

The Mirror of Perfection: G. K. Chesterton's Interpretation of St. Francis of Assisi

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IF one knew nothing of G.K. Chesterton's writings, but knew well the man himself, and were asked which saint most reflected his mind and disposition, one would surely answer St. Francis of Assisi. His love of Francis was a lifelong inspiration. "In those days of boyhood," he says, "my fancy first caught fire with the glory of Francis of Assisi," who remained a vivid association with the magic of his early days. "His figure," he affirms, "stands on a sort of bridge connecting my boyhood with my conversion to many other things."¹ Appropriately, he pays tribute to this, his spiritual catalyst, by writing his book about him very shortly after his conversion to Roman Catholicism. His most concentrated statement on Catholic spirituality, tacitly intended as a catalyst for others, constitutes both a considerable insight into Francis and a mirror of his own religious spirit. What, then, was its context and message, and how accurate and valuable an account of Francis is it?

Just as his *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923) does not appear haphazardly in Chesterton's life, so this book and his other writings on Francis have their place in a literary context, of which he himself was very much aware: "the romance of [Francis's] religion had penetrated even the rationalism of that vague Victorian time," he comments (p. 17). From the Reformation onwards, Francis had been held in special contempt in England as a classic example of Catholic superstition and perversity, so that his reputation

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, People's Library (London, n.d.), pp. 18, 19. References to this edition are henceforth cited in text by page number.

became a touchstone of attitudes. Among Victorians, Charles Reade's verdict was that Francis had "the folly without the poetry" of Diogenes; Charles Kingsley's that he was "unmanly [and] superstitious."² It is because of this heritage of contempt that Chesterton refers to the notion that Francis was a fanatic (p. 141), and generally defends him from the idea that he was unreasonable. The first nineteenth-century English non-Catholic to view him favorably appears to have been Wordsworth, in his 1837 poem "The Cuckoo at Laverna"; and Chesterton duly comments how nobody understood Francis's anticipation of "all that is most liberal and sympathetic in the modern mood" until Wordsworth (p. 7). Victorian Catholics were, of course, eager to recover Francis's reputation for holiness: Frederick Faber and especially Cardinal Manning took an interest, Manning making the first English translation of, and editing the *Fioretti*, as *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi* (1864). The Catholic poets Aubrey de Vere and Lionel Johnson, wrote poems about him in the 1890's, and Johnson wrote an essay in 1899. But as late 1893, the *Catholic Dictionary* could comment: "It is difficult to realize in this nineteenth century the extraordinary attraction which the example and preaching of St. Francis exercised on his contemporaries."³ Nevertheless, by that time, Chesterton had already acquired a strong appreciation of him.

The revolution in the general appreciation of Francis came in 1894, with the publication and translation into English of the Protestant Paul Sabatier's great biography, the *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, a book which is still highly regarded. Subsequently, the market was saturated with studies of Francis's life and spirit, and with translations of the medieval sources. Just one example of this development was that the Catholic, Montgomery Carmichael (1857-1936), contracted an interest in him; and, in 1901, he edited a Franciscan source, *The Lady Poverty* (that is the *Sacrum Commercium Beati Francisci cum Domina Paupertate*), and in 1902 published his novel, *The Life of John William Walshe*, a work which also related to the Franciscan world. This wave of enthusiasm continued up to, and beyond, the

² For Francis's reputation in the nineteenth century see Kevin L. Morris, *The Image of the Middle Ages in Romantic and Victorian Literature* (London, 1984), especially pp. 82-83. On Francis's reputation c. 1875-1925 see review of H.F.B. Mackay, *The Message of Francis of Assisi, Tablet*, February 14, 1925, pp. 205-206: fifty years ago Francis "was vaguely pictured as merely one of the fanatics and ascetics to whom Papists said their prayers instead of to Almighty God"; although he has become increasingly favored by non-Catholics.

³ *A Catholic Dictionary* ed. William Addis, Thomas Arnold, new ed. (London, 1893), p. 387.

septcentenary of the saint's death in 1926, so that in 1931, Chesterton could observe: "St. Francis of Assisi has been for ages a popular saint; in our own age he has for the first time been in some danger of being a fashionable saint."⁴

Perhaps Chesterton has his own childhood enthusiasm underpinned by his reading in John Ruskin and Francis Thompson, who frequently alluded to Francis. Though not a Catholic, Ruskin underwent a conversion away from humanism to a sort of neo-Catholicism when he was working on Giotto's frescoes in Assisi in 1874, so that he came to think of himself as a Franciscan Tertiary. Manning, attempting a full conversion, sent him a copy of the *Fioretti*.⁵ Ruskin, Giotto and Dante—all devotees of Francis—were in Chesterton's mind in 1894 when he visited northern Italy, from which he sent a letter which declares, "I happen to affect" St. Francis.⁶ It would seem, however, that on this tour, he neglected to visit Assisi, where he would have seen the Giotto frescoes of Francis in the Upper and Lower Churches, apparently going there first only in 1929.⁷ In one of his "Francis" writings, he alludes to these connections when he observes: "As I grew up, the Ruskinian [aesthetic] revolution prevailed, and most men came to realize that Giotto was a great painter."⁸

Chesterton was naturally aware both of Francis Thompson's close association with the Franciscans—an association which persisted from the early 1890's until his death—and his writings on the Franciscan spirit commenting on how natural it is to associate Francis with Thompson,⁹ and emphasizing the spirit of simplicity in both.¹⁰ Their thoughts traveled adjacent channels: Francis "was a poet whose whole life was a poem," who made his life into art (p. 102), says Chesterton, a comment which recalls Thompson's proposing that Franciscan simplicity was embodied in the Franciscan's direct, honest expression of himself, which, he adds, "makes the true poet take to the Franciscan and the true Franciscan to the poet," for

⁴ Foreword to *Giotto. The Legend of St. Francis as depicted in the Assisi Frescoes and Faithfully copied by Edith M. Cowles* (London, 1931), p. 7. Hereafter Cowles, *Giotto*.

⁵ See R. H. Wilenski, *John Ruskin* (London, 1933), pp. 352-353, and E. T. Cook, *The Life of John Ruskin*, 2 vols. (London, 1911), vol. II, p. 450.

⁶ Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London, 1944), pp. 50-53.

⁷ A cryptic comment in his *Autobiography* (London, 1936), p. 314 suggests as much.

⁸ Cowles, *Giotto*, p. 10.

⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (London, 1943), Chapter I, p. 33.

¹⁰ See "A Dead Poet," 1907, in G. K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered*.

"the Franciscan embodies in himself the poet's ideal." Both writers associate the Franciscan's mind with that of the child, and both wrote of the saint's asceticism. Incidentally, on the same page (p. 102), Chesterton, always one to recycle a good turn of phrase, says that the things which Francis said were more imaginative than the things which he wrote, the things which he did more imaginative than the things which he said, an observation which parallels what Coventry Patmore used to say of Thompson: that his prose was finer than his poetry, and his talk better than both."

Chesterton began to express his interest in a poem of 1892, called "St. Francis of Assisi," a piece which is confused but suggestive. It speaks of Chesterton's anguish about whether or not life has meaning, and seems to suppose that hope resides in identifying with the Christianity of Francis, with his love of life; but he seems to distinguish him from the ecclesiastical ethos of his day: "Dark the age and stern the dogma, yet the kind hearts are not cruel, / Still the true sound rises resistless to a larger world of love:" "his tale of mercy's triumph;" and he "Did not claim a ruthless knowledge of the bounds of grace eternal."¹¹ Already he is thinking of committing himself—albeit vaguely—to the Franciscan way. In December of 1900, he contributed an article on Francis to *The Speaker*, in which he anticipates the themes of the puzzle presented to the modern mind by Franciscan asceticism referred to in Thompson's 1903 essay "Health and Holiness." Here he regards Francis in a paradoxical light, as an "amazingly unworldly and almost maddening simple-minded infant," who was nevertheless "one of the most consistently successful men that ever fought with this bitter world," the secret of whose success was "his profound belief in other people."¹² His brother Cecil remarked that this essay was a milestone along Chesterton's road towards orthodoxy and Catholicism: for one thing, he said, he shows friendliness towards monasticism, whereas before he would not have been so inclined.¹⁴ In *the Victorian Age in Literature*, Chesterton rightly notes the Victorian's "schism in the sympathies" when considering the Catholic world; and in *St. Francis*, he says that he is addressing the modern world

¹¹ The phrase appears in *Selected Poems of Francis Thompson* (London, 1921), pp. vi-xvii; Chesterton borrowed this device in the article "Where All Roads Lead," *Blackfriars*, Vol. III, no. 31 (October, 1922), p. 374. The Thompson quotation is cited in Regis J. Armstrong, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life* (New York, 1994), p. 18.

