

THE WRITINGS OF
ST. FRANCIS
OF ASSISI

St. Francis of Assisi

The Writings of Saint Francis of Assisi

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e-artnow, 2021

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EAN 4066338129178

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SOME LOST, DOUBTFUL, AND SPURIOUS WRITINGS

INTRODUCTION.

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I.

The writings of St. Francis may, as is obvious, be considered from more than one point of view. Premising this, we are afforded a clue to the difficulty which has led students of Franciscan sources to divide themselves into two camps as to the objective value of these writings. Indeed, one writer ¹ goes so far as to compare the attitude of modern scholars toward them to that of the “Spiritual” and Conventual Friars respectively in the first century of Franciscan history. For while one party, led by M. Paul Sabatier, ² attaches what some regard as almost undue weight to the writings of St. Francis as a source of our knowledge of him, the other party, following Mgr. Faloci Pulignani, ³ displays, we are told, a tendency to belittle their importance. The truth is, as Professor Muller long ago pointed out, ⁴ that these writings afford us little if any information as to the life of their author, a fact which may perhaps account for their comparative neglect by so many of the Saint’s biographers, but it is not less true that they bear the stamp of his personality and reflect his spirit even more faithfully than the Legends written down on the very morrow of his death by those who had known him the best of all. ¹ For this reason they are well worth all the serious study that scholars outside the Franciscan Order are now beginning to give to them.

To say that the writings of St. Francis reflect his personality and his spirit is but another way of saying that

they are at once formidably mystic and exquisitely human; that they combine great elevation of thought with much picturesqueness of expression. This twofold element, which found its development later on in the prose of mystics like St Bonaventure and in the verse of poets like Jacopone da Todi, and which has ever been a marked characteristic of Franciscan ascetic literature, leads back to the writings of the Founder as to the humble upper waters of a mighty stream. St. Francis had the soul of an ascetic and the heart of a poet. His unbounded faith had an almost lyric sweetness about it; his deep sense of the spiritual is often clothed with the character of romance. This intimate union of the supernatural and the natural is nowhere more strikingly manifested than in the writings of St. Francis, which, after the vicissitudes of well nigh seven hundred winters, are still fragrant with the fragrance of the Seraphic springtide.

Important as the doctrinal aspect of St. Francis' writings must of necessity be to all who would understand his life—since “the springs of action are to be found in belief, and conduct ultimately rests upon conviction”—it is foreign to the object of the present volume. I am here concerned with the literary and historical aspect of these writings. Suffice it to say that St. Francis' doctrine, ¹ which received, so to speak, the Divine *Imprimatur* upon the heights of La Verna two years before his death, ² is nothing more or less than a paraphrase of the Sermon on the Mount. Nowhere can there be found a simpler literalness in the following of the “poverty, humility, and holy Gospel of the Lord Jesus” than in the writings of St. Francis, and any attempt to read into

them the peculiar doctrines of the Abbot Joachim of Flora, the Humiliati, the Poor Men of Lyons, or any of their nameless followers, is as unjust as it is unjustifiable. Needless to add that St. Francis' writings contain no new message. Indeed, the frequency with which certain very old and familiar aspects of the eternal truths are insisted upon by St. Francis in season and out of season, is not unlikely to weary the average reader who does not pause to look between the lines. This tendency to repeat himself, which is habitual with St. Francis, does not necessarily bespeak any dearth of ideas. On the contrary. His simple, childlike nature fastened upon three or four leading thoughts "taken from the words of the Lord," which seemed to him all-sufficing, and these he works into his writings over and over, tempering them to the needs of the different classes he addresses as he understood them. If then we recall the circumstances under which St. Francis wrote and the condition of those for whom his writings were intended in the first instance, far from being bored, we may gain something from each new repetition.

Because St. Francis loved Jesus and His Eucharistic Passion, ardently, enthusiastically, almost desperately—to borrow Bossuet's adjectives—his sympathy extended to every creature that suffered or rejoiced. His writings are eloquent witnesses to this far-reaching, all-embracing solicitude. They may be said to run over the whole gamut. Witness the soft note touched in the letter to Brother Leo and the deep masculine tone in which the Testament is pitched. On the whole, however, his writings fall naturally under three heads: ¹ those, like the Rules, which represent

St. Francis as legislator; those, like the Letter to a Minister, which show us St. Francis as a spiritual father; and those, like the Praises and Salutations, in which we see St Francis as his earliest biographer saw him—"not so much a man praying as prayer itself." ²

