and, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." . . .⁸

Thomas of Celano says that the Rule followed by Francis and Bernard was a divine gift to them. Francis opened the book of the gospels three times at random, and put his finger on the three verses of the primitive Rule. While it is perfectly possible that the two men went through this solemn ceremony to discover the divine will for them, the coincidence is very difficult to accept, especially in the light of the prevailing revulsion

⁷ *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli* . . . , ed. and tr. Rosalind B. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 241.

⁸ Peter Waldo, a merchant of Lyons, had founded the lay order called the Waldensians about a generation before St. Francis. He also advocated poverty.—Ed.

against medieval capitalism. It seems even more unlikely if one has read the story of Saint Augustine's conversion from paganism in his *Confessions*. Augustine says that one day a child playing outside his house sang over and over again the phrase "Take it and read it!" and moved by he knew not what he took up the first book that came to hand, and found himself reading a part of the Epistle to the Romans in which Saint Paul calls for conversion to a more ascetic way of life. In the thirteenth century, Augustine was one of the most influential of early Christian writers, and Celano's *Lives* contain several reflections of his thought and phraseology. That Augustine should by coincidence, or the finger of God, have lighted on the one text that could touch him is perfectly credible. That Francis and Bernard should have lighted upon precisely the three passages that epitomized Francis's ideals and summed up the aims of the general reforming movement is all but unbelievable.

The more likely truth is that in the first instance Francis had no plans to found an Order. His aim was personal holiness and perfection. When first Bernard and then others joined him, and needed precepts—"sentences" in the jargon of both the lawyers and the Poor in Spirit—to guide them, he made them learn by heart these three texts as the touchstone of their actions in all circumstances.

The aim was perfection. The interesting thing about medieval Christian perfectionism with its emphasis on perfection through poverty is that there is no evidence that Christ and his followers the apostles practised total poverty as though it were an art to be perfected by constant attention to its skills. . . .

It was the eremitical prophets, from Elijah to John the Baptist, who wooed and pursued poverty. Though the urge to make oneself "like Christ" by imitating not him but the prophets living in desert places on next to nothing seems to have appeared early in Christian history, it would seem to be of non-Christian origin. It was the *illuminati* among the gnostics and neo-Platonists, and the perfect among the Cathars, who were bound by their creeds to free themselves as far as possible from material goods as in themselves evil.⁹ Whether the adoption of this ideal of perfection into Christianity was valuable remains questionable. Its popularity in Francis's time is explicable in terms of protest; over-simplifying—but not much—the argument could be summarized: our bishops and abbots are obviously rich, and obviously bad; therefore they are not Christ-like, because Christ was good; therefore Christ, who said "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" must also have been deliberately poor; therefore "poor" equals "good" and absolute penury equals Christ-like perfection.

⁹ The Gnostics and neo-Platonists were early sects that competed with and later blended with early Christianity. They were among the most spiritual of the influences coming into early Christianity.—Ed.

Christian perfectionism through poverty was a kind of fanaticism, and all fanaticism is dangerous. History records the stories of "successful" hermits; how many broke down trying to be hermits, how many slunk back to the cities, how many went mad, how many starved to death, history does not record. Francis committed himself and Brother Bernard to a life of discomfort deliberately chosen, and of cheerful acceptance of whatever evil befell them. By his acceptance of the injunction to preach, he saved his movement from the fate of many earlier eremitical groups. If his brothers preached, they could not so isolate themselves from human beings that they lost their own humanity. That the brothers became super-tramps, in the style of Joachim of Flora,¹⁰ was thus of crucial importance, if only because it saved Francis himself from going on attempting to be a hermit and perhaps ultimately withdrawing altogether into himself, as he seems several times to have been in danger of doing. In Christian terms, he was "called" to a "mixed life" of prayer and action. In its origins, his movement was a reaction against the oversophistication of monastic capitalism, the quasi-aristocratic life of the higher clergy and, at the same time, the Christ-less-ness of ordinary Christians of the middle classes now becoming powerful. Having tasted poverty, it is doubtful whether he had any romantic illusions about the godliness of the poor, but his deliberate courting of poverty was a romantic rather than a pragmatic gesture. He was an extremist and, in his own way, a rebel. He carried his personal protest against the corruption of riches to extreme limits. There is a story in the *Mirror of Perfection* which, whether it is authentic or not, perfectly illustrates the romantic fanaticism of his devotion to his principles.

It relates that a certain novice who could read wanted permission to own a psalter. But Francis's ideal—which he later had to abandon in practice—was that his brothers should desire neither knowledge nor books, and knowing this, although the novice had permission from his immediate superior to own a psalter, he asked the founder what he advised. Francis replied, very romantically, that Charlemagne, Roland, Oliver and "all the paladins" fought to the death for the faith and died martyrs to it, but nowadays men were content to receive "the praise of men" for telling the stories of what the heroes had done: similarly there were too many Christians ready merely to read what the Saints had done. A few days later, the same novice again asked permission to own a psalter; this time Francis told him that if he were allowed a psalter, the next thing he would want would be a breviary, and when he had a breviary, he would sit on a chair like a great prelate, and say to his brothers: "Bring me the breviary!" Then he poured ashes on his head, and said repeatedly: "I—a breviary! I—a breviary!" Months later, meeting Francis in the street, the same

¹⁰ An Italian Carthusian who founded his own order in the late twelfth century, Joachim of Flora (Fiore) was a famous mystic and holy man.—Ed.

novice again tried to persuade him to allow him a psalter; Francis told him to do whatever his superior permitted. The brother went happily on his way, but after a moment or two, Francis had second thoughts and running after him, took him back to the precise spot where they had talked together, and there withdrew what he had said, reiterating the rule of the Order as it then stood, that a brother should have nothing beyond a tunic, a cord, breeches, and, in the worst weather on the worst roads, a pair of sandals.

