

## ASSISI OF SAINT FRANCIS

' *It is built with bulwarks :  
a thousand bucklers hang upon it,  
all the armour of valiant men.*'

—(Cant. IV. 4.)

**I**N all the world there is no town to compare with this little walled city seated on a spur of the Umbrian Hills. No place is so intimately and exclusively bound up with the ever-continuing memory of one man. For Assisi is Saint Francis, and Saint Francis is Assisi. One cannot remain an hour there without fully realising this all-embracing fact. Yet to appreciate all that Assisi stands for, a short stay of a day or two is not enough. Some persons, even Catholics, are content to limit their visit to this city which is so wholly a shrine, to a few hours, and even take it as a place to see *en passant* on a motor drive from Perugia.

I myself reached Assisi with somewhat mixed feelings. The whole countryside was enveloped in mist and driving rain. Accommodation at an *Albergo* seemed rough, after home comforts. And—worst of all—one felt little or no devotion, only dryness in place of exaltation, and, I am even ashamed to confess the word, a sense of possible boredom in contemplating a more than very brief stay. Yet in less than twenty-four hours this feeling of desolation gave way to intense joy and inward peace. Assisi's Saint Francis had worked that magic spell over me that has been his to exercise during seven centuries on the hearts of men of good will. I cannot explain it otherwise. The weather for an Italian May continued atrocious, and the hotel food unappetising to an English palate. But one had found the spirit of Assisi, and nothing else mattered. I have visited many places in the world, and not a few sanctuaries, but none has ever affected me as

## *Assisi of Saint Francis*

this little Umbrian hill town. I could recall every minute of the ten days spent there and deeply envied an English tertiary from Manchester who had elected to remain for the remainder of his earthly life at Saint Francis' feet.

Pilgrims should, I think, avoid the common mistake of staying beside the Church of Saint Francis in the lower town. It proved more convenient as well as more airy to take up quarters a stone's throw from the Church of the Minerva. This building, as its shape and pillared colonnade abundantly attests, was formerly a Roman temple, dedicated to the goddess of wisdom. Passing under an archway leading to a small square, the Church of Santa Chiara, foundress of the Poor Clares, is reached within a few minutes. It enshrines the body of the Saint contained in a stone reliquary below a wonderfully lifelike effigy in wax. By winding ways with gems of mediaeval architecture at every corner the climbing road leads to the Cathedral of Saint Ruffino. The fact that the Bishop of Assisi is a son of Saint Dominic is one of many illustrations typifying the close connection ever existing between two great orders.

Wherever your steps may lead you, they pass continually over reminders of Saint Francis and of some episode in his life. It was from this square in front of the Duomo that Saint Francis went forth on his life's apostolate after his famous interview with the Bishop and final dedication to the Lady Poverty. A few paces higher is the stable—now an oratory—where his mother, the pious Pica, gave birth to a son whose world-wide influence would remain for all time. The road to the Church of San Damiano which Saint Francis rebuilt, partially with his own hands, winds down by Santa Chiara. Here the Saint composed that wondrous song the Canticle of the Sun. Chanted sonorously by a full choir in the old mellifluous Italian

## *Blackfriars*

dialect of the time, as I have heard it sung at Assisi, it is an unforgettable melody. '*Laudate sie o mio signore cum tutte le tue creature specialmente messer lo frate sole.*' 'Praised be Thou, my Lord, with all Thy creatures, especially Brother Sun.'

The door is still visible whence Saint Clare issued bearing the Remonstrance containing the Most Holy Sacrament when there occurred an irruption of wandering Saracen raiders. Her little terrace garden is exactly as she left it and is gay with bright-hued flowers tenderly fostered by loving hands. Never shall I forget a Sunday evening walk in May down to San Damiano, and so through ilex, oak and olive groves to the road leading down past the Portiuncula. It was a gorgeous night, the rays of the declining sun softly falling on tree and flower. No sound but the vesper hymn of the woodland birds that Saint Francis loved. Slowly declined the sun in those waves of crimson, purple and lilac seen only at their fullness in an Italian sunset. It was indeed a walk along the Franciscan way for by it fared the royal progress of Saint Francis on his last journey to his beloved city when he was borne by his children to pass by Saint Damiano, where Saint Clare and her sisters were awaiting him. Where the two roads meet there blazed out into the night the scintillation of many lights. It came from the open door of a wayside chapel. There to a crowd of peasant folk a priest was giving Benediction.

