



E V E R Y M A N ' S      L I B R A R Y

THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF ST. FRANCIS

THE MIRROR OF PERFECTION  
BY LEO OF ASSISI

THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS  
BY ST. BONAVENTURE

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With a new Introduction by Father Damian J. Blaher, O.F.M.  
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SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI, born in 1182, his father, Pietro Bernardone, being a merchant. When young his way of life was wild, but after being captured by the Perugians in 1201 and two subsequent illnesses he embraced a life of pious poverty. By 1209 he had eleven disciples; in 1212 he drew up a Constitution for his order, and Pope Innocent III gave them formal sanction in 1216. Visited Egypt in 1223. Died in 1226 and canonized in 1228.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been said that no one ever reads an introduction. Nevertheless, this one is being written to introduce *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* to the general reader in order that he may more fully appreciate their rare beauty and delicate charm. To read *The Little Flowers* without knowing beforehand something about Saint Francis and his companions as well as about the *Little Flowers* themselves would be to miss in great part the incomparable delicacy of the narrative as well as the significance of the Franciscan venture of which they tell and which they helped so much to develop and propagate.

On the evening of October 3rd in the year 1226, Francis Bernardone, *Il Poverello*, with the closing words of the 141st Psalm of David on his lips—that Psalm which begins, *Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi*—gave up his spirit to God. One of his spiritual sons of later years has said, “He died singing in the forty-sixth year of his age and the twenty-fifth of his Conversion.” It is said by his early biographers that as he lay dying, dusk was already falling in the Valley of Spoleto, and in the twilight a flock of crested larks, such as one sees so frequently in Umbria, circled the rude hut in which he lay and sent a song of joy and splendor aloft as if saying their last farewell to their friend. And at that very moment, those same biographers tell us, Brother James, a holy one, saw a brilliant light, borne on a little white cloud, passing over many waters and mounting straightway to heaven.

The very next day the body of Saint Francis—everyone called him Saint even then, although he was not canon-

ized until 1228 by his great and good friend Cardinal Ugolino, Count of Anagni, lately become Pope Gregory IX—was laid to rest in the Church of San Giorgio to be removed four years later to the great Basilica in Assisi which bears his name, the cornerstone of which was put in place by Pope Gregory himself in 1228, the day after he had declared Francis a Saint.

The life of Saint Francis is well known, for it is probably from a biographical and historical point of view one of the best documented lives of the Middle Ages. In point of fact, it is not the events in his life that have caused trouble to some of his biographers, but it is rather the interpretation of those events that have led some far astray.

Francis was one of several children of Pica the wife of Pietro Bernardone a well-to-do cloth merchant of Assisi in Umbria. He was born toward the end of 1181 or early in 1182—the precise date is not known. Although he was not of noble birth, his father was plentifully provided, which was a consideration in an age when opulence was fast becoming a practical substitute for nobility of birth. In his early youth Francis was indulged by his parents and he grew to be a more or less typical product of his time—a medieval youth to whom gay and good times were an essential part of living. Because of his affable and affectionate manners and the incomparable charm of his personality he found himself more often than not the leader of the revelers and the king of the merrymakers. To say that Francis loved gaiety, merrymaking and conviviality is not the same as saying that he was a wicked or an evil youth. In fact, all of his biographers are well agreed that he was not, even though Saint Francis himself in later years referred to his early life as to the time “when I was in sin.” This remark may be taken as nothing more than a Saint’s exaggeration. One fact is certain, however, Francis could never have been a *débauché* or *roué*; he was too high and noble a character for that. Even in his youth,

which he called sinful, he would have been miserably mis-cast in such a rôle.

His father had had great hopes for him in the business, but those hopes were soon shattered. Francis did, indeed, know how to make money, but he knew even better how to spend it—or even give it away. When one of those local wars which were forever harassing the peace of the Middle Ages broke out between the Perugians and the Assisians, Francis, always the knight errant in his own mind, was not slow to enlist. Taken captive by the Perugians, he remained in prison until the year 1203. Those were years of reflection. The grace of God was now beginning to work in Francis, but he scarcely recognized it; although he was obviously searching for something, he did not yet dream of sanctity. A subsequent attack of fever and illness gave him time for further reflection. He was now like a moth being drawn irresistibly to the flame, and the flame in this case was the love of God, but Francis did not yet know that. On his recovery he set out in the panoply of a knight to join the Pontifical army of Innocent III at Apulia, but admonished in a dream to return home he got no further than Spoleto where he abandoned his plans and returned to Assisi. The moth was indeed getting closer to the flame. In the Summer of 1205 at one of those usual gay affairs in which the youth of Assisi so frequently indulged, Francis was not as his usual merry self and was chided for this by his companions. As one of his biographers has said, "Francis heard their laughter and was angry, but not with them. For in sudden light the whole of his former life was before him, in its folly, its lack of object, its childish vanity. He saw himself in all his pitiful reality—and in front of him stood in shining beauty the life he hitherto had *not* led—the true life, the just life, the beautiful, noble, rich life—life in Jesus Christ." The flame was beginning to singe the wings of the moth. It was not long after this that Francis embraced the leper

