



1958

2. St. Francis of Assisi

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "2. St. Francis of Assisi. Pt. IV: The Medieval Ferment." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 6-9.

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2. St. Francis of Assisi

Abstract

A much different expression of the love of this world, and yet one which had certain similarities to the Goliard's, came from St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). He is probably the one person most people would name as having been most like Jesus. Born in the Italian town of Assisi, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, he early enjoyed the good things of this life which easily came his way. A desire for military glory was frustrated by illness and imprisonment in an enemy city. During his convalescence something within him began to change. His father, perfectly willing to pay for the young man's revels, objected strenuously when Francis suddenly took the money for some of his merchandise and spent it on the repair of broken-down churches and for outcast lepers. Francis' s decision to redirect his life was confirmed for him when he found that he was able to kiss the lepers he was trying to help. But it brought a straining of relations between father and son which ultimately led to a dramatic break (1206), father and son mutually disowning each other, and Francis choosing God as his Father and, in the very best troubadour fashion, Lady Poverty as his true love. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Assisi, Christianity, Jesus Christ, St. Francis, Lady Poverty

Disciplines

Cultural History | European Languages and Societies | History | History of Christianity | History of Religion | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section IV: The Medieval Ferment](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. St. Francis of Assisi

A much different expression of the love of this world, and yet one which had certain similarities to the Goliard's, came from St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). He is probably the one person most people would name as having been most like Jesus. Born in the Italian town of Assisi, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, he early enjoyed the good things of this life which easily came his way. A desire for military glory was frustrated by illness and imprisonment in an enemy city. During his convalescence something within him began to change. His father, perfectly willing to pay for the young man's revels, objected strenuously when Francis suddenly took the money for some of his merchandise and spent it on the repair of broken-down churches and for outcast lepers. Francis's decision to redirect his life was confirmed for him when he found that he was able to kiss the lepers he was trying to help. But it brought a straining of relations between father and son which ultimately led to a dramatic break (1206), father and son mutually disowning each other, and Francis choosing God as his Father and, in the very best troubadour fashion, Lady Poverty as his true love.

Having broken with his past, Francis lived for a time as a recluse repairing crumbling churches, until he felt called by a reading of Matthew 10:7-10 to go out helping, healing, and preaching, without making any provision for his own needs. What distinguished his actions was the simple sincerity and enthusiastic joy which radiated through him and all that he did. He saw the whole world of nature as a manifestation of the love of God. His work was accompanied by songs, made up as he walked along, which gained for him the title of Jongleur of God. This attitude explains why people were attracted to him, and why others sought to join him. All he asked of those who would follow him was that they sell all they had, give it to the poor, and join in his work. This was an invitation which was in sharp contrast with the practice of many contemporary monks.

Soon Francis sought papal approval of his band of about twelve men. Innocent III was aware of the power of such a group for either good or ill; the papacy, after all, had had experience with people who took the Bible literally. The Florentine painter Giotto (c. 1276 - c. 1337) has recorded a vision that Innocent is said to have had in a dream after he first met

* Reprinted from Helen Waddell, The Wandering Scholars (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1934), pp. 211-213. Used with permission.

(Love of the world)
*Wanted for the church to continue. Didn't attach his order, resigns his order.
Loved life & nature (same as Goliards - essential points) because he thought
he was part of the world.*

Francis. In the dream, he saw Francis holding up the falling church of St. John Lateran (where church councils were often held). Hoping to put any movement of criticism and reform under papal control, and to use it wherever possible to strengthen the Church, Innocent gave the Order of Friars Minor (the name suggested by Francis for his followers) his permission to preach, although apparently he did not give it in writing. Despite the fact that in 1209 the pope approved the simple rule drawn up by Francis, it was not until 1223 that the Franciscans were formally recognized as an order.

Official acceptance, the fame of its leader, and the work that it was doing served to swell the order's membership rapidly. Most of its work was done in the towns, where the need was great. Here the simple preaching of the friars received a hearty welcome from many people who were looking for the religious sustenance which the Church was not then providing. The penances which the Franciscans ordered, unrestricted by the official rule books, were much more realistic than those of the priests and monks. Their lack of concern for position and privilege touched a kindred chord in the hearts of the townsmen. The essential democracy of the friars more than matched the individualism of the townsmen. Their frankness and honesty in facing the problems of poverty and disease endeared them especially to the large numbers of poor people, from whose ranks many of their members were eventually to come.

However, the success of his order brought with it those very problems which Francis had seen long before and had tried to avoid. Friends and sympathizers who felt that they could not join the order, and who yet wished to help it, pressed on it money, houses, and lands. This was in direct contradiction to Francis' original idea that the friars should support themselves by working or, if that were not possible, by begging. Meanwhile, the Church insisted on a detailed set of regulations more in harmony with its own ideas, offering at the same time increased immunities and privileges, both of which Francis had sought to avoid. Once again an order was faced with the question of how to avoid the failure which success brought. And, along with this came the further question of organization and administration. The order had grown and spread beyond Italy. It needed some sort of institutionalization and regularization if it were to continue to exist as an order. And yet these very necessities seemed to forecast its spiritual death. Should it compromise with the intentions of its founder and pay the price of success, or should it try to remain true to those intentions and refuse to accept the gifts of its friends and protector?

