

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

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INTRODUCTION

THE Italy of today, at least in its countryside and smaller towns, resembles the Italy which St Francis knew seven hundred years ago far more closely than modern England resembles the England of the thirteenth century. Apart from isolated fragments that here and there survive, the whole face of our country has been completely altered. The religious upheavals in the sixteenth century, the imperial expansion in the centuries that followed, the industrial revolution in the nineteenth, all contributed to bring about a fundamental change. Other countries have fared better or at least changed less. The immense contrasts between Normandy and Hampshire became immediately apparent to our men in 1944. Their education had provided them with no inkling that such contrasts existed, nor with any guide to measure them; they, like England itself, had long since been severed from their origins.

Elsewhere continuity has been less gravely assaulted; and where religion has kept some hold upon the lives and thought of the people, one powerful element of continuity, knitting the centuries together one to another as they pass, has been present. Assisi of today and its surrounding country and the lives its people live would not strike St Francis as so very unlike the Assisi which he knew and the people he lived with and loved there. The political surface has changed, no doubt, but not the fundamentals, the life, the buildings, the churches—above all, the religion. Politically, the unit in the days of Francis was still the city and the surrounding lands with some sort of allegiance—claimed and admitted or denied and withstood, as the case might be—to a greater power, the Empire perhaps, or some league of cities, or the Papacy. Actually, a typical change in its political life took place at Assisi when Francis was about seventeen: the nominee of the Emperor, whose castle dominated the town—as its ruins do still—was driven out, the city walls were rebuilt, allegiance to the Empire thrown off, and a quasi-independent status was established and maintained till such time as the Papacy claimed to replace the Empire as Assisi's overlord, and made good its claim. But such changes, exciting as they must have been at the time, left no lasting alteration in the lives and habits of the people, much less in the countryside itself. So it comes about that though Francis lived a long time ago, the world he knew may still be explored today, and it is easy to see him now in just such surroundings as history shows us to have been his when he lived. This is one reason of his great popularity, especially in view of the wealth of contemporary literature in which he figures.

But it is Francis himself who provides us with the reasons to account for the widespread devotion to him. There was about him a broad humanitarianism which endeared him to all he met, a directness of approach which proved irresistible, whether he was dealing with Pope or Sultan, cultured men or rustics, good men or bad; an entire absence of parade, of artificiality, of the studied manner, together with so palpable a sincerity in his words, whether of praise, rebuke, or sympathy, that they achieved their purpose at once; a disarming trustfulness in claiming help from others, material or spiritual, coupled with a complete and devastating independence once his mind was made up. His life, too, was full of attractive incident; he was a lover of all God's handiwork, not animals alone, but hills, streams, and the fruits of the soil; he had a picturesque habit of dramatizing his thoughts or his resolutions, and of acting as well as enunciating his rebukes. His death, when it came, offers us a perfect picture at once utterly human and unspeakably sacred, an almost unique combination, closing in a truly great life, at once so homely as to repel none, so sublime as to inspire all.

Only a very little of all this can, I am afraid, be presented to readers in the few following pages; but even so, I would ask them to bear in mind from the outset that there comes a moment in the saint's life which discloses for us once for all the secret of it, an inward force which integrates his whole career and harmonizes every aspect of it. If this is unperceived, then the whole life of Francis appears—as to many it still continues to do—bereft of all real significance beyond the trifling and the sentimental, and his real message remains unread.

THE DAWN

FRANCIS was born about the year 1181. His father, Pietro Bernardone, was in a substantial way of business as a dealer in cloth. From time to time he journeyed as far as the south of France to attend the markets there, and it is thought that it may have been on one such occasion that he met with Pica, the woman destined to be the mother of Francis. In any case she it was whom Bernardone made his wife, and brought back to his home at Assisi. In due course a son was born, and christened John; but his father was away in France at the time, and, on his return, delightedly called his son Francesco, the name by which he has been known ever since. Pietro Bernardone must have been a radiantly happy man on that day when he crossed the threshold of his house and caught up from out his young wife's arms his little baby boy, his first-born son, and kissed him and called him his very own Francesco. Things were to go ill with him later on, so let us spare this one glance for him as the centre of a happy home, cheerful and kindly. The anger and misery that we know are to come to him, and all—he was to think—his own son's doing, are a measure of the love he bore him now, and of his hopes and happiness.

Boyhood

Francis followed the usual course of schooling of the children of the town. He learnt his letters from the clergy of St George's, the church in which he had been baptized. He learnt French as well, probably from his mother; and, later on, would sing the songs of the Troubadours, those singing poets, as they have been called, who came over from Provence into Italy and awoke the echoes on hillside and street and tavern with their songs of youth and chivalry, of endurance and love; and besides French there was Latin. Francis was not educated in the technical sense of the word; indeed, to his own contemporaries he was illiterate, he had no academic status of any kind; but if education means a training in the perception of values, and in the development of powers of intense appreciation of them, educated he certainly was; and perhaps his home life and his mother had as much to do with it as his school.

