

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

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DURING the last two months there has been a steady stream of pilgrims towards the little hill-town of Assisi, so beautifully situated in one of the loveliest parts of Italy overlooking the many-hued plain of Umbria. But it is not the fairness of the scenery that has drawn this devout host. Rather is it the grandeur of a noble personality. Here, seven hundred years ago, on Oct. 3rd, Francis Bernardone commonly known as St. Francis of Assisi died, and it is on this day that the celebrations which have continued through these weeks will reach their culmination.

The famous sites of Assisi are all associated with the life and work of this man. On the level of the plain is the Portiuncula, literally the "little portion of ground", but now the name is applied to the small chapel built on this plot which became the scene of his visions and mystic experiences. Passing up the steep and wearisome hill, and through the arched gate-way, one reaches the noble edifice of St. Francesco, dark and solemn in the lower church, but in the upper church soaring lofty and luminous, all of it adorned with matchless frescoes, descriptive of the scenes of St. Francis's ministry. Farther west and south is S. Chiara, a Gothic building of 1257, under whose altar is the tomb of Sister Clara, "that ideal of a Grey Sister, sober, steadfast and demure", who following St. Francis's direction formed the order of the "Poor Clares." In Assisi, indeed, one thinks and dreams of only one person; nor is it easy to recall another town that is so wholly identified with a single name. But it is not only Assisi that has felt his charm. All Italy, and in fact the world, bears the marks of this saint. Within two years of his death he was canonized, the order he founded became for a time the most healthful religious force in Europe, and the calm judgment of the modern student is that he was one of the most extraordinary and illustrious figures of history. It is therefore most natural that attempts should be made to find the secret of this persistent influence.

§ 1

He brought fresh inspiration to art. The rise and progress of Italian painting are closely associated with St. Francis. Citizens of Assisi and friends of the friar wished to erect a

monument worthy of the great Master, and accordingly the Gothic church of S. Francesco was built to guard and honour his tomb. Tradition tells that in his humility St. Francis had requested to be buried among the malefactors on the Hill of Execution, because of his sinfulness; but when his followers had built the memorial church, they re-named the hill "Paradise." This church became the home of the newer painting. Symonds says that "the building of the church of St. Francis at Assisi gave Italian painting the first great impulse, and to the piety aroused by St. Francis throughout Italy it owed its animating spirit in the fourteenth century." (*Fine Arts*, 1420).

Giotto, born forty years after the death of the friar, came hither at the request of the General of this Order, and this remarkable youth painted in fresco thirty-two scenes of the life and acts of St. Francis, "so perfectly that he acquired very great fame." Thus the first great genius of Italian painting won his spurs and gained his inspiration at Assisi. A new cycle of art subjects was provided. These Franciscan themes offered new fields for conquest. The humanism of the saint and his love for earthy beauty, his spontaneity and naturalness, all found an immediate response in the youthful Giotto, who was quick to break away from the monotony of the old traditions, and who exchanged the drab of the primitives for the glowing colours of nature. We perhaps cannot adequately appreciate the magnitude of this achievement, because of our failure to recognize the mission of art. To us painting is a mere external adornment, a luxury meant for the few; but in those days the Italian often received his clearest conception of truth by means of the revelation of colour and design. In that dawning of the new enlightenment, art was not an elective. It was a major subject in the course of civilization.

§ 2

He quickened letters, and laid Italian literature under a great debt. He was a lover of song, and had cultivated the arts and graces of the Troubadours, when as a gay youth he paraded the streets of his town, the leader among those who sang these songs of Provence. After his conversion his joyous enthusiasm would break out in extemporaneous and rapturous songs of praise called "lauds". His disciples tell how he would take two pieces of wood as his rustic violin and improvise songs in the vernacular. Among these the best known is the *Canticle of the Sun*, composed after a period of intense agony of body and mind, an outburst of exultant and victorious praise:

Praised be my Lord God with all his creatures, and specially our brother the sun, who brings us the day and who brings us the light, fair is he and shines with a very great splendour: O Lord he signifies to us Thee!

Praised be my Lord for our sister the moon and for the stars, the which he has set clear and lovely in heaven.

Praised be my Lord for our brother the wind, and for air and cloud, calms and all weather, by the which Thou upholdest life in all creatures.

This classic was the first of the many Italian religious poems, and had a distinctive place in the development of Italian literature. Ernest Renan called it "the most perfect utterance of modern religious sentiment."

