

THE LIFE OF SAINT  
FRANCES OF ROME



# THE LIFE OF SAINT FRANCES OF ROME

*Lady Georgiana Fullerton*

TAN Books  
Gastonia, North Carolina

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This edition of *The Life of Saint Frances of Rome* was edited, re-typeset, and published by TAN Books in 2025 from *The Life of Saint Frances of Rome, and Others*, originally published by Burns and Lambert, London, 1855.

Cover design by Caroline Green

Cover image: Detail of *The Crucifixion with St. Elizabeth of Hungary and St. Frances of Rome* (1630), Guercino. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

ISBN: 978-1-5051-3566-4

Kindle ISBN: 978-1-5051-3568-8

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5051-3567-1

Published in the United States by

TAN Books

PO Box 269

Gastonia, NC 28053

[www.TANBooks.com](http://www.TANBooks.com)

Printed in the United States of America

**The authorities on which the History of  
St. Frances of Rome rests are as follows:**

Her life by Mattiotti, her Confessor for ten years. Mattiotti enjoined her, as a matter of obedience, to relate to him from time to time her visions in the minutest detail. He was a timid and suspicious man, and for two or three years kept a daily record of all she told him; afterwards, as his confidence in her sanctity and sanity grew complete, he contented himself with a more general account of her ecstasies, and also put together a private history of her life. After her death, he wrote a regular biography, which is now to be found in the Bollandist collection (Venice, 1735, vol. ii.).

Early in the seventeenth century, Ursinus, a Jesuit, wrote a life, which was highly esteemed, but which was never printed, and, except in certain fragments, is now lost.

In 1641, Fuligato, a Jesuit, wrote the second life, in the Bollandist collection, which contains particulars of events that happened after Mattiotti's time.

Other well-written lives have since appeared: especially a recent one by the Vicomte de Bussière, in which will be found various details too long to be included in the sketch here presented to the English reader.

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## CHAPTER I

### *General Character of the Saint's Life— Her Childhood and Early Piety*

There have been saints whose histories strike us as particularly beautiful, not only as possessing the beauty which always belongs to sanctity, whether exhibited in an aged servant of God, who for threescore years and more has borne the heat and burden of the day, or in the youth who has offered up the morning of his life to His Maker, and yielded it into His hands before twenty summers have passed over his head; whether in a warrior king like St. Louis, or a beggar like Benedict Labré, or a royal lady like St. Elizabeth of Hungary; but also as uniting—in the circumstances of their lives, in the places they inhabited, and the epochs when they appeared in the world, much that is in itself poetical and interesting, and calculated to attract the attention of the historian and the man of letters, as well as of the

theologian and the devout. In this class of saints may well be included Francesca Romana,<sup>1</sup> the foundress of the religious order of the Oblates of Tor di Specchi. She was the model of young girls, the example of a devout matron, and finally a widow, according to the very pattern drawn by St. Paul; she was beautiful, courageous, and full of wisdom, nobly born, and delicately brought up: Rome was the place of her birth, and the scene of her labours; her home was in the centre of the great city, in the heart of the Trastevere; her life was full of trials and hair-breadth escapes, and strange reverses; her hidden life was marvellous in the extreme: visions of terror and of beauty followed her all her days; favours such as were never granted to any other saint were vouchsafed to her; the world of spirits was continually thrown open to her sight; and yet, in her daily conduct, her character and her ways, minute details of which have reached us, there is a simplicity as well as a deep humility, awful in one so highly gifted, touching in one so highly favoured.