In Business

In due course Francis began to take his share in his father's business. A certain amount of retail work appears to have been carried on from the house itself, and sometimes Francis would be left in sole charge. He must have been a delightful young man to do business with, interested in everything under the sun except money; one of those people for whom money is nothing as long as they have plenty of it; and Francis had plenty of it, and was the soul, if not yet of true generosity, at least of great kindness. Out of office hours, so to speak, he moved in the gayest society Assisi could offer, dressed marvellously, dined sumptuously, and was generally extravagant all round: and his father—provident man of business though he was—was secretly proud of it all and was, in fact, as extravagant in his hopes as his son in his spending. His mother meanwhile looked quietly on, and thought differently: Francis would be great, no doubt—she once confided to a friend—but not in the way his father fancied.

A Prisoner of War

Soon a great change came: Assisi went to war with Perugia. In those days war was not conducted in the grand manner to which we have become accustomed since; it was more after the nature of those raids and forays of which we read in old Border history; but it made widows and orphans all the same—and prisoners of war. Francis, about twenty-one years of age by now, had joined in, of course; but the day went against Assisi, and before long he found himself with several others immured in a fortress. His captivity seems to have lasted quite a long time, as much, perhaps, as two years.

A characteristic incident occurred during it. Among the prisoners was one whose sullen manners and depressed spirits had driven the others to leave him severely alone. Francis, despite many rebuffs, never rested till by his tact and unremitting kindness he had got the poor man into a happier frame of mind and induced him to join the rest.

Home Again

On the suspension of hostilities, he returned to Assisi and soon afterwards fell seriously ill. Details of the nature of the sickness are lacking; possibly it was some legacy due to the long months of confinement ; it held him bed-ridden for some time and left him very weak. At last he was able to get up, and then to walk about again, up and down his room at first, then here and there about the house, finally outside. He was so anxious to view again that beautiful countryside, which no visitor to Assisi can ever forget. Slowly and with the aid of a stick, but quite alone, he made his way out to some spot whence field and vineyard and distant hills lay before his gaze. He looked-and knew at once he was changed. The beauty of God's handiwork filled his sight as of old, but his soul was empty. Never before had he felt so deep a void in his life; and as yet he did not understand that this was really the first dim breaking light of a great spiritual dawn.

Back to the Wars

In course of time his strength returned, and with it something of his natural buoyancy and good spirits. But he was restless, and when a chance of change came he welcomed it. This time it was a military expedition in Apulia under the famous Walter of Brienne, and sponsored by the Papacy. Francis equipped himself for his journey in the most up-to-date and lavish fashion, and rode away followed by the proud gaze of his father and the wiser hopefulness of his mother. She at least was not saddened, nor much surprised, when a day or so later he returned quietly without any show at all. What had happened? Two things-a splendid act of kindness on the part of Francis and one more touch of divine pressure upon his soul. It appears that as he rode southwards to join the war, he fell in with another, a nobleman bent on the same errand as himself. As they talked together, Francis began to feel secretly uneasy at contrasting the brilliance of his own equipment with the threadbare state of that of his companion. At last a resolution shaped itself in his mind; would his companion, he suggested, honour him by allowing an exchange? One likes to think there was some hesitation on one side, and some need of insistence on the other; but, anyway, a partial exchange was ultimately agreed to and carried out. That night, at the first halting-place of their journey, Francis had a vision. He seemed to be in a hall full of arms, armour, saddles, and equipment of every sort, and presiding over it all a beautiful maiden. This pleased him immensely, as it seemed to presage military fame and leadership and a distinguished bride; but later, as the glory faded, he seemed to hear a voice questioning him: `Who can do most for you, servant or master?' He answered: `The master.' `Why, then,' continued the voice, `do you follow the servant rather than the master?' Whatever the ultimate significance, the immediate meaning was clear. Francis changed all his plans and returned to Assisi.

THE QUEST

BACK in his native town, Francis was still quite uncertain as to what he was to do with his life. He discovered in himself a longing for solitude and for prayer. He did not break at once with the companions he had known before they themselves saw to that-but he was not quite the same Francis they had known of old, and when they rallied him on his preoccupied manner and declared he must be in love, he gaily told them they were right and that never a wiser or more beautiful bride existed anywhere than his. His mind was turning towards the bride pure and undefiled, as St James puts it, of religion, of the service of God.

An Early Friend

How much one would like to know more of that one companion who in these days showed himself so devoted to Francis. He was of the same age as himself, and absolutely in his confidence. They would go for long walks together; and then, when Francis would be absolutely alone, this friend would wait quietly for him till his prayer and spiritual travail were for the moment done. But this was clearly a time of great inward stress for Francis. If, on occasion, he would speak of a great treasure within his grasp, there were many when he appeared to his friend utterly worn out. The idea of absolute renunciation was probably taking shape in his mind. He once went as far as Rome and stood before the doors of St Peter's in borrowed rags of clothing, and begged for alms with the rest just to see what it all felt like. Much wiser and exploring

deeper recesses of his soul was his gesture of love when meeting a leper in the open plain, he leapt off his horse, placed alms in the sufferer's hands and kissed him. The former was picturesque and, in modified form, has often been repeated; the latter appears seldom and only in the annals of real sanctity.

