

Saint Francis of Assisi: A “Grammar of Gratitude”*

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NO ONE BETTER than Francis of Assisi can benefit from an alert and spontaneous style, and from a perception at once intuitive and passionate, such as we find in this early essay by Gilbert Keith Chesterton. In his *Saint Francis of Assisi*, which reflects the captivating genius of Francis and the bright apologetic of the author of both *Orthodoxy* and *Heretics*, we discover something destined to occur, a mutual encounter marked by profound affinity for and a common love of the creation and the Creator.

Chesterton's *Saint Francis of Assisi* was published in 1923,¹ shortly after the author's entrance into the Roman Catholic Church, but the attachment that Chesterton felt for this figure of the medieval Church dates from well before his conversion. As early as November 1892, Chesterton wrote a poem about the “solitary dreamer” of Assisi, and, the day after the death in Paris of Oscar Wilde, who himself had become a Catholic,²

* Translated from the French by Romanus Cessario, O.P.

¹ It was translated into French as early as 1925 by Isabelle Rivière in the collection *Roseau d'or*, which dates from the same year and which would welcome in 1927 the first part of the *L'homme éternel* (*The Everlasting Man*). See Yves Habert, “Le Roseau d'or” in *Pierre d'Angle* 7 (2001): 173–95. This present essay relies on the edition of Ignatius Press (San Francisco, 2002), with an introduction by Joseph Pearce. The original French of this essay draws on the translation of Antoine Barrois, sometimes lightly corrected (Paris: Dominique Martin Morin, 1979). See my “*Saint François d'Assise: une 'grammaire de la gratitude,'*” *Pierre d'Angle* 13 (2007): 41–48.

² See Pearce, introduction to *Saint Francis of Assisi*, by G. K. Chesterton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 187.

Chesterton published in *The Speaker* on December 1st, 1900 an article on St. Francis. This essay already pointed out what Chesterton refers to as the enigma of Francis: why did this lover of creation, of all things good and beautiful, require of himself and of his brethren the most absolute renunciation of material things? “Why did he who loved where all men were blind, seek to blind himself where all men loved? Why was he a monk and not a troubadour?”³

Is it not best for us to proceed apace through Chesterton’s *Francis*? The essay is full of surprises, of connections—clarifying or incongruous depending on one’s frame of mind. It also contains approximate historical information—those things that Chesterton evidently did not research but above all borrowed by empathy, by a connaturality with his hero. This empathy developed into an overall outlook that summons the reader to happiness.

It is indeed his reader that Chesterton above all thinks about; he who is at once a good journalist and a good apologist for Christianity. How to compose without putting the reader off? Chesterton is envisaging a reader who likely would be deeply influenced by the then prevailing prejudices against the Middle Ages in particular and against Catholicism in general. How to approach his reader so as to be understood at least a little? How to proceed? Chesterton obviously could have made Francis the precursor of our favorite modern causes: beyond his respect for nature, is Francis not also the friend of animals, the denouncer of profit and of the reign of money, and the pacifist? But the reader who knew Rousseau, Renan, Arnold, and Tolstoy nonetheless would reproach such a Francis for what they would consider his superstitions. Would it not be better to leave to one side the religious question? But this approach would be impossible without mutilating completely this saint who remained a tenderly devout man. An alternative approach would effect the inverse. If one insists on the asceticism of Francis, his fasts and his stigmata, his *persona* would become incomprehensible to the contemporary mentality.

Chesterton purports to look at Francis of Assisi as if from the outside, in order precisely to explain to the curious—who more or less are wont to cherish sympathy for a figure that they do not know well—how such a man was able to reconcile the irreconcilable, to wit, austerity with merriness. So Chesterton argues that

by approaching it in this way, we may at least get a glimmering of why the poet who praised his lord the sun, often hid himself in a dark cavern, of why the saint who was gentle with his Brother the Wolf was so harsh to his Brother the Ass (as he nicknamed his own body), of why

³ Quoted in Pearce, introduction, 187.

the troubadour who said that love set his heart on fire separated himself from women, of why the singer who rejoiced in the strength and gaiety of the fire deliberately rolled himself in the snow, or why the very song which cries with all the passion of a pagan, "Praised be God for our Sister, Mother Earth, which brings forth fruits and grass and glowing flowers," ends almost with the words, "Praised be God for our Sister, the death of the body."⁴

To be sure, modern readers may be scandalized by the last years of Francis spent on Mount Alvernia, which they would be wont to interpret as the failure of a life. It behooves Chesterton, then, to explain to the moderns that this experience deals with a sort of "amorous folly," an outlandish love for men and for God. However one would immediately need to clarify, in order to avoid the worst sort of misunderstanding, that this love emanates not from someone who is abstract, theoretical, intellectual, philanthropic, someone who never displeases anyone, but from a man in love with real people and with Christ.

