

THE VISIONS OF SAINT
FRANCES OF ROME

THE VISIONS OF SAINT
FRANCES OF ROME
HELL, PURGATORY, AND
HEAVEN REVEALED

by
Saint Frances of Rome

Translated and edited by
Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

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Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

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*I am Alpha and Omega; the beginning and the end.
To him that thirsteth, I will give freely of the fountain of
the water of life.*

(. . .)

*But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable,
and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers,
and idolaters, and all liars,
they shall have their portion in the pool burning with
fire and brimstone,
which is the second death.*

Revelation 21:6, 8

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Translator's Introduction

It is fitting that heaven, purgatory, and hell should be matters not only of perennial interest but of the greatest and most intense concern to all Christians. For these three states represent the various possible destinations of our immortal soul—heaven and hell as eternal realities, with purgatory as a temporally limited place of purification and penance. If we concern ourselves (as most of us necessarily do) with the things of this present world, which are merely passing and contingent, how much more should our hearts be occupied with those realms of existence which endure forever and ever? If we give serious attention to what happens to us during our earthly life, which lasts just a few short years, how much more should we strive for happiness and peace in that future life which shall have no end?

Throughout the generations, there have been innumerable attempts to depict or imagine the spiritual realities of heaven, purgatory, and hell, both in the visual

and musical arts, and in literature. More importantly, numerous saints have received visions and revelations pertaining to the nature of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Among these revelations, the visions of Saint Frances of Rome (1384–1440) must be given an honored and distinguished place. Frances was a holy Roman woman of illustrious, wealthy, and noble lineage, who was granted the grace of visions in a particularly vivid and powerful way. Moreover, she had a wonderful spiritual director and confessor, Canon Giovanni Matteotti, to whom she would describe these visions in precise and dramatic detail. Matteotti, in turn, took the greatest care to commit these illuminating and inspiring revelations to writing; both as a witness to the sanctity of Frances and for the spiritual benefit and edification of future readers.

Astonishingly, the most epic and complex series of visions experienced by St. Frances—encompassing, hell, purgatory, and heaven—all took place on a single day.¹ During this time, the saint was afflicted by a very grave illness and, in turn, was confined to her bedchamber.

¹ The editors of the *Acta Sanctorum* opine that this must have occurred sometime after 1432. As Saint Frances died in the year 1440, this means that the visions were experienced towards the end of her life.

There, the eyes of her soul were opened to obtain an unforgettable glimpse into these most awesome and stupendous mysteries. On the evening of that same momentous day, she confided all that she had witnessed and experienced to her trusted spiritual director, making these revelations under holy obedience² to that faithful priest. The diligent Canon Matteotti then meticulously made a written record of everything which she had said. The result is a remarkable and unique work of visionary literature, which is here presented for the first time in English.

The visions which St. Frances revealed are detailed, complex, and often intensely harrowing. In particular, the torments of hell, which comprise by far the largest portion of the work, are described in often gruesome and horrifying detail.³ Nevertheless, as she witnessed

² The narrations which follow often mention that Saint Frances shared her revelations *under holy obedience*, after having been asked to do so by her spiritual director. This holy obedience reflects the obedience of St. Frances to the Church, in the person of its minister (i.e., the priest who was appointed as her confessor and spiritual director.) It also reflects her fidelity to the Benedictine charism of obedience to religious superiors.

³ The reason for the shortness of the section on heaven (compared to those on hell and purgatory) is explained by Saint Frances's own observation that "there were many things in her visions of heaven which she could not comprehend, and that those things

all these things, St. Frances relates that she was accompanied by the archangel Raphael as her unfailing companion and guide. This powerful angel imbued her with courage and strength, both by his reassuring presence and his inspiring words of exhortation.

The modern reader will inevitably be struck by certain resemblances to Dante's poetic masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, which was completed about a century before St. Frances had her visions. However, Dante's immortal poem was a work of pure artistic inspiration, imagination, and literary genius, whereas the writings of St. Frances were a genuine and inspired revelation, given by the grace of God in response to her intense prayer and contemplation.