The Voice from the Cross

In time events moved more rapidly. On the outskirts of Assisi—as every visitor knows—are found the Church and Convent of St Damian. In the days of Francis it was a poor, ruinous little chapel, with a room or two adjoining for the priest. Francis was praying there one day before the crucifix when, as from the very figure of Christ depicted there upon the wood, a voice spoke to him: ‘Go, Francis, repair My church, which, as you see, falls in ruin.’ Francis does not seem to have been the least disconcerted: he was hungering for guidance and listening for it everywhere. He took this message quite literally : St Damian's must be put right: one step enough for me: if the kindly light pointed but to that, he was content. Hurrying home, he seized a bale of fine scarlet cloth, saddled and mounted his horse and rode off to a market at Foligno. Here he effected the sale of the cloth, and of the horse and the harness as well. Then, with a substantial sum of money on his person, he started on the long walk back. He came at last to St Damian's, offered everything to the astonished priest and begged leave to stay with him. The good priest refused the money, and it was left for the time being on the window-sill, but he knew Francis well and allowed him such poor hospitality as his house afforded. It was not long before Pietro Bernardone got wind of these fantastic doings, and, in high dudgeon, came down to seek his son. Francis fled; and Pietro, baffled and very angry, had to return home empty-handed.

Trouble in the Home

After an interval of some weeks, Francis returned to the priest's house. But he would not be a burden upon another's poverty, kindly and welcoming though the good priest was. He must maintain himself in some fashion, he thought: and so he walked up one day, into Assisi and started to beg alms in real earnest from his astonished fellow-citizens. All knew him and some were kind, but many mocked him. A little later Bernardone heard some mild sort of tumult going on near his house. He must have guessed and feared what was afoot. He hastened out, and there was the lost idol of his dreams, gaunt, ill-kempt, a butt for the ribaldry of a crowd of urchins. He seized Francis, dragged him back into his home, beat him mercilessly and locked him up in a cellar. But he was due for a business journey almost immediately: and nothing must interfere with that; so, with many injunctions to Pica, he left Assisi. Mother and son in the same house together, but even Bernardone should have foreseen as inevitable what actually happened next. Pica went in to Francis, spoke lovingly to him, argued with him no doubt, as in duty bound, urging him to be sensible, knowing all the while that he knew she never expected, hardly even hoped that he would give in. She left him at liberty; they kissed and parted.

In the Bishop's Court

Francis went back to St Damian's and resumed his old life. Then, of course, his father returned and learnt from Pica all that had happened and of the way his son was living. Angered beyond measure, he made his way down to the priest's house. Francis stood his ground and faced him. Argument and bullying were alike of no avail; but Bernardone-in however bad the cause-had something of the determination of his eldest son. He went straight off to the civil courts and laid a summons against Francis with a view to charging him with theft and to disinheriting him altogether. When the summons arrived, Francis refused to obey it: He alleged that, as a man who had already left the world, he was no longer subject to the civic authorities, the city consuls, and he appealed to the Bishop. The consuls were most unwilling to press their rights, and to Bernardone it was all one who settled the case for him; but settled it should be; he was determined on that. The Bishop at the time was Guido, already a friend to Francis and to remain so all his life. When the case came on it aroused much interest, so well known to everyone were the two principal parties, and so unusual the nature of the dispute. The Bishop ruled that the money in question, lying till now on the window ledge at St Damian's, must be restored to Bernardone, for, however pious the uses to which Francis would put it, it was not his to dispose of. Hearing this, Francis,

in a flash of intense exhilaration and before anyone could intervene, stripped off all his clothes, arranged them in a heap, laid the money on top and then addressed the by-standers: 'Listen, all of you, and understand this,' he exclaimed, 'Till now I have called Pietro Bernardone my father; but my purpose is to serve God, so I here hand over to him the money he is troubled about, and the clothes I had of him; and now I say: Our Father who art in heaven: not Father Pietro Bernardone.'

An Interlude

Francis was not angry with anyone, least of all with his father: he was rejoicing in a sense of new-found liberty, and longed to be friends with all: but for Bernardone it was a hard moment: he gathered up the clothes and money and left the court. Meanwhile, some sort of rough garment was procured for Francis, who then went back to St Damian's, and in a day or so moved right away from Assisi. Did he ever mean to come back? Perhaps, now the money had gone, he felt he could do no more for the little church, and wished to sever himself once for all from his native surroundings. For a few days he stayed in a Benedictine monastery, where he was employed in the kitchen: then he went on to Gubbio and was hospitably received by a friend there. This friend gave Francis a recognized sort of hermit's dress, a tunic, girdle and staff and shoes; possibly also some advice, for, thus equipped, Francis soon returned to St Damian's. There may have been no money, but the little church must still be repaired, and Francis set about begging stones and oil for the lamps and much else that was needed. This begging was a much more familiar feature in the Italy of the days of Francis than it would be in England today; but still it was not always easy. Here, for example, was a familiar house, full of the companions he knew well; he could hear them singing as he stood in the street outside: he could not enter and beg there: but he forced himself to it, and did.