The Church of Saint Mary of the Angels containing the original tiny temple of that name known as the Portiuncula lies at some distance down the road. Its position, flanked as it is by rows of modern workmen's dwellings and close to the railway station spoils its appearance exteriorly. Inside, the great white basilica strikes one with a certain sense of cold vastness. This first impression is relieved to an extent by the lovely Rose Chapel. Still it must be remembered that one

does not remark a casket when admiring its jewel within. Also, the size serves to show this little church in a setting which otherwise would be impossible. Blessed Angela of Foligno, who died in 1309, speaks of the crowds surrounding the tiny church, and it was then that in ecstasy she saw a building which seemed to grow larger and larger. This vision was fulfilled by the basilica built later during the Pontificate of a Dominican Pope, St. Pius V., to house the original Church.

The tiny Saint Mary of the Angels where St. Francis and his companions heard Mass possesses the extraordinary indulgence of the Portiuncula. It is available to all entering the Church *toties quoties*. In other Franciscan churches it operates only from Vespers on August 1st till sunset next day, but at the Portiuncula itself it is perpetual.

Full of interest as are Saint Damiano and Saint Mary of the Angels, devotion must necessarily concentrate on the triple Church of Saint Francis on the lower slope of Assisi. The great convent of the Friars, for long partially sequestered by the Italian Government, was restored to them in its entirety on the occasion of the celebration of St. Francis' seventh centenary. It was a *beau geste* on the part of Mussolini and doubtless was one of the many circumstances which helped towards the Vatican Treaty. The building of the lower church was commenced in July, 1228, the day succeeding the Saint's canonisation, the first stone being laid by Pope Gregory IX who, as Cardinal Ugolino, was the protector and constant friend of the Order. In the upper Church, from the windows of which an unrivalled view is gained over the plains of Umbria, are contained those marvellous frescoes by Giotto depicting the chief incidents of the Saint's life. Here also is the Altar on which only the Pope can celebrate Mass.

## *Blackfriars*

It must not be forgotten that Assisi was within the limits of the original States of the Church and was therefore under the Pope's temporal sovereignty. The exact location of the body of Saint Francis was not discovered until 1818, nearly six hundred years after his death. The sacred relics repose in the crypt below the first Church in a sarcophagus of plain marble. Daily at *Ave Maria* is sung Benediction in the lower Church. As the choir children's sweet voices chanted the '*Laudate Dominum omnes gentes,*' its cadence growing softer as one stole away through the shadows of the great church and down the long flight of steps leading to the tomb, you felt, kneeling at that wonderful spot, the culmination of that Franciscan spirit which pervades Assisi and which seems to be most concentrated in this lamp-lit shrine.

The days at Assisi passed only too quickly, and on the day of departure I completed the last step of my pilgrimage. This was the long ascent of Monte Subasio to the Hermitage of the Carceri, where Saint Francis spent so much time in prayerful retirement. The sheer steepness and narrowness of the road make it impassable save to small two-wheeled vehicles. The view of Assisi as it is seen from the lower slope of Monte Subasio is an entrancing sight. It gives the impression of a fortified city in the midst of one large garden of olive and cypress. As the mountain path mounts higher and higher, the full beauty of the Umbrian plains and the river and lakes which water it is revealed. The Carceri itself comes upon you suddenly at a turn in the road. Its little white stone buildings seem suspended, as it were, from the side of a deep ravine most thickly wooded in oak, chestnut and hazel. A white flower in a jade vase.

Here one sees the primeval simplicity of the Franciscan life. A little terrace overlooking the sea of green supports a stone well from which the Saint must

## *Assisi of Saint Francis*

often have quenched his thirst. And here he is said to have delivered his sermon to the birds. Inside are that perfect little Chapel where St. Francis assisted at the Divine Mysteries, and the humble cells adjoining. In the cliff below the sanctuary you are shown the caves where he was accustomed to retire for those long hours of prayer and contemplation. I think it is here, and beside his tomb, that one feels most in the presence of the Franciscan spirit. Perhaps at the Carceri you realise the absolute simplicity of his whole life in a spot where the brightest and sweetest wild flowers abound and where the deep woodlands re-echo to the song of birds.

I left Assisi in the late afternoon of a glorious day which had turned to the mist and rain of the day I arrived. But with far other feelings, for I had gained that for which all should make this pilgrimage of grace. As the Florence express thundered past the calm waters of Lake Trasimene its many lights revealed through rain-blurred windows the island on which Saint Francis spent forty days of Lent in solitary meditation. One final vignette of many depicting 'The Franciscan Way.'

JOSCELYNE LECHMERE.