Troubled and wild were the times she lived in; perhaps if one had to point out a period in which a Catholic Christian would rather not have had his lot

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1 Editorial note: Also known as St. Frances of Rome. She is referred to as Francesca throughout this text.

cast,—one in which there was most to try his faith and wound his feelings, he would name the end of the fourteenth century, and the beginning of the fifteenth. War was raging all over Europe; Italy was torn by inward dissensions, by the rival factions of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. So savage was the spirit with which their conflicts were carried on, that barbarism seemed once more about to overspread that fair land, and the Church itself was afflicted not only by the outward persecutions which strengthen its vitality, though for a while they may appear to cripple its action, but by trials of a far deeper and more painful nature. Heresy had torn from her arms a great number of her children, and repeated schisms were dividing those who, in appearance and even in intention, remained faithful to the Holy See. The successors of St. Peter had removed the seat of their residence to Avignon, and the Eternal City presented the aspect of one vast battle-field, on which daily and hourly conflicts were occurring. The Colonnas, the Orsinis, the Savellis, were every instant engaged in struggles which deluged the streets with blood, and cut off many of her citizens in the flower of their age; strangers were also continually invading the heritage of the Church, and desecrated Rome with massacres and outrages scarcely less

deplorable than those of the Huns and the Vandals. In the capital of the Christian world, ruins of recent date lay side by side with the relics of past ages; the churches were sacked, burned, and destroyed; the solitary and indestructible basilicas stood almost alone, mournfully erect amidst these scenes of carnage and gloom; and the eyes of the people of Rome were wistfully directed towards that tutelary power, which has ever been to them a pledge of prosperity and peace, and whose removal the signal of war and of misery.

It was at that time, during the Pontificate of Urban VI., in the year 1384, that Francesca was born at Rome; that "she rose as a star in a dark night," according to the expression of the most ancient of her biographers. Her father's name was Paul Bussa; her mother's Jacobella de' Roffredeschi; they were both of noble and even illustrious descent, and closely allied to the Orsinis, the Savellis, and the Mellinis. On the day of her birth she was carried to the church of Santa Agnese, in the Piazza Navona, and there baptised. Little could the worshippers who may have been praying there that day for a blessing on their bereaved and distracted city, have guessed in what form that blessing was bestowed, and that that little babe, a few hours old, was to prove a most powerful instrument in the hands of God for

the extinction of schism, the revival of piety, and the return of peace.

From her infancy, Francesca was not like other children. Her mother, when she held her in her arms or hushed her to sleep on her knee, had always an involuntary feeling of reverence for her little daughter; it was as if an angel of God, not an earthly child, had been lent her; a heavenly expression shone in her eyes, and the calm serenity of her infant features struck all who approached her with admiration. Francesca learned to read at the same time that she began to speak; the first words she was taught to utter were the sacred names of Jesus and Mary; at her mother's knee she lisped the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, and during the whole course of her life she never omitted that practice.

At two or three years old she had the sense and intelligence of a grown-up person; an extraordinary piety revealed itself in all her words and actions. She never played like other children; but when left to herself would often retire into silent corners of her father's palace, and kneeling down, join her little hands in prayer; and lifting up her infant heart to God, would read a devout book, or repeat hymns to the Blessed Virgin, her own dear mother as she used to call her. Silence appeared to be the delight of this young child—

the deepest reserve and modesty an instinct with her. At the age of six years the practices of the saints were already familiar to her. She had left off eating meat, eggs, or sweets of any description, and lived on plainly boiled vegetables and bread. The necessity of eating at all seemed irksome to her, and she never drank anything but pure water. Then also had begun her unwearyed study of the lives of holy women, and especially of the virgin martyrs who have shed their blood for the love of Jesus Christ. The Sacrament of Confirmation, which she received at that time in the church of Santa Agnese, the same in which she had been baptised, filled her with ardour to show her love for her Lord by every imaginable means, even those the most painful to the flesh.

Her mother was a very devout person, and in the habit of visiting every day some of the churches, especially those where indulgences were to be gained, and she also frequented the stations with affectionate assiduity. For in that troubled epoch, as in the earliest times of the Church, as now, as always, on certain days, in certain places, the relics of apostles, of martyrs, and of confessors were exhibited to the faithful, often on the very spot where they had finished their course with joy, having kept their faith and won their crown. The