In addition, we are reminded that the influence of St. Francis on the pen of Dante, the father of Italian literature, was no less potent than his effect upon Giotto, the father of Italian painting. A distinguished Franciscan scholar goes so far as to say that without St. Francis there would have been no Dante. Allowing as we should for the partiality of a devotee, we must acknowledge the prominent place occupied by St. Francis in the *Divine Comedy*. In the 11th and 12th Cantos of the *Paradiso* he is likened to the sun, "a splendour of cherubic light"; while by his mystical marriage to the Lady Poverty, St. Francis is said to have come nearer than any other to the mind of Christ:

She, (Poverty), reft of her first husband (Christ), scorned, obscure,
One thousand and one hundred years and more,
Waited without a suitor till he came.

Indirect evidence abounds throughout the poem of familiarity with Franciscan customs and beliefs. Dante's following of Vergil is likened to the pilgrimage of these wandering brothers:

Silent, alone without company, we went on, the one in front
and the other behind, as Friars Minor go along the way.—*Inf.* 23.

The fact that Dante's body was laid to rest in a Franciscan sanctuary at Ravenna has been thought to lend some likelihood to the tradition that the poet had actually joined the ranks of the Order either as a novice or as a tertiary.

§ 3

St. Francis rescued the Church from its moral decline, and initiated a revival of religion that remained as one of the most persistent spiritual forces for centuries after his death. In the

upper church at Assisi there is a fresco representing the dream of Innocent III, in which the Pontiff saw the Lateran Basilica ready to fall in ruins and saved only by the strong shoulder of St. Francis who was supporting it. This was the graphic mode of saying that the papacy and the officials of the Church were in grave danger of bringing ruin to their organization, and that they received invaluable aid from the devotion and zeal engendered by this movement. The earnestness with which St. Francis proclaimed the call to repentance and holiness, the insistence with which he preached the gospel to the poor, his demand for social justice and his universal love for mankind—these proved the most salutary influence of a time when materialism and greed prevailed even in high quarters. The Franciscans, though their later history was not without its dark blots, though their mendicantism sometimes degenerated into pauperism, yet saved the Church in a period of serious danger. Sir James Stephen may be quoted as an unprejudiced judge:

So reiterated and so just have been the assaults on the Mendicant Friars, that we usually forget that, till the days of Martin Luther, the Church had never seen so great and effectual a reform as theirs. Nothing in the histories of Wesley or of Whitefield can be compared with the enthusiasm which everywhere welcomed them, or with the immediate and visible result of their labours. In an age of oligarchic tyranny, they were the protectors of the weak; in an age of ignorance, the instructors of mankind; and in an age of profligacy, the stern vindicators of the holiness of the sacerdotal character and the virtues of domestic life.

§ 4

But the attraction of St. Francis for the average man will probably rest in his mastery over the highest of all arts, the art of living. This man had discovered the peace of the simple life. Hearing one day in church the words of Jesus, "Provide neither gold nor silver nor brass in your purse, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes nor yet staves", he left off shoes and staff and girt himself with a cord. His vow of absolute poverty was resolutely maintained to the end, and he never refused the request of any beggar if he could in any way grant it. He dared not possess wealth when his Master had had no place whereon to lay his head. But with this austerity went an unceasing joyousness. He sent forth his poor men as "Jugglers of God", who were to bring laughter into the faces and hearts of the people, like the jugglers of the street or stage. They must bear in mind that "a single sunbeam may drive away many shadows." His soul was ever

filled with the praises of God. When in his wanderings he was met by a band of robbers, and they asked him who he was, he replied, "I am the herald of the Great King." When they beat him and cast him into the ditch, he only sang the louder. The *Canticle of the Sun* reveals the way in which all fear had been driven from his mind by the perfect love which ruled his heart. The sun is not a pagan god nor a heartless force, neither is the sea the haunt of a resentful Neptune, but the sun and fire are his brothers and the sea his sister. The world thus was for him one united family, and of all the forces and events of life he would say "All ye are brethren."

Many of the incidents told of him remind one of the ways of children, as when he talked to the flowers or preached to the birds. "Brother birds, greatly are ye bound to praise the Creator who clothed you with feathers, and giveth you wings to fly with, and a pure air to breathe, and who careth for you who have so little care for yourselves." But we must not infer that this childlike simplicity grew out of a weakness of character. This quality was indeed his strength, and in St. Francis was fulfilled the saying of his Master: *He that is greatest among you shall be servant to all.*