But if the quest was sometimes hard for Francis, it was a constant irritant to his father, who cursed him whenever he met him. The counter-measure adopted by Francis has become famous: he got a simple fellow, a beggar like himself, to accompany him on his rounds, and should his father appear he was to cap his curse with a blessing. Then there was a younger brother—one bitter cold day, kneeling in church behind Francis, who, in his scanty coverings, was shivering with the cold, he whispered audibly to his neighbour: 'Ask Francis to sell you a pen'orth of his sweat.' But Francis was a match for him. Turning round, he said with a happy smile: 'Oh, but I sell it much more profitably to my Lord.' But whatever his brother thought, we ourselves must not be misled by his gaiety. Francis as his whole life shows, was of an intensely affectionate nature, and it would be a misreading of his character to fancy his heart was steeled in these early days against this separation from those he loved, his mother especially; or that he was indifferent to their antagonism. It was all real grief to him.

For perhaps as long as two years this sort of life—not unfamiliar in the Middle Ages—was led by Francis. When St Damian's was repaired, he started on another church, he spent much of his time, too, helping to serve the lepers: and lodged often enough in the settlements assigned to them. Then a third church caught his eye and heart: it too needed much repair work. It lay in a wood in the plain below Assisi; it was called St Mary of the Angels. It was in this little chapel, set to its right use again, that one morning at Mass there came to Francis the light he had so long been praying for.

THE TASK

EARLY In the year 1208, Francis—now about twenty-seven years of age—was hearing Mass in the little Chapel of St Mary of the Angels, when suddenly the mist in his soul lifted and he saw his way clear before him. It was the Gospel that impressed him so forcibly, the story of the sending out of the Twelve Apostles to preach, the independence of all material resources which Our Lord then inculcated, and the message of penance and peace they were to carry abroad. When Mass was over, Francis consulted the priest to make sure he had caught the Gospel meaning aright, and then exclaimed joyfully: 'This is the way of life for me.' Forthwith he put off his shoes, replaced his leather girdle with a cord, tossed aside his staff, and began his life's work. We are inclined to wonder how it was all done, but we should remember that the dawn of the thirteenth century was like the end of a long winter. Everywhere new life, new hopes, ill-defined anticipations, a new

range of scholarship even, were springing into movement. Much of it all would be still-born, much would flourish for a brief day and go out, but here and there, would be small beginnings destined to strike deep roots, stretch out wide arms, traverse the centuries, survive. Such was the movement born in the heart of Francis that spring morning seven centuries ago.

The First Disciples

His first sermons were delivered in the Church of St George. His appeal now, and all his life long, was for peace. Violent class struggles, symptomatic of the age, had arisen in Assisi; and he was bent on calming them. But wider still was his love of God. The Gospel he had listened to that morning with such new wonderment as though hearing it for the first time had made him aware, as never before, of his intense love of God and of God's Church.

To Francis, God was made visible in Jesus Christ, and the work of Jesus Christ was made actual in His Church. Here he differed from others of his time—sincere men, no doubt—who sought to rejuvenate Christian society, but who failed to see that to build apart from the Church is to build for a day: perpetuity is her mark and, where she will, her gift; it was hers to Francis. So it came about that in an incredibly short space of time, Francis found himself the centre of a little group of followers: Bernard, a man of business, Peter, a priest and Canon of the Cathedral Church of Assisi, Giles, of the Golden Sayings, Philip, the tall, and many others. When their numbers reached eight, Francis sent them out two and two to preach; it was only a beginning, but even so, France and Spain were both reached: then almost miraculously it seemed—they all reassembled together at Assisi. Not that they had any settled home as yet: an outhouse or barn would serve them for the time being: but for Francis something of incomparably greater importance was now to be secured.

Rome Approves

His disciples now numbered twelve: before anything else was attempted, they must go to the Father of all Christendom and get his approbation and his blessing on their work. To Rome, then, they all went; and Francis wrote out a little Rule, or Way of Life, as he called it, for the Holy Father to read and approve if he would. At Rome they were very fortunate in meeting their good friend, Bishop Guido. He was afraid, at first, that they were abandoning his diocese: but being reassured about that, he introduced them all to Cardinal John Colonna, Bishop of Sabina. The Cardinal, himself a monk of the monastery of St Paul—outside-the-walls, had a long talk with Francis, exploring his purposes. He soon satisfied himself that here was no ordinary character, to be quietly side-tracked into some monastery, so clear was Francis as to the path he hoped to tread, so gentle yet so firm in his refusals to deviate from it. With such friends behind him, it is not surprising that when the time came for their audience Pope Innocent III received Francis and his companions very kindly. He approved of their Rule and enterprise, encouraged them to persevere, authorized them to preach, and gave each one the tonsure, thereby admitting them to the clerical state.

Never did a happier group of friars walk out together from Rome than did Francis and his twelve companions in that summer of the year 1209. Everyone and everything smiled upon them: their needs were met without asking, and when they came to the beautiful valley of Spoleto they lingered on day after day, loath to leave it. But no; Francis knew it was to no such quiet and even life of prayer and seclusion to which he was called—though frequently enough the old longing would return—but to a life of movement, seeking to rekindle everywhere the fire of the love of God. The little party returned, then, to Assisi. And now there was no mistaking the feeling of his fellow-citizens. Crowds of men and women, young and old, of every section of its society, flocked to hear him. After a brief sojourn in a few rude huts at Rivo Torto, the ever-growing Franciscan family took over the little Church of St Mary of the Angels. The Benedictines whose property it was allowed the friars also the use of a few modest buildings and of the adjacent land, in consideration of an annual token rent of a basket of fish: on no other conditions would Francis agree to hold it. Yet with what tenacity of love did Francis cling to that sanctuary of St Mary's: it was the cradle of his order, the *fratres minores*, as he would have them called, and it was to this same convent he would come back to die.

