

A Reading Essay

THE SHEER VOLUME of research done on Saint Francis and the Franciscan movement is such that no single scholar can easily keep up with it. There are learned journals in a variety of languages and popular magazines under Franciscan auspices in many parts of the world. One valuable resource for keeping up with Franciscan scholarship is *Greyfriars Review*, which provides essays in English translations of the more significant research done in the various languages.

What appears below is only a sampling of literature, all in English, of books which in my estimation are helpful in understanding the life of the saint. Many more particular studies have not been included, and of the books mentioned, some are more reliable than others. Comments made about the books will attempt, in obedience to Francis's love for *cortesia*, gently to indicate which of the books are the better ones. In my years of reading about Francis the tradition of Italian scholarship have been most illuminating for me. Those books and essays are not mentioned in this rather brief survey but scholars in matters Franciscan will recognize my debt to those scholars.

The single best and most indispensable resource for serious English-language students for the study of Saint Francis is a four-volume compilation edited by three Franciscan friars (Regis Armstrong, Wayne Hellmann, and William Short) that provides, in fresh new translations, every text by and about Francis of Assisi for the period up to 150 years after the saint's death in 1226. The titles of the volumes are: *Francis of Assisi: The Saint* (1999); *Francis of Assisi: The Founder* (2000); *Francis of Assisi: The Prophet* (2001); and *Francis of Assisi: Index* (2002). All of the volumes are published by New City Press in New York. They contain all of the writings of the saints; legends about him; liturgical texts; papal documents; and testimonies about him from extra-Franciscan sources. Those four volumes replace the old and somewhat inadequate *Saint Francis of Assisi: Omnibus of Sources* (recently reprinted from the one volume 1973 edition in two volumes by Franciscan University Press in 2002) whose main value today is the charts provided to identify where certain stories of Francis either appear or do not appear in the various legends.

There has been a notable shift recently towards a close examination of Francis's own writings. Regis Armstrong published *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1982), which is a compendium of the writings of both Francis and Clare with useful introductions and notes. The same scholar also published a close study of those writings in *Saint Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1994). In addition, Edith van den Goorbergh and Theodore Zweerman's *Respectfully Yours: Signed and Sealed Francis of Assisi* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 2001) has some excellent close readings of some of Francis's

own texts arguing that there is a complexity to them not always recognized at first glance.

Clare of Assisi did not receive the full study she deserves in this present book on Francis but there are some fine biographies of her available in English for those who wish to know more about this extraordinary woman. In 1993 the Franciscan University Press (Quincy, Ill.) published three lives of the saint: Marco Bertoli's *Clare of Assisi*; Margaret Carney's *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life*; and Ingrid Peterson's *Clare of Assisi: A Biographical Study*. The indefatigable Regis Armstrong has also assembled an excellent resource of historical documents on Clare: *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York: Paulist, 1988).

The tradition of modern biographies of Saint Francis must begin with Paul Sabatier's study of 1894 translated into English as *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York: Scribner, 1906). For an excellent study of the romantic presuppositions of Sabatier, see the important study: C. J. Talar. "Saint of Authority and Saint of the Spirit," in *Sanctity and Secularity during the Modernist Period: Six Perspectives on Hagiography circa 1900*. Edited by L. Barmann and C. Talar. *Subsidia Hagiographica* #79 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1999), 131-150.

Sabatier's controversial life of the saint provoked a Catholic response by Johannes Jørgensen's 1912 biography in English of the saint, *Saint Francis of Assisi: A Biography* which went through many editions and remained a highly popular work. Gilbert Keith Chesterton's biography, written in the 1930s, is short on fact but, typical of Chesterton, is still highly readable and not infrequently possessed of brilliant insights. As a young man the Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis visited the elderly

Danish writer, Jørgensen, in Assisi and, inspired by their conversations, published a fictionalized biography of the saint in 1962 which reflected more of the vitalism of Zorba the Greek than Francis himself.

Omer Englebert's *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1965), translated from the French, was a more rigorous historical study but today seems dated. Helen Moak managed the daunting task of abridging Arnaldo Fortini's five-volume Italian biography of the saint into a single volume: *Francis of Assisi* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). Fortini, the long-time mayor of Assisi, had mined the archives of the city for decades and, through his work, found many important data about the life of Francis.

The novelist and literary figure Julien Green wrote a lyrical biography of the saint entitled *God's Fool: The Life and Times of Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), which is still a joy to read. Adolph Holl's *The Last Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1980) is an attempt to recast Francis as a radical reforming Christian set against the institution of both church and world. A more convincing case was made by Leonardo Boff's *Saint Francis* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) who was himself a Franciscan friar and a prominent liberation theologian.

More recently there has been a spate of Francis biographies of varying quality. Three excellent works by recognized scholars must be mentioned: Raoul Manselli, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1988), and Chiara Frugoni, *Francis of Assisi* (New York: Continuum, 1998) represent excellent examples of contemporary Franciscan scholarship in Italy while Michael Robson, *Saint Francis of Assisi: The Legend and the Life* (London: Chapman, 1997), is a superb work by a Brit-

ish friar and scholar. A more modest but stimulating work is Pierre Brunette's *Francis of Assisi and His Conversions* (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan University Press, 1997), which studies (note the plural in his title) the stages of Francis's journey.