¹² In *The Debater*, no. 17, vol. 3 (November, 1892), pp. 78-80; see John Sullivan, G. K. Chesterton: *A Bibliography* (London, 1958), item 519.

¹³ "Francis" in C. K. Chesterton, *Simplicity and Tolstoy* (London, 1912), p. 39.

¹⁴ Cecil Chesterton, G. K. Chesterton: *A Criticism* (London, 1908), p. 97.

which "can admire [Francis] yet hardly accept him, or which can appreciate the saint almost without the sanctity," admitting "I myself have for so long been in various stages of such a condition" (p. 16). The 1900 article hints at this duality that he shared with his age, his own "schism in the sympathies." Why, he asks, did Francis, who loved life so much, deny so much of it to himself by being an ascetic? The question is put forcibly, yet the answer is vague, though he suggests the solution to the paradox when he says that it was the Franciscans who "were the spendthrifts of happiness, and we who are its misers"; words which perhaps imply that their happiness lay in emancipation from ownership, in which emancipation they were schooled by the self-denial of asceticism. Chesterton's *St. Francis* addresses this point, just as it develops other ideas about the saint outlined in his 1906 *Daily News* article, "The Paradox of Humility" (reprinted in the Chesterton volume *Lunacy and Letters*).

So why did Chesterton write his book on Francis; why then, and what was its immediate context? Francis was clearly a deep influence on Chesterton's inner life, so there was a certain inevitability about the book, an inevitability precipitated both by his conversion and by the Franciscan anniversaries. The *St. Francis* was his first major religious statement—indeed the first book he wrote—since his conversion to Catholicism in July 1922, and it was evidently a sort of celebration of the Catholic spirit to which he had so recently committed himself, as it was implicitly a comment upon his own spiritual autobiography, for his conversion enabled him to reclaim the magic of his childhood, just as he had carried the spiritual fire of those early times in the torch of his continuing contemplation of Francis. At his home, Top Meadow, he incarnated the torch, so to speak, by placing a small stone statue of Francis in the garden, and another statue of the saint to watch over him in his study.¹⁵ Doubtless the torch of St. Francis was a prominent light leading him on his way into the Church: he refers to the figure of Francis "drawing" him from boyhood (p. 155); and he tells how, when he was engaged upon his conversion quest, he was preoccupied with models of simplicity and humility, and Francis was an already established hero embodying these qualities. He relates how he wanted to find someone with an attitude which enabled him fully to enjoy any humble thing, such as a dandelion: "The only way to enjoy even a weed," he realized, "is to feel

¹⁵ Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton* (London, 1952), p. 154; G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 16.

unworthy even of a weed," and to feel grateful for it.¹⁶ In a striking and probably indicative parallel, he has Francis refer to "Brother Dandelion"; and he declares that Francis was always careful to give thanks (pp. 137, 182).

This intimacy with the spirit of Francis meant that Chesterton could offer especially acute insights about him, although he denies that his insight was complete (p. 82). In some respects they were kindred spirits, so that in writing of Francis, he is describing himself. It is a common observation that biographies are often unconsciously autobiographical on a subtextual level: this is true of his book on Robert Louis Stevenson; and it is, perhaps less obviously, true of his book about Francis. Like many readers and writers, he was desperately searching for a mirror of his own soul, and Francis was his friend from childhood—"at no stage of my pilgrimage has he ever seemed to me a stranger" (p. 16)—precisely because they were kindred spirits, a kinship symbolically completed upon his conversion, for Francis too had experienced conversion, from goodness to great holiness. Such bold statements require elucidation.

Chesterton describes Francis in terms of many of his own preoccupations: he says that he was a democrat, a liberal, suspicious of wealth and property, socially compassionate, a lover of the material world (p. 7); he says that Francis (like himself) "never, all his life, exactly understood what money was" (p. 42); and he says that there is in Francis the note—obviously a shared one—of "a humorous sense of bewildering the worldly with the unexpected; something of the joy of carrying an enthusiastic conviction to a logical extreme" (p. 138). He remarks on Francis's "passion for simplicity" (p. 66), a quality inherent in himself. He also attributes to him his own way of seeing the world freshly by looking at it, as it were, upside down (pp. 79ff).¹⁷ He quotes (inaccurately, as usual) Cardinal Newman's observation that "if Anti-Christ is like Christ, then Christ, I suppose, must be like Anti-Christ" (p. 134)¹⁸ in order to make the point that if Francis was like Christ, Christ must be like Francis. Perhaps we can similarly suppose that Chesterton was like Francis, sharing his qualities of

¹⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, pp. 331-334.

¹⁷ Viola Meynell appropriately commented how her mother, Alice, thought that the habit Chesterton was charged with, "of turning things upside down," was merely the "setting-right of things that had been standing on their heads": Viola Meynell, *Alice Meynell: A Memoir* (London, 1929), pp. 259-60.

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, Lecture VI, 5th ed. (London, n.d.), p. 224.

simplicity, humility, gratitude and love. In recent times, there has been a move to get Chesterton recognized as a saint, and those who knew him certainly attributed to him the saintly qualities that they attributed to Francis. For example, W. R. Titterton recalled how he had “deep-rooted in him the Catholic virtues of simplicity and humility.”¹⁹ As Chesterton emphasized Francis’s free spirit, so his colleague Gregory Macdonald judged that he had been “one of the few free men” of the twentieth century.²⁰ Vincent McNabb testified to his “unmistakable character of humility,” and declared that “by an achievement of genius and sanctity he had a child’s simplicity of thought,” and was “the *servus servorum*, making all he met his masters whom in love he served,” an observation which recalls Chesterton’s comments on Francis’s ideal of service.

If these comments answer the question, “Why Chesterton?,” there is also the question, “Why Francis?” Just as Francis represented the epitome of his feeling for spirituality, so medievalism—the sense that medieval Christendom potentially incorporated the best in human society—had been at the heart of Chesterton’s message to the modern world; and Francis could be said to have been the soul of medieval Catholicism: Francis was, he says, “the soul of medieval civilization” (p. 184), “the most original genius of the thirteenth century” (p. 34). He epitomized the thirteenth-century Catholic renaissance, which even in England had long been recognized as a peak of European culture: Chesterton himself had observed that the early thirteenth century was “perhaps the most purely vigorous time in all history,” marking the “earliest and youngest resurrection of Europe,” when “religious faiths were strong.”²¹ Yet in purveying medievalism—which in cultural terms had had its day—and in emphasizing Francis’s spirituality, his specifically religious dimension, he is not trying to alienate the modern mind; he is not—as some conservative Catholics take a perverse joy in doing—trying to dig the ditch between Catholicism and the contemporary world ever deeper: quite the reverse, for his “special design” is one of “making matters intelligible to average modernity” (p. 109). Even in the question of

¹⁹ W. R. Titterton, “G. K. Chesterton: Great Catholic Apologist,” *The Clergy Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (July, 1936), p. 6.

²⁰ Gregory Macdonald, “G. K. Chesterton,” *The Month*, Vol. CLXVIII, No. 866 (August, 1936), p. 140.

²¹ Vincent McNabb, “Gilbert Keith Chesterton,” *Blackfriars*, Vol. XVII, No. 197 (August, 1936), p. 579.

²² “The Little Birds Who Won’t Sing,” *Daily News*, May 16, 1908, in G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, 3rd ed. (London, 1909), pp. 195-196.

asceticism, he tries to show Francis as a potential healer of the self-inflicted wounds of secular man, as a restorer of wholeness. Why would he wish to slap down modern man, when his model's own mission has been to reconcile, not to alienate, for he "not only loved but respected" all men (p. 110).