Both the words and the actions in this story ring true. The *Mirror* has been variously dated between 1227 and 1318; it claims to be the work of Brother Leo, who also collaborated in the work of *The Three Companions*. Whether the *Mirror* is early or late as a whole, in this story it does reflect Francis's mind admirably. The stories of Charlemagne and the paladins, recently composed in French in the *Chansons du geste*, had set Europe on fire with the ideal of chivalry. Francis's own dream had been of becoming a knight of Christ, going out and doing things; his own "thing" was preaching by word and example, and seeking perfection in poverty; pouring ashes on his own head and taking the importunate novice back to the very spot where he had misled him to set him on the right path again were romantic, courtly gestures in the grand tradition though on a minute scale; they were *gestes*, the deeds of a paladin translated into another field, the quest for holy perfection, and performed in the name of Lady poverty. The contempt reflected in the story for the great abbots and prelates of the church, sitting on their chairs and ordering their brothers "Bring the breviary!" is too obvious to need comment. . . .

Story after story reflects [the] memory of how simple it had all seemed in those early days—the tale of the coming of Brother Giles, for instance, from the *Mirror of Perfection*: "In the early days of the Order," when Francis, Peter and Bernard were staying at Rivo-Torto, a ruined and deserted leper-house an hour's walk from Assisi beside the road from Perugia to Rome, Giles simply arrived "from the world" and stayed with them. After he had been with them for several days, a man even poorer than the brothers came begging. Francis turned to Giles and said "Give him your tunic." Giles took it off, and the beggar put it on. His ready obedience showed Francis that Giles was a true brother at heart "so he was received," and afterwards "advanced to the greatest perfection." . . .

The idea has grown up, probably on the basis of the legends related in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, that Francis was a pleasant and gentle man. So he could be—when it suited him. But he could also be ruthless in defending his own vision and pitiless in making either his own brothers or outsiders feel and look fools, if he thought that would serve his ends. There is often humour in the tales related in the *Fioretti*—but it is frequently a very rough, coarse and rustic humour. If Francis had been soft, he could not have created the Order of Friars Minor, writing its rule him-

self and personally persuading Innocent III to approve it at a time when the pope was fighting all innovations except his own. Yet that is precisely what he did. . . .

Suggestions for Further Reading

MOST OF THE FRANCISCAN source materials are readily available and make interesting reading. There are several editions of the *Fioretti*, but the best is probably the one excerpted for this chapter, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi*, in the first English translation, revised and amended by Dom Roger Huddleston, intro. Arthur Livingston (New York: Heritage, 1965). It is also available in "*The Little Flowers*" and *The Life of St. Francis, with the "Mirror of Perfection,"* ed. T. Okey (London, Toronto, New York: J. M. Dent and E. P. Dutton, 1925). See also *St. Francis of Assisi, His Life and Writings As Recorded by His Contemporaries . . .*, tr. L. Sherley-Price (London: Mowbray, 1959). St. Francis's writings are available in two editions, *Writings*, ed. Placid Hermann (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1964), and *The Writings of Saint Francis of Assisi . . .*, tr. and ed. Father Paschal Robinson (Philadelphia: Dolphin Press, 1906). The biographical work of Thomas of Celano is available in *The First and Second Life of St. Francis with Selections from the Treatise on the Miracles of Blessed Francis*, tr. and ed. Placid Hermann (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1963). There is also an excellent critical edition of *The Writings of Leo, Rufino and Angelo, Companions of St. Francis*, ed. and tr. Rosalind B. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

There are literally dozens if not hundreds of brief, adoring biographies of St. Francis, all of them essentially uncritical. Typical of these is G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Doubleday, 1924), the work of an eminent man of letters and prominent Catholic layman of the early twentieth century. More tough-minded biographical studies are harder to find. But in addition to the two works excerpted for this chapter, two more can be recommended: Anthony Mockler, *Francis of Assisi, The Wandering Years* (Oxford and New York: Phaidon and Dutton, 1976),

and Adolf Hall, *The Last Christian*, tr. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

On Italy in the age of St. Francis there is an excellent, brief, readable social history by the Dutch scholar H el ene Nolthenius, *Duecento: The Late Middle Ages in Italy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), organized in a series of topical chapters. See also the more structured work of Marvin B. Becker, *Medieval Italy, Constraints and Creativity* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1981). Three general histories that treat St. Francis and the Franciscans are also excellent: H. Daniel-Rops, *Cathedral and Crusade: Studies of the Medieval Church, 1050-1350*, tr. John Warrington (New York: Dutton, 1957); R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); and David Knowles, with Dimitri Obolensky, *The Middle Ages*, vol. 2 of *The Christian Centuries: A New History of the Catholic Church* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).