



Saint Francis of Assisi

G.K. Chesterton , Joseph F. Girzone (Foreword by)

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Francis of Assisi is, after Mary of Nazareth, perhaps the greatest saint in the Christian calendar, and one of the most influential men in the whole of human history. By universal acclaim, this biography by G. K. Chesterton is considered the best appreciation of Francis's life--the one that gets to the heart of the matter.

For Chesterton, Francis is a great paradoxical figure, a man who loved women but vowed himself to chastity; an artist who loved the pleasures of the natural world as few have loved them, but vowed himself to the most austere poverty, stripping himself naked in the public square so all could see that he had renounced his worldly goods; a clown who stood on his head in order to see the world aright. Chesterton gives us Francis in his world--the riotously colorful world of the High Middle Ages, a world with more pageantry and romance than we have seen before or since. Here is the Francis who tried to end the Crusades by talking to the Saracens, and who interceded with the emperor on behalf of the birds. Here is the Francis who inspired a revolution in art that began with Giotto and a revolution in poetry that began with Dante. Here is the Francis who prayed and danced with pagan abandon, who talked to animals, who invented the creche.

Saint Francis of Assisi Details

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From Reader Review Saint Francis of Assisi for online ebook

T.E. says

A brief sojourn with Chesterton to relieve the long, long voyage with Tolstoy. Both enjoyable in their own way, but after 800 pages of that contemplative, gentle gloom peculiar to Tolstoy Chesterton's vigor (one can imagine the quick, definite strokes of his pen, the delighted dance of his writing across the sheet), is definitely needed.

Wonderful stuff. Francis, I think, is not so much fun as Aquinas, for he is a little more frightening. (Throughout the book, he reminded me disconcertingly of my quick, unnervingly cheerful little math teacher, of whom I am slightly afraid.) Nevertheless, this book was--I can think of no other phrase--good for me. It is simple and sane and it reminds me that not every answer in the world is laissez faire capitalism. I would do well to study St. Francis, though I doubt any other biography can parallel the vivid tapestry colors in which he is painted here.

In short: Chesterton is still the Besterton.

Darren says

This book read more like one of Chesterton's personal dilemmas - complaining that historians write about historical figures without giving historical context. He rambles on about how to write a good biography rather than teaching the reader. I found it difficult to read. St. Francis is awesome though.

amapola says

Il santo non è un superuomo, è un uomo vero

Questa non è una biografia vera e propria, direi che si tratta di una specie di ricerca del *luogo della santità* in Francesco partendo dal suo sguardo sul mondo, dal suo sentire, dal suo operare, partendo cioè dal suo essere uomo.

E' un libretto esile, di poche pagine, ma ricco dell'intelligenza debordante dell'autore, della sua ironia esuberante, del suo gusto per il paradosso e anche della sua schietta e semplice religiosità.

Come si fa a non amare Chesterton?

Monica says

This book was written early in Chesterton's career, and soon after he became a Christian, even though St. Francis had always inspired him as a young boy. St. Francis is easy to like, and Chesterton brings him to life. Francis seems almost impulsive in his fervor to do God's will - actly rashly at times in ways that get him into trouble (with his family, the law!) but always with the best of intentions. This book was well-done, although, as with Chesterton's book on St. Thomas, I wish I was better educated than I am on medieval history and the classics. I went out and bought a book on the Crusades after reading this book, so that I could understand his references better, and understand the environment in which Francis lived. Chesterton has a style that's never dry. He's entertaining, even humorous at times. His voice is so clear, you can almost see this large Brit there

in front of you with a pipe and a beer, telling you the story of a man from years ago who gave up everything in the hope of attaining an everlasting everything. His kindness to and love of God's world (nature AND humanity) are an inspiration.

Lee Ann says

I hadn't thought seriously about Francis for a while and this book makes me think I've never thought seriously about him at all. GK rescues Francis from fuzzy Victorian myth and returns him to a most severe Christianity. By reading Francis in the light of his time period (the medieval) and in the light of the troubadour movement, GKC reveals the romantic passion underlying the saint's religious severity. The Franciscans were born as a romantic movement, sacrificing all for the Beloved. Francis lived the romance of the spiritual, in contrast to the troubadour's limitations of mere earthly love. Love makes sacrifice a joy. If sacrifices made to please or protect a human lover are good, how much better are those same sacrifices when made to honor and please Love himself? Love is a paradox of suffering and joy. The paradox of love is only resolved in a life of love.