Historical Recap

To start off, Chesterton intends to undertake an exercise in historical pedagogy. He aims to avoid committing the same mistakes that do a majority of his colleagues—no doubt journalists—when they use words like crusade, heresy, and inquisition, without bothering to inquire about their true signification or their true origin. Chesterton first of all sets up a somewhat somber picture of the moral and religious degeneration of classical antiquity, against which Christianity establishes itself. Chesterton insists very much on the tyranny of sexual practices that flourished throughout the last period of the Roman Empire, an era that saw no alternative to Venus and to Priapus in anyone other than Pan, that is to say, an oscillation between lasciviousness and terrorism. Chesterton even offers some formulas: "Pagans were wiser than paganism; that is why the pagans became Christians,"⁵ and also "the glad news brought by the Gospel was the news of original sin."⁶

Only "the abrupt supernatural" could offer a chance of salvation out of such a set of circumstances. This remark introduces the second historical period that Chesterton describes, one corresponding to the first centuries of the Middle Ages. He argues that during this epoch we can observe an expiration and a purification of the faults of the pagan world, not only by the institution of a severe monasticism complete with its

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 194.

⁵ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 208.

⁶ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 207.

terrible penances, but also by the solicitude for a perennially renewed reform of the Church, one which entailed necessarily a doctrinal purity that explains the Crusades and the battle against heresy.

It is only then, according to our author, that a third period of history could emerge, from the end of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, the period of St. Francis, a period of renewal, that took place within the flourishing of a certain recovered innocence and which harbored the expectation of a general reconciliation. Chesterton explains, for example, that the celebrated attempt by St. Francis to convert the Sultan by the naked power both of the word and of his life represents for Brother Francis the concluding stage of the violence of the Crusades.

As with all rapid generalizations, a schema of this type cannot satisfy the historian. Still, Chesterton touches upon something true by trying to give an explanation as to why in St. Francis and also, he will say, in St. Thomas Aquinas, one finds a high priority given to redeemed nature. Chesterton shows this sentiment at work in the Poor Man of Assisi throughout the chapters of the book, which are at once demi-historical and demi-psychological.

Fighter and Builder

Francis of Assisi was a man of action, one always on the lookout for glory. Chesterton excels in describing him as alive, impetuous, gentle but not a dreamer, generous, and jolly. He shows quite well that Francis lacked all sense of money, as much when making expenditures as in observing poverty. Francis likewise amassed over the course of his life a long list of rashly uttered vows. If Francis once had wanted to be a fighter, it was in the chivalrous not the bellicose sense, for he lived, both before and after his conversion, within the demanding culture of medieval courtesy.

It was a sickness that made him grow up and accept humiliations in the eyes of his fellow citizens. Having become a builder, he worked with his own hands, but this meant that he had come to understand "the idea of a new supernatural light on natural things, which meant the ultimate recovery not the ultimate refusal of natural things."⁷ Accordingly in this way, he took his distance from the traditional monastic spirituality.

Chesterton recounts the adventures of Francis after his conversion in a manner droll, but not at the same time without a bit of ingenuity that helps people understand the practices of his holy hero.

It is said that in place of the girdle which he had flung off (perhaps with the more symbolic scorn because it probably carried the purse or wallet

⁷ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 232.

by the fashion of the period) he picked up a rope more or less at random, because it was lying near, and tied it round his waist. He undoubtedly meant it as a shabby expedient; rather as the very destitute tramp will sometimes tie his clothes together with a piece of string. He meant to strike the note of collecting his clothes anyhow, like rags from a succession of dust-bins.⁸

Standing on His Head

Because Francis (a name that Chesterton translates as “Frenchy”) ought to have loved the language of the troubadours, the central chapter of the book is called even in the English edition, “Le Jongleur de Dieu,” or “God’s Juggler.” This is the point: Chesterton shows poetically that Francis’s conversion to humility consists in passing from the noble and passionate songs of a troubadour to the antics and acrobatics of the juggler, who often was the servant of a knight or even of a troubadour. Chesterton develops this theme in several stages.

The first step consists in seeing the consequences of the parlous jump that conversion entails. At one moment, the head is upside down, as is said of the crucified St. Peter, and at the next, Francis lands on his feet, but entirely renewed.⁹ We find there the experience of the reversal of all things in the discovery of their supernatural dimension. Fallen, like St. Paul on the way to Damascus, Francis will be from then on the jester of the King of Paradise, looking for nothing but rejoicing in everything. This passage reflects the resonances not only of St. Paul but also of Erasmus. This part of the text also may reflect something of the autobiographical, giving to Chesterton’s humor and eccentricity an implicit depth.