These writings fall within the category of work that is described as *private revelations*. Private revelations of this type, though genuinely and authentically experienced by the person concerned, do not make any claims to doctrinal authority. They are necessarily filtered through the cultural, historical, and personal perspective of the person receiving them; this biased perspective will generally tend to contribute something to the private revelations' color, content, and form. Therefore, there are several

which she did witness, she perceived only in an unclear and obscure way.”

passages in these visions (such as St. Frances's description of limbo) which should not be read as authoritative statements of Catholic doctrine. All passages of this type are identified in footnotes. Saint Frances herself, at the end of the work, very prudently states that she wishes everything she has related be subjected to the judgment and magisterium of the Holy Catholic Church. The modern reader should, of course, bear this humble reservation in mind at all times. Saint Frances was not a dogmatic theologian, but a mystic and a visionary. She was not concerned with explicating or expounding questions of doctrine and dogma, but rather of her own direct spiritual experience and insights afforded to her by the grace of God.

To this wonderful saint's momentous and unforgettable visions of hell, purgatory, and heaven, have been added a small selection of other visions that St. Frances received from the years 1430–1434. These were similarly narrated to and carefully recorded by Canon Giovanni Matteotti. If the visions of hell and purgatory (which constitute by far the largest part of this volume) are generally utterly terrifying and heart-rending, most of these other selected visions are suffused with a radiant and enchanting beauty. Thus, they form a perfect and fitting counterpart to the major work offered here.

As has been noted, St. Frances of Rome was an Italian noblewoman of extraordinary piety and sanctity. Despite feeling a vocation to consecrated religious life during her childhood, she was married at a young age, and so became a wife and mother—fulfilling both roles with the most admirable and exemplary love and devotion. After some years, with the consent and understanding of her devout and religious husband, she established a convent for women, following the Rule of Saint Benedict. These pious women were Benedictine *oblates* rather than nuns; meaning that they lived an enclosed, religious life without being bound by any formal or public vows. By the grace of God, the convent founded by St. Frances has continued to exist and operate into our own times. In Latin, it is known by the beautiful and evocative name of the *Turris Speculorum*, or in Italian the *Tor de'Specchi* (meaning “The Tower of Mirrors”).

Today, St. Frances of Rome is venerated as the patroness saint of Benedictine oblates, widows, and (very curiously) automobile drivers.⁴ A translation of the life of

⁴ Saint Frances was declared patroness of automobile drivers in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, on account of a popular tradition that whenever St. Frances traveled the streets of Rome, an angel would go before her with a lantern to light her way. Reference to this miraculous

the saint found in the Tridentine *Breviarium Romanum* is included immediately after this introduction.

The source of the texts for the visions of Saint Frances is the *Acta Sanctorum*, March, Volume II, published in Antwerp in 1668, which compiles Matteotti's written records. The literary style of the original is vivid, dramatic, and colorful, but sometimes exhibits a certain confusion of structure and repetitiveness. The original text also features a considerable number of expressions of ambiguous meaning (apparently derived from colloquial, late-Medieval Italian words now fallen into disuse), which even the learned editors of the *Acta Sanctorum* have not always been able to determine with complete certainty. In preparing this edition, the translator has endeavored to render the meaning faithfully into idiomatic and comprehensible English. In some cases, a certain amount of informed conjecture, paraphrase, and literary license has been employed to do this. We leave it to the reader to judge the success, or otherwise, of this humble attempt.

It is hoped that these powerful and often startling visions may awaken the soul of each reader not only to genuine fear and horror of the eternal punishments of

phenomenon appears in one of the visions contained here. See the chapter entitled, "The visions of Saint Frances commence."

hell, but also (and more importantly) to a passionate yearning for the unimaginable glories of heaven. For it is to that place of everlasting and transcendent happiness and ineffable splendor that God wishes to lead us all, through the merits and mercy of His Only Begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB,
Translator and editor,
Abbey of the Most Holy Trinity,
New Norcia, Western Australia

The Life of Saint Frances of
Rome from the *Breviarium*
Romanum ex Decreto SS.
Concilii Tridentini Restitutum

Frances, a noblewoman of Rome, gave illustrious signs of her virtue from a tender age. Even as a young girl, she disdained the trivialities and flippancies of childish games and all the vanities and temptations of the world, delighting instead in the refuge of solitude and deep prayer.