devotion of “the stations,” as it is performed in Rome, is one of the most touching links with the past that it is possible to conceive. To pass along the street, so often trod by holy feet in former and in latter days, and seek the church appointed for that day’s station; to approach some time-worn basilica, or ancient sanctuary, without the city walls may be, and pausing on the threshold, give one look at the glorious works of Almighty God in the natural world,—at the wide Campagna, that land-sea, so beautiful in its broad expanse and its desolate grandeur, at the purple hills with their golden lights and their deep-blue shadows, and the arched sky telling so vividly the glory of its Maker; and then slowly lifting the heavy curtain that stands between that vision of earthly beauty, and the shrine where countless generations have come to worship,—to tread under feet the green boughs, the sweet-smelling leaves, the scattered flowers, that morning strewn upon the uneven, time-trod, time-honoured pavement; bowing in adoration before the Lord in His tabernacle, to thank Him for the wonders that He has worked in His saints,—for the beauty of the world of grace, of which that of the visible world is but the type and the shadow; and then move from one shrine to the other, wherever the lights upon the altars point the way, and invoke the assistance, the

prayers of the saints whose relics are there displayed;— all this is one of those rare enjoyments which at once feed the soul and awake the imagination, and which the devout Christian can find in no place but Rome.

It was these “stations” that Francesca’s mother frequented, and took her little daughter with her. Sometimes she went to some church in the heart of the city; sometimes to some lonely shrine without the walls. Then, as now, the beggars (so we find it mentioned later in the life of the Saint) congregated at the doors, and clamoured for alms. Then, as now, the lights burned upon the altars, and the sweet smell of fragrant and crushed leaves perfumed the air. During sermons the little girl’s attention never wandered; and on her return home she was wont to repeat what she had heard with unction and delight.

Her mother’s favourite church was that of Santa Maria Nuova; in our day more frequently called that of San Francesca Romana. It stands in the Toro Romano, close to the ruins of the ancient Temple of Peace. It was served at that time by the Benedictine monks of Mount Olivet; and to one of them, Don Antonio di Monte Savello, Jacobella de’ Roffredeschi intrusted the spiritual direction of her daughter. He was a man of great learning and piety, and continued her director for five and thirty years.

Every Wednesday the little maiden came to him for confession. She consulted him about her occupations, her religious exercises, and her studies, and exactly obeyed his most minute directions, even in indifferent things. Often she tried for his permission to practise greater austerities; and such was her fervour, and the plain indications of God's designs upon her, that he occasionally allowed her to perform penances which might have been considered in ordinary cases too severe for her tender age. At other times he forbade them altogether; and she submitted cheerfully to his commands, without a word of remonstrance or complaint, and resumed them again at his desire, with the equanimity of one who well knew that the spirit of perfect obedience is more acceptable to God than any works of devotion.

“A celestial brightness, a more eternal beauty, Shone on her face, and encircled her form, when after confession Homeward serenely she walked, with God's benediction upon her. When she had passed, it seemed like the ceasing of exquisite music.”<sup>2</sup> Francesca's daily life was as perfect as a child's could be. No untrue words sullied her pure lips; no gross thought dwelt in her mind. She seldom laughed, though a sweet smile

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2 Longfellow: *Evangeline*.

was often on her lips. Up to the age of eleven, her life was one long continual prayer. Every little action was performed with a view to the glory of God. Her trifling failings she deplored with anguish; every stain on the pure mirror of her conscience was instantly washed away by tears. It was not long before it pleased God to vouchsafe to her extraordinary graces. Her early and almost intuitive acquaintance with the mysteries of religion was wonderful. Every day she meditated on the Incarnation and the Passion of Jesus Christ; and her devotion to the Blessed Virgin increased in proportion to her love for our Lord. Her face flushed with delight, and a seraphic expression beamed in her eyes, when she spoke of the sufferings of Jesus, and the glories of Mary. From the little oratory where she held secret communion with heaven, she went out into the world with the most ardent desire to serve the poor, to console the afflicted, to do good to all. The affection of her young heart found vent in numerous works of charity; and Francesca's name, and Francesca's sweet voice, and Francesca's fair face, were even then to many of the sufferers of that dark epoch a sign of hope,—a pledge that God was still amongst them as of yore, and His Spirit at work in the hearts of men.