A Growing Apostolate

But in these years the new movement, so tiny in its origins, yet so confident in its knowledge of Papal approbation, began to surge forward apace. Its young leader, twenty-eight years of age, was in the full vigour of his powers. He preached in all the surrounding districts, Perugia and Tuscany as well as Assisi, and always with the same disarming simplicity and earnestness. As a rule, he went forth and spoke from the fullness of his heart, quite heedless of the number of his listeners. Sometimes he prepared a sermon, but often enough, when it came to the point, he was obliged to confess that he had forgotten all he had prepared, and then straightway would speak with immense vigour just as the spirit moved him.

Saint Clare

Among the many won over by Francis to the total consecration of their lives to God must be mentioned Clare and her sister Agnes. In 1212 St Damian's was ready for them, and Francis joyfully installed them there with the other devout souls who had come to join them. Long before, as he toiled at the restoration of that little church, he had foretold the noble purpose this convent was to fulfil.

Missionary Beginnings

And now he turned to another work, at first sight of a very different sort. This same year was to mark the first tiny beginnings of that huge missionary movement which, by the end of the century, was destined to reach as far as the Indies and Peking. The aim of Francis was Syria, but the ship in which he and his companion were sailing was driven on to the coast of Dalmatia. No other ship being available in which to continue their journey, there was nothing for it but to return. This they succeeded in doing; not, however, without some difficulty as, being without passage-money, they had to get aboard surreptitiously. All ended well; as, when food ran short, the friars made their appearance with such an abundance, supplied by a friend ashore, as to satisfy everybody and placate the ship's master.

The next scheme of Francis was an endeavour to reach Morocco, and to convert the Mohammedans there. Having failed on the eastern side, he would assault the western end of their great North African crescent. But this time sickness prevented him from getting any farther than Spain; whence he returned, yet again with hopes disappointed, to Italy. But they were far from being in vain, these unfulfilled ventures of Francis; they were the first stirrings of a new springtime. Since the early centuries which witnessed the consolidation of a Christian Europe, from the isles of the north-west to the Slavonic countries in the east, the idea of missions in the far lands beyond the borders of Christendom had lain dormant in the Church till Francis kindled anew the fires of apostolic zeal.

Council of the Lateran

In 1215 a General Council of the Church—the fourth Council of the Lateran—was summoned to meet in Rome. Francis was certainly in Rome on this occasion and attended some of the meetings. The purpose of the Council was to organize a new Crusade for the recovery of the Holy Places, to foster the revival of Catholic life, especially by means of preaching and by the observance, as a minimum duty, of the newly issued precept of Easter Communion, to close up the ranks of the Church Militant by forbidding any further dispersal of energy in the way of new brotherhoods or orders. These, though matters of great moment, did not directly affect Francis. His own Rule, even with its “privilege” of poverty, i.e., the rejection of endowments and of all use of money, was regarded as already in possession before the Council met; and there was no question of merging his religious family with any other.

But the immense significance of the Council for Francis and, indeed, for many others, lay not in the detail of its decrees, but in the fact that it constituted an appeal from the very master of Christ's Church on earth, to a world-wide renewal of the ideals of Christian righteousness, to the love of God, and to zeal in His cause. Such an appeal from such a source went straight to the heart of Francis, and more than ever confirmed him in his way of life. It was at Rome on this occasion that Francis first met and embraced St Dominic. As time went on, their mutual regard for one another grew

apace: each saw in the other a man wholly aflame with zeal for the spread of the Kingdom of God, and no link clasps souls together more closely than that. Two years later they met in Rome again under the hospitable roof of one who had come to be a great and powerful friend to both, Cardinal Ugolino. Before parting, Dominic begged from Francis his cord. Francis, so ready as a rule to give away anything he was asked for, on this occasion hesitated; he felt the immense reverence and esteem that lay behind the request, but he yielded at last in true humility before the affection of his friend, and gave up his cord. Dominic girded himself with it at once.

The Portiuncula

Pope Innocent III died at Perugia—with Francis at his side—in the July of the year following the Council. He was succeeded in a few days by Honorius III. Back once more at St Mary of the Angels, Francis was praying one morning early in the little church when he had a vision. Christ appeared to him; bade him seek out the new Pope and beg a plenary indulgence for all who, contrite and having confessed their sins, should visit St Mary's. That same morning, with Brother Masseo accompanying him, Francis set out for Perugia, and quite simply put his request before the Pope. Honorius granted it readily, thereby suddenly raising the little church almost to the same level as the tomb of the Apostles at Rome, the Holy Places in Palestine, or St James of Compostela in Spain. In deference, however, to many expostulations from high quarters, the Pope limited the privilege to one day each year, the day already fixed, viz., August 2nd, for the consecration of the church. But what an outstanding power Francis, all unbeknown to himself, had become that he could thus circulate in the Papal Court, ask for and obtain the most amazing concessions, and undo, without giving the matter a thought, the counsels of his adversaries. On August 2nd, 1216, St Mary of the Angels was consecrated. Several bishops were present, and Francis preached in the open to the assembled crowds and announced the new indulgence—known universally now as the Indulgence of the Portiuncula, or Little Portion, the pet name in Francis's day for St Mary of the Angels. .