At the age of eleven, she earnestly consecrated her virginity to the Lord, and resolved to enter a convent as a nun. Nevertheless, her parents could not be persuaded to grant her permission to do so, despite all her efforts. Rather, in humble obedience to these parents [when she had reached the age of marriage], Frances

was wedded to a certain young man of distinguished affluence and nobility, called Lorenzo Ponziano.⁵

After her marriage, she continued to cultivate a life of strict prayer and penance as much as her status and responsibilities as a wife permitted her to do so. Except when compelled by some unavoidable obligation, she studiously avoided theaters, banquets, parties, and other worldly and secular entertainments. Contrary to the custom of most women of her wealth and position, she always wore very simple attire of common wool. Whatever spare time she had from her domestic duties, she diligently devoted herself to prayer and the performance of charitable works for her neighbors and the poor. A particular concern of hers was to help guide other married noblewomen to cultivate their spiritual lives, and to avoid the sins and vanities which were then so prevalent among persons of that class.

For this purpose, she established a house of Benedictine oblates in the city of Rome. In this religious house, or convent, women were able to live a life of prayer and enclosure in the manner of consecrated nuns, but without binding themselves by any formal vows. Frances did this while her husband, Lorenzo, was still alive, for

⁵ In the circles and times in which Saint Frances lived, arranged marriages for young women were very much the norm.

he graciously granted her his permission and blessing to consecrate her life more fully to God in this manner.

But misfortunate was soon to befall this holy woman. First, her husband was sent into exile, and then the family was deprived of all its wealth and social standing. However, Frances remained perfectly steadfast and committed herself to her religious life with even greater stricture and austerity. She considered herself to be a mother of all those who needed her assistance, including the poorest and most degraded and wretched of the women and girls of Rome. She kept long vigils of prayer and subsisted each day on a single meal of herbs, legumes, and pure water.

Frances was graced with innumerable visions and spiritual graces. Often when witnessing the elevation of the Most Blessed Sacrament, she would be taken up into an ecstasy of celestial contemplation and would remain physically immobile for some time. She was often severely vexed by many demons, but was granted a very powerful guardian angel, whose presence she is reported to have been able to see clearly.

Distinguished by many astonishing miracles and pious virtues, Frances departed from this world to enter the glories of heaven in the fifty-sixth year of her life. Her name was added to the canon of saints by Pope Paul V.⁶

⁶ Saint Frances was canonized by Pope Paul V in 1608.

THE VISIONS OF
HELL, PURGATORY,
AND HEAVEN OF SAINT
FRANCES OF ROME

*as recorded by her spiritual director,
Canon Giovanni Matteotti*

Saint Frances commences her narration to her spiritual father

Once it happened that Blessed Frances was gravely afflicted by illness and so confined to her bedchamber. While there, not wishing the time to be wasted, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to the most intense prayer and contemplation. As evening fell and the hour for vespers approached, her spiritual father entered her room to visit her and inquire about the state of her health. At once, he perceived from the expression on her countenance that she had undergone some very deep mystical experience that day, and he asked her (under the bonds of religious obedience) to relate to him all that had taken place. Frances replied that, after much prayer and contemplation, she had been taken up into a spiritual ecstasy. The will of God had then led her soul forth from her body to inspect the realms of hell, purgatory, and heaven.

Under holy obedience, she began first to describe her visions of hell. As she entered those infernal regions, she saw there a vast and unfathomable abyss of unspeakable horror and unimaginable foulness. Even to speak or think of this place was, she testified, a source of the most grave trembling and fear for her. Nevertheless, as one committed to the charism of obedience, she was prepared to follow the directions of her spiritual director and tell him all her experiences honestly and without reservation. So, in a state of holy fear and reverence, she proceeded to relate all that she had witnessed, in accordance with the commands of Holy Mother Church, as expressed through her appointed spiritual father.

What she related to him is recorded accurately in the following pages.

The geography of hell and the state of limbo

At the entrance of hell, there was an enormous and imposing inscription written in grim and dreadful lettering of dark crimson—the color, indeed, of congealed blood. This ominous inscription ran thus:

“BEHOLD, THIS PLACE IS HELL,
WHERE SOULS CONDEMNED MUST
DWELL.
OF ALL THE LANDS ACCURSED
THIS IS BY FAR THE WORST!
FROM PAIN THERE IS NO REST
WITHIN THESE REALMS UNBLESSED:
THE FLAMES HERE BURN FOREVER,
THE TORMENT CEASES NEVER!”