Perhaps more urgently and boldly than any of his contemporary predecessors, Chesterton presents Francis as a model and as a bridge between the human and the divine—just as Francis had bridged Chesterton's childhood vision and his adult conversion—justifying the ways of God to men. His business was certainly to evangelize: to "lead others a little further along that road" of understanding Francis and what he stood for (p. 17). Shortly after he wrote his book, *St. Francis*, he commented that "ordinary men... can love the lover of ordinary men, who loves them in an extraordinary way.... Men can admire perfect charity before they practice even imperfect charity; and that is by far the most practical way of getting them to practice it."²³ It was not such a fantastic notion, to use Francis in this way. His reputation had grown not just because of notable biographies, but, as Owen Chadwick observes, because of the trend in Victorian devotion to emphasize Jesus the man, and to realize that in this sense he could be imitated: hence the interest in *The Imitation of Christ*, and in Christ's best imitator, Francis.²⁴ The large number of Protestant sources for *Francis* was evidence of the respect in which he was now held by non-Catholics, and Chesterton was aware of the favor in which he was held by Protestants and agnostics, and that the modern mind—at least in England—was receptive to his spirit.²⁵ Thus, Francis was a good vehicle by which to present Chesterton's understanding of Catholic spirituality to a non-Catholic audience. His importance for Catholics was self-evident, for he stood behind so much of Catholic culture: he "saved Catholicism at a moment when it might have gone down before Islam and a hundred heresies"; he "truly established the Church," and is "still upholding the Church as Atlas upheld the world."²⁶ So it was important for English Catholics to have a simple but

²³ "Introduction" to Owen Francis Dudley, *Will Men be Like Gods?* (1924), reprinted as "Utopias" in *G. K. C. as M. C.* (London, 1929), p. 161.

²⁴ Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Vol. II (London, 1980), p. 468.

²⁵ See "The Hat and the Halo," *Universe*, November 3, 1926 (original title "On False Sentiment") in G. K. Chesterton, *The Thing* (London, 1929), pp. 146, 151; G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, p. 314; G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, pp. 16, 17.

²⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 181 ff; C. K. Chesterton, *The Resurrection of Rome*, 1st ed. (London [1930]), p. 132.

insightful introduction to one of their greatest saints—and an introduction by a contemporary Catholic.

At first glance, the publication date of the *St. Francis*—October 1923—seems arbitrary, particularly since 1926 marked the septcentenary of Francis's death; but 1923 was the septcentenary of the inauguration of the final Franciscan Rule, while 1924 marked the septcentenary of the Friars' arrival in England; thus things Franciscan were very much in the air in 1923. Chesterton was not alone in working on his book about St. Francis in that year: two Franciscan specialists were also working on books,²⁷ and at that time Laurence Housman was producing his cycle of Franciscan plays. For Chesterton personally, the *St. Francis* was a natural climax to his meditation upon his conversion in the summer of 1922, a meditation initiated in an oblique manner in a series of articles called "Where All Roads Lead," published in *Blackfriars* from October, 1922, to April, 1923. Here he observes that the Church commends "a sentiment of gratitude for the breath of life. Indeed, it is a spirit in which many Catholic poets have rather specialized, and its first and finest appearance, perhaps, is in the great *Canticle of St. Francis*."²⁸ And in early June, 1923, he gave a talk to non-Catholics at the Mount Street Jesuit establishment in London on obstacles to conversion, a talk in which he touched on the themes of asceticism and humility, which so exercised him in relation to Francis.²⁹ He was, in fact, obliged to complete the *St. Francis* by the end of that month, and he was still working on it at the time he gave this talk.³⁰

Some speculation has been offered as to general literary stimulants to Chesterton's interest in Francis; but what of the actual sources of his thinking as presented in the *St. Francis*? In the text, he mentions the writings about Francis of Matthew Arnold, Ernest Renan, and Mrs. Oliphant. He describes the first two as skeptics, who could admire only half the man, the half which elicited humanist sympathy which was the wrong half, because it was the spiritual part which gave meaning to the whole (Chapter I). Chesterton had read "Renan's Essay on Francis of Assisi" by the end of the nineteenth century, and had been sufficiently stimulated to want to write his

²⁷ I refer to Dominic Devas, *Franciscan Essays* (London, 1924), Father Cuthbert [Hess], *The Romanticism of St. Francis* (London, 1924)—a new edition of his 1915 book.

²⁸ *Blackfriars*, Vol. III, no. 35 (February, 1923), p. 622.

²⁹ *The Tablet*, June 9, 1923, p. 774.

³⁰ Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, pp. 153-154.

own essay on the saint.³¹ (This Renan "essay," entitled "*St. François d'Assise*," contained in Renan's *Nouvelle Études d'Histoire Religieuse* of 1884, was a landmark in the rediscovery of Francis, and Renan inspired Sabatier to write about him.) Shortly afterwards, he got his chance with his *Speaker* article of 1900, which constituted a comment upon James G. Adderley's *Francis the Little Poor Man of Assisi*, of the same year, which volume claimed to be no more than "a much-condensed epitome" of Sabatier—it was actually introduced by Sabatier. (Incidentally, Chesterton claims that he is specially positioned to explain Francis to a puzzled world because he too was once on the outside, whereas now, on the inside, he partly comprehends [pp. 10, 16], a statement which seems inversely to echo Renan's well-known aphorism, that to write the history of a religion with proper understanding, it is necessary to have once believed in it, while now disbelieving.) As to Arnold, Chesterton is alluding to his essay "Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment," from the *Essays in Criticism First Series* (1865), an article with which he had been familiar since at least 1906.³² The essay perfectly exemplifies the Victorian "schism in the sympathies," and compares Christian and pagan—"Hebrew and Hellene"—as embodied in Francis and Theocritus, Arnold believing that the Catholic Christianity represented by Francis was still psychologically and culturally, if not intellectually, valid. Perhaps it was thinking of Arnold's emphasis on Francis as a cultural phenomenon—he tended to see all religion in cultural terms, or, perhaps, to see culture in religious terms—that made Chesterton eager to stress that Francis was of much more than merely cultural significance. But he certainly seems to have born in mind Arnold's judgment that Francis's century was, after the primitive age, the most interesting in the history of Christianity; and that Francis was, perhaps, its chief figure, "because of the profound popular instinct which enabled him, more than any man since the primitive age, to fit religion for popular use. He brought religion to the people."³³ This emphasis on his power as a populist will have caught in the mind of Chesterton the populist. He had also read Margaret Oliphant's popular

³¹ Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, pp. 45-46.

³² This is evident from his *Daily News* article of 1906, "The Paradox of Humility," where he refers to Arnold quoting Francis on "my brother the donkey": G. K. Chesterton, *Lunacy and Letters* (London, 1958), p. 100. In fact, Arnold quotes Francis as referring to "my brother the ass"; and Chesterton made a similar (erroneous) reference in his Preface to the 1906 Dent volume of Arnold's *Essays Literary and Critical*.

³³ "Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold," *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1973), p. 223.

Francis of Assisi (1870), which he compliments as a “fine and delicate study” (p. 127); and, indeed, for someone brought up in the Scottish free-church tradition, she certainly had an extraordinary sympathy for and sensitivity towards Catholicism, a sympathy which doubtless nourished Chesterton’s understanding of the saint.

One can only guess about other sources. If only through Adderley’s book, he at least knew of Sabatier—whom, incidentally, Belloc had heckled when he lectured on Francis at Oxford in the 1890’s³⁴—although he does not seem to have relied on him, perhaps because he distrusted an eminent Protestant historian writing about a Catholic saint: for example, Chesterton’s account of Pietro Bernardone’s social position is notably different in emphasis from that of Sabatier, and he is quite clear that Francis stole from his father, whereas Sabatier evades the point. Father Cuthbert’s and J. Jorgensen’s majestic and painstaking accounts were available, and there were a number of simple, popular biographies, such as those by Anna M. Stoddart and Elizabeth W. Grierson (whose *the Story of St. Francis of Assisi* was re-issued in 1922), studies which rather pre-empted the need for another such; which is presumably why he did not follow exactly in their footsteps. Since it was more to his purpose, he may have seen the Protestant D. H. S. Nicholson’s *The Mysticism of St. Francis of Assisi* (published in early 1923), a book which pictured Francis as a rebel against Church authority. As to the medieval sources, he indicates that he knew St. Bonaventure’s “official” account of Francis (p. 151), as also the more authentic Thomas of Celano and *The Legend of the Three Companions* (p. 165); and, in 1906, he read *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*.³⁵ For his purposes, he did not really need any other medieval accounts, although the important *Mirror of Perfection* was readily available in the “Everyman” selection of the sources, first published in 1910, and reprinted in 1923.