The opposite of this all-embracing love is heresy. All heresy is in essence a narrowing of faith and truth. The heretic sees the truth but not all of the truth. His partial truth blinds him to the whole. The fullness of life and truth and God is beyond what the heretic can understand. The one thing a heretic cannot worship is that which is beyond him. The heretic, by narrowing God, wants to control Him. The heretic will not embrace a fullness of truth if that Truth is bigger than the heretic himself. It's an ego thing really. The greatest heresy of them all, Islam, is the result of Mohamed's inability to accept that God may be bigger than what he, Mohamed, can understand. Mohamed wants to control God, to contain God within the confines of his own mind. Mohamed wanted to simplify God and make him more rational, more understandable, more sensible. More like Mohamed. But God cannot be contained by any one mind. Simplifying Him is nothing more than ignoring Him.

Rather than ignore Him or, worse, trying to domesticate Him, Francis obeyed Him. Francis' loving, joyful obedience led to a renewal of faith after the great trials of the Dark Ages. The Dark Ages, though not as dark as we like to think, were a great purge. The bloody battle for the survival of Christianity, led to the purgation of paganism and the birth of modern Europe. The tainted traces of pagan naturalism were washed away, freeing nature to be seen as itself. Pagan myth had suffused nature with pre-ordained images and associations. Most of those images were poisoned by a decadent sensuality, the sensuality of tragedy rather than love. Once those images were purged from the mind, man could see nature in its pre-pagan innocence.

Matt Bianco says

G.K. Chesterton puts forth a masterful piece of literary work describing the life of St. Francis of Assisi. He first puts St. Francis and his life into historical perspective. Why was his ascetism necessary? Why was the world then ready for someone who could love nature the way he did? Chesterton answers these questions.

Next, he describes what drove St. Francis to his life and then his life. At this point, he has said nothing of those things that would be considered supernatural or miraculous, only what he did that is incontrovertible. He then puts perspective into why St. Francis would throw himself into the fire of the Mohammedans. And, the import of the events and words of his death.

He next addresses the controversy that arose after his death, between the differing factions among the Franciscans and the role the papacy played in that. Finally, he touches on the miracles, why they were left out of this biography, and why they shouldn't have needed to be.

Chesterton is wonderful, as always.

David says

I undertook to read this work shortly after the appointment of our newest Pope, Francis, as the saint with whom he identifies most strongly. I wanted to study the words of a great writer (Chesterton) about a great historical figure (Francis of Assisi) and I was not disappointed. However, beyond broad strokes, it is ultimately impossible, either for Chesterton, as he wrote it, or for today's reader, to cut through the hagiography that envelopes a saint of such renown. In the end, all that can be said with confidence is that he lived and he made a tremendous impression on those of his time and his life continues to inspire devotion to a simple and caring form of Christianity. This did help me to understand our new Pope better and to see the spiritual dimension of his perspectives.

Carol Apple says

To be honest I chose to read this book because I like G.K. Chesterton more than because I was so interested in St. Francis. I got a very entertaining dose of Chesterton, a funny paradox on every page, and after reading the book, I am also fascinated by St. Francis. The book assumes you know the broad outlines of the story. Chesterton references previous biographers, those contemporary with Francis and those Victorians such as Matthew Arnold in the then recent past (St. Francis of Assisi was first published in 1923.) I did not know the broad outlines of the story but had no trouble following along. I just know where to go when I want more details.

The writing is charming and incisive and gives you a sense of the kind of spiritual earthquake one eccentric individual can make. Chesterton's unique and imaginative analysis of that time and place - 11th century Italy - was equally as valuable to me as the history and analysis of the man who now most often appears in our world as a garden statue. By the time you finish the book you can easily believe that the spiritual seeds Francis sowed during his brief life are still bearing fruit.

Of course with any human system, things degenerate in the end as some followers become fanatical and lose the original vision in the passion for their own agendas, and in the last chapter Chesterton deals with how this began to happen with the Franciscan movement about the time of Francis' death. It sounds like some of the followers wanted to break off from the Church and start a new radical religion that hated people who did not follow their rules. Chesterton makes a case the the Pope and the Catholic Church did the right thing by incorporating the movement into its fold and giving it the official stamp. Chesterton believed that the Church throughout history has generally upheld balance and inclusiveness and has kept the ship of Christianity from listing to far to the right or the left.

