

# Francis of Assisi

the life and afterlife of a medieval saint



ANDRE VAUCHEZ



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*The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*



André Vauchez

Translated by Michael F. Cusato

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*To Denise,  
without whose support this book would never have been completed;  
To Étienne, Anne, and Antoine, who have heard me talk about it  
for such a long time;  
And to those friends who have patiently waited for it.*

No matter how hard we try, we always rebuild monuments in our own fashion.  
But to build with only genuine stones requires a lot of work.

—Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*

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## PREFACE

You might be saying to yourself upon opening this book, “Not another life of Francis of Assisi!” There are already so many! Besides, he seems so well known, so familiar to us. Who has not heard of this saint who loved poverty, preached to the birds, and was the first to bear the stigmata? Writing a biography is a legitimate undertaking when it corrects the oblivion into which someone has fallen after playing such an important role while alive; or to rehabilitate the reputation of a man or woman who has been misunderstood or poorly treated by earlier authors. Francis belongs to neither of these categories. For a long time, he has been famous and universally recognized as one of the great spiritual figures of the human race, as was shown yet again when representatives of the principal world religions gathered in Assisi in 1986, at the call of Pope John Paul II, in order to pray for peace and to reflect on how to help bring it about in our world.

But in spite of the renown of Francis and his native town of Assisi, it is not at all certain that many of our contemporaries—outside of Italy, where he is still a popular figure—know who he really was. Numerous authors who have been interested in him both in the past and in our own time have sought above all to edify their readers by presenting him as a model to follow; or to invite us to share the emotion, even the enthusiasm, that some aspect of his fascinating personality has inspired in them. Others have even devoted brilliant essays to him, sometimes based upon an enlightened intuition, like *Le Très Bas* (The lowliest) of Christian Bobin, or sometimes anchored in the study of his social and cultural context, like Jacques Le Goff’s *Saint Francis of Assisi*, but without trying to present a complete view of his life or his message.<sup>1</sup> We can also mention as illustration the numerous films, more or less romanticized, that have been devoted to the Poor Man of Assisi in an attempt to reconstruct his life through its principal episodes.

With only a few rare exceptions—like the splendid *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (known in English as *The Flowers of Saint Francis*) by the Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini (1950)—such reconstructions are but figments of the imagination or fanciful creations. These presentations are inevitably artificial because the search for a consistency—after-the-fact—leads one to paper over the gaps in the documentation, thereby transforming into a singular and straightforward destiny a life which, like that of every human being, is marked by uncertainty and discontinuities.

These deficient presentations first of all result from the fact that, very often, those who are interested in Francis of Assisi have not gone back to the sources, which are numerous and varied, or have not used them properly. Indeed, the lack of knowledge about the specific character of hagiographical texts and the refusal to approach them in a comparative perspective have too often led biographers of Francis of Assisi to stitch together a kind of patchwork, lining up bits of information drawn from texts written for different purposes and in different periods. The image, in large measure artificial, that derives from these more or less arbitrary combinations reflects more accurately the subjectivity of their authors than it does the climate of the period in which the Poor Man of Assisi lived.

One of the major problems posed by the biography of Francis is that everyone thinks he or she knows Francis well enough to interpret him however one wishes; his personality is so rich that it can indeed give rise to different “readings.” For centuries, we have celebrated him as the ascetic and the stigmatic, the founder of a great religious order and the paragon of Catholic orthodoxy. Then, at the end of the nineteenth century, he was considered a romantic hero, upholding an evangelical and mystical Christianity which had been destroyed by the ecclesiastical institution. In our own day, we have placed more emphasis on the image of the defender of the poor, the promoter of peace between individuals and religions, the man in love with nature, the protector and patron of ecology, or even the ecumenical saint whom Protestants, Orthodox Catholics, and even non-Christians can relate to. To each his or her own Francis, one is tempted to say, just as Paul Valéry spoke of “[his] Faust,” thus claiming the right to interpret for himself this great literary myth. Such a situation, which attests to the importance of the person and the fascination which Francis has never ceased to exercise on people, is probably inevitable. It corresponds to the multifaceted character of the personality of the saint of Assisi that is mirrored in the variety of sources through which we know him. But the historian, faced with such multiple aspects, immediately feels uneasy and willingly leaves to popular writers the task of producing synthetic works (unsatisfactory from a scientific point of view),

which, except for a few details, are scarcely remembered in a later era. Because this popular literature exists, moreover, the historian is more inclined to take refuge in erudition and “pure” research. Indeed, contemporary historiography has often been marked by the assumption, given the current state of our knowledge, that an authentic biographical reconstruction of the person of Francis may not even be possible.