What of the quality of Chesterton’s *St. Francis*? It has been highly regarded in “the right quarters”: Even Pope Pius XI knew of the book, and asked Chesterton about it.³⁶ The Francis biographer, Anthony Mockler, judged it to be “the most brilliant” of the undocumented biographies, and repeatedly quoted it approvingly.³⁷ Edward Hutton noted that Chesterton

³⁴ Robert Speaight, *The Life of Hilaire Belloc* (London, 1957), p. 113.

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Lunacy and Letters*, p. 98.

³⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *A Centenary Appraisal*, ed. John Sullivan (London, 1974), p. 163.

³⁷ Anthony Mockler, *Francis of Assisi: The Wandering Years* (Oxford, 1976), p. 27.

had written "a brilliant but inaccurate essay" on Francis;³⁸ while the prominent scholar of the Franciscan world, John R. Moorman, declared that, of the modern lives of Francis, Chesterton's was "the most brilliant, though full of inaccuracies."³⁹ This last is a slightly harsh estimate, for Chesterton provides an introductory meditation on Francis, rather than a factual, documentary biography, so that there are relatively few facts about which to be inaccurate; whereas the facts that he does have—and he acknowledges the equivocality of the sources, so presenting them with due hesitancy—are, in the majority of cases, correct; and his insights are almost always exactly right. His inaccuracies do, however, require comment.

Chesterton makes it quite clear that he is addressing not scholars but the "ordinary man," with a simplified, rough outline, designed to present Francis as a religious phenomenon rather than as an historical character (pp. 7-11, 64, 126). Aware of the inconsistencies within the original sources, he consciously presents his own version: for example, his description of the scene where Francis strips naked and disowns his father (pp. 60-61) is a selection from a different version. Francis's life, he says, had "the character of an allegory," of "a symbolical drama," so that "a sort of double meaning" ran through it all (pp. 64, 65): Francis had to be interpreted, just as Chesterton himself often cannot be taken entirely literally, his truth having to be winked out from amongst his characteristic rhetorical devices, his semi-private, allusive language. He admirably makes the case that while the stories about Francis often appear slight, they are really invitations to the reader to meditate on spiritual depths; and the same is true of Chesterton: with acute simplicity he invites the reader to larger thought. By an adept suggestivity, he stimulates readers to their own creative exploration of subtleties, potentialities and depths, rather than forbidding further thought by too analytically defining the subject's parameters. This is his normal *modus operandi*, but here his method is particularly well-judged. Francis's and Chesterton's method of charming rather than bullying, of inviting rather than of harassing, is surely a model for all Catholics in the process of evangelization.

³⁸ *The English Catholics 1850-1950*, ed. George A. Beck (London, 1950), p. 531. Hutton was in a position to know: in 1950, his translation of Englebert's life of Francis was published; and in 1926 he had written a book on *The Franciscans in England, 1224-1538*.

³⁹ John R. Moorman, *St. Francis of Assisi*, rev. ed. (London, 1976), p. 118.

Yet there are a number of fairly indisputable factual errors.⁴⁰ For example, when he says that Francis was seen to be angry “only once... when there was talk of an exception to the rule,” when some of the Brothers built an impressive institution in Bologna (pp. 115, 148-149), he is mistaken, for Francis was angry on a number of occasions; but he is essentially correct, in that he did get angry only when his vision, epitomized in the Rule, was challenged by those who purported to live by it; again, this does seem to have been his most spectacular show of anger. Chapter VII, “The Mirror of Christ,” contains a clutch of mistakes: he refers to “The Assembly of the Straw Huts” (p. 143), which is permissible, although it is consistently referred to by the authorities as “the Chapter of (the) Mats.” He says that this event occurred before Francis’s journey to the Middle East, whereas most authorities suppose that it took place after his return.⁴¹ Also, he says that, according to tradition, Francis and St. Dominic met at this Assembly “for the first and last time”; whereas, according to tradition, they first met at the 1215 Lateran Council, and they met at least twice.⁴² He suggests that Francis stripped down to his hair shirt on the occasion that he separated from his father, and when he was dying; but this is just the bashfulness of the period speaking, for the sources appear to be quite clear that on both occasions, he wished to be completely naked.

Chesterton asserts that Francis would have “defended the defense of Christian unity by arms” (p. 144); and his general drift is clear: he actually has a chapter called “Francis the Fighter,” and uses inappropriate military imagery, as in his mention of “the Franciscan plan for quartering its spiritual soldiery upon the population” (p. 120);⁴³ and he plays down Francis’s rejection of violence, as when he suggests that Francis abandoned the chance of military glory in Apulia only because he was sick, returning to Assisi disappointed and humiliated (pp. 55-56). But this occasion could be better understood as part of his conversion, as a turning from war to peace, from

⁴⁰ Though I make several specific criticisms of Chesterton’s facts and emphases, I would disassociate myself from anything like the blanket criticism by Lawrence J. Clipper in *G. K. Chesterton* (New York, 1974), p. 113: *St. Francis of Assisi is* “a rather saccharine ‘appreciation’ that lacks sufficient intellectual analysis of Francis and his movement.” This is to misread the whole book completely.

⁴¹ See John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order* (Oxford, 1968), p. 54.

⁴² See Omer Englebert, *Saint Francis of Assisi: A Biography*, Chapter 2, p. 26.

⁴³ To be fair to Chesterton, he probably derived this phrase from a passage in the *Fioretti* (Chapter XVIII), where Cardinal Ugolino refers to the Friars as “the army of the knights of God.”

the quest for glory to the quest for holiness. As one authority tells the story: when Francis returned home, having turned his back on war, "all were amazed that he appeared in no way humiliated... and that, on the contrary, he appeared gayer than ever."⁴⁴ And in *The Legend of the Three Companions*—one of the earliest of the sources—there appears the psychologically telling detail that, before he actually turned back, he gave away his splendid new military equipment; and then we are told that "he started back towards Assisi in glad expectation that God... would soon reveal His will for the future.... His mind was changed and he gave up all thought of going to Apulia."⁴⁵ Chesterton, of course, had a personal interest in not presenting his hero as a pacifist, because he himself was strongly opposed to pacifism, having in recent years staunchly proposed the morality of Britain's war against Germany. Though Francis's attitude to war is, like most things about him, debatable, in the present writer's view, Chesterton's perspective is the most serious positive mistake in the book, and there is much to be said against it.⁴⁶ For example, is it likely that one who modeled himself so emphatically on Christ—who Himself eschewed power and force, who gave His life as a sacrifice—would have embraced the path of violence, of crusade, of "holy war," which was, after all, but a pseudo-Christianization of the *jihad* of Islam, which religion he wished to eliminate by peaceful conversion? To put it another way, why would a man who removed worms from the roadway so that they would not be trampled embrace war on behalf of the gospel? It is exceedingly difficult to see Francis, who said that revenge belonged to God, whose Brothers particularly did not bear arms, who urged the Brothers to be agents of peace, who habitually greeted people with the words, "God give you peace," prepared to countenance killing and maiming people in order to protect Gospel values. And if he did not favor war in "the defense of Christian unity," why did he not preach against the Albigenses (or "Cathars," who in Italy were called the "Patarini"), who were condemned as heretics by the papacy throughout Francis's life, and who even infected Assisi itself? (It was in 1209, when Francis's mission was taking shape, that papal crusaders murdered thousands of Albigenses at Béziers; and the Lateran Council of 1215 ordered the punishment of heretics.) Finally, if

⁴⁴ Omer Englebert, *Saint Francis of Assisi: A Biography*, Chapter 2, p. 26.

⁴⁵ *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, ed. Marion A. Habit, 3rd ed. (London, n.d.), p. 895.