whom he met on the wayside. Now his conversion was almost complete. In later years he wrote "The Lord gave to me, Brother Francis, thus to begin to do penance; for since I was in sin it seemed to me too bitter to see lepers, and the Lord Himself led me amongst them and I showed mercy toward them. And receding from them, that which seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body for me. And afterward I remained a little and I left the world." The moth had dived into the flame, and the flame had flared up and the glow and heat of it was soon to envelop and warm the hearts of many.

He entered upon a new mode of life. Francis had chosen this new life for himself, but it was inevitable that others should join him. His winning ways had made him a leader in revelry among his companions, and as grace does not destroy nature, he could not help but attract others to this new way of life. First there was one, Bernard of Quintavalle, a rich and important man of Assisi, then another, Peter Catanii, a lawyer; then Giles; then the priest Sylvester; Angelo Tancredi; Bernard and so on. In a few months there were a dozen. Francis wrote a rule of life for his companions for which he first received oral Papal approval in 1209 from Pope Innocent III. The new fraternity, known as the Friars Minor, spread like wildfire throughout Umbria and other parts of medieval Italy. Great numbers flocked to join, but as the numbers increased so did the difficulties of the Order. The reason is not far to seek, since it must be obvious to all that not every man was made of the stuff of which Francis of Assisi was made, and not every man could follow exactly in his footsteps.

Saint Francis was a unique person; there can be no doubt about that. From the time of his conversion he had a positive genius and passion for loving God. He was devoted to Poverty; that he made the capital precept of his new rule, but it was not a fanatical attachment to

abject mendicancy; Francis was no mere beggar nor did he want his Friars to be useless beggars. "I labored with my hands," he wrote, "and I wish to labor and I wish firmly that all the other Friars labor in work that pertains to honesty. And those who do not know how should learn." His idea of poverty was a complete detachment from all created things in order to be more attached to God. For him poverty was total renunciation of self. It was not love of poverty for sake of poverty, but it was the separation of his heart from all earthly things so that he might give it all to God. For him poverty embraced obedience, simplicity, humility, chastity. The symbol *par excellence* of poverty for St. Francis was Christ on the Cross, and his burning desire was to be conformable to Him. Poverty was only a means and not an end in itself; it was a means the end of which was love of God. He was completely detached from creatures, but he loved created things because they were created by God and were for him the mirror of God. That is why it was not silly or ridiculous for Francis to preach to his "Sisters" the birds, or speak to "Brother" Fire or compose a canticle to "Brother" Sun.

His love of God was a source of ecstatic joy which is one of the characteristic marks of Saint Francis and his followers. It is probably because of his winsome simplicity and contagious unbounded joy that he has had such an appeal to all men throughout the centuries. He has been the object of universal love by men of all beliefs and even by men of no belief. He has given to posterity some of the warmth that filled his own heart and few men have been able to resist it. Saint Francis was the very antithesis of a Puritan; he could not tolerate about him those who were sad or meloncholy; for him sadness and moroseness were signs of hypocrisy and sin—a person who is sad must be in sin. "It is not fitting," he said, "that a servant of God should offer to men the spectacle of sadness and

trouble, but rather one of constant cheerfulness." He did not, however, confuse sadness with suffering—suffering could be a source of joy if it helped to conform one to Christ. In Chapter VIII of the *Little Flowers* we read how on one winter's day when Francis was going from Perugia to Saint Mary of the Angels in Assisi with Brother Leo, he discoursed on perfect joy with Leo and he gave what to many must seem a very annoying definition of perfect joy. But that talk with Brother Leo is exquisitely Franciscan—no one but Saint Francis could have described perfect joy in that way.

As has already been mentioned, even before the death of Saint Francis difficulties were arising in the Order. There were those who wished to remain faithful to the very letter of the rule that Francis had written and to what they considered to be the mind and intentions of Saint Francis, and there were those who favored development, evolution, adaptation and compromise—especially with regard to poverty. After the death of the *Poverello* the Order entered into turbulent and stormy times which for awhile seemed to threaten the entire Franciscan venture.