It was Matthew Arnold, I believe, who first held St. Francis up to English readers as a literary type ³ —a type withal as distinct and formal as the author of the *Divine Comedy*. But however true a poet—and without St. Francis no Dante—it is certain that the *Poverello* was in no sense a man of letters. He was too little acquainted with the laws of composition to advance very far in that direction. His early years had been a bad preparation for study, and he ever remained a comparative stranger to the ecclesiastical and classical learning of his time, though probably his culture was larger than we might be led to conclude from his repeated professions of ignorance and the disparaging remarks of some of his early biographers. Through his mother he seems to have got some acquaintances with French; ¹ he received elementary instruction in reading and writing from the priests at San Giorgio, who also taught him enough Latin to enable him to write it in later years after a fashion, ² and to understand the ritual of the Church and its hymns, which he was wont to sing by the wayside. But in considering St. Francis' literary formation, we must reckon largely with the education he picked up in the school of the Troubadours, who at the close of the twelfth century were making for refinement in Italy ³ The imagery of the *chansons de gestes* seems to have exercised an abiding influence upon St. Francis' life and writings, as is evident from his own tale of

the Lady Poverty, which later inspired the pen of Dante and the brush of Giotto. Witness, too, his frequent allusions to the Knights of the Round Table; his desire that his Friars should become “the Lord’s Jongleurs,” and his habit of courtesy extended even to Sister Death.⁴ On the other hand St. Francis was nothing if not original. His writings abound not only in allegory and personification, but also in quaint concepts and naive deductions. His final argument is often a text of Holy Scripture, which he uses with a familiarity and freedom altogether remarkable. Indeed there are parts of his writings in which the interweaving of Scriptural phrases is so intricate as almost to defy any attempt to indicate them by references, the more so since the Biblical language adopted by St. Francis is not always taken from the Bible, but often from the Liturgy, Missal, and Breviary.¹ For the rest, as Celano puts it, “he left empty ornaments and roundabout methods of speech and everything belonging to pomp and to display to those who are ready to perish; for his part he cared not for the bark, but for the pith; not for the shell, but for the nut; not for the multiple, but for the one only sovereign good.”²

If we may judge from the two solitary autographic fragments of his that have come down to us,³ St. Francis was not by any means a skilful penman. Be this as it may, St. Bonaventure clearly implies that he had a secretary,⁴ to whom he dictated notes, and affirms with Celano that the Saint signed such documents as called for his signature with the “sign *thau*,” or capital *T*.¹ Whether or not St. Francis’ practice of signing his name thus has any connection with Brother Pacifico’s vision of the large *T*,² is a matter of

conjecture and of small import. What is certain is that St. Francis wrote little. The most characteristic of his extant writings are very short, extremely simple in style, and without any trace of pedantry. If some of the longer pieces seem to show the touch of a more skilful hand than that of St. Francis, *idiota et simplex*, we need not on this account feel any misgivings as to their authenticity. Whatever assistance he may have received in pruning and embellishing certain of his later compositions from Cæsar of Spires or another, no one who examines these writings carefully can doubt but that they are the work of the great Saint himself.

From a literary standpoint perhaps the most carefully composed bit of St. Francis' writing that has come down to us is the realistic picture of the miser's death in the letter "To all the Faithful." More interesting, however, to the student is the "Canticle of the Sun," not only as an example of the simple, spontaneous Umbrian dialect rhyme which St. Francis taught his poet followers to substitute for the artificial versification of courtly Latin and Provençal poets, but also because of the light it throws on St. Francis' literary method,—if method it may be called. His piecemeal fashion of composing as the spirit moved him, is also manifest in a very different work, the First Rule, as is evident from the modification and additions this strange piece of legislation suffered during the fourteen years it was in force. ¹ St. Francis' practice of returning to his old writings, retouching and remoulding them, working them over and inserting parts of them in his new ones, goes far toward explaining

difficulties which would otherwise arise from the resemblance between his different compositions.

For the rest, even though St. Francis' literary culture was incomplete, his constant contemplation of the "things that are above" and the perfect purity of his life whetted alike his understanding of supernatural truth and of the human heart, and so it comes to pass that his simple words, written down in the far-off thirteenth century and with a fashion of speech different from ours, yet work wonders to this day, while the tomes of many a learned doctor "leave all things as they were before."