⁴⁶ One authority suggests that the Friars initially joined the call for crusade, but that, following his Middle East experience, Francis advocated only prayer and example as tools for conversion: Mockler, *Francis of Assisi: The Wandering Years*, pp. 215-216, 237-238, 245.

Francis was not a pacifist, his consent to war would have radically undermined his quest for powerlessness through humility and poverty. At least Chesterton does allow that Francis preferred to prevail by "persuasion and enlightenment" (p. 145), and observes that he wanted to end the Crusades "by conversion and not by conquest" (p. 141).

Some of Chesterton's emphases in *St. Francis* may also be quarreled with. He still tried to conform the Middle Ages to his own ideals, as when he plays down medieval class conflict and suggests that then there was no real Capitalism (pp. 41, 70); whereas in fact there was real Capitalism and substantial class conflict, as Francis's Assisi itself bears out. More importantly, he minimizes the tensions between Francis and the Brothers and the Church, as Catholic writers tend to do. He is clearly reluctant to cast any aspersions upon the Church that he had just joined, even though he would have been criticizing the Church of 700 years ago; and, indeed, it would probably have been bad manners to do so. He does not, however, ignore the "either Francis or the Church" dilemma, but treads very carefully, and it is of interest to understand what was so difficult about this dilemma, and how he came to terms with it, for he was certainly aware that there was a dilemma. Though propriety meant that he could not elucidate those aspects of the Church of which Franciscanism in its purest form—that is, Francis's vision—was an implicit critique, he does advert to the idea that the Church needed reforming, and to the fact that the Church was hesitant about Francis.⁴⁷ A decade later, perhaps feeling more assured in his role as a Catholic, he emphasizes the point by registering that Francis's mission lay in "bringing Christianity into Christendom," for he "saved us from Spirituality" by "bringing God back to earth," by reaffirming the Incarnation, and hence also the religious value of the material world.⁴⁸ This implicitly suggests that his mission was a tacit critique of the Church. The sign that in the *St. Francis* he is not really going to come to grips with this dilemma is Chapter II, "The World St. Francis Found," in which he presents a fascinatingly mythified account of the historical context into which Francis entered. To start with a small example, he does not mention that the Church was suspicious of the troubadours with whom Francis identified himself; just as he fails to mention how the Church was

⁴⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 73, 123-124. In a *Universe* article of 1928, he says that Francis and St. Dominic "purged the congested conventionalism of much of the monasticism around them": G. K. Chesterton, *The Thing*, p. 103.

⁴⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, p. 21.

persecuting poverty sects—such as the Waldenses—not entirely unlike his own; nor does he detail those negative aspects of the contemporary Church to which Francis posed such a startling contrast.

What, then, was the substance of the dilemma, the tension between Francis and the Church, which Chesterton dealt with so delicately? In the first place, there is the question of the relationship of the Friars Minor to the laity. True, he adverts to Francis's influence on the laity in Chapter VII, "The Three Orders," and he points us in the right direction when he says that Francis intended the Friars "to mingle with the world" (p. 115); but he fails to develop the point that in a sense Franciscanism was for and of the laity: it had its totally lay section, the Third Order; its mission was emphatically to the laity—unlike all other pre-existing religious orders; and Francis himself was noticeably unconcerned to clericalize the Friars. After his death, the Order was thoroughly clericalized.⁴⁹ Nor was Francis interested in books or learning: in fact, he was quite hostile to theologizing, and elsewhere Chesterton candidly calls him "the book-hater."⁵⁰ After his death, the Friars became great scholars. He also alludes to Francis's lack of interest in law: he was "rather vague in his documents," he observes in another moment of self-portraiture;⁵¹ but he does not draw the contrast between Francis's simple, spontaneous religion of the heart and the Gospel and the contemporary Church's legalism. He makes more of his rejection of property; but because he himself believes in property—at least in "the property-owning democracy"—he blurs Francis's unyielding principle against the Friars owning property either individually or collectively—whether books, buildings, land or capital—by shifting blame to the extremist followers of Francis, the Fraticelli, for the disputes over this matter. The Franciscans were eventually obliged to hold property. Finally, Francis rejected power, a fundamental point, of which Chesterton makes surprisingly little; a point of dissonance which the Church—then busy forcefully consolidating and expanding its power across the Continent and

⁴⁹ Anthony Mockler says that, by 1216, the Friars were perceived "rather as a lay movement than a clerical one" (*Francis of Assisi: the Wandering Years*, p. 208); and, as the conservative Catholic historian Paul Johnson put it: the laymen in the Franciscans' ranks "were soon eliminated. In 1239, the last lay general, Brother Elias, was deposed, accused of promoting laymen to positions of authority: three years later a new constitution was adopted which made the order a bastion of clericalism (Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 240).

⁵⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, p. 21.

⁵¹ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, p. 14.

beyond—resolved by elevating Friars Minor to bishoprics and to the papacy. He insured himself by insisting on his orthodoxy, and by proclaiming his obedience to the ecclesiastical authorities; but, in a devastating moment of truth, he realized that his dream was crumbling: towards the end of his life, in great distress he raised himself from his sick-bed and cried out: “Who are these who have snatched my order and that of my brothers out of my hands?”⁵² Chesterton does not reflect the whole truth about the relationship between Francis and the Church when he commends the papacy for its receptivity to ecclesiastical experiment: “It was,” he says, “really the Pope who upheld St. Francis and the popular movement of the Friars.”⁵³ If this was true, it was so on a personal level, rather than on an institutional one.

Francis’s life, then, held several elements of an implicit critique of the contemporary Church; and this tension between his vision, the desires of some of his Brothers, and the Church’s requirements was resolved by the Church adapting Franciscanism to her needs: Even his biography was adapted, when it was officially re-written by St. Bonaventure, the earlier, more authentic versions being suppressed. Though Chesterton refers to these tensions (for example, on pp. 106, 175), he gives no substantive idea of how strong was the opposition to Francis and his purist disciples, although, again, he does refer to it (pp. 123-124): he manages to be more explicit a decade later, when he says of Francis: “A man who dares to make a direct appeal to the populace always makes a long series of enemies”; and “in the case of the Friars, the higher orders of State, and to some extent even of the Church, were profoundly shocked at such a loosening of wild popular preachers among the people.”⁵⁴ He resolves the problem by taking the Church’s side, and proposing that Francis’s extremism was misguided (pp. 174, 181): as he says, the point the Pope had to settle was “whether Christendom should absorb Francis or Francis Christendom,” the Pope rightly deciding that “the Church could include all that was good in the Franciscans and the Franciscans could not include all that was good in the Church” (p. 175): in short, the Franciscan vision was, after all, too narrow. There is a lot to be said for this view, and a lot of Catholics say it. Chesterton says it with particularly brilliant charm; but we should be clear that it is Francis’s view, and not that of the Fraticelli, that is regarded by the

⁵² Marion A. Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, p. 512; cf. p. 1166.

⁵³ G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (London, 1962), p. 54.

⁵⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, pp. 35, 36.

Church as too narrow.⁵⁵ Correlatively, while Chesterton proclaims that Francis was “emphatically... a challenge to the modern world” (p. 48), he flinches from the fact that he was also a challenge to the Church, not just in his own time, but in ours also. It is a painful dilemma for all Catholics who perceive it, and it is possible that Chesterton, as a truly Franciscan spirit, had been caught on its horns for some years—the many years during which he was deciding whether or not to become a Roman Catholic. And one wonders whether he did not eventually become a little uncomfortable with the uncompromising Francis, for he says:

I will confess that, while the romantic glory of St. Francis has lost nothing of its glamour for me, I have in later years grown to feel almost as much affection, or in some aspects even more, for [St. Thomas Aquinas].... There are moments when St. Francis... is almost too efficient for me.⁵⁶

This leaves the question of how Chesterton construed Francis's spirit. His lifelong contemplation of Francis helped lead him to Catholicism; it follows that the *St. Francis* draws together most of the threads within Catholic spirituality that attracted him. It, therefore, reveals how he perceived the heart of the Church; or, in his own expression, how he interprets the riddle which unites Galilee and Assisi, and to which the Church alone holds the key (p. 135). He declares what he is about: “It is perhaps the chief suggestion of this book that St. Francis walked the world like the Pardon of God. I mean that his appearance marked the moment when men could be reconciled not only to God but to nature and, most difficult to all, to themselves” (pp. 176-177). “I too,” he attests, “have lived in Arcady; but even in Arcady I met one walking in a brown habit who loved the woods better than Pan” (p. 16). Francis, then, is a lover, the roaming apostle of happiness and simplicity, who is “always going home” (p. 181), yet always sees the divine home from which all things come (p. 86); and because of this seeks to inaugurate a new age, wherein Christians could once again feel at home in the natural world, after the end of the “Dark Ages,” when

⁵⁵ In fact, the picture regarding the Fraticelli—the “extremists”—is not so simple as Chesterton indicates: they were not all heretical, and were sometimes supported by the Franciscan Tertiaries; nor were they the only followers of Francis to be persecuted: the so-called Spirituals—those adhering to the pure vision of Francis—were also persecuted, even though they were (usually) orthodox Franciscans: see Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, pp. 108, 424, 453.