Amy C. says

Chesterton is, in my opinion, an ideal author for this reflection on St. Francis (it's not really a biography, more of an extended musing). Everybody loves Francis, but very few really get him, so the world ends up brushing aside the full personality of the man (a great loss). GKC gets Francis. This book does much to restore the full picture of Francis, and beautifully so. If I could I'd quote the whole book at you.

Simon Hill says

G.K. Chesterton reveals the man without the myth and mysticism while never denying a word of it. In the casual yet pacy, witty yet serious style that is Chesterton, this small but precious book tells us more about who Saint Francis was than several larger tomes combined. By avoiding exuberant apocrypha and concentrating largely upon the man who became a saint, rather than the saint who became a phenomenon, Chesterton makes Saint Francis' life and achievements both interiorly and for the world, both accessible and desirable.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. As is often the case from GK, the text is written for the curious and cleverly avoids his new found religion of Roman Catholicism while being wholeheartedly and unashamedly Catholic.

Ted says

I picked up the book hoping to read a thorough biography of St. Francis, and though I was moved by the Franciscan anecdotes the author shared, this is largely an overwrought essay by G. K. Chesterton defending his new conversion to Catholicism and luxuriating in his self-conscious witticisms: "There are many who will smile at the saying; but it is profoundly true to say that the glad good news brought by the Gospel was the news of original sin" (28). Fine, it's pithy, but where is your editor?! It takes thirty-nine pages of this blather to get to the birth of St. Francis. I was itching by page thirty to burn the book, written in 1924 though my yellowed paperback was printed in 1957, but after reading positive reviews which referenced actual biography in the book, I pushed on. And though the book is still light on the events of St. Francis's life, the pace picks up and I closed the book mostly satisfied and certainly moved by the optimistic, selfless, artful existence of this troubadour from Assisi. I'll be getting back to Assisi in 2013 after a nineteen year absence; and though I remember the striking mountain village as being stuffed with tourist schlock, I look forward once again to walking through the stone arteries where one of humanity's greatest men taught us to give and give thanks.

Fr. Ryan Humphries says

An amazing and insightful spiritual biography that's light on factual details, heavy on context and depth and chock full of Chestertonian wit and wordplay.

Greg says

Not nearly as much a book about Francis as a book about Chesterton. You can learn a little about Francis here but this is mainly Mr. Chesterton's ode to himself and his opinions. His effort to explain away the Inquisition is particularly bizarre. He does have some great lines and insights though, in particular his description of mysticism.

Sara says

Second Reading Dec 2016

First reading Dec 2015

I think that this may be one of my favorite Chesterton works. The first book written after his conversion to Catholicism but supported by his still Anglican wife Frances, this book has universal appeal for Protestants and Catholics.

Francis is a mysterious creature. A true mystic and a genuinely beautiful soul. I have struggled in vain to understand our new Holy Father (Pope Francis) and have mostly been confused by his actions. This text, however, has helped me to understand what any good lover of St. Francis is going after - Francis's radical and humble Christian witness.

Francis loved a gospel that was so simple that the village idiot could understand it. "St. Francis walked the earth as the pardon of God."

There is much to love in Francis and much mimic in his walk towards Christ.

GKC, however, goes a bit further. He explains that it makes perfect sense that this first Italian poet (Francis) should never have heard of Virgil. His service to our Lord was one in opposition to books. But, his is not the only path to Christ. GKC wisely points out that it would make no sense of Dante would not have heard of Virgil. Each man serves God in truth, goodness and beauty but on separate and equally relevant paths.

Rev. Linda says

Continuing with my study of the life of St Francis of Assisi, I chose this title for my next read after reading the short section in "The Francis Story" that Chesterton wrote. This book puts his life into the perspective of what the times were like just after the Dark Ages, and how the sight of a begger seeking alms changed his entire life. Chesterton called St. Francis "a poet whose whole life was a poem." The book is an unabridged republication of the 1924 original edition.

