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## THE POPULARITY OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI.

BY SHEILA KAYE-SMITH.

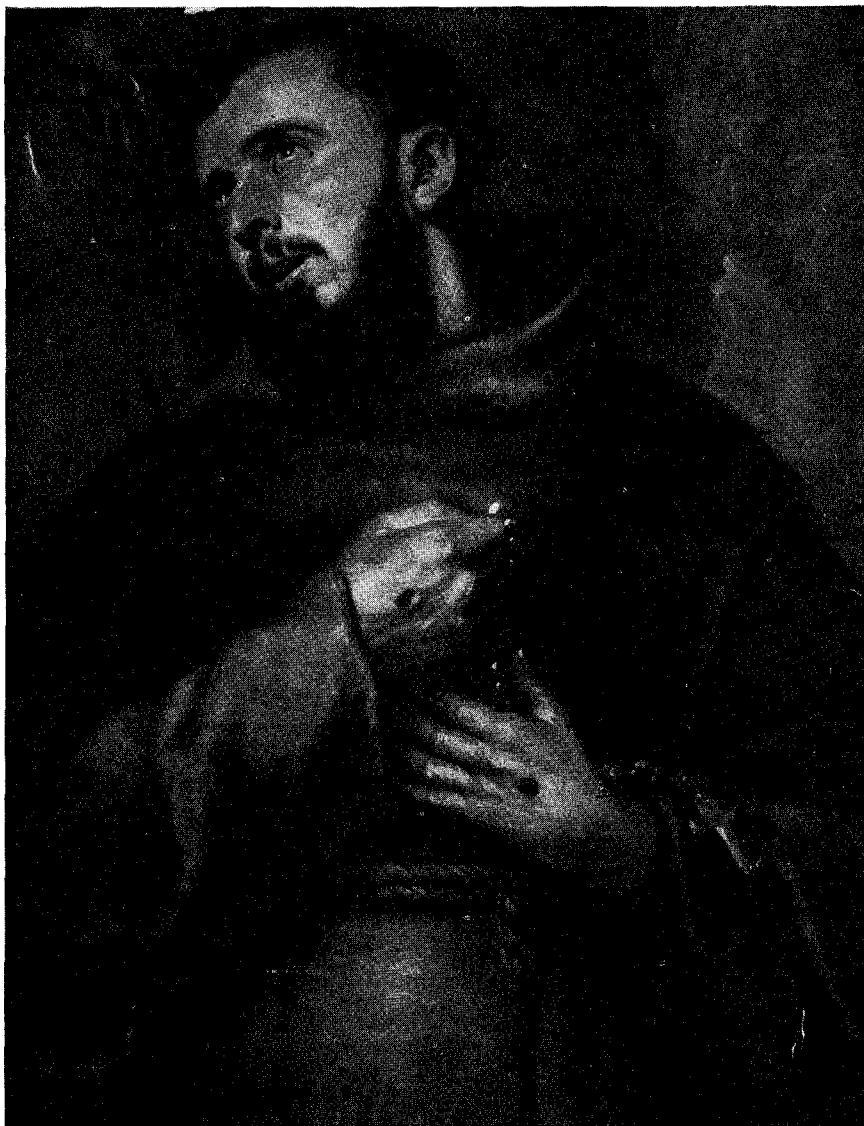
ONE of the many remarkable things about St. Francis of Assisi is the breadth as well as the strength of his appeal. With him it is not a case of special devotion from members of the Church which he inspired, nor even of the admiration of those who, while not members of that Church, have the greatest sympathy with the Catholic spirit. Francis of Assisi is a hero to many to whom Catholicism or indeed any form of orthodox religion means little. His most famous biographer is a Liberal Protestant. Yet Francis is not only a Catholic saint and a saint of the so-called Dark Ages, but a monastic saint, vowed to a life apart from his fellows, with a whole system of discipline and prayer, as well as orthodox Roman theology, dividing him from the semi-sentimental, semi-materialistic thought of to-day.