More popular works written recently tend to conflate the later legends into a biographical whole, as does Valerie Martin's *Salvation: Scenes from the Life of St. Francis* (New York: Knopf, 2001) and Adrian House's *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Hidden Spring/Paulist, 2001). Marginally better is Donald Spoto's *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Viking, 2002), which does show a familiarity with the critical scholarly literature.

The life of Francis is intimately connected to the growth of the Franciscan Order. The writings about the saint are frequently shaped by differing understandings of the mind of Francis, which has given rise to the knotty "Franciscan Question" debated by scholars for more than a century. A useful guide through the skein of writings after Francis may be found in Jacques Dalarun's *The Misadventure of Francis of Assisi: Towards a Historical Use of the Franciscan Legends* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 2002). There are some classic studies of the origin and growth of the Franciscan *religio*: Cajetan Esser, *The Origins of the Franciscan Order* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1970), Rosalind Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), and John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), is an excellent study of the rise of the radical Franciscans.

Finally, notice should be given to more particularized studies of the saint and his spirituality. Roger Sorrell's *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) is an excellent study of the nature stories and their background. Octavian Schmucki, *The Stigmata of St. Francis* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1991), is a careful historical investigation of the phenomenon of the stigmata. Bernard McGinn has excellent pages on the place of Francis in the history of Christian mysticism (with an excellent bibliography in the notes) in *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism — 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 42-64. William Short's *Poverty and Joy: The Franciscan Tradition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999) is a readable survey of the Franciscan tradition as is the somewhat more ambitious work of Anton Rotzetter, Willibrod-Christian Van Dijk, and Thaddeus Matura, *Gospel Living: Francis of Assisi Yesterday and Today* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1994).

APPENDIX

The Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord:

Make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon,

Where there is discord, union,

Where there is doubt, faith,

Where there is error, truth,

Where there is despair, hope,

where there is sadness, joy,

Where there is darkness, light.

O Divine Master,

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled

as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love;

for it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

The Prayer of Saint Francis

THE ABOVE PRAYER, attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, is one of the best known and most quoted prayers of modern times. Entering the phrase "The Prayer of Saint Francis" into a standard Internet search engine will result in over a thousand sites. Many religious organizations post the prayer on the Web; various musicians have set the prayer to music and recorded it on discs or tapes; it is found, set to music, in many hymnbooks; the prayer and variations of it are part of the spiritual literature of Alcoholics Anonymous; it is found in various sites of spiritual healing, prayer groups, New Age sites, and groups that espouse peacemaking or spiritual forms of therapy.

It comes as a shock to many people to discover that the prayer, however much it reflects the Franciscan sensibility, was written in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, in its first published form it was not even associated with the saint. How that association with Saint Francis arose and how the prayer spread is imperfectly understood even though the main lines are clear.

Evidently the prayer was published as an unsigned contribution to a small popular magazine in Normandy in France in 1913. In 1915 the Marquis de la Rochetulon, the founder of a Catholic weekly called *Souvenir Normand* sent the prayer to Pope Benedict XV along with a few other prayers on the subject of peace. It is not clear if the Marquis had written the prayer himself or found it circulating in his native Normandy. On January 20, 1916, the prayer was published in the Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano*. A week later the French Catholic newspaper *La Croix* reprinted the prayer — a common enough practice in the midst of the horrors of World War I.

In those early appearances there was no connection to Saint

Francis of Assisi. In fact, the prayer was directed to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, then a widespread and enormously influential form of devotion to the humanity of Christ (the basilica of Sacre-Coeur in Paris would not be finally finished until 1919). How then did this prayer for peace become associated with Saint Francis?

Shortly after the Roman publication of the prayer in *Osservatore Romano*, a French Franciscan had a poster made up for the benefit of the Third Order of Saint Francis (the lay branch of the Franciscan family) depicting Saint Francis holding the Rule for the Third Order in one hand and the Prayer for Peace in the other. Under the prayer was a note of its source (*Souvenir Normand*) and this annotation: "This prayer sums up Franciscan ideals and also represents a response to the urgent needs of our age." Evidently, from this first connection, the prayer became associated with the name of Francis. Quite possibly (but this is only a surmise) the association became concretized through the network of Third Order fraternities.

Leonardo Boff's recent meditative book on this prayer from which much of the above information is derived (*The Prayer of Saint Francis* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001]) argues that the prayer in fact does have a close affinity not only to the spiritual message of Saint Francis but also to its style. Francis loved to articulate disjunctions in his prayers and paraphrases of prayers. Boff points especially to the twenty-seventh *Admonition* of the saint. Using contrasts to show how virtue overcomes vice Francis says: Where there is charity and wisdom/there is neither fear nor ignorance; where there is patience and humility/there is neither anger nor disturbance. Francis includes six such contrasts. One finds the same kind of disjunctions in the

saint's "Praise of the Virtues." Of course, this is not to argue that the *Admonitions* are a direct source for the prayer but only to suggest that the style of the prayer, with its contrasts, is concord with the style of the saint.

As of this writing there is still ongoing research into the origins and dispersion of this prayer but for now we will be content to allow this prayer to bear the name of the saint in popular usage — it is a fitting tribute to his generous soul.

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