All the while the numbers of the brethren were increasing rapidly, and in 1217 the first Chapter of the order was held. The beginnings of close organization are apparent in the delineation of separate provinces, with provincial superiors to rule them. After the Chapter missionaries were despatched to various countries, though not outside Europe. Francis himself was persuaded to remain in Italy, where, as guide of the young fraternity, he would be within reach of many of the newcomers to inspire them with his ideals, and at the same time in close contact with such leaders of the Church as Cardinal Ugolino. When, three years later, a second Chapter was summoned to Assisi, it was presided over by the Cardinal himself, and no less than five thousand brethren assembled at it. This time Francis secured the appointment of two Vicars who were to govern the Order in his absence, for he was himself determined to share in the missionary work to which he felt his friars were preeminently called. One party started out on the old trail through Spain to Morocco. He himself with thirteen others sailed for the East. They reached Acre, a stronghold of the Christian forces in Palestine, and thence sailed down to Egypt and joined the Crusaders' army outside Damietta. What followed is best related in the words of one of the Crusaders themselves, James de Vitry.

In Syria

‘We saw the founder and head of this Order whom all the others obey as their Prior, a simple and ignorant man, but loved of God and men, by name Brother Francis. To such a degree of exaltation and fervour of spirit was he seized that when he had come to the Christian army outside Damietta in Egypt he reached the camp of the Soldan of Egypt himself, so bold was he and so fortified with the shield of faith. When the Saracens captured him on the road, he said. “I am a Christian: lead me to your Lord.” And when they had dragged him before the Soldan, the cruel beast was turned to gentleness by the expression on the face of the man of God, so that for several days he listened most attentively to his preaching to them the faith of Christ. At length, fearing lest some of his people should be converted to the Lord by the power of his words, and so go over to the Christian army, he ordered him, with all reverence and with every safeguard, to return to our camp, saying to him at the last: “Pray for me that God may reveal to me that law and that faith which is to

him most pleasing.”* *

This incident is so picturesque in itself and has inspired so many artists that its deeper significance is apt to be overlooked. It was the death-blow to the Crusades, those efforts to force the issue by armed power; and the dawn of that new wisdom which knows—however slow men are to apply that knowledge—that evil can only be really cured, not by counter-violence, but by good.

The Rule

Leaving a group of friars behind him to maintain the Christian life in Syria as best they might, Francis, with Brothers Elias and Peter in his company, returned in the early autumn of 1220 to Italy. He had been absent for quite twelve months at least, and things had not gone too well whilst he had been away. As an Order the Franciscans were still very young, and a variety of currents was eddying about, each striving to assert itself over the others. Some were for solitude, some for the towns; some were for the life of retirement, some for preaching everywhere; some were all against study, some anxious to throw themselves into the teeming intellectual life bursting into vigour around them. Francis replaced the two Vicars by one, choosing Brother Peter for that office; and meanwhile he busied himself with drawing up a more detailed and formal Rule for his religious family. This was no easy task, and there must have been much drafting and redrafting of texts. In 1221 a complete Rule was drawn up; but it soon became evident to Francis that it would not succeed in doing what he hoped, and what every Rule should do, namely, unite his great family together more and more closely; and so, with his good friend Cardinal Ugolino to help him, he drew up another. In 1223 this was ready; and it was submitted to the Holy See and definitively approved by Pope Honorius III, and has remained the Rule of the Order ever since.

But we must not imagine that all this time Francis was doing nothing else but worrying over Rules and administration. The old enthusiasms never waned; and in fact when Elias, a great administrator, succeeded Brother Peter as Vicar in March, 1221, Francis was freer than for many years past to devote himself to his life of prayer and preaching. There is a delightful picture of him, at the Chapter which met in the summer of that same year, sitting quietly at the feet of Brother Elias, who presided, and letting him do all the work; only intervening towards the end by reminding his Vicar that the mission to Germany, which had been tried already and proved abortive, must certainly be tried again; and it was.

