

The Francis We Never Knew: Surprising Revelations About the Man From Assisi

by Christopher Blum/Crisis Magazine

It would be a pardonable offense were one to greet the prospect of yet another book on St. Francis with a yawn. But in the case of Augustine Thompson's *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Cornell, 2012), it would be a mistake. All of us know something about St. Francis, but few of us know the truth. Father Thompson delivers it.

"In his final words to his followers, the issue he found most pressing was not poverty, not obedience, but proper reverence for the Eucharist." Imagine summing up Saint Francis of Assisi by pointing to his devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. Yet this is not all we learn from Father Thompson, O.P. In the course of putting to rest various myths about his subject, he tells us surprising truths: for instance, Francis expected his followers to work with their hands rather than to impose upon others by their begging. Francis was more incensed by dirty altar linens and chalices than mistreatment of the poor or breaches of the peace. And Francis, far from being a Deep Ecologist, "was emphatically not a vegetarian."

If he was not the man we thought him to be, or the man of those with agendas, then what was he? A man who with dogged determination tried to put the words of the Gospel into practice; a man so transformed by grace, that when the barbaric thirteenth-century physician approached his diseased eyes with a red-hot brand, thinking to cure them by cauterizing the flesh of his face, Francis, far from flinching, made the sign of the Cross over the iron and said: "My Brother Fire, noble and useful among all the creatures the Most High created, be courtly to me in this hour. For a long time I have loved you and I still love you for the love of that Lord who created you. I pray our Creator who made you, to temper your heat now, so that I may bear it."

It is indeed the courage and the manly endurance of St. Francis that the reader of this new biography is invited to contemplate. Father Thompson explains that his work is "the first sustained attempt in English to treat [the] medieval sources for Francis in a consistently, sometimes ruthlessly, critical manner." He does not, however, leave the reader to wade through sheaves of source criticism, but rather presents a brief, almost stark narrative of some 140 pages, shorn of all footnotes and with a mere handful of scholarly asides. For readers who take an interest in such matters, the volume's second half will be compelling, for it consists in a parallel march through St. Francis's life in which Thompson matches his own account with those offered by other experts on St. Francis and with the primary sources themselves. Most, however, will probably flip to these notes only occasionally as they read through the biography, for the story is told in a

way that captures and holds the attention and leaves little occasion for idle wondering about interpretive disputes.

Those who have long known and loved St. Francis will perhaps be disappointed that the wolf of Gubbio does not here make an appearance. He does not meet Father Thompson's standard for sources, which says that those originating more than two generations after the saint's death are likely to be tainted by the medieval tendency to embroider a saint's life through the multiplication of miracles. Yet he is no scoffer. In addition to matter-of-fact recountings of well-attested miracles of healing and of moral conversions wrought by Francis—and sometimes by the touch of his personal effects—there is also a sustained consideration of his stigmata that, at least to this reader, is a ringing vindication of their reality. And there are also pages that can only be described as edifying, as for instance a beautiful retelling of the story of the first crèche at Greccio and a stirring account of Francis's personal devotion to the Passion of Christ.

Some readers will perhaps find the author's frankness when treating his subject's personal shortcomings to be disconcerting. Francis, viewed through Thompson's eyes, seems to have veered perilously close to psychosis, whether in the narcissism and then the depression of his life before conversion, or in his erratic behavior as an ill-suited and unhappy leader of a religious community afterwards. Yet these aspects of this new biography of St. Francis are subordinated to the highly-disciplined narrative treatment, in which ancillary details are kept to a minimum and mentioned briefly, while the spotlight is kept firmly on the deeds and saying of St. Francis that can be trusted to reveal, as much as possible, "the man behind the legends."

Thompson is quick to point out that his "new" Francis is the product of his own inquiry and reflection, and so not necessarily a more "real" Francis, but an "historical" one. To the reader of his *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125-1325* (Penn State University Press, 2005), some of his interests and concerns will be readily perceptible. One of these is to situate Francis within the expectations and common suppositions of his extraordinarily pious age, without which his movement never could have started, much less have grown exponentially by the time of his death. It is interesting to note, however, that for all of the ways Francis's new community reflected conceptions of holiness that had been emerging for almost a century in central Italy, there were also distinct divergences—as, for instance, Francis's determination that he and his followers should eat meat. In Francis's Italy, one who pursued a seriously mortified life, even a layman or woman, would often go without meat during many days of the week and year, in accord with various liturgical observances. But Francis thought these observances went beyond the letter of the Gospel and so should be set aside in favor of a more literal, and hence more humble, following of Christ. Francis was also an innovator, notably in the area of Eucharistic piety; although not the first to do so, he insisted upon the importance of genuflecting at the elevation of the Host at a time when clerical piety indicated only a profound bow.

This work is, however, more than a new light shed on aspects of Franciscan piety; it offers us contact with the saint himself. In his introduction, Fr. Thompson mentions his "hope that this book will speak to modern people, believers and unbelievers alike, and that the Francis I have come to know will have something to

say to them today.” Perhaps himself testifying to his own experience of living with the saint and finding his estimation of him change over time, he adds: “I am sure that he will teach each reader something different.” It is the great merit of this work that its author has striven for and attained a high degree of transparency before his subject; he has truly presented Francis so that each reader may ponder both the riches of his character, and, crucially, the still greater riches of God’s grace in bringing that character into conformity with Christ.

It is this transparency that makes Thompson’s *New Biography* so compelling. The reader is again and again brought up short by the other-worldly holiness of the saint. Although Thompson points out that he thinks Francis’s spiritual vision paradoxical, even calling it “impossible,” nevertheless it is clear that he, too, has found Francis strangely moving. For Francis’s truly radical pursuit of obedience and humility is so far removed from our daily patterns of life that he can only seem a marvelous, unrepeatable, essentially inimitable miracle of God’s grace. Yet Francis, like us, held his treasure in an earthen vessel, and to meet him as a man with a temperament that was at times out of harmony, with a psyche displaying its wounds, and with a mind often perplexed and unsettled—to meet him, that is, and to see that but for God’s grace he was as we are—is to be offered a rare and valuable perspective upon the nature of holiness.