In this dreaded region, Blessed Frances was to see, hear, and sense many things of infinite and

indescribable terror. It was, as she recalls, as if she was taken out of herself, and suffused with such an intense and all-consuming fear and horror that it could scarcely be imagined or put into words.

But at the same time, she felt a certain powerful and benign presence beside her, which she could not, however, perceive with her physical senses. Nevertheless, this mysterious and kindly presence seemed to urge her to take courage and not to let dread overcome her.

Now, the entrance to this infernal place had been (as has been mentioned) unimaginably dreadful and imposing. But within, it was even worse—much, much worse! For there were dense clouds and opaque shadows of an almost palpable darkness, which no human words could ever suffice to express, nor human senses could comprehend. This realm, hell, was divided into three parts: an uppermost part; a middle part, of greater and more severe torments than the first; and finally, a nethermost region, where the punishments and sufferings reached infinite and unbounded extremity. Between each of these parts, or levels, vast and empty regions of space were interposed, which were filled with hideous black nebulae and swirling, lightless mists.

Of all the creatures and entities which inhabited this infernal kingdom, there was one who stood out as the

largest and most dominant of them all—an enormous and ancient dragon. Indeed, this beast was present in all three of the levels of hell, with his head in the uppermost level, his body in the middle level, and his tail reaching into the nethermost region. His gigantic and monstrous head, posited in the top level, was turned towards the entrance. And his hideous mouth gaped open, with his tongue hanging out in a sinister fashion. Out of this opened orifice poured a fire that burned with scorching intensity, yet it emitted no light. A putrescent and nauseating stench also issued from his mouth. Similarly, black fire—hot, fetid, and lightless—also seeped through his eyes and ears.

There, Frances, the handmaid of God, heard also great wailings and cries. These ululations⁷ filled the ear, articulating horrid and appalling blasphemies, together with the most wretched laments of dolor⁸ and distress. And as Frances attempted to describe to her spiritual father the torments and lamentations which she had perceived, she herself was filled with an unspeakable pain and sorrow, and she began to break down in tears.

Indeed, she narrated that as she witnessed this multitude of horrors, she felt completely overwhelmed and

⁷ Lamentations or wailings.

⁸ Pain.

as if she were about to faint away. But then she recalled that, at that point, the unseen, benign presence, who had exhorted her to courage earlier, again comforted her. Later on, it was revealed to her that this spiritual presence was, in fact, none other than the mighty arch-angel Raphael himself.

Frances saw there also the prince of the fallen angels, Satan (or Lucifer). His countenance was utterly terrifying, and he sat positioned upon a wooden beam in the middle region of the inferno. His head reached into the uppermost region, while his feet reached to the bottom level. Thus he lay, effectively occupying all three parts of hell simultaneously. His arms and legs were extended outwards, yet in such a way that they bore no likeness to a cross (for that holy form is strictly not permitted in hell). He was crowned with a kind of sinister tiara, resembling the antlers of some great deer or elk. And out of the main horns of these antlers, innumerable smaller horns sprang forth, with sparks and flames issuing from each. Metallic chains, glowing red hot, were bound around his hands, feet, and torso. One of these chains extended from Satan to the great dragon that Frances had seen before.

Frances, the handmaid of the Lord, also saw innumerable other, lesser demons. These were passing freely in

and out from hell to the world, and from the world back to hell. To the accompaniment of dreadful clamors and outcries, they dragged with them the condemned souls of those whom they had managed to ensnare or deceive. The demons mocked and derided these lost souls mercilessly, with such appalling utterances that they cannot be repeated here nor committed to writing. And Frances herself sensed the pain and despair which filled these unfortunate victims with such a degree of intensity that, even as she tried to describe it to her spiritual director, she again broke down utterly in tears of piteous melancholy.