⁵⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, p. 16. One assumes that by “too efficient” he is thinking of Francis's almost unstoppable single-mindedness.

they had felt the need to expiate the sins of the ancient world, which had so thoroughly contaminated nature (Chapter II). This grand reconciliation was to be achieved by focussing Christendom's mind on God in Christ, but not to the detriment of man or of the material world; for Francis had "a reckless faith not only in God but in man" (pp. 143-144), his supernaturalism meaning "the ultimate recovery, not the ultimate refusal of natural things" (p. 63). Yet pleasure was not to be for pleasure's sake, but for God's sake (p. 80), if it was to have meaning. In this way, he rendered acceptable a new spirit of movement, of gesture, of drama, a new depth; which together inaugurated "the beginning of what we call the modern spirit; the spirit of romance and experiment and earthly adventure."⁵⁷ He had a "liberating and humanizing effect upon religion," especially in terms of imagination,⁵⁸ thereby importing a new energy to European culture. It is tempting to believe this to be true, especially since one might suppose that Giotto's and Dante's admiration for Francis channeled his influence into art and literature.

If this was the heart of Francis's mission, who, in Chesterton's view, was he, and how did he view his Order? He was "intensely individual" (p. 181), "a thing not to be replaced or repeated while the earth endures" (p.169): "even among the saints he has the air of a sort of eccentric" (p. 96). Francis was indeed deeply eccentric, even amongst the saints, who are by definition eccentrics: a man who carried a broom around, to sweep out dusty churches; who gave away his clothes, though he wore few and had no spares; who often played non-existent instruments. As we have seen, his individualism was too strong for the Church to take undiluted, yet it was not without value and effect: it cleared the ground for fresh vision, enabling him unhesitatingly to take his inspiration not so much from the Church as from the Christ of the gospel: a feature Chesterton acknowledges when he refers to his "unmixed and unlearned appeal to the Gospels." He frequently refers to him as a revolutionary: for one thing, "his whole life was a revolt against the mercantile life of his father"; he was the "greatest of all foes to the go-getting ideal." A saint was not for confirming society in its conventions: the Apostles were "the salt of the earth" because they were "the very exceptional people; the permanently incongruous and incompatible people";⁵⁹ and,

⁵⁷ Cowles, *Giotto*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, p. 25.

⁵⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, pp. 26, 15, 16 respectively.

if it be good that a man should be original, should add something creative and not merely customary or conventional, should do what he thinks right in his own way and without fear of worldly consequences in ruin or starvation, then St. Francis was original; more original than most modern men.⁶⁰

So, for Chesterton, there was at least some room in the Church for an individualist who was original and creative. He considerably develops the theme of his being a creator: "He was a poet and can only be understood as a poet" (p. 101); he was "pre-eminently a dramatic person" (p. 98). This is very true, for Francis's whole life was a series of enactments or incarnations of ideas, of serendipitously and felicitously symbolic moments. Schooled in troubadour, chivalric and romance culture, he made "the very act of living an art" (p. 102). "Many of his acts," he continues, "will seem grotesque and puzzling to a rationalistic taste," but at least "they were always acts and not explanations, and they always meant what he meant them to mean." While he incarnated universal truths in this way, it is important to Chesterton that he incarnated the Faith in a very personal, individual manner, that though he was an eccentric who engaged in grotesqueries he was still acceptable to Catholicism; for the loving vision was all-inclusive—"Catholic" in that sense—so that the humble and the ugly could be spiritually vital and significant. Elsewhere he says, "The ugly animals praise God as much as the beautiful," a fact well understood by the medievals, who built their cathedrals "in the Gothic manner, with all the animals of the earth crawling over it, and all the possible ugly things making up one common beauty, because they all appealed to God." One wonders if he saw himself similarly as the ugly eccentric, and craved acceptance in his uniqueness: he certainly saw his public persona as a sort of gargoyle, while he seems to have felt that his real, internal self was that of a lonely individualist, who was in danger of being rejected.⁶¹

Francis's personal incarnationalism, his drive to exemplify the Gospel, informed his concept of what the Friars should be, as Chesterton realized. His purpose was to act, to be, to incarnate his beliefs: thus he had a fraternity because of his "perpetual preoccupation with the idea of brotherhood" (p. 108); and he was to be a good example to the Brothers, so

⁶⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *The Thing*, p. 148.

⁶¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions*, 3rd ed. (London, 1924), pp. 2, 3. And see Chesterton's letter to Knox in Evelyn Waugh, *The Life of Ronald Knox* (London, 1962), pp. 178-179.

that they might be an example to the Church and to the world, which example, Chesterton notes (p. 176), was to be one of Gospel simplicity; hence his disregard for theological learning, since its complexity distracted from the simple obligation to incarnate. The brothers were to be as egalitarian as possible, because the Christian perspective was so great that in essentials all appeared the same: Francis was not sure "which he must attend to, the beggar or the merchant," so grounded was his vision in equality (pp. 46-47); and "he who believes in the existence of God believes in the equality of man."⁶² This perspective dictated that people care for each other on a fraternal basis, a conviction which indicated a democratic political structure. Hence Chesterton observes that this "democratic emotion" was "to some people native and constant," as with Francis; and "no community, perhaps, ever had it so much as the early Franciscans."⁶³

There was indeed such an egalitarian and democratic ethos about the early Franciscans: Francis evidently even wished to avoid titles within the order suggestive of the leaders being ensconced in positions of power and authority. Lordship destroyed fraternity, while Francis "said he had found the secret of life in being the servant," in which state there was "a freedom almost amounting to frivolity" (p. 78); thus he saw himself not as the master of his order, but as the Lord's servant (p. 140). The truth of this is reflected in Francis's forbidding the Friars to become prelates, in himself always remaining a deacon—for a *diakonos* is a servant—and in his rejecting ecclesiastical privileges, which would have damaged the Friars' role as servants. Related to this is the observation that Francis's notion of his order was very different from that of already existing orders, whose "corporate pride" (p. 114) repelled him. He also notes that the Friars were to be without possessions (p. 115), that this gave them a special freedom (pp. 115-116), remarking Francis's "gentle mockery of the very idea of possessions" (p. 138). But it is surprising that he makes so little of this point, both because it was the central platform of Francis's way, and because Chesterton was himself so aware of the spiritually corrupting aspect of wealth and power: elsewhere he proclaims "the alien and grotesque nature of the power of wealth, the fact that money has no roots," and is but an "evil magic calling monsters from the ends of the earth."⁶⁴ Disappointingly, he never makes the

⁶² G. K. Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem* (London[1920]), p. 28.

⁶³ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London, 1905), pp. 272-273.

⁶⁴ "In the Place de la Bastille," *Daily News*, May 5, 1906, in G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, pp. 51-52.

vital observation that in becoming a pauper Francis was rendering himself powerless, because he realized that in a wicked world wealth is power, and power corrupts. Francis's own comments on money were equally uncompromising: money was no more than "an ass's dung"; "Let us take care that we do not lose the Kingdom of Heaven for so pitiable a thing! If we should find money anywhere, let us heed it no more than the dust under our feet!"