At Bologna

In 1222 we find Francis at Bologna. The house of the friars had been founded in that city while Francis was away in Syria. On his first visit, after his return, someone inadvertently spoke of it to him as your house. Francis immediately turned all the brethren out of it, including some who were sick, so disgusted was he at the idea of his friars being regarded as the owners. Only when the civic authorities protested that the house was their property, which they were allowing the friars to use, could he be prevailed on to allow them to re-enter. Now, in the summer of 1222, he came back to Bologna to give it in return of his best and what it sorely needed—peace within its walls. Here is a contemporary picture again, and very vivid: it was written by Thomas of Spalato:

‘In the same year, on the day of the Assumption of the Mother of God, when I was a student at Bologna, I saw St Francis preaching in the piazza before the Palazzo Publico, where almost the whole town was assembled. The theme of his sermon was “Angels, Men, Devils”: and he spoke so well and so wisely of these three rational spirits that to many learned men who were there the sermon of this ignorant man seemed worthy of no little admiration, in spite of the fact that he did not keep to the method of an expositor so much as of an extempore speaker. Indeed the whole manner of his speech was calculated to stamp out enmities and to make peace. His tunic was dirty, his person unprepossessing, and his face far from handsome; yet God gave such power to his words that many factions of the nobility, among whom the fierce anger of ancient feuds had been raging with much bloodshed, were brought to reconciliation. Towards him, indeed, the reverence and devotion of men was so great that men and women rushed upon him headlong, anxious to touch the hem of

*. *See Moorman, Sources for the Life of St Francis, p. 56.*

his garment and to carry away bits of his clothing.’*

Christmas at Greccio

Such was Francis amidst the crowds. Now let us see him on the hillsides. The season of Christmas was approaching and Francis was staying in the little convent of Greccio perched high up on the side of precipitous slopes overlooking the valley of Rieti. As the great feast drew near, he found it more and more difficult to keep his intense love of Jesus to himself: he needed an outlet. Like the martyr-poet three centuries later, he felt keenly the Burning Babe's lament, “Yet none approach to warm their hearts or feel my fire but I”; and he determined that this time at least he would gather as many as he could to warm their hearts by the fire of Christ's love. He had a good friend in the district to help him in his plans, a cave in the hillside was selected, and by Christmas Eve all was ready. How wonderful it looked to the peasant folk who climbed the steep slope and gathered in and around the cave. An altar had been set up, candles burned brightly in the darkness, and a real ox and ass had been allowed pride of place near the manger, wherein was laid the figure of the Child. At midnight the sacred ministers pressed their way through the crowds, stood at the altar and the Mass began. Francis was the deacon, and after he had sung the Christmas Gospel in a rich, strong voice that floated down into the valley, he preached the sermon. It was, of course, on the love of Jesus for man, and every time he pronounced the Holy Name Francis lingered on it as though savouring some delicious sweet; and to many it seemed as though the little figure, lying so still in the manger, woke as from a sleep to life. That Jesus might live in the hearts of men, as He lived in his own, was ever the hope of Francis; and that Infant stirring in the straw is the perfect symbol of his apostolate, and the perfect summary of his message. That delivered, and his real task was done.

THE END

THAT Christmas at Greccio was probably the Christmas of 1223. Francis was forty-two years old, and it almost comes as a shock to realize that he had only three more years to live. He was still active enough and often on the move from place to place, but his physical vitality was beginning to decline. It is to this we probably owe the few writings of St Francis that we have. Apart from the Rule and the Testament, it was chiefly to reach those to whom he was unable to come at the time that Francis put his pen to paper. We have his Admonitions, probably addressed to Chapter gatherings, and some Letters, mainly of the kind meant to be circulated amongst the houses of his Order.

Love of the Eucharist

Here it must suffice to note with what intensity of ardour Francis, in these letters, presses upon his priests, his lay brethren, and the faithful in general, devotion to the Mass and the Holy Eucharist. It was his deep love of the Blessed Sacrament that lay behind his toil in lifting up from decay one after another of the little churches round Assisi. He would often, on his travels, set to and sweep out the dust in some ill-kempt country chapel: he loved to see the altar linen clean and tidy, and helped to provide poor churches with both linen and altar vessels; for every priest, whatever his reputation, he had the deepest and most sincere respect. All this was but the outward mark of the faith he valued so highly and to which he would draw all others if he could.

Side by side with his love of the Eucharist was a devotion to the Passion of Our Lord. There was nothing sombre or depressing in his thoughts on the sufferings of Christ. He was well aware of the weight of evil that caused them, and of what to him seemed his own contribution thereto; but at the same time he could not help being overwhelmed and overjoyed at the memory of the love that chose the Passion and of the immensity of grace and hope and glory it had brought back to men.

La Verna

These mysteries of love and suffering must have been much in the mind of Francis during the late summer of the year
**Moorman op. cit p. 56.*

1224. He was spending his days in prayer and solitude on the famous mountain in Tuscany, la Verna. The Order he had founded was spreading everywhere, riding high on the crest of the wave of Papal encouragement and guidance. Learned men and men of great administrative qualities were joining it in large numbers and from every country. The vision had indeed come true which Francis had had long ago, and which he had related to his first followers to encourage them, telling them how he had seen the roads leading to St Mary of the Angels thick with men of every race, French and English and Spaniards, hurrying to enrol themselves as his sons. That very year 1224, Francis had sent Brother Agnellus from Paris to establish the friars in England; and almost as soon as they landed, some sure instinct as to their vocation sent them at once to the large cities and the university towns. Francis felt that powers greater than his own were moulding the new Order to purposes more varied and on a wider scale than ever he had foreseen. Now on la Verna he would be quite alone. The whole mountainside had been presented to the friars by a great friend and benefactor, a certain Lord Orlando. A tiny dwelling place for a few brothers had been built, but Francis withdrew even from that, and established himself in a little cell on the far side of a deep ravine, and only accessible by a plank bridge. Brother Leo, so dear and loyal a friend, was to come every evening with a little food, and at midnight to say Matins with him. It was almost like the old life again, when Francis had tramped over the wild hills north of Assisi with his one solitary companion, and then left even him so as to be alone and pray. But now the search was done and the treasure had been found, and Francis was at peace—the peace of perfect self-surrender before God's holy will.