However, Francis is neither a myth nor a legendary person, even if many *legendae* were written about him during the Middle Ages. And there is no reason that he should remain more out of reach than his contemporaries like Saint Louis or Frederick II, both of whom have been the subject of remarkable biographies and whose historicity no one has ever questioned. Surely, since Henri-Irénée Marrou, we know that absolute objectivity does not exist in this domain and that any claim to know things “as they really happened” is illusory. But a biographer who wants to produce a work of history must not renounce his or her objectivity simply because biography, like history, is written in the present and reflects the hopes of its time. The author of this book is well aware that it is the work of an individual belonging to a time, place, and culture that will by necessity determine his way of framing the questions. He is interested in Francis, for example, because he had for a long time lived and worked in Italy and has regularly visited Assisi and Umbria. He has been able to measure the profound impact of Franciscanism in that country, where he met numerous people for whom the saint of Assisi remains a living point of reference. As a medievalist, he has dedicated his research to the history of holiness and to the study of hagiographical texts—legends and miracle collections—which constitute the core of the documentation that we have at our disposal for knowing the figure of the “Poverello”—the Little Poor One.

But acknowledging the factors which might have influenced him is not in contradiction with the search for a certain methodological rigor. The historian, even and especially when he avoids this subjectivity, is necessarily engaged in his subject in some manner. That does not prevent him from doing his work honestly, or rather exercising his “craft as an historian”—to use the apt expression of Marc Bloch—while taking his distance vis-à-vis all legends, golden or black, and while approaching the study of the broadest possible documentation with the maximum of objectivity. When the historian proceeds thus, he shows that “we do not have anything better than the testimony and the criticism of the testimony to validate the historical representation of the past.”<sup>2</sup> He or she must also have the humility not to claim to be saying everything or to know everything about the life and personality of one’s subject, of whom it is necessary to recognize that certain aspects—and not just a few—escape our grasp or

remain opaque to us. Indeed, as the documentation relative to Francis betrays, as we shall see, certain *lacunae*, the great temptation is to fill in the gaps by recourse to conjecture and to confer on his existence a unity and logic which it obviously did not have. Thus the historian must be careful to stress the evolution of his subject without covering over the subject's hesitations and contradictions: a task especially difficult in this case, where the hagiographical texts that speak of the Poor Man of Assisi have a tendency to "make an abstraction" of his lived reality and present his life as an exemplary account in which the person counts less than the personality. Jacques Le Goff, however, has shown in his *Saint Louis* to what extent the medieval sources contemporary to his subject, in spite of their partial and biased character, are fundamental to understanding how the image of the sovereign was created.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Francis as well, it is important to analyze with precision the first steps of the tormented genesis of the historical recollections about him, as well as the interpretations, sometimes contradictory, of which his person and project were the object throughout the centuries that followed his death and even beyond. If the documentation that we have at our disposal only rarely permits us to get at the "real" Francis, it does highlight the considerable impact that he had on his contemporaries and upon generations afterward.

Thus this work does not present itself as a biography in the classic sense, moving from the birth to the death of its subject. It devotes considerable space, after a description of the principal steps of his earthly life, to the study of his posthumous destiny and of the impact of his message through the centuries: in short, to all that is meant by the German term *Nachleben* (afterlife). For the beginning does not determine everything; and truth cannot be separated from its transmission. The story of the Poor Man of Assisi did not stop the day of his death. We can even say that, in a certain sense, he knew a second life in this world after he had left it. Thus the "historical" Francis—the only one we can grasp—results from what he managed to reveal of himself in his writings and, at the same time, from the different perceptions of his person and life by his contemporaries and those interested in him through the ages.

The critical approach that I will endeavor to use in this book is not meant to throw suspicion—as is fashionable today—on a universally admired person; even less is it meant, through any sort of iconoclastic spirit, to cast doubt on the greatness of the man. Rather, I strive to rediscover Francis especially in those things which make him different from us. Not a Francis who is the forerunner of our modern times or the poetic hero of harmonious concord between human beings and nature; but a person who lived in the Italy of the communes between the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries whose life

I shall try to retrace in all its uniqueness. The worst pitfall for a historian is anachronism. By seeking at all cost to adapt the Poor Man of Assisi to our present day under the pretext of making him acceptable and interesting for our contemporaries, we risk distorting him and losing sight of his original characteristics, as well as the concrete issues of his life. As Peter Brown has said, "We must never read Augustine as if he is our contemporary." Making Francis "relevant," as is often attempted, is only a surreptitious way of speaking about ourselves while making it seem we are speaking about someone else.<sup>4</sup> Let us thus seek, first of all, to place Francis within his own time, without nourishing the illusion that we are rediscovering the Francis of Assisi who traveled the pathways of Umbria with a few rag-tag companions and whose lived reality will always escape our grasp. The main difficulty consists in reconstructing for today's reader a world which has become foreign to us and to render it understandable, in spite of the insurmountable discontinuity that exists between its categories of thought, its forms of sensibility, and our own. But only when one has made this attempt of distancing does it become legitimate to ask ourselves what it is in the life and witness of the Poor Man of Assisi that still interests us.