There is evidence of Francis's spirituality in Chesterton's description of his personality as manifested in his life and in the life of his order, and he develops these at some length in the *St. Francis*. Nevertheless, rather frustratingly, he does not lucidly or formally show how the parts articulated with each other: that was not his way. Perhaps by isolating the parts they may be clarified, their mutual relationship be indicated; although any attempt to show the mechanics of spirituality is a fool's quest. For both Francis and Chesterton, power was a bad thing because it was a function of ego, of pride, which is the father of all sins, but also the destroyer of spiritual insight. The purgative of pride was humility and powerlessness, a consciousness of dependence on God, all of which restored the true perspective and corrected spiritual vision, leading to an experience of gratitude—or worship—and wonder at existence and at all creation. At the center of this cluster of ideas Chesterton seems to have placed an almost mystical concept of "nothingness," which is reminiscent of St. John of the Cross, who advised: "In order to attain to the possession of all things, desire to possess nothing whatever"; and whose disturbing slogan was, "*Nada, nada, nada*" ("nothing, nothing, nothing"). Chesterton said that even before he accepted Christianity he had thought about

that point at which extremes meet, and the most common thing becomes a cosmic and mystical thing. I did not want so much to alter the place and use of things as to weight them with a new dimension; to deepen them by going down to the potential nothing; to lift them to infinity by measuring from zero. The most logical form of this is in thanks to a Creator.

He goes on to remark that "all the old carols, from the dark ages downwards, have been soaked in a purely Christian spirit of holy poverty and the overwhelming conception of the humility of God"; and Christmas, he suggests, is "the best traditional symbol" of these things.⁶⁵ This excerpt

⁶⁵ "Christmas and the Distributist," *G. K.'s Weekly*, vol. XX, No. 509 (December 12, 1934), pp. 235-236.

reflects powerfully on Chesterton's concept and love of Francis, whose symbolic popularizing of the Christmas crib by re-enacting the Nativity scene on the hillside at Greccio in 1223 he duly refers to in the *St. Francis* (p. 183); and it clearly informs a key passage in the book:

It was in a wholly happy and enthusiastic sense that St. Francis said, "Blessed is he who expecteth nothing, for he shall enjoy everything." It was by this deliberate idea of starting from zero, from the dark nothingness of his own deserts, that he did come to enjoy even earthly things as few people have enjoyed them... the less a man thinks of himself, the more he thinks of his good luck and of all the gifts of God.... He sees more of the things themselves when he sees more of their origin (pp. 84-85).

Francis's "great fixed idea" was of "praise and thanks springing to their most towering height and out of nakedness and nothing" (p. 168): "he knew that the praise of God stands on its strongest ground when it stands on nothing," and that "we can best measure the towering miracle of the mere fact of existence if we realize that but for some strange mercy we should not even exist" (p. 182). "The mystic who passes through the moment when there is nothing but God does in some sense behold the beginningless beginnings in which there was really nothing else. He not only appreciates everything but the nothing of which everything was made" (p. 87). This, he says, is why Francis, having nothing, and naming himself as nothing (p. 101), was joyful.

It is at this point that the associated themes of asceticism and dependence come into play, for through them the mystical insight is achieved; through "the vigil of asceticism," the "vision of a natural world made new" (p. 80) is attained. Asceticism was a rich thing: it was an expression of St. Francis's humility and of his desire to imitate the suffering Christ (p. 140); it was a ritual of thanksgiving, an offering of tribute to the glory of creation; and it was self-denial as an act of love (pp. 91-92), whose natural conclusion was the desire for martyrdom (pp. 141-142). Ritual, Chesterton once said, "will always mean throwing away something; *destroying* our corn or wine upon the altar of our gods."⁶⁶ But the modern world had lost sight of all of this. He had written this book about Francis he said, "almost entirely to show that St. Francis *was* an ascetic, and *not* (as his modern admirers suggest) merely a votary of art and song."⁶⁷ In other words,

⁶⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *The Superstitions of the Skeptic* (I. D. K. Club Booklets, Cambridge, 1925), p. 31.

he wished to reclaim Francis as a spiritual figure. (Incidentally, he also tried to do this by emphasizing the miraculous dimension—at least in the abstract—spending a whole chapter on it, as a riposte to the long heritage of British “anti-miracle” writers, notable among them Hume and Lecky.)⁶⁸ Hand-in-glove with his asceticism lay Francis’s principle of dependence: by poverty he made himself dependent on others, and so lived out the idea of indebtedness to God: “the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be forever paying it” (p. 90). The “sense of a divine dependence” constituted for the saint an ambience of “broad daylight” (pp. 83, 84, 86), a sense of reality, which gives rise to the spirit of gratitude (pp. 87-88). In this way, one avoids that commonest corruption of religion: to make one’s faith an idol of mere self-approval.

The great paradox is that out of this “almost nihilistic abyss” comes praise (p. 87); not praise of nothing, but of a Person: for somehow personality emerges from the void: the “background” of Francis’s mind was “that divine darkness out of which the divine love had called up every colored creature one by one”; a darkness which by contrast and by isolation highlights every phenomenon, so that, in the mystic’s perception, each one assumes an intense particularity, the quality of distinct personality, so that he could refer to “Brother Wind” and “Sister Water” (pp. 98ff), and relate to the world, and to people, as a lover (p. 14). In this way, Chesterton says, the supernatural “united him more perfectly to the natural” (p. 166). The personal quality of the physical world had long been an important principle for Chesterton: Christianity confronted the East on this ground: “the idea that personality is the glory of the universe and not its shame; that creation is higher than evolution, because it is more personal.”⁶⁹ For the Christian, Nature was not “Mother,” did not have any moral authority over humanity, but was, rather, “Sister,” with whom to play happily: “Nature is not solemn to Francis of Assisi”; for him, she is “a sister, and even a younger sister: a little, dancing sister, to be laughed at as well as loved.”⁷⁰ The emphasis on personality led into the emphasis on the importance of the particular, especially that of the particular person, to whom respect and courtesy were automatically due: just as Vincent McNabb said that Chesterton made “all

⁶⁸ At least one reviewer found his defense of miracles unconvincing: M. H. Carré’s review of G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* in *Hibbert Journal*, vol. 22 (1923-1924), pp. 830-832.

⁶⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *William Blake* (London, 1920), p. 209.

⁷⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London, 1927), p. 205.

he met his masters whom in love he served," so Chesterton said Francis made each individual feel that he was "being valued and taken seriously," and "treated the whole mob of men as a mob of kings" (pp. 110-111).

This metaphysical notion of personality had its inevitable equivalence in the doctrine of the Incarnation: Christ was the personal bridge between nature and super-nature. Before this mystery, Francis's response was the perfect humility of being completely Christ-centered: Chesterton has a chapter in his *St. Francis* called "The Mirror of Christ," a title suggested by the medieval source known as the *Speculum Perfectionis*, the "Mirror of Perfection." Francis mirrored Christ by, as it were, "acting him out": "to go and do something was one of the driving demands of his nature" (p. 59); a fact which, in itself, makes Francis a "mirror of God," for it is in God's nature to incarnate His creativity and goodness, to substantiate the personal nature: "there is in all good things a perpetual desire for expression and concrete embodiment," for "the trend of good is always towards Incarnation."⁷¹ This conviction connects with Chesterton's theme of Francis being a spiritual dramatist: in Francis, he says, God's love "is made popular by pantomime."⁷² For Francis, the recognition of and the love of the Personhood of God in Christ is not an alternative to loving people: it is a necessary concomitant, because true spirituality naturally issues in loving personal relationships, not only with God's creation but especially with the "mirrors of God," that is, with human beings. In Chesterton's view, this emphasis is particular to Francis, and makes him "the most human of saints" (p. 180), a hero of humanity, whose task was "humanizing divinity" in a "humanistic revolution"; Francis being a "humanist" since he insisted on "the immense importance of the human being in the theological scheme of things."⁷³

This whole theme of reconciliation—reconciliation between man and nature, as between man and man—allows Chesterton to refer to "the optimistic orthodoxy of the great St. Francis."⁷⁴ Moreover, Francis's reconciliation of man with nature, he believes, lies behind the notion of his being a fundamental influence on the development of European culture.⁷⁵

⁷¹ G. K. Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men* (London, 1926), pp. 145, 146.