There is no Saint about whom more has been written than Saint Francis of Assisi, and the controversies that have raged about him are unique in all hagiography. One thing is obvious: that Saint Francis could not have been all that those who write about him have said that he was. Because he loved all God's creatures, the birds of the air, the flowers of the fields, the animals in the woods, the sun and the stars they have called him a Pantheist; because he was an ascetic, albeit a Christian and a joyful one, they have thought him a yogi; because most of his sermons were moral ones and not dogmatic as called for by the times, they have thought that he must have been a pre-Reformation Protestant; to others he was the *vir catholicus et totus apostolicus*—a catholic and completely

apostolic man. Renan, undoubtedly with a good deal of cynicism and scepticism, referred to him as the "only perfect Christian after Jesus." In the late 19th century there was a great revival in Franciscan studies which has continued to this day. The greatest impetus was given to this movement by M. Paul Sabatier, a Protestant clergyman who published his famous *Vie de Saint François* in 1894. M. Sabatier's *Vie* was simultaneously chosen by the French Academy and put on the Index of Forbidden Books—both for good reason. The *Vie* was indeed a scholarly and beautifully written work, but M. Sabatier did not seem to grasp the religious significance of Saint Francis, and the figure which emerged was an anachronistic Saint Francis, a ". . . modern pietistic French Protestant of the most liberal type, with a veneer of thirteenth century Catholicism. . . ." Sabatier in a certain sense deserves the title of "The Father of Franciscan studies" which has been given to him—by Franciscans incidentally; he deserves it because he aroused the scholars from their slumber and led them to Saint Francis; almost everything that has come after Sabatier has been written in support of or in opposition to his theories.

The enormous literature on Saint Francis has already been mentioned. It almost seems that as soon as Saint Francis died everyone began to write about him. Brother Thomas of Celano wrote the first biography; original sources for the life of Saint Francis continue right up to the 15th century closing with such works as the anonymous *Speculum Vitae* of 1445 and the previous *Conformitates of Bartholomew* of Pisa in 1385, which so scandalized the 16th century reformers because of the parallelisms drawn between Francis and Christ.

The struggles in the Order founded by Saint Francis did not fail to leave their mark on the writings of the early days. Most of the writings had a "slant"—the direction of which was determined by whether the author

was of the *Spirituals*, as the no-compromise group was called, or of the *Conventuals* or compromise group. The writings in turn were making the rift in the ranks even greater, and as a result the General Chapter of the Order held at Narbonne in 1260 commissioned Saint Bonaventure to write an official biography of Saint Francis so that, "a serious and correct presentation of the many existing legends could be given." Saint Bonaventure, General of the Order, placed his new legend before the Chapter of the Order assembled in Pisa in 1263, and his work was so acceptable that they voted to destroy all other legends of Saint Francis. The Chapter ordered that the Friars destroy all other legends that had been written about Saint Francis and where such were found outside the Order the Friars were to seek to dispose of them. Fortunately for future historians all the written legends were not destroyed, and what is even of perhaps greater importance many of the Friars, who knew Saint Francis and his first companions intimately, kept up the oral traditions and often reduced them to writing. Indeed, Saint Bonaventure had written a good life of Saint Francis, he had not falsified the facts, but it was the traditional *vita et miracula*—life and miracles—of the hagiographer; in it Saint Francis was embalmed; true as it was, it was not the living Saint Francis that his companions had known. Bonaventure above all wanted peace in the Order and his official life of Saint Francis along with the *auto da fé* of 1266, whatever we may think of it, went a long way toward establishing the Order and saving it from complete chaos.

But let us leave the scholars to themselves. It is a fact that Saint Francis always enjoyed great popularity among the ordinary people of Europe, and in more recent times among the people of the English speaking world. This is in no small part, in fact for the most part, due to a delightful little work which appeared in the 14th century

entitled, *Fioretti di San Francesco*, or in English, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*.

The *Fioretti* is for the most part an Italian translation and development of an earlier Latin work entitled *Actus beati Francisci et Sociorum eius* which appeared between 1322 and 1328. The Italian version or *Fioretti* was made not long after that. In most of the ancient manuscripts and printed editions of the *Fioretti* there appear four other works: *Considerations on the Holy Stigmata*; *The Life of Brother Juniper*; *The Life of Brother Giles*; *The Sayings of Brother Giles*. These are later additions. The *Fioretti* proper consists of fifty-three chapters which are evidently from two different sources. The first thirty-eight chapters treat of Saint Francis and his Companions, Bernard, Leo, Masseo, Rufino, Sylvester, Lady Clare; then there are two chapters in which Saint Anthony of Padua is the protagonist; finally, thirteen chapters dealing chiefly with the Friars of the second and third generation who had settled in the Marches of Ancona.