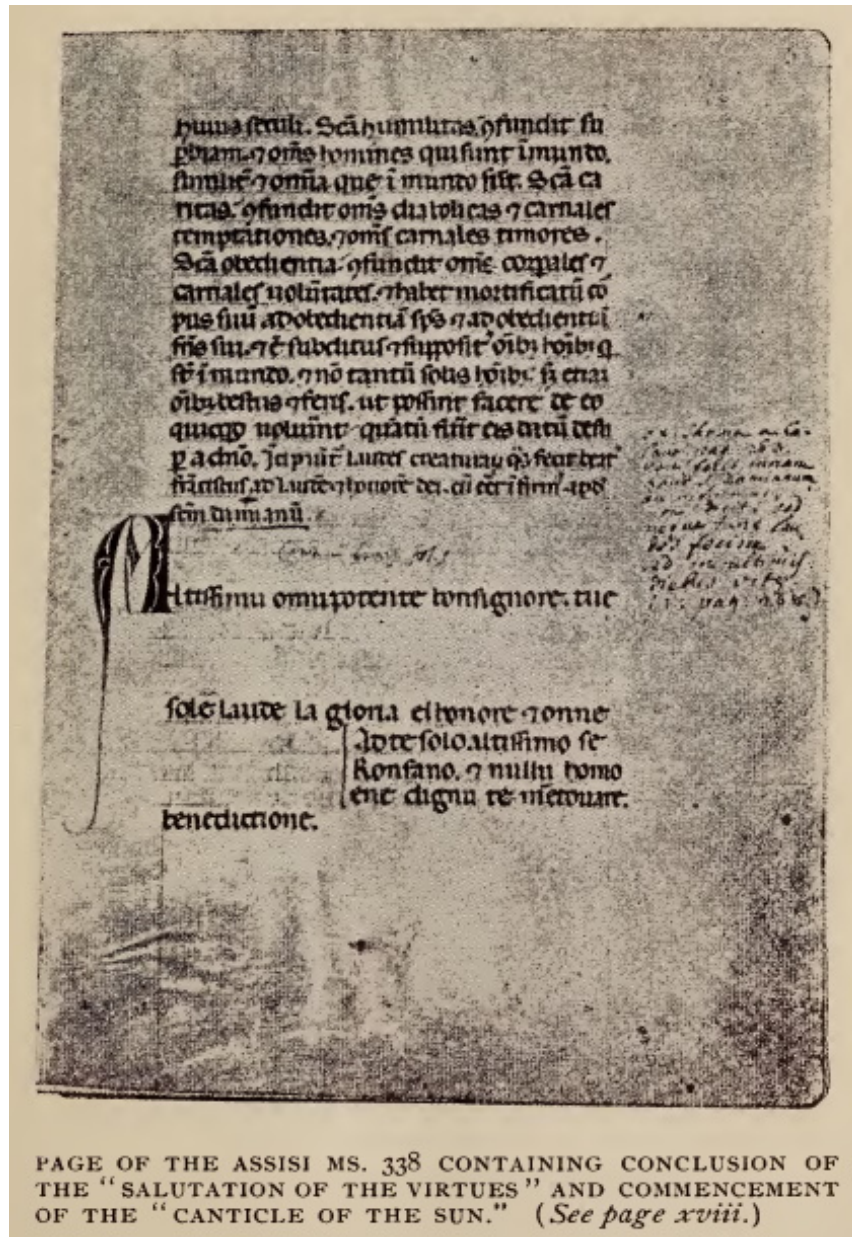
It remains to say a few words concerning the history of St. Francis' writings before coming to the writings themselves.

II.

The history of the writings of St. Francis, from the time of their composition in the far-off thirteenth century down to our own day, opens up a most interesting field for speculation. Who, it may be asked, first gathered these writings together? In answer to this question nothing definite can be said, for the early Legends and Chronicles of the Order are silent on the subject, and we must rest content to begin our inquiry with the oldest MS. collections containing the writings of St. Francis. Many such collections exist in mediæval codices, but any attempt to classify these MSS. is, in the present state of our documentation, beset by peculiar difficulties. Not the least of these difficulties arises from the fact that even as in the Legends or Lives of St. Francis we can distinguish a double current; ¹ so, too, in the

early MS. collections two distinct families or categories are found representing or rather illustrating the twofold tradition and observance which date from the very beginnings of Franciscan history. ²

The first place among these collections belongs to the MS. numbered 338, formerly in the Sacro Convento, but now in the municipal library at Assisi. Critics who have studied this early codex are not in accord as to its age. ¹ But it dates at least from the beginning of the fourteenth century. It includes eleven of the nineteen works here translated. They are contained in three parchment books in the following order: fol 12-16, The Second Rule of the Friars Minor; ² fol. 16-18, The Testament; ³ fol. 18-23, Admonitions; ⁴ fol. 23-28, The Letter to All the Faithful; ⁵ fol. 28-31, The Letter to the General Chapter; ⁶ fol. 31-32, Instruction to Clerics on the Holy Eucharist; ⁷ fol. 32, Salutation of the Virtues; ⁸ fol. 33, The Canticle of the Sun; ⁹ fol. 34, Paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer; ¹⁰ fol. 34-43, The Office of the Passion; ¹¹ and fol. 43, The Regulation for Hermitages. ¹²