These demons, grasping the souls which they had claimed for hell, led them through the grim entrance of the unhallowed inferno. They hurled some into the flaming mouth of the great dragon, which gaped open nearby. These souls were swallowed by the dragon, but then after a while foully regurgitated, covered in disgusting and acrid mucous. At this point, they were led before a certain magistrate or high officer of the demons. Before this fiery, infernal magistrate, the case of each particular soul was carefully considered. Then the most appropriate region of hell and form of torments were determined for it on the basis of the sins and crimes it had committed and the vices to which it had succumbed during its earthly life. They were then

forcibly taken to their destined place of punishment, to the cacophonous and clamorous accompaniment of indescribable weepings and wailings.

Frances then related that the journey of these souls to their destined places was by no means quick or immediate, as it was (as she later saw) for the souls who were released from purgatory and carried off to enjoy the glories of heaven. For both heaven and hell consist of three distinct levels. In the case of the supernal⁹ realm of eternal glory and splendor, the three levels are, in ascending order: the heaven of the stars, the heaven of crystal, and the Empyrean heaven.¹⁰ Both the three levels of heaven and the three levels of hell are separated from each other by incalculable distances. But, to return specifically to hell, on account of the dense, obsidian darkness and impenetrable, opaque fogs which pervade it, all motion and movement there were rendered indescribably slow, laborious, and oppressively painful.

⁹ Celestial.

¹⁰ The Empyrean heaven was a name given to the highest and most transcendent level of the heavens. This description of the geography of heaven is very similar to that presented in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It reflects the influence of the cosmology of Aristotle, whose scientific and philosophical works were given great authority at the time.

The saint saw that some of the souls led through the gates of hell by various demons were not cast into the mouth of the dragon. Rather, they were led directly to the aforementioned magistrate of the demons and stood before him unchained. But they were then similarly judged, and then handed over to the appropriate demons to undergo their due torments. These were the souls who were guilty of less serious crimes and were therefore to remain on the uppermost level of the inferno. Even there, though, their torments were endless and unspeakable. This upper region was populated by numberless demons, some in the form of vipers, some in the form of toads, some in the form of other horrid and nameless beasts. Here were tormented the souls of Christians who were negligent of their faith, or who failed to make proper confession before passing away. Frances was appalled and shocked to witness this, but her invisible companion (who was, as has been noted, the archangel Raphael) again urged her to be strong and take courage.

At this point, Frances perceived another being or entity—an angel, not a devil—who stood near the gates of hell. The place where he was located was a little beyond the reach of the great dragon, and beyond the grasp of Lucifer, enchained (as he was) to his wooden

beam. Nor was it touched at all by the noxious flames which emerged from the inferno. This place is called *limbo*. It was here that the holy patriarchs and prophets, who lived before the time of Christ, had waited patiently and hopefully for so long for the day when the Savior would come to release them from their bondage.¹¹ This place, limbo, is free from fire and freezing cold, and from the serpents, demons, and foul stench of hell. Here, there is no weeping, nor wailing, nor blasphemy, nor any torments at all; but rather a calm, motionless, and peaceful condition of somnolent shadow and dreamless slumber. This is the place where infants who have not been baptized find their rest. In limbo, as in heaven and hell, there are three levels that are of different degrees of darkness. The highest level, where the shadow is lightest, is where infants conceived by good Christian parents, but who pass away before they are baptized, rest in painless peace. The second level, which is somewhat darker, is where the unbaptized, but innocent, offspring of non-Christians dwell,

¹¹ Reference to this descent of Christ to the underworld (here interpreted as limbo) is to be found in the Apostles' Creed: ". . . *descendit ad infernos*." The literal and original meaning of *infernos* in Latin is simply "lower regions." The contemporary meaning of *inferno* as a place of fire is an etymological extrapolation of its original sense.

who pass away in their infancy.¹² The third and darkest region of limbo is where infants conceived by monks or nuns or priests, or from incestuous relationships, and who die without receiving the sacrament of baptism, are bound to remain.¹³

¹² The original text here reads: *“parvuli concepti ex Hebraeis, et in infantile aetate mortui.”* It seems likely that Frances intended this to include the unbaptized infants of all non-Christian peoples, which is reflected in the present translation.

¹³ This description of the fate of unbaptized and illegitimate infants should not be read as an official Church teaching. It does, however, reflect the view which was prevalent and generally accepted at the time.