

THE LIFE *of*
ST. FRANCIS
of ASSISI

Imprimatur

✠ Henry Edward Manning
Archbishop of Westminster
December 8, 1867

THE LIFE *of* ST. FRANCIS *of* ASSISI

ST. BONAVENTURE
(from the "Legenda Sancti Francisci")

Edited, with a Preface, by His Eminence
CARDINAL MANNING

*"To him that thirsteth, I will give of the fountain
of the water of life, freely. He that shall overcome
shall possess these things, and I will be his God;
and he shall be my son."*

—Apocalypse 21:6-7



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Published with the assistance of The Livingstone Corporation. Cover and interior design by Mark Wainright, The Livingstone Corporation. Typeset by TAN Books.

Cover Illustration: *St. Francis Preaching to the Birds and Blessing Montefalco*, 1452 (fresco), Gozzoli, Benozzo di Lese di Sandro (1420–97), Bridgeman Art Gallery.

ISBN: 978-0-89555-151-1

Printed and bound in United States of America.

1 2 1 1 1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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*“But as many as received him,
he gave them power to be made the sons of God,
to them that believe in his name.
Who are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh,
nor of the will of man, but of God.”
—John 1:12-13*

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THE life of a Saint, written by a Saint, as the life of St. Paul of the Cross written by his companion, the Blessed Strambi, speaks to the heart with a vital power which no work of merely natural genius can command. It has a twofold operation of the Spirit of God with it, both in the subject and in the writer. Such is, in an eminent degree, the Life of St. Francis, by St. Bonaventure—the life of the Seraphic Patriarch written by the Seraphic Doctor. Among uninspired books there are few that breathe more sensibly the love of God. There is a light and a sweetness about it which is not of this world. The anecdote of St. Thomas visiting St. Bonaventure's cell, and finding him in ecstasy, is too well known to need recital. St. Bonaventure was then writing the Life of St. Francis, and it was on these very pages that he was intent when St. Thomas drew back from the door, saying, "Let us leave a Saint to work for a Saint." It is in this same spirit of love and reverence that we ought to read this book.

✠ HENRY EDWARD,
Archbishop of Westminster.
Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1867.

PROLOGUE

THE grace of God our Saviour hath appeared in these our latter days in His faithful and devout servant Francis, and hath been manifested through him to all those who are truly humble and lovers of holy poverty; who, honoring and devoutly adoring the superabundance of the divine mercy, which was so bountifully poured forth upon him, have been taught by his example to forsake all impiety and worldly desires, to conform their lives to the life of Christ, and with intense and burning desire to thirst after the hope of heavenly beatitude. For so graciously did God look upon this truly poor and contrite man, that He not only raised the poor and needy from the vile dust of worldly conversation, but also set him to be a light to the faithful, making him to become a true professor, leader, and herald of evangelical perfection, that, bearing witness to the light, he might prepare before the Lord a way of light and peace in the hearts of the faithful. For, shining like a morning star in the midst of a dark cloud, he enlightened by the bright rays of his pure doctrine and holy life those who lay in darkness and in the shadow of death, and thus guided them onwards by his bright shining to the perfect day. And like the glorious rainbow set in the darkness of the clouds, he came forth as the angel of true peace and the sign of the covenant between God and man, bringing glad tidings of peace and salvation: being sent by God, like the Precursor of Christ, to

prepare in the desert of this world the highway of holy poverty, and by word and example to preach penance to men. Thus prevented by the gifts of heavenly grace, enriched with the merits of invincible virtue, filled with the spirit of prophecy, and ordained to the angelic office of declaring good tidings, burning with seraphic fire, and raised above all human things in the fiery chariot of divine love, it may be reasonably affirmed from the clear testimony of His whole life that he came in the spirit and power of Elias.

We may also say that he was truly shadowed forth by that other friend of Christ, the Apostle and Evangelist St. John, under the similitude of the angel whom he saw ascending from the east with the sign of the living God. Under this figure we may assuredly discern Francis, the servant, herald, and messenger of God, the beloved of Christ, the pattern for our imitation, the wonder of the world, if we carefully observe and mark the excellency of his marvellous sanctity, by which, during his life, he imitated the purity of the Angels, so that he may be set forth as an example to all the perfect followers of Christ.

And we are not only moved firmly to believe this, and confidently to affirm it by that office which he exercised in his own person, inviting all men to tears and penance, clothing himself in sackcloth, girding himself with a cord, shaving his head, and signing, with the salutary Sign of the Cross, the foreheads of those who mourned over their offenses against God, even as the Angel was wont to mark the foreheads of men with the mysterious character of Tau: we recognize him, indeed, by the habit which he wore, bearing the outward semblance of the Cross, but far more certainly by the seal of the likeness of the living God, even of Jesus Christ crucified, which was impressed upon his body, neither by natural power, nor artificial contrivance, but by the marvellous efficacy of the Spirit of the living God.