For psychological reasons it would be interesting to know why certain saints capture at once the popular imagination, while others, whose sanctity appears to be no less and who made just as much stir in their own generation, have no appeal beyond their immediate time and devotees. Why is it, for instance, that Francis of Assisi attracts more widely than Francis de Sales or Francis Xavier? In the first case, perhaps, the

reason is not hard to find. Francis de Sales was a high-born bishop, a prince of the Church and a nobleman; and though the collect appointed for his feast celebrates

the "Blessed Confessor Saint Francis" having "become all things to all men," the circumstances of his life, as given us either by himself or by his fervent disciple, the Bishop of Belley, show him as chiefly a frequenter of ecclesiastical circles, moving either among devout women or pious churchmen. There is about him too rare an atmosphere, he lacks homeliness, and though he lived nearer our age than St. Francis of Assisi he seems altogether more remote from us.

In the case of St. Francis Xavier the situation is more complex. Here is a man whose story, one would think, is bound



St. Francis Praying.

From the painting by Rubens.

to capture the popular imagination outside his own communion as well as within it—the soldier of fortune converted and changed into the soldier of the Lord, the life of dedicated adventure, ranging from the shores of Spain to the unknown shores of the Yellow Sea—beside which the saint died with his eyes on China, the land to which he longed to bring the Good News he had brought with so much romantic triumph to Japan.

No doubt one reason why we have not the same

feeling for Francis de Sales and Francis Xavier as we have for Francis of Assisi is that they were both theologians, and theologians brought by the conditions of their time into direct conflict with the faith which is the faith of most Englishmen of the present day. Francis de Sales drove back the Reformation from Savoy into Switzerland; Francis Xavier, Knight of the Society of Jesus, was pledged to fight the darkness of Protestant error with the light of truth as shed by the Council of Trent. The average man does not like the theologian, even if he happens to agree with his theology; or rather I should say that the amateur theologian does not like the professional. We are all theologians in a measure, and are jealous for the little systems we build for ourselves and range against those great edifices of the chartered craftsmen, as gipsies pitch their tents in the grounds of a great house.

But I think another reason why Francis Xavier, at least, fails in his appeal to the majority, is that from its beginning there has been a tendency to ignore and belittle the virile element in Christianity. The soldier saint has not the same chance of popularity as the saint whose only war-cry appears to be "Peace and goodwill." Francis of Assisi was kind to animals, while the Jesuits burnt heretics—that may account in a measure for the difference in our attitude towards them.

We see this tendency to emasculation at work throughout the whole history of Christianity. We see it in church music, which has degenerated from the austere simplicity of Gregory to the sentimental banalities of Gounod—and worse than Gounod. We see it in church art—the saint in a stained glass window and in most so-called religious pictures is an anæmic if not an effeminate creature. Even a harsh, knobby, truculent personality like St. Paul can only be made manly by the addition of a beard, and when we come to St. John—Boanerges, Son of Thunder—all that as a rule the artist can show us is a drooping, sentimental boy. We have even pursued this tendency with our Lord Himself. I doubt if there is any aspect of the Gospels more striking to anyone who reads them for the first time, or who reads them after a long interval, than the fact that the Christ they show is so entirely different from the Christ of popular tradition. Instead of the "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" of the hymn, we find the Lion of Judah roaring in the courts of the Lord, fierce and relentless in His condemnation of all that was hateful to His Father's honour. If at times He carries the shepherd's crook, at others He is armed with the whip of small cords with which He drove the money-changers from the Temple when the zeal of the Lord's house ate Him up. Instead of a careless, good-natured toleration of every form of belief and ethics, we find a Teacher who replied to that inquiring nonconformist, the woman of Samaria: "Ye worship ye know not what; salvation is of the Jews." We have built up a milk-and-water conception of Christianity which we have come to revolt from, forgetting that we ourselves have created it. In this we have been helped by changes in the meaning of English since the days when the Authorised Version of the Bible was made. Then the word "meek" had not its present milky significance, but one very similar to that of the French "*debonair*."