Francis' own decision was not easily made. Seeing that he was unable to stem the tide of success, he finally chose to withdraw from the position of leadership and to remain true to his own basic beliefs. The price of such a choice, nevertheless, must have seemed very high. It meant that he was forced to sit by and watch his order become wealthy, regularized and formalized,

protected by privilege, an arm of the Church in its struggle for power, and finally, and worst of all, he had to watch it being torn by internal strife. His decision, however, had certain advantages, both immediate and long-run. He had chosen to be a follower of Christ rather than a leader of men. When asked why anyone should follow him he was able to reply that it was God's will.]

It is because the eyes of the Most High have willed it thus; he continually watches the good and the wicked, and as his most holy eyes have not found among sinners any smaller man, nor any more insufficient and more sinful, therefore he has chosen me to accomplish the marvellous work which God has undertaken; he chose me because he could find no one more worthless, and he wished here to confound the nobility and grandeur, the strength, the beauty, and the learning of this world. *

[Thus, in humility and sincerity, he was able to unite two things which the Church had been unable to bring together: the monk's individualistic concern for his own salvation and the Church's published concern for all men. He avoided losing his own identity in any institution; and this at least partly accounts for his unique place in the history of Christianity.]

[We can get some understanding of the place of Francis from the fact that he was canonized in 1228, only two years after his death. But an even better understanding of the man can be gained from his "Canticle of the Sun."] Parts of it were composed during his active lifetime. There is evidence that he composed the last part of it on his deathbed in the little church of St. Damian, the first that he rebuilt, and where he had first resolved on his new way of life. This last scene, as the circle of his life closed, adds an artistic dimension to the spiritual harmony of his life. [His canticle was the first song written in the Italian language. In it we can catch something of the love of God, man, and nature which were uniquely blended in Francis' life, and which radiated from it.]

O most high, almighty, good Lord God, to thee
belong praise, glory, honor, and all blessing!

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 splendor: 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.

Praised be my Lord for our sister water, who is very

* Paul Sabatier, Life of St. Francis of Assisi, trans. Louise Seymour Houghton (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 185.

serviceable unto us and humble and precious and clean.

Praised be my Lord for our brother fire, through whom thou givest us light in the darkness; and he is bright and pleasant and very mighty and strong.

Praised be my Lord for our mother the earth, the which doth sustain us and keep us, and bringeth forth divers fruits and flowers of many colors, and grass.

Praised be my Lord for all those who pardon one another for his love's sake, and who endure weakness and tribulation; blessed are they who peaceably shall endure, for thou, O most Highest, shalt give them a crown.

Praised be my Lord for our sister, the death of the body, from which no man escapeth. Woe to him who dieth in mortal sin! Blessed are they who are found walking by thy most holy will, for the second death shall have no power to do them harm.

Praise ye and bless the Lord, and give thanks unto him and serve him with great humility. *

The history of the Franciscans after the death of their founder in 1226 was one of increasing control by the papacy, internal dissension, and criticism from the groups who had first welcomed them. [Within the order there was a stubborn minority who wished to remain true to the original ideals of Francis himself. These came to be called the Spirituals.] The compromising party, who accepted property for their convents, were referred to as the Conventuals. [The ensuing struggle between these two groups was so bitter that it could not be resolved. The result was that Franciscan came to burn Franciscan as heretic, and in 1323 a pope pronounced heretical the apostolic poverty advocated by the Spirituals. In time the order lost much of the respect which it had called forth from ordinary people. The secular clergy had always hated the Franciscans because of their independence of episcopal organization. And the other orders of regular clergy, especially the Dominicans, hated them as rivals.]

The Dominicans were introduced in the preceding chapter in connection with the Albigensian heresy. Following the lead of their founder, they emphasized the intellectual and institutional aspects of the religious life. They became the great compilers and systematizers of knowledge, producing such summaries as those of Thomas Aquinas. Like the Franciscans, they also increased in wealth, privilege, and position, and they suffered a similar decay. [But the greater individualism and independence of the Franciscans tended to make them more appreciative of new ideas and new directions of thought. Here we find the influence of Francis himself continuing, first within his order, then beyond it, as men appeared who were willing to tackle the problems of the late Middle Ages: in education, in politics, and in science, as well as in religion. Thus Francis contributed to both the variety and the ferment of his time.]

* Ibid., pp. 305-306.

His reason is his life.
Aquinas (scholarly) - Francis (live & preach a message of love)
reason & love
reason you can reach god. ← → *God around you.*
Immanent god