⁷² Cowles, *Giotto*, p. 11.

⁷³ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, p. 26; See also Cowles, *Giotto*, p. 11.

⁷⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Generally Speaking* (London, 1937), p. 157.

⁷⁵ See G. K. Chesterton, *The Resurrection of Rome*, p. 132, and Cowles, *Giotto*, p. 7.

But for Chesterton himself, Francis was particularly important as an embodiment of the linked themes of humanity, of wonder, and of gratitude, so prominent in Chesterton's own thinking. He developed the categories from an early period: in one of the Notebooks from the 1890's, he supposes that "humility, activity, cheerfulness, [are] the real triad of Christian virtues"—a good description of Francis. "Humility," he continues, "is a grand, a stirring thing, the exalting paradox of Christianity, and the sad want of it in our own time is, we believe, what really makes us think life dull, like a cynic, instead of marvelous, like a child."⁷⁶ He explained something of the import of humility in the impressive essay called "A Defense of Humility," a piece which, perhaps significantly, was published only a few months after his first essay on Francis in the same periodical;⁷⁷ and, in the 1906 essay on Francis, he placed humility as "the central symbol and standard" around which the coming battle between Christianity and anti-Christianity would be fought: hence the importance of stressing Francis as the model of true humility.⁷⁸ Chesterton's *St. Francis* predominantly emphasizes—perhaps to the neglect of other themes—the gratitude and wonder to which Francis's humility gave rise: Francis was, he says, "a great giver; and he cared chiefly for the best kind of giving which is called thanksgiving" (p. 182); and this because in eliminating himself in his own sight he saw the source of all things—and, therefore, the meaning and significance of all things—more clearly (p. 85). Here again, while truly describing Francis, he is also describing himself; for, as his friend and colleague Desmond MacCarthy recalled: "What seems to have been the compulsive force that threw him at the feet of God was an emotion best described as gratitude, a gratitude which was at once an ecstasy of humility and the most triumphant and comprehensive emotion of which he was capable."⁷⁹

The object of all this was not some sort of perverse, life-denying masochism: Chesterton and Francis—and Catholicism in its full truth—were not puritanical. "We have to tell them," Chesterton proclaimed, "how to enjoy enjoyment," and he certainly believed that happiness and spirituality were intimately connected, happiness being a particular

⁷⁶ Cited by Maisie Ward in *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 74, and see following.

⁷⁷ Published in *The Speaker*, April 13, 1901, and collected in G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant*.

⁷⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Lunacy and Letters*, p. 99.

⁷⁹ Desmond MacCarthy, "G. K. Chesterton," *Sunday Times*, April 23, 1944, p. 3.

trademark of Francis.⁸⁰ So the purpose of his Third Order was “to assist ordinary men to be ordinary with an extraordinary exultation” (p. 120). Conversely, the word *fear* recurs suggestively in *St. Francis*: for example, when a man places God at the center of his vision, says Chesterton, he sees all phenomena more truly, and has “more wonder at them but less fear of them” (p. 85); and he truly observes of Francis that when he met the leper on the road he “saw his fear coming up the road towards him, the fear that comes from within and not without” (p. 57). In overcoming his fear of lepers on that occasion, in finding complete trust in God, Francis surely conquered all fears, and henceforward knew that he could live without all the normal securities of life: family, home, money, status, power. In his fearlessness, he was free: a dual theme of great importance to Chesterton, who had also struggled with fear, and was always concerned with spiritual freedom. He rightly projects Francis as a model of Christian freedom, while noting how he explicitly confined himself—as Chesterton did—within the portals of orthodoxy: a conundrum which, however, he fails to explain in his discussion of the saint. But he does note how Francis was “almost anarchic,” beyond convention (pp. 50-51); how he so turned normality upside-down that it was in becoming pauperized (pp. 115-116) and a servant that he achieved freedom (p. 78): his dependence on God, he insists, is what made him free (p. 86), for “the medieval Christian insisted that God gave man a charter,” that is, “a gift of liberties and not of laws.”⁸¹ His liberty issued in eccentricity and spontaneity, in his disregard for both convention and pragmatism: “All his life was a series of plunges and scampers; darting after the beggar, dashing naked into the woods, tossing himself in the strange ship.”⁸² And again, he writes: “The jester could be free when the knight was rigid” (p. 78). This was true of Francis and of Chesterton alike: while accepting orthodoxy, they seemed to wend their own free-spirited, happy, spontaneous, humble ways to heaven, while loving the world.

In all this, it is important to remember that loving the world was neither for Francis nor for Chesterton a matter of leaving the world alone: religion was “political” in the deepest sense, because both religion and politics were about how people related to each other; and Chesterton

⁸⁰ G. K. Chesterton, “Christmas and the Distributist,” *G. K.’s Weekly*, Vol. XX, No. 509 (December 1934) p. 326; and see “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” *Good Words*, September/October, 1904, reprint in G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (London, 1950), p. 12.

⁸¹ G. K. Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men*, p. 252.

⁸² G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chapter I, p. 14.

acknowledges this obliquely in his discussion of Francis. He knows that the feelings of wonder, of gratitude, and of humility are not the whole of the Christian vision, for these feelings were often blocked, because, "we were only partially or imperfectly the sons of God... we suffered by the Fall or Original Sin."⁸³ "Wonder and humility and gratitude are good things," he observed while writing *St. Francis*, "but they are not the only good things; and there must be something to make the poet who praises them admit that justice and mercy and human dignity are good things too."⁸⁴ This awareness accounts for why, when describing the poetical Francis, he adverts to his universal courtesy and respect (pp. 108-110), to the medieval "ethics of fraternity and fair play" (p. 34), (Francis epitomizing the Middle Ages), to his egalitarian sensibility, to his being "the tribune of the poor" (p. 183), to his ministry amongst the lepers—the rejects of society (p. 57), to his work for peace and fraternity, to the Franciscans being "communists" (p. 173), to his being—roughly—what Chesterton himself roughly was: a Christian "socialist" (p. 184). (The use of the word "communists" should not be too surprising: in his early essay on the relationship between Christianity and Socialism, he allows for early Christianity being communistic, and refers to "the socialism of Christianity."⁸⁵ In short, Christianity was not just an attitude, but an act; it was a way of living, not a mere set of views; it was a matter of giving good example, rather than of receiving it; and Francis embodied this philosophy.

Chesterton saw Francis both in very large historical—indeed, cosmic—terms, and in very intimate, personal terms, as both the archetypal medieval man who haunted the modern work by virtue of having inaugurated a new world-view, and as the man of whom, towards the end of Chesterton's life, he still dreamt, because his "absence haunts me like a presence."⁸⁶ At the end of *St. Francis of Assisi*, he attests that his own life has been a "brief candle burnt out so quickly before his shrine" (p. 185). The burning of that votive candle was not wasted, for Chesterton was indeed not so distant a reflection of his hero in whom he saw his own ideals lived out to perfection, and who so relentlessly mirrored their common Lord. Shortly

⁸³ G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man*, p. 243.

⁸⁴ G. K. Chesterton, "Where All Roads Lead," *Blackfriars*, Vol. III, No. 35 (February, 1923), p. 621.

⁸⁵ Cited in Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 73.

⁸⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *The Resurrection of Rome*, p. 131.

after Chesterton's death, Ronald Knox, discoursing upon Francis's simplicity conceived as the power of a direct insight into truth and value, commented:

I think if you asked me who was the simplest person I have ever known I should mention the name of one of the cleverest men of our generation, Mr. G. K. Chesterton.... And it is not out of place to mention him here, because he was perhaps the best biographer St. Francis ever had.⁸⁷

Though modest, Chesterton's book is an intriguing dialogue between Francis and himself, a dialogue which, in so imaginatively elucidating fundamental concepts of both, constitutes one of the great English Catholic spiritual statements of the twentieth century. With all its shortcomings and faults, it is a profoundly true and creative reflection of its subject, strongly suggesting to its readers how they themselves might reflect Francis: it is a case of heart speaking to heart, and faithfully passing on the message; it is a dream of pure goodness.

⁸⁷ Ronald Knox, *Occasional Sermons of Ronald A. Knox* (London, 1960), p. 98.