Daniel says

Faço por não me pronunciar de forma negativa em relação a livro algum, mas sinto que a pobre classificação que lhe atribuo merece uma justificação breve. G.K. Chesterton escreve uma biografia de São Francisco polvilhada de opiniões pessoais que desde o início me aborreceram, tais como uma ode triunfal à Idade Média como período de purificação pós-pagão, séculos de negrume. Na verdade o texto está recheado de afirmações infundamentadas e mesmo erradas - um exemplo: ou se admite que Jesus cresceu no Paganismo ou no Cristianismo, quando a resposta é nada mais que Judaísmo, aqui obliterado. Terminada a leitura, o que fica é que *1. São Francisco não era pagão* e *2. São Francisco não era comunista nem apoiava o comunismo*, não obstante o intervalo temporal. Ah, e se todos os muçulmanos tivessem sido convertidos ao Cristianismo também se tinha poupado muito sofrimento. Agora é ver se o meu carinho por S. Francisco não é abalado por esta "afronta literária", agravada pelos inúmeros erros ortográficos e de concordância da edição que li.

booklady says

Read this for a retreat I took with John Michael Talbot back in 1998. Finally reread it or rather re-listened to it. In light of our new Holy Father's choice of a namesake, I want to listen to it again. Chesterton's writing is dense and needs a great deal of unpacking. It includes a long introductory explanation about how a biographer might approach the life of this unusual historical figure. Francis of Assisi, born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, has so many popular legends and untruths associated with him that most people, especially Catholics, have no idea what the man (much less the saint) was really like. As such we moderns like to pick and choose aspects of medieval lives we understand and disregard the rest.

Chesterton's biography is devoted to highlighting the ambiguities associated with clinging to some partial view of St. Francis to the expense of his totality, however challenging it may be for us. For example, we may find it easy to accept his total vow of poverty and devotion to the sick and yet eschew his strict obedience to the Pope and Church teachings, or vice versa. And yet we cannot call ourselves true sons/daughters of Francis without embracing his complete vision.

Excellent read but not recommended as a first book about St. Francis.

Jesse Broussard says

I have one tremendous criticism to make of this book. If you have some perfectly good, bitter resentment towards the Franciscans (entirely legitimate), or towards St. Francis himself, or even the Jongleurs de Dieu, this book will take that exquisite resentment and turn it into an entirely unsatisfactory mushy benevolent feeling.

Another of Chesterton's brilliant works. Frederick Buechner once fondly criticized Chesterton with the comment that he'd written entirely too much for all of it to be excellent. I can sympathize, so long as I mention the fact that I've not yet found any of his "less than excellent" work. This book was delightful, short, and densely packed--the written version of a small piece of extremely rich cheesecake. One of the lines that stuck with me: "He could only be tempted by a sacrament."

However, being Chesterton, it does have the one typical criticism (other than making other writers boring), that the tremendously fat Catholic lightly leaps from topic to topic like the mountain goat from crag to crag, or the Hollywood star from blonde to blonde, and we end up not really knowing a whole lot more about St. Francis. But who reads books by Chesterton in order to learn about some narrow topic? You might as well hike solely in order to lose weight, or make love to your wife for the sole purpose of manufacturing babies, ignoring all of the pleasure to be gained from how delightful God made the path.

Mark Schofield says

GK Chesterson is a wonderful writer. He reminds me of C.S. Lewis in that they are both writers of Christian Apologetics but Chesterson knocks Lewis's socks off.

Chesterson says that we can only understand Francis if we think of him as a troubadour of the Middle Ages

and accept the fact that he loved God with the passion that we normally associate with romantic love. Chesterson also talks about early Christianity being a turning from the nature worship of the Greeks and the Romans. He feels that this worship of nature led to the decline of classical civilization. Although I can't quite accept that I agree with his opinion that St. Francis brought reverence for nature back into the Christian religion.

My only quibble with the book is that Chesterson talks about many of the saint's legends but stops short of retelling them. He seems to have lived in a world where people were familiar with these stories. I am afraid that stories such as those told about St. Francis have been banished from our secularized and rational culture.

Dhanaraj Rajan says

A Warning:

If you are a person new to the life of St. Francis and if it is your objective to know more of the saint's life then this is not the book for you. G. K. Chesterton himself says that this is just an introduction. But I would say that this is not an inclusive and appropriate introduction into the saint's life for the new and inquiring person.

But if you are well aware of the life of st. Francis then this book can serve you well by offering few interesting reflections on some of the vents that took place in the life of the saint from a secular perspective (different from a spiritual and theological perspectives).

At times the reflections are more revealing and at times you find G. K. Chesterton rationalising more of it and it becomes hard for the reader.