The Authorship of the *Actus* is not known although parts of it have been attributed to Brother Ugolino of San Giorgio. The Italian version or *Fioretti* is attributed to Giovanni dei Marignolli (San Lorenzo), but this attribution lacks sufficient historical basis. Whoever the translator was—it is almost certain that he was a Florentine Franciscan—he has created with his quaint Tuscan tongue one of the great classics of Italian literature, which for centuries has enjoyed a popularity in Italy second to none, not excepting Dante nor the Sacred Scriptures.

The title which he gave these stories *Fioretti* is not without interest. Although the literal signification is *Little Flowers*, it is more than likely that the translator and compiler, for the *Fioretti* is a compilation, did not appreciate fully the delightful way in which the title captures the spirit and the tone of the stories, since in the Middle Ages *Fioretti* was a generic term signifying collection, an-

thology, catena. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were full of Latin collections and handbooks entitled *Florilegia*, *Floreta*, *Flores*. The term no longer had its literal connotation any more than has the word *anthology*—which literally signifies to gather flowers—in our own tongue. Somewhat the same can be said of the English title of this work *The Little Flowers*. The first English translations appeared with the revival of interest in Franciscana around the turn of the last century. Whether the literal translation of *Fioretti* into *Little Flowers* was a studied one or merely a happy fault is hard to say, but even though *Little Flowers of Saint Francis* at first falls delicately on Anglo-Saxon ears, we must be grateful that the title was not made to read *Anthology of the Deeds of Saint Francis* nor *Collection of Stories about Saint Francis*.

It remains but to say something about the value of the *Little Flowers* as history. There was a time when these stories were considered for the most part as fabulous and allegorical creations, and in some cases even ridiculous, but more and more their historical value is being realized. The true history of many of the stories has been supported by other authentic sources. It used to be said, for example, that the story of Saint Francis and the wolf of Gubbio related in Chapter XXI was pure allegory; the wolf which Saint Francis “tamed” was no real wolf but rather a ferocious Signore or possibly a wild brigand harassing the townspeople of Gubbio. Yet recently discovered independent sources have shown that Saint Francis actually visited Gubbio at a time when wolves were ravaging the countryside, and, what is more, recent excavations have unearthed the skull of a wolf under the walls of the church of *San Francesco della Pace* where legend says Francis’ wolf slept at night and was buried.

One can readily admit that the stories in the *Little Flowers* have been embellished, but this does not destroy

the basic truth contained in many of them. The embellishments can all the more readily be admitted if one realizes that the Marches of Ancona, where the *Fioretti* had their origin, were a stronghold of the *Spirituals*. They tried above all to emphasize in their homely little tales the poverty, humility and simplicity of their Seraphic Father. This well accounts for some of the obvious exaggerations and also gives the reason why Elias of Cortona, who was in the opposite camp from the *Spirituals*, does not fare so well in Chapter XXXVIII. But all in all the *Fioretti* are for the greater part crystallized oral tradition which is no mean source of history. They are the oral traditions of the early days as preserved and written down by the Friars of the Marches of Ancona. Scholars may wonder how the *Fioretti* came to be written, but this is no problem to any Franciscan. There is not a Friar who in the evening in the recreation room, or during meals in the refectory or the walk in the monastery garden, has not himself recounted or heard other Friars tell of the early days in his own Province of the Order. And how common it is after the stories have been told to hear some Friar say, "Someone should write these things down." More often than not the stories are never written, and it is here perhaps that the modern Friar may differ from those 14th century Friars in the Marches of Ancona who wrote and collected the *Actus* and the *Fioretti*, and to whom posterity must ever be beholden. When the Friars recount such tales among themselves, a listening Friar, who was perhaps himself an eyewitness of the happening being related, may often notice some embellishments being woven around the facts, but that is the stock in trade of every good story-teller; the basic facts remain true. And certainly it is rare that one would find among the Friars such a story made out of the whole cloth.

As has been said, the *Little Flowers* are not a life or biography of Saint Francis, but a collection of simple

stories about him and his Companions as well as about the Friars of the Marches of Ancona. They form, however, the most genuinely authentic Franciscan document in existence. They are the kind of stories that seem to have written themselves and which no one but Saint Francis could have inspired. They are exquisitely Franciscan, for in them Saint Francis lives again and walks and breathes; he is no longer the dead and embalmed Saint Francis of the biographers. Even if the stories had been pure inventions of the imagination, which of course they were not, they could not have captured in any higher degree the spirit, the winsomeness, the simplicity of Saint Francis and his early Companions. It is this atmosphere which they breathe that makes them classics.

The *Little Flowers* were written by the heart, and by a Franciscan heart at that. They should be read with the heart.

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