I know myself, then, to be most unworthy and unequal to describe the life of this most venerable man, thus set forth for the

imitation of the faithful; nor should I ever have attempted such a task, but for my ardent love for my brethren; being moved thereto by the urgent request of our General Chapter, and no less by the devotion which I am bound to bear to this our holy Father, by whose merits and invocation I was (as I well remember), while yet a child, delivered from the jaws of death. Were I then to be silent in his praise, I should fear justly to incur the charge of ingratitude. Good reason, indeed, have I to undertake this labor, that so, in return for the bodily and spiritual life preserved to me by God for the sake of his merits and virtues, I, on my part, may preserve as best I may (albeit imperfectly), the acts, words, and virtues of his life, which are scattered and dispersed in divers places, and so gather them together, that they may not perish with the lives of those who lived and conversed with him on earth.

Having, therefore, to set forth the life of so holy a man, that I might obtain certain knowledge of all things relating to it, I went to the place where he was born, and learned, from many who had been familiar with him whilst he was yet on earth, the manner of his life and conversation, and of his departure out of this world. I examined all these things with great diligence, and conferred thereupon with some who, having been his chief disciples, had full knowledge of his marvellous sanctity, and who are worthy of all credit for their approved virtue and perfect knowledge of the truth. Now, in describing all these things, and the sublime and wonderful deeds which God was pleased to work by this His servant, I have judged it fitting to avoid all curious ornaments of style and vain eloquence of words—believing that the devotion of the reader will be enkindled rather by a pure and simple idiom than by an ornamental phraseology. Neither have I been careful, in weaving the web of my story, to follow the order of time; but, to avoid the confusion of subjects which might thence arise, I have rather studied to follow such an order as would string together facts of the same class and kind, although they may have taken place at dif-

ferent times. The beginning, therefore, and course of this life, and finally the end of it, shall be related in fifteen chapters, the contents of which, for greater clearness and distinctness, are set down below.

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CHAPTER ONE

Of the Manner of Life of St. Francis Whilst He Yet Wore the Secular Habit

IN THE city of Assisi there dwelt a man named Francis, whose memory is in benediction; for God in His mercy, preventing him with His divine blessing, vouchsafed to deliver him from the perils of this present life and filled him abundantly with the gifts of His heavenly grace. For although he was brought up in his youth among the vain children of worldly men in the vanities of the world, and was employed by his father, as soon as he had acquired some knowledge of letters, in the pursuit of worldly gain; yet, by the continual present help of God, he never suffered himself to be carried away, like the lawless youths around him, by sensual pleasure, albeit he was of a gay and joyous spirit; nor, although dwelling among covetous traders, was he intent upon gain, nor did he set his heart and hopes on money. For in the soul of this young man there dwelt, by the gift of God, a certain innate and natural love of the poor of Christ, which, growing up with him from his earliest childhood, filled his heart with such benignity that, in obedience to the words of the Gospel, he resolved within himself to give to everyone who should ask of him, and especially if the petitions were made in the Name of God. Now it happened one day, when Francis was wholly engrossed by the tumult of worldly

business, that a poor man asked an alms of him; contrary to his usual custom he passed him unheeded, and went on his way. But speedily recollecting himself, he ran after the poor man, charitably relieved his wants, and made a solemn promise to God that, from that day forth, he would never refuse an alms to any that should ask it of him for the love of God. And this promise he faithfully kept till the day of his death, meriting thereby an abundant increase of the grace and love of God. So that he was wont to say, after he had perfectly put on Christ, that even while he still wore the secular habit, he could never hear words expressing the love of God without his heart being deeply moved and affected. And certain it is, that in the sweetness and mildness of his bearing, the gentleness of his manners, his patience and docility—far beyond the ordinary custom of men, the munificence of his bounty, exceeding even the extent of his means—in all these things shone forth the beauty of this young man's soul, clearly betokening the abundant outpouring of the divine blessing reserved for him in days to come.

A certain man of great simplicity dwelt in those days at Assisi, who, by virtue of knowledge divinely infused, whenever he met Francis in the street, would take off his mantle, and spread it upon the ground before him, declaring that he did so because he was a man worthy of all honor and reverence, who should shortly perform great works and marvellous deeds, and was, therefore, to be highly honored and praised by all faithful Christians.

But Francis as yet knew not, neither understood, the great purposes of God towards him; for being by the will of his father engrossed by external affairs, and also by reason of the original corruption of our nature drawn down and depressed by earthly things, he had not learned to contemplate heavenly mysteries, neither did he yet know the sweetness of divine consolation. And, forasmuch as the Lord is wont, by afflictions and tribulations, to open the ears of the spirit, so, by the right hand of the Most High, he was suddenly changed, his body being afflicted with long and severe

sufferings, that so his soul might be prepared to receive the unction of the Holy Ghost. Now, when he had recovered his bodily health, going forth one day, as was his wont, in apparel suited to his state, he met a certain soldier of honor and courage, but poor and vilely clad; of whose poverty, feeling a tender and sorrowful compassion, he took off his new clothes and gave them to the poor man-at-arms, thus at once fulfilling two offices of piety, by covering the shame of a noble cavalier and relieving a poor man's penury.