The Stigmata

Yet would God set a seal upon His servant, a seal at once searing and glorious, which would mark him out for all time as Christ's very perfect follower. A day or so after the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross the great vision was vouchsafed to Francis. The figure of Christ on the Cross, yet in glory ineffable, appeared to him: two wings folded above Christ's head, two outspread in flight, two gathered around His limbs. As the Figure approached, intense sorrow, intense joy passed and repassed in the soul of Francis: then came the hidden colloquy none but he could know, nor with any other share. When the vision had left him and all was still again and himself once more alone, Francis found that the wounds of Christ's Passion were his. In hands and feet and side he saw them and felt the pain of them; hands and feet as though nails had been struck through them, his side as though a lance had pierced it: Christ's seal.

At the end of September Francis bade farewell to the friars on La Verna, and to his friend, the Lord Orlando, and moved away into Umbria towards the old home, St Mary of the Angels. He could only walk now with great difficulty, and all his travelling must be made on a donkey. Despite this, however, he seemed full of energy, and embarked almost at once upon a new apostolic journey.

But it was not to be for long; his strength soon waned, and his sight was failing rapidly. Everything that the devoted care of Brother Elias and the skill of doctors could do was tried, but without avail. Clare was full of solicitude. It was in the garden of St Damian's, in a little hut there, that Francis, during a sleepless and tormented night, composed his famous Canticle of Brother Sun, and when morning came got pen and ink and paper, and dictated it to one of the brothers. Before leaving, he told Clare she would see his face once more. She did, for when they were carrying the lifeless body of Francis back into Assisi to lay it in the Church of St George, the bearers went by way of St Damian's that Clare and her daughters might look for the last time upon the features of their beloved father. It is like St Francis that in these last years of his life he wrote his Canticle, breathing joy and gratitude in every line, and also his Testament, his last message to his children, a quite different thing—in fact, a most moving document, full of a strange mingling of sternness and gentleness, of discouragement and of hope.

Last Days

And now the autumn has come of the year 1226. After a long journey as far north as Siena, where a famous physician had been consulted, Francis had made his last journey home, over the familiar ways, through the familiar towns, Cortona and Gubbio, Gualdo and Nocera, back to Assisi. He was taken to the palace of good Bishop Guido, for the civil authorities

feared for his safety in the lonely little convent below the town: there was no knowing what the Perugians might be at, and they would have loved to have Francis in their city. Meanwhile, Francis was showing all around him how beautiful a thing is death. He was so joyous about it that he would add another stanza to his Canticle in praise of this new sister. How often he had said: 'Brothers, till now we have done but little: come, let us begin'; and for him the end was truly a beginning. But for his brethren, for those especially who had been with him in the early days, his death could be nothing less than an end; his passing a great sorrow. When death seemed near, Francis, lying in bed, crossed his arms and laid them one on the head of his first companion, Brother Bernard, one on the head of his Vicar, Brother Elias, kneeling by the bedside, and blessed them and, through them, all his children.

But still Sister Death tarried in her coming, and the sick man rallied a little, and Brother Elias obtained the necessary permission to carry the dying saint to the home he had so loved and wished to die in, St Mary of the Angels. They bore him down into the valley on an open litter; but before the journey was over, Francis bade the bearers lay the litter down turning its head to Assisi, and thus viewing the city of his birth for the last time, he blessed it. Arrived at St Mary of the Angels, another most unexpected and most welcome visitor made her appearance. This was a certain noble lady of Rome, Giacoma de Settesoli. She had met Francis and sought counsel of him during one of his early visits to Rome, and for many years had been a friend and benefactor to Francis and his brethren. Francis had been on the point of sending a special messenger to ask her to come to visit him and to bring with her all that was needed for his burial, and some special sweet cake as well of which he was very fond and would taste again; but, before the messenger had left, there was the sound of horses' hoofs and the tramp of many men in the courtyard. It was Giacoma herself, come with a retinue befitting her rank, and with all Francis had asked for, to visit her friend. What a warm welcome he had for her, and how he rejoiced in God's goodness in thus forestalling his wishes, providing for all his needs, and enabling him to see once more one who had been so devoted to him and his.

When she had left and Francis was alone again with his beloved children, he spoke most gently to them, but bade them lay him habitless on the naked ground, for he knew death was at hand. He had two of the brothers sing to him his Canticle of Brother Sun, and then, almost with his last breath, he recited the 141st Psalm, with its beautiful words, 'Lead forth my soul from bondage that I may praise Thy Name: the blessed wait for me till the reward be mine.' He could do no more. He had the Passion of Jesus read to him from the Gospel of St John, and in the reading of it quietly died. It was sunset on October 3rd, and outside in the dusk some late lark was singing.