PAGE OF THE ASSISI MS 338 CONTAINING CONCLUSION OF
 THE "SALUTATION OF THE VIRTUES" AND COMMENCEMENT
 OF THE "CANTICLE OF THE SUN"

The same collection either wholly or in part is given in
 the well-known fourteenth century compilation of *materia
 seraphica* known as *Fac secundum exemplar* from the
 opening words of its prologue, and which may be found in

the Vatican MS. 4354, the Berlin MS. 196, the Lemberg MS. 131, ¹ and the Liegnitz MS. 12 ² The Mazarin MSS. 989 and 1743, ³ as well as the Dusseldorf MS 132, ⁴ may also be said to belong to this family of codices which present the writings of St. Francis in practically the same number and order as Mariano of Florence adopts in his *Chronicle*, composed about 1500 ⁵

We now come to the second collection of St Francis' writings, which is often found along with the traditional *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, and the *Speculum Perfectionis*. It is represented by the celebrated Florentine codex at Ognissanti, ⁶ the codex 1/25 at St. Isidore's, Rome, ⁷ the Vatican MS. 7650, ⁸ and the codex of the Capuchin convent at Foligno, ¹ all of which contain St. Francis' works in almost the same order as that given by Bartholomew of Pisa, in his *Liber Conformitatum*. ²

This second collection of the writings of St. Francis differs from the first one in several details. In the first place it omits the Instruction to Clerics on the Holy Eucharist and adds the letter To a Certain Minister ³ Again, the Assisi and Liegnitz MSS., which are typical examples of the first collection, place the prayer, "O Almighty Eternal God," etc., ⁴ at the end of the letter to the General Chapter, whereas in the Ognissanti MS. and others of the same family this prayer is found elsewhere. So, too, in the Assisi and Liegnitz MSS. the Salutation of the Virtues is inscribed "Salutation of the Virtues which adorned the Soul of the Blessed Virgin Mary and which ought to adorn the holy soul," while in the Ognissanti and kindred MSS. the title of this piece reads: "Salutation of the Virtues and of their efficacy in

confounding Vices.” These examples suffice to indicate that this twofold family of MSS. includes also a twofold reading, as becomes more evident from the variants noted elsewhere in the course of this work. Meanwhile, let us pass on from the MS. collections of St. Francis’ writings to the

PRINTED EDITIONS

Two diverse compilations, each containing part of the *Opuscula*, were published at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The first of these, known as the *Speculum Vitae B. Francisci et Sociorum ejus*,¹ and quarried largely from the *Actus Beati Francisci*, contains (fol. 126-127) among various legends and other narrations some of St. Francis’ prayers, and (fol. 189) also the First Rule. The second compilation, which is of a much more polemic character,² and which contains a larger number of the *Opuscula*, appeared successively with some variations in form at Rouen in 1509 as the *Speculum Minorum*,³ at Salamanca in 1511 as the *Monumenta Ordinis Minorum*,⁴ and at Paris in 1512 as the *Firmamenta trium Ordinum B. Francisci*.¹ The seventeenth century saw the appearance of

WADDING’S EDITION.

The honor of making the first serious attempt to collect all the writings of St. Francis belongs to the renowned Annalist of the Order, Father Luke Wadding.² His celebrated edition of the *Opuscula*³ is distributed in three parts: Part I contains the Letters, Prayers, and the Testament; Part II, the Rules; and Part III, the Monastic Conferences, the Office of the

Passion and Canticles, followed by Apophthegms, Colloquies, Prophecies, Parables, Examples, Benedictions, etc.

Wadding's edition of the *Opuscula* differs mainly from all preceding collections in this, that whereas the latter contained only those pieces which as regards both matter and form were the handiwork of St. Francis, Wadding felt justified in including among St. Francis' writings many *dicta* of the Saint found in the early Legends. For example, St. Bonaventure ⁴ relates of St. Francis "Non enim securum esse *putabat* earum formarum introrsus haurire imagines." Wadding, in his sixth Conference, by changing *putabat* into *puto*, gives this passage as the *ipsissima verba* of St. Francis. Again, in the seventeenth Conference, he entirely changes the form of what St. Bonaventure elsewhere ¹ relates of St. Francis when he substitutes "Officium praedicationis Patri misericordiarum omni sacrificio *est* acceptius" for "Istius Miserationis officium Patri misericordiarum omni sacrificio *firmabat* acceptius."