No doubt this sentimentalising process, founded on some instinctive tendency, has helped to put St. Francis of Assisi in his present place in the popular imagination. It is not that he was merely a mild and good-tempered saint, but that his life and circumstances give more scope for sentiment than do the lives of Francis de Sales or Francis Xavier. Also he is one of the "little" saints of history. He is akin to the Little Flower herself, St. Thérèse de l'enfant Jésus. One wonders how much the popularity of her canonisation is due to the fact that she was always such a little girl—a little girl whose doll is still to be seen among her relics at Lisieux. She gives us the impression that the saintly life is an easy and childlike affair, an impression which we cherish even while we realise it to be an illusion. The saint who strives and fights, who resists unto blood and at a great price wins his freedom, may, we admit, be a more admirable character, but we do not find him so appealing. There is something so inevitable, so natural and so easy about the whole story of St. Francis that our hearts are touched even more than our imaginations, our love even more than our wonder.

There is too another quality which has helped recommend him to Englishmen, and that is his romantic fellowship with the beasts. He was their friend in a day when they had not the favour that modern times have given them. The love of St. Francis for the birds and for the fierce wolf of Agobio appeals to us English people even more than his love for his fellow men. Recently those in high places have pointed out that he had an even closer association with the animals, in the fact that, like most of his generation, he was probably verminous. But we must remember that in those days high places were equally liable to the same reproach. St. Francis called himself the Troubadour of God, but the Troubadours, for all the glamour that history has cast upon them, were soiled and tattered fellows, and with their gaiety also was mingled austerity, an austerity which we find underlying the songs of the Troubadour Francis.

Nowadays only athletes are austere. We expect our athletes to train themselves and deny themselves for the sake of sport; we have lost the conception of austerity as a training for other ways of life—the life of the poet and the life of the saint. In the Middle Ages austerity was admired as a form of spiritual athletics—the physical side of the training for holiness which the saints, who were the sportsmen of the Middle Ages, underwent so courageously. Francis, for all his gaiety, was no exception to the rule; indeed, though we are inclined to turn aside from the idea of his asceticism, it stands out as a dominant passion of his life. We have the story of his forty days' fast, the fast which he broke in the midst by eating half a loaf for fear that he should dare to think himself too like his Lord. There is also the well-authenticated story of the stigmata—the inward suffering of the spirit so reacting on the body that the body itself is wounded with the wounds which are the wounds of the Body of Christ.

It is difficult perhaps to see a clear picture of this saint. Our pens and imaginations have been too busily at work upon him for too long. From the first authority has had to check a tendency to over-idealise



**SUPPLEMENT TO "THE BOOKMAN,"  
CHRISTMAS, 1926.**



*From the painting by Murillo  
(Madrid Museum).*

**ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI,  
"LA PORCIUNCULA."**



*From "ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI"*  
*Essays in Commemoration, 1226-1926*  
*Edited by WALTER SETON, M.A., D.Lit.*  
*(University of London Press).*

**ST. FRANCIS RECEIVING THE STIGMATA.**  
(By Sassetta, 1444.)

*By courtesy of Sir Joseph Duveen.*





From "ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI"  
Essays in Commemoration, 1226-1926  
Edited by WALTER SETON, M.A., D.Lit.  
(University of London Press).

MYSTIC MARRIAGE OF ST. FRANCIS AND THE LADY POVERTY.

(By Sassetta, 1444.)

(Musée Condé, Chantilly.)



SUPPLEMENT TO "THE BOOKMAN,"  
CHRISTMAS, 1926.



ST. FRANCIS IN PRAYER.

From "ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI"  
By G. K. CHESTERTON  
New edition, with illustrations in colour  
(Hodder & Stoughton).

and romanticise him, for he captured the people's imagination from the start. Later on we may have grown too critical, been inclined to deny too much, to see too small and one-sided a picture. Perhaps we are nearest the truth if we see him as a typical Italian, not of the austere, aquiline Roman sort, but the Italian of the provinces, merry and smiling, light-hearted, full of goodwill and of humility, the Italian that we see so often in our streets, come from some peasant home in Lombardy or Tuscany, making music under our street lamps, a wayfarer giving tunes and smiles for the dole

of charity. The Italian organ-grinder is not so unlike the Italian friar. Is it impossible to imagine an organ-grinder who, behind his outward merriment and music-making has an intense, almost remorseless, spiritual life, hidden austerities and hidden yearnings, hidden mystical aspirations and experiences? If our imagination can give us that—and I do not think it is beyond imagination even if it is beyond probability—then our imagination has taken us a little way towards St. Francis, where he sits in converse with the sun, wounded and smiling.

## ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI.

BY MGR. WILLIAM BARRY, D.D.