For Francis, like Jesus or Socrates, is one of those spiritual masters whom each generation must remake as its own by rediscovering them through reflection, study, and a comparison between the teachings that come from such figures and from that generation's own experience. Like these masters, the Poor Man of Assisi escapes all appropriation, to the extent that he is like all other human beings, beyond their respective beliefs, in their search for a model of humanity and wisdom. Moreover, his story continues to fascinate and to touch each one of us to the extent that it incarnates in an exemplary manner the conflict between a creative experience (which is, at root, distinguishable from every prescriptive observance) and the requirements of an institutionalization that assures the survival of a founding charism (but which simultaneously alters certain essential characteristics of the original project). Here we discover a dialectical tension that is fundamental in the history of Christianity and the Church, but which goes beyond the sphere of religious experience and concerns all movements and ideologies that, to use the words of Charles Péguy, begin in "the realm of the mystical" only to end up in "the realm of the political." Nor should we forget the famous phrase attributed to the same author: "They have clean hands because they do not use their hands." This allows us to measure, in this area, the futility of overly simplistic dichotomies in historical reconstructions.

If the fact of writing a new biography of Francis finds in this approach sufficient justification, is it not necessary to still say something new about him so that the enterprise might actually be worth the effort? Such is the case today,

thanks to the profound renewal which has marked Franciscan studies for forty years or so, particularly in Italy, thanks to the works of numerous philologists and historians whose research has helped advance the understanding that we can have of the life of the Poor Man of Assisi. This statement will perhaps appear somewhat surprising since the majority of sources on which we work today have been known for a long time; and, in the absence of any sensational new discovery in this area, one can wonder where anything new might come from.

But if the body of texts upon which our knowledge of Francis rests has not been enriched in the course of the past half-century, new editions and especially the progress of critical reflection have allowed us to better date and situate certain sources in relationship to others. For the historian's work does not consist, as we have already said, in merely juxtaposing the information coming from various documents, placing them all on the same level, stripped of context; it is rather to establish among the sources a hierarchy founded on their proximity to the events which they report on, the particular contexts of their authors, and the intentions underlying their composition. Scholars have long dreamed of discovering, hidden in a hitherto unknown manuscript, the "real" *Life of Francis* that one of his companions would have been able to write, perhaps Brother Leo, who was his secretary. We know today that we will probably never find this text—if such a text ever existed in this form (which is doubtful). So rather than wandering off on this hopeless quest, researchers concern themselves with establishing the relative value of each of the known sources that tell us about the Poor Man of Assisi, and with drawing from these their historical significance.

These works remain for the most part inaccessible to nonspecialists, few of whom even suspect that such sources exist. Thus it seemed to me that, as we come to the end of this rich season of historiography, the time for harvesting has come: it is time to bring to the awareness of a larger reading public the results of these recent studies which now allow us to speak about Francis in new ways—and even oblige us to do so. Their authors are too numerous to mention all of them here; one will find their names in the notes and in the bibliography which appear at the end of this volume. I want, however, to recognize a particular debt that I owe to two of them who have now passed away: Raoul Manselli, who introduced me *verbo et opere*, by word and deed, to the history of Franciscanism during my sojourns in Rome, and Father Théophile Desbonnets, O.F.M.: the latter, in particular, continued and enriched the tradition of Franciscan studies in France at a time when this area was scarcely a matter of interest. And at the heart of the Italian historiography to which I owe so much, allow me to give a special place of honor to Giovanni Miccoli and Grado Giovanni

Merlo, who, among living authors, are the ones whose studies probably have contributed the most to renewing the historical approach to Francis and to medieval Franciscanism.<sup>5</sup>

I would like to especially thank Nicole Bériou, Jacques Dalarun, and Chiara Mercuri, who have kindly read through my manuscript and shared with me observations that helped me to avoid various errors or imprecisions. Those that remain are attributable to me alone.

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*Part I*

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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH  
1182—1226

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## FRANCESCO DI BERNARDONE

### A CITY, A MAN: ASSISI AND FRANCIS

Few historical figures have been as associated with a place and, more precisely, with a city than Francis of Assisi. Saint Thomas is “Aquinas” only by virtue of his birth. Saint Bernard, although in principle constrained by monastic stability, was often absent from the abbey of Clairvaux to which his name remains associated. In contrast, Francis is tied to Assisi with every fiber of his being. This is where he was born at the end of 1181 or the beginning of 1182; where he died during the night of the third and the fourth of October 1226; and where he was buried, before his body was transferred—in 1230—to the basilica built in his honor on the western edge of the city. He spent his whole childhood in his native city. And if he often left it after the birth of his fraternity, he was not away from it for very long, except when he went to Egypt and Palestine in 1219–1220. The rest of the time, at the conclusion of his preaching campaigns in central and northern Italy, he always faithfully returned there or, in any case, to the church of the Portiuncula, located about a little more than a mile outside its walls: the cradle of his order, which always remained for him a primary point of reference. Franciscanism is really the only Christian religious movement that might be able to speak of having a capital (Assisi) and a center (Umbria). The imprint which the Poverello has left is nowhere stronger than in those places where he lived and sojourned for a long time.

When Francis came into the world at the end of the twelfth century, what was this city like where his human and religious experience would take root? In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante admirably evoked its natural surroundings:

Between Topino's stream and that which flows down  
from the hill chosen by the blessed Ubaldo,