Thus it comes to pass that in Wadding's edition, side by side with the undisputed writings of St. Francis, we find doubtful, even spurious, extracts from different sources attributed to the Seraphic Father. It must ever remain a matter of regret that Wadding, instead of following the oldest MSS. that he had at hand, was content to transcribe the incomplete and often interpolated parts of them he found in second-hand compilations, like that of Mark of Lisbon. His work from our standpoint is vitiated by imperfect research and unreliable criticism. But if Wadding was more profuse than prudent in his attribution of Franciscan

fragments to the Founder, it must be remembered that he wrote at a time when even the highest minds troubled themselves little enough about literary exactness. For what we now glorify as “scientific criticism” had not yet become the fashion. The faults therefore of Wadding’s edition of the *Opuscula* are largely the faults of his time; and considering the difficulties to be overcome, the result of his labors was very creditable. And if he had never undertaken the task of collecting St. Francis’ writings, any attempt of ours to that end would be surely more arduous, and perhaps not so fruitful.

Several editions of St. Francis’ writings have appeared since Wadding’s day, notably those published by de la Haye,¹ Von der Burg,² and Horoy.³ But these editions are very imperfect. Their authors, in spite of the advance made in historical criticism since Wadding’s day, have merely reproduced and rejuvenated the edition of the great annalist. The same is true of the various translations of the *Opuscula*, —they are simply Wadding in Italian,⁴ English,⁵ French,⁶ German,⁷ or Spanish,⁸ as the case may be.

On the other hand, M. Sabatier’s strictures on the “numerous ecclesiastics” who have edited the writings of St. Francis, for not reprinting Wadding’s comments on them, are a trifle wide of the mark, seeing that their editions were prepared mainly for a class of readers whose point of view is practical and devotional, rather than theoretical and speculative, who read the writings of the saints not merely as historical or literary documents, but as words of spirit and of life. For such a clientele critical notes would be caviare indeed.

The remarkable upgrowth of interest in the sources of early Franciscan history that has characterized the literature of the past decade accentuated the need of a more perfect edition of St. Francis' writings. The matter was soon taken in hand by the Friars Minor at Quaracchi—already famous in the literary history of the Order—and in 1904 they issued the

FIRST CRITICAL EDITION

of the *Opuscula*.¹ Without overlooking the internal character of each document, the Quaracchi editors based their edition upon the early MS. tradition, weighing by this standard all the various writings contained in the stereotyped editions of St. Francis' works, with the result that many a familiar page that had come down to us on the good faith of Wadding was found wanting. Thus the seventeen letters commonly ascribed to St. Francis have been reduced to six, the Rules of the Second and Third Orders have been eliminated, only one of the twenty-eight monastic conferences, and one of the seven blessings, are left; most of the prayers have gone, and all the colloquies, prophecies, parables, etc, have likewise disappeared. Most likely the doubtful and suppositious works thus excluded often embody the doctrine and ideas of St. Francis; to a greater or lesser extent some of them may even be his in substance, but as there is no good reason to believe they are his own composition they are not entitled to a place among his writings.

The authentic works of St Francis left to us then, according to the Quaracchi edition, are the Admonitions,

Salutation of the Virtues, Instruction on the Blessed Sacrament, the First and Second Rules of the Friars Minor, the Testament and Regulation for Hermitages, some fragments from the Rule of the Clares, Six Letters, the Praises of God, the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin, the *Chartula* containing the *Laudes* and Benediction for Brother Leo, the prayer *Absorbeat*, and the Office of the Passion.

The Quaracchi edition does not therefore embody any new matter, but it contains for the first time in any edition of St. Francis' works the letter "To a Minister" in its entirety. For the rest, while purging the text of St. Francis' writings of the many doubtful and apocryphal pieces with which they had come to be burdened in the course of time, the Quaracchi editors have perfected the text of the authentic writings by their emendations and collations, notes and comments, thus conferring the freedom of no small city upon the students of Franciscan sources.

The year 1904 also saw the publication, almost simultaneously, of two other works dealing with the *Opuscula* of St. Francis, written by well known professors at Bonn ¹ and Munich, ² and both of real value. ³ It would be foreign to our present purpose to examine either of these works in detail. Suffice it to say that they accord in substance almost completely with the conclusions of the Quaracchi editors. If anything, they lean more on the side of kindness toward certain doubtful writings. Thanks to this trilogy of works, and to certain learned criticisms which they have called forth from Fr. VanOrtroy, ¹ M. Sabatier, ² and Mr. Carmichael ³ among others, we are now in a position to form a fairly accurate estimate of what St. Francis really *wrote*.