The second moment is that of the praise of creation. Francis escapes at once exacerbated spiritualisms and the cerebrations of the Courts of Love, while at the same time he rejects with the same resolve the cult of nature and of pantheism. For praise is addressed to the Creator, which makes us understand, according to Chesterton, the difficult position of the atheist who finds himself without anyone to thank. The mystic himself knows well that all depends on God, that all indeed hangs “on a hair of the mercy of God.”¹⁰

Still, one must advance further. For Chesterton, the key to the paradox that I have announced from the start and which unites in Francis a spirit both of penitence and of joyful praise, is to be found in the fact that

⁸ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 239.

⁹ On the tomfoolery of St. Francis, see Christiane d’Haussy, *La vision du monde chez G. K. Chesterton* (Paris: Didier, 1981), 221.

¹⁰ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 251.

the debt owed to the Creator can never be repaid, and so it becomes on this account a source of joy. We arrive indeed at the mystery of Christian love where one stands as at once debtor and creditor, but which has nothing further to do with the chivalric love founded on a hoped-for recompense. Indeed, the Christian debt points to something else:

There the infinite creditor does share the joy of the infinite debtor; for indeed they are both debtors and both creditors. In other words, debt and dependence do become pleasures in the presence of unspoiled love; the word is used too loosely and luxuriously in popular simplifications like the present; but here the word is really the key. It is the key of all the problems of Franciscan morality which puzzle the merely modern mind; but above all it is the key of asceticism. It is the highest and holiest of paradoxes that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be forever paying it back. He will be for ever giving back what he cannot give back, and cannot be expected to give back. He will always be throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks. Men who think they are too modern to understand this are in fact too mean to understand it; we are most of us too mean to practice it. We are not generous enough to be ascetics; one might almost say not genial enough to be ascetics. A man must have magnanimity of surrender, of which he commonly only catches a glimpse in first love, like a glimpse of our lost Eden. But whether he sees it or not, the truth is in that riddle; that the whole world has, or is, only one good thing; and it is a bad debt."¹¹

This "happy debt" of life received and of life redeemed reveals the secret of Francis. He has written, says Chesterton, a "grammar of acceptance", a "grammar of gratitude,"¹² just as Newman wrote a *Grammar of Assent*. "Francis understood down to its very depth the theory of thanks; and its depths are a bottomless abyss."¹³

Upon this mystical vision, Chesterton allows a dramatic reading to unfold, theatrical in some ways, we today might say a theo-dramatic. One should never lose sight, he affirms, that Francis of Assisi was a true poet. Recall that before giving himself over to a beautiful and almost technical literary analysis of the *Canticle of Creation*, Francis did not fear to evoke for this purpose his beloved fairy tales. But the poet himself becomes the actor in a play that he himself had composed, or more precisely trans-

¹¹ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 252–53.

¹² "A grammar of acceptance; a grammar of gratitude." Chesterton plays also on the English words: "St. Francis cared chiefly for the best kind of giving which is called thanksgiving." See Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 318.

¹³ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 318.

forms himself into a divine mime. Francis modeled himself on Christ and by becoming his mirror-image, embraced better the dimensions of the Redemption than up to that moment had been his customary practice.

More so, the apologist in Chesterton recognizes that for the modern reader many evangelical precepts become more attractive, even compelling, in the *Fioretti* than in other expressions. Chesterton himself, however, does not make much in his book of Francis's miracles. They, in any case, would rub the scientifically minded the wrong way. . . . Moreover, the signal characteristic found in the life of Saint Francis is that "the supernatural part of the story seems quite as natural as the rest."¹⁴ And furthermore, to whom does it fall to fix the limits of the supernatural?

An effort to approach poetically a figure who himself is both a poet and poetical, *Saint Francis of Assisi* allows Chesterton to develop a hagiographical style that is all his own. In his desire to make the essence of Francis's extraordinary holiness understood, the author fixes first of all on the signs, on the symbolic gestures that appear throughout in the associations of ideas and in historical approximations. He is a painter who proceeds by "rapid strokes and summaries,"¹⁵ even when he treats the mystical. This work of art, like a painting, invites us to see, to experience, and through this contact, to achieve understanding.

This essay of Chesterton, it is true, includes elements of diagnosis and of judgment on the contemporary world. But inasmuch as the author already has covered this ground in his 1909 *Orthodoxy*, the rejection of the pagan cult of nature and of hedonism, these "values" of a world that he denounces, appear, prophetically moreover, as subordinate themes in *Saint Francis*. Chesterton deliberately turns rather toward a view of the supernatural that never forgets the natural but rather illuminates it. He does this so that the action of grace can flow forth, and can be seen in both the willing acceptance of and steadfastness among the most difficult of trials. Chesterton remains an apologist without a doubt. But he is one in that rare sense of a man who wants to make others share in an emerging enlightenment. N.V

¹⁴ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 303.

¹⁵ Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 84.