On the following night, when he was asleep, the divine mercy showed him a spacious and beautiful palace filled with arms and military ensigns, all marked with the Cross of Christ, to make known to him that his charitable deed done to the poor soldier for the love of the great King of Heaven should receive an unspeakable reward. And when he asked for whom all these things were reserved, a divine voice answered him that they were for him and for his soldiers.

When Francis awoke, early in the morning, not being yet accustomed to understand and interpret divine mysteries, nor through visible signs to ascend to invisible truths, he thought that this strange vision betokened some great earthly prosperity. Therefore, being still ignorant of the Divine Will, he determined to go into Apulia, there to enter the household of a certain Count of great magnificence and liberality, who dwelt in that country, hoping in his service to acquire military honor and renown, according to what he supposed to be the meaning of the vision. When he had travelled for some days together, he came to a certain city, when the Lord spoke to him in the night with the familiar voice of a friend, saying, "Francis, who can do most for thee—the Lord or the servant, the rich man or the poor?" And when Francis replied that the Lord and the rich man could do more for him than the poor, "Wherefore, then," said the voice, "dost thou leave the Lord for the servant, and the God of infinite riches for a poor mortal?" Then said Francis, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" And

the Lord answered: "Return home; for the vision which thou hast seen prefigured a spiritual work which thou shalt bring to pass, not by human counsel, but by divine disposition." So, when the day dawned, Francis set forth in great haste towards Assisi, full of joy and confidence; and from that time he awaited in obedience the revelation of the Will of God, and withdrawing from the tumult of worldly affairs, he most devoutly besought the divine clemency to vouchsafe to make manifest to him all that he was to do. And so, by the practice of frequent prayer, the vehement flame of heavenly desires increased daily within him, and already, for the love of his celestial country, he despised all earthly things, as if they existed not; for he knew that he had found the hidden treasure, and like a prudent merchant he considered within himself how to sell all that he had to make it his own. But he knew not yet how he was to purchase it, nor what he was to give for it; only it seemed to be made known to him that the spiritual merchant must begin with the contempt of the world, and that the soldier of Christ must begin by victory over himself.

Now, as he was riding one day over the plain of Assisi he met a leper, whose sudden appearance filled him with fear and horror; but forthwith calling to mind the resolution which he had made to follow after perfection, and remembering that if he would be a soldier of Christ he must first overcome himself, he dismounted from his horse and went to meet the leper, that he might embrace him: and when the poor man stretched out his hand to receive an alms, he kissed it and filled it with money. Having again mounted his horse, he looked around him over the wide and open plain, but nowhere could he see the leper; upon which, being filled with wonder and joy, he began devoutly to give thanks to God, purposing within himself to proceed to still greater things than this.

He sought continually for wild and solitary places, where, with tears and unutterable groans, he poured forth long and fervent prayers, until at last our Lord was pleased to hear him; for being

one day engaged in fervent prayer, according to his custom, in a lonely place, he became wholly absorbed in God, when Jesus Christ appeared to him under the form of a Crucifix, at which sight his whole soul seemed to melt away; and so deeply was the memory of Christ's Passion impressed on his heart, that it pierced even to the marrow of his bones. From that hour, whenever he thought upon the Passion of Christ, he could scarcely restrain his tears and sighs; for he then understood (as he made known to some of his familiar friends not long before his death) that these words of the Gospel were addressed to him: "If thou wilt come after Me, deny thyself, and take up thy cross and follow Me." And from that day forth he clothed himself with the spirit of poverty, the sense of humility, and the affection of interior piety. And inasmuch as heretofore he had greatly abhorred the company of lepers, and could not endure even the distant sight of them, now—for the love of Christ crucified, who, according to the Prophet's words, was despised as a leper—he, in contempt of himself, sought out and served lepers with great humility and piety, and aided them in all their necessities. For he often visited them in their houses, giving them bountiful alms, and with affectionate compassion he would kiss their hands and their faces; and he desired to bestow upon poor beggars not only his money, but even himself; oftentimes taking off his own clothes to cover them, tearing or cutting them in pieces for them when he had nothing else to give. With the greatest reverence and piety he was wont to supply the necessities of poor priests, especially by providing them with ornaments for the altar, that so he might at the same time bear his part in the divine worship and provide for the needs of the ministers of God. About this time, he was visiting with great reverence and devotion the holy temple of St. Peter, at Rome; he saw a great multitude of poor surrounding the church door; and partly induced by the love of poverty, partly by the delight which he took in the exercise of works of mercy, he gave his own clothes to the one who seemed most destitute; and

putting on the poor man's rags, he remained there all day amidst these poor people, in marvellous joy and gladness of heart, that so despising the glory of the world he might attain to evangelical perfection. He labored with all diligence at the mortification of the flesh, that thus the Cross of Christ, which he bore inwardly in his heart, might be impressed also outwardly on his body. And all these things were done by Francis, this servant of God, before he had taken the religious habit, or separated himself from the conversation of the world.