TWO figures from the Middle Ages, a woman and a man, have lately stood out before the modern world and taken its homage in acknowledgment of qualities intensely human but still something more. I mean, of course, Joan of Arc and Francis of Assisi. Both are Catholic Saints, and we keep their festivals in this order, although the French heroine came a full two centuries after the "Poverello," the Poor Man, who was God's friend and ours. I have traced the swift and splendid career of the Maid from Orleans to Rheims, and thence to Beauvais and the fiery pile beside Rouen Cathedral where the saviour of France was burnt in 1431. And I have said Mass over the body of the "Seraphic" (as we also call him) beneath Giotto's immortal picturing of his dedication to Gospel poverty. Long ago, when I first read his life, I added the name of Francis to my own, being still a member of what is termed the Third Order. But St. Francis did not found any "Order," in the medieval corporate sense. He brought a fresh inspiration to Christians by creating in beautiful but distracted Umbria something that more resembled Galilee than our Western world had seen in the past—nothing short of a divine episode. Italy, says a bold proverb, added in the person of Francis another page to the New Testament. What more could be told us that would not seem dispraise after this?

And how was the miracle wrought? By a single word, but an incarnate example in him that uttered it—the word "poverty." He said in presence of the creative, combative and magnificent thirteenth century, "With Christ I am fastened to the Cross." He stripped himself literally of all things, with a passion of disdain so complete that it became joy and broke into song. When comrades, kindled by his heavenly ardour, thronged about him, Francis bade them go "as God's minstrels" and spread abroad the glad tidings of this emancipation from care, contentions, covetousness. To be poor, yet happy in God's favour—that was sound Pauline philosophy, "as having nothing, yet possessing all things." His "Friars"—the "Brethren," or "Minors," the "Common Folk"—went forth, a joyous band, not secluded in cloisters, but as the Apostles did, wherever men abounded; nor is it untrue to affirm that wherever they came a wave of Christian happiness flowed into suffering hearts. The genuine Franciscan note was joy, simple as the Saint's trust in God. Hence the love of nature, the incentives to poetry and art. Not only Giotto, but the supreme

Dante, whose words paint while they move musically on, is in the tradition of Assisi. For the days of Galilee had their lovely landscape, their hymns and parables, their "Fioretti," once again, while Francis with his companions evangelised the Casentino country-side.

And in spirit and in truth we may catch a breath of this mountain air, while reading the "Fioretti," if we will become as little children for awhile. How almost impossible is such a mood in a century like ours! Perhaps for that very reason many who would not dream of imitating Francis are drawn to admire him. Englishmen, too, can enter most heartily into the adventurous life, the freedom from bounds, and the extempore makeshifts, which lent an air of crusade to the coming of the Friars. They were fervent Catholics, but arrived everywhere as if to convert the natives; and monasticism of the elder type found itself old-fashioned wherever these wandering "minstrels of God" appeared. Francis himself was neither a priest nor a monk. He did not wish that his disciples should retire into a solitude, or be fenced in with exemptions and privileges, much less were they to become Lord Abbots or Peers of Parliament, or Prince Bishops. The mighty medieval structure of the Church seemed solid enough in the age of that undoubtedly great ruler, Innocent III, who has been called the Augustus Cæsar of the Papacy. And when this poor little pilgrim from Umbria drew nigh with a petition that he might have leave to spread the Gospel message, Pope Innocent turned scornfully away. But in a vision of the night he saw Francis holding up the roof of St. John Lateran against collapse; and he awoke and altered his policy. Henceforth, no favours could be too precious for the Friars. The succeeding Pope, Honorius III, conceded to Francis that remarkable "Indulgence of the Portiuncula" which I cannot stop to explain, but which was almost unique among Indulgences down to these latter days. Cardinal Ugolino, later known as Pope Gregory IX, was a devoted, though politic, friend of St. Francis and St. Clare. He canonised Francis in the year 1228.

But neither he nor any other authority of an age given over (despite its violence) to legalism could rise with our Seraph to the law of liberty. Hence the sufferings which he endured from worldly-minded, ambitious brethren like that Elias who usurped the Saint's powers, but sacrificed to ambition the original simplicity of the